FRACTURED PLURALISM. THE PROSPECTS OF POLITICAL LIBERALISM IN THE AGE OF VIBES

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ABSTRACT
Political liberalism, both in Rawls and in the subsequent tradition, takes as its point of departure the "fact of pluralism" of comprehensive doctrines, some of which are reasonable. But while the notion of reasonableness has received ample attention, the underlying model of pluralism has not. In this paper, we first analyze the Rawlsian understanding of pluralism and conclude that, because of its heavy focus on "doctrines", it is overly intellectualistic and, as such, it fails to accurately describe the fractured nature of (especially) contemporary societies. Current social disagreements are often based on conflicting intuitions, feelings, or "vibes", and they do not involve comprehensive, internally consistent systems of beliefs and values. This inadequacy in Rawls has its consequences, as a descriptively accurate account of contemporary pluralism presents a series of challenges for the typical formulations of political liberalism and some of its key concepts. In the second half of the paper, we elaborate these challenges for two of them: overlapping consensus and (un)reasonableness.

KEYWORDS
Rawls; political liberalism; fractured pluralism; comprehensive doctrines; unreasonableness.

1. INTRODUCTION

American historian Daniel Rodgers observed in 2012 that the last quarter of the century was an 'age of fracture', an era marked by intellectual disaggregation. Major intellectual projects of the middle decades of the 20th century came to be slowly supplanted by a 'contagion of metaphors', which were incapable "of holding in focus the aggregate aspects of human life as opposed to its smaller, fluid, individual ones" (Rodgers 2012, p. 6). Social categories of thinking were remade, intellectual models slipped across domains, ideas were adapted to more personalized needs of an increasingly hyper-specialized social life. Within this new

fractured pluralism, common projects following a comprehensive set of values seem outdated, increasingly replaced by more individualized, ephemeral, and intuitive political commitments.

Here we do not wish to bemoan this new(-ish) state of affairs, nor look for parties to blame. There has arisen an entire cottage industry of intellectual accusations, finding fault for our new, increasingly fluid, individualistic, and identitarian pluralism in either neoliberalism, late-stage capitalism, the new right, post-modernism, or critical theory, none of which are entirely satisfactory and some border on the conspiratorial. We are more curious about what this new terrain of pluralism means for our understanding of political liberalism. In this essay, we want to focus on Rawls' understanding of pluralism and how it is impacted by an era when our disagreements no longer seem to involve a clash of doctrines and when even the unreasonable challenges to our democracies are not overly intellectual. It is our contention that Rawls' reading of pluralism was over-intellectualized, and in this essay, we wish to address some of the implications of this fact.

To this end, we first review the nature of pluralism and disagreement in late Rawls (section II) and then seek to provide a descriptively more accurate conception (section III). The subsequent sections elaborate on the consequences of contemporary fractured pluralism for some of the key concepts of political liberalism. Section IV focuses on the idea of overlapping consensus, while Section V develops the implications of contemporary pluralism for the concept of (un)reasonableness. In general, we claim that contemporary fractured pluralism poses a serious challenge to some of the typical formulations of political liberalism, although they could potentially be overcome.

2. THE INTELLECTUAL'S PLURALISM

People have always differed in their opinions, values, and worldviews. Yet, for much of human history, most philosophers had hoped that these disagreements can be overcome, usually by serious rational deliberation, so that we can reach some sort of consensus about the nature of good life or the best form of government. Nowadays, however, this hope seems to have faded. Most contemporary theorists acknowledge that pluralism is a permanent feature of any society, but especially the current liberal democratic ones, where people are free to make up their minds and have almost unconstrained access to the internet.

But acknowledging this "fact of pluralism" comes with a sharp philosophical challenge. If deep social divisions across opinions, values, and worldviews cannot be avoided, how can we find a lasting, stable consensus on the form and character of our governments? On the one hand, finding this consensus seems to be ruled out by the very fact of pluralism. But if such a consensus cannot be found, some

people will always have a reason to rebel against any regime, weakening its stability. Moreover, the absence of consent in parts of the population makes political legitimacy difficult to achieve. At first sight, no option seems to be working, we are left with a puzzle to solve.

The previous paragraph represents a rough reconstruction of the basic motivation behind Rawls' *Political Liberalism* (2005, henceforth **PL**). Our ambition in this paper is not to solve the puzzle (that would be much too ambitious), but to question some basic assumptions behind its typical formulations. Famously, right at the beginning of the book, Rawls poses the one question that would go on to guide the entire project. He asks, "how it is possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines" (PL, p. 4). This sentence captures the specific Rawlsian interpretation of the puzzle described above. Added to our vague articulation is, first, a liberal grounding (that is, society has to be just and composed of free and equal citizens). More importantly for our purposes, the formulation also captures the Rawlsian understanding of pluralism, with citizens divided by "reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines."

When it comes to the "pluralism of reasonable doctrines", much of the extensive literature on political liberalism focuses on the "reasonable" part of the phrase (Larmore 1999; Nussbaum 2011; Ancell 2019). This is hardly surprising as it is the move from pluralism to reasonable pluralism that enables Rawls to solve the original puzzle. But that is not the only consequential part of the formulation. We hold that it is also critical to focus on and evaluate the specific Rawlsian understanding of pluralism of *doctrines*, which remains underdiscussed.

In general, the understanding of pluralism in Rawls is guided by one key anthropological assumption, already stated several times: he views human beings as holders of doctrines. He writes, "I assume all citizens to affirm a comprehensive doctrine to which the political conception they accept is in some way related" (PL, p. 12) and proclaims that citizens are assumed to "have at any given time a determinate conception of the good interpreted in the light of a (reasonable) comprehensive view" (PL, p. 81). All in all, everyone is expected to adhere to a more or less precisely defined system of values and virtues (PL, p. 152n).

This focus on doctrines has an understated but key role in *Political Liberalism*. It enables Rawls to interpret pluralism not in terms of individual people and their differing beliefs or values, but in terms of rival systems of thought. Contemporary liberal societies are characterized by the fact that they contain several articulated comprehensive doctrines, and citizens are free to choose between them (PL, p. 36). As a result, disagreement within society, as discussed in the book, does not occur between people, but between (a limited number of) doctrines.

The historical model that seems to drive the Rawlsian understanding of pluralism is the clash between Catholics and Protestants during the 16th and 17th

centuries (Rawls 1997, par. 3). Then, European societies were in a grip of a bloody struggle for political domination between distinct, elaborate doctrines, and neither was strong enough to establish dominance. The result, as Rawls reconstructs it, was a precarious *modus vivendi* that, over time, became more stable as the rival Christian churches renounced their ambitions to dominate political life. The struggles of reformation-period Europe, therefore, form an important precedent upon which Rawls wants to build his theory (PL, pp. xxii-xxvi).

Historical parallels aside, there is another reason why Rawls models his understanding of pluralism on religious doctrines: they provide a key viability test for his theory. If it turns out that Catholicism, Protestantism or any other major religion is incompatible with political liberalism, then the entire project, with its focus on stability and congruence, seems doomed to fail, as it would permanently exclude important parts of the population from the constituency of public justification (Weithman 2010; Nussbaum 2011). However, if Rawls can show that political liberalism can be made compatible with major established religions, this would already be a big achievement for his theory.

The focus on religious pluralism, therefore, serves multiple purposes. Religious toleration provides a blueprint for the "political, not metaphysical" solution to social cooperation, while the inclusion of major religions inside reasonable pluralism seems to be the necessary condition for its viability. However, and this is important, the focus on religious doctrines brings forth a rather specific type of conflict. The established Christian denominations (Rawls explicitly mentions Catholics, Protestants or Quakers) endorse rather complex sets of values, dogmas and articles of faith across different domains (cosmology, ontology, metaphysics, ethics and politics), elaborated over centuries. They do, therefore, put forth comprehensive, internally consistent systems of thought that their members are expected to embrace. The conflicts between religions are thus easily understood as conflicts of "doctrines".

The understanding of pluralism as a conflict between incompatible theoretical systems of thought is also carried over to all secular examples that Rawls works with. He basically only ever mentions three: the comprehensive liberalisms of Kant and Mill and utilitarianism of Bentham (and Sidgwick) (PL, p. 37)[1]. The doctrines that every citizen is expected to affirm are thus introduced in the form of elaborate philosophical systems that, very much like religious dogmas, cut across several disciplines and domains. When representing social diversity, the examples that Rawls uses are highly abstract, consisting of complex, interconnected values and arguments. Overall, Rawls presents a deeply intellectualized understanding of pluralism. The society, as he sees it, is composed of citizens invested in

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[1] The one exception to this rule is a brief discussion of pluralism on p. 160 in PL. We discuss it in detail below.

philosophy and theology, who affirm elaborated, consistent sets of values and principles.

While we hold that the Rawlsian understanding of pluralism is over-intellectualized, his view might not have seemed too far-fetched in the recent past. In the 20th-century United States, most citizens were active members of churches belonging to major Christian denominations. They, therefore, could have been expected to endorse the comprehensive doctrines that these churches developed over centuries, across cosmology, metaphysics, and ethics. The tiny minority of atheists and agnostics usually came from the intellectual classes, and most of them could perhaps be expected to provide a more or less elaborate account of their worldviews. Thus, when Rawls looked at the United States in the late 20th century, he might have indeed seen a disagreement between a finite number of well-thought-out "doctrines". Nonetheless, we hold that such a picture was deceptive already then and it is even more so now. The next section will provide a descriptively more adequate account of contemporary pluralism, while the rest of the paper will develop the consequences for the broader project of political liberalism.

3. INTUITIONS, FEELINGS, VIBES

The key problem with the assumption that all citizens "have a determinate conception of the good interpreted in the light of a comprehensive view" and "affirm a comprehensive doctrine" is its descriptive inadequacy. There is a strong, enduring consensus in social sciences that, in fact, the very opposite is the case. To illustrate, let us quote Dennis Chong and James Druckman at length:

> [F]rom the earliest days of public opinion research, citizens have been found to have low-quality opinions, if they have opinions at all. In the public opinion literature, high-quality opinions are usually defined as being stable, consistent, informed, and connected to abstract principles and values. The general conclusion among scholars is that such opinions are rare in the mass public (e.g., Converse 1964, Zaller 1992).
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> Early studies of mass public opinion conducted in the 1950s and 1960s raised serious doubts about the competence of citizens to participate in political affairs. On the whole, citizens were woefully uninformed about the institutions of American government, political office holders, and contemporary political issues. Their views on issues were superficial and unconnected to overarching principles such as liberalism or conservatism. (Chong & Druckman 2007, p. 103)

In social sciences, this conclusion is typically demonstrated using the power of framing and framing effects in political opinion-making. For example, in the 1980s, 65% of Americans were consistently in favor of "expanding assistance to

the poor" while 80% were opposed to more spending on "welfare" –despite the fact that the two phrases have almost identical meaning (Rasinski 1989). In other words, the political opinions of most people are not derived from the abstract, comprehensive doctrines they hold. Typically, they are the product of their intuitions on the spot, without much theoretical depth. When we encounter pluralism in our societies, it is mostly *not* a pluralism of doctrines.

But while the observed disconnect between political attitudes of citizens and "doctrines" remains stable over time, there have been other social developments that undermine the Rawlsian stance even more. As mentioned above, in the lifetime of Rawls, most Americans were active members of established Christian churches, which all adopt and preach elaborate, comprehensive sets of beliefs. In this way, their members could, at least in theory, be described as "affirming a comprehensive doctrine" (although what exactly does that mean in practice is unclear). But since then, there have been some major social developments. In the last 30 years, Church attendance dramatically declined across the board. But what is perhaps more important for our purposes, the traditional (especially Protestant) churches are in deep crisis, while Pentecostalism and other evangelical denominations are on the rise. And what these new, ever more popular churches have in common, are the anti-doctrinal, anti-intellectualist attitudes, with much more focus on direct personal experience with God (Miller 1999). So, while almost all Christians in the US 30 years ago could be understood as affirming a relatively well-specified, deeply theoretical doctrine, this is certainly not the case now. Even religious pluralism might no longer be aptly described as a pluralism of doctrines.

So, what would be a descriptively adequate account of pluralism today? It would have to acknowledge that our digital hyperconnectivity is "reorganizing our attention and reshaping our ways of thinking, seeing, and feeling" (Brubaker 2023, p.2). Instantaneous connection impacts public sentiments, making them more volatile, more intense, and more responsive to logics of algorithmic demand, resulting in more moral outrage and more political polarization. And despite expectations of increased transparency and sociability, hyperconnectivity has made our politics more fragmented and opaquer (Brubaker 2023). Looking at current social media culture might be instructive here. Abidin (2021) studying online influencer culture suggests the term 'refracted publics' to analyze the combined impact of platformed logics, influencer cultures, social media vernacular, attention economies, and online distrust & misinformation. Refracted publics are, among other things, noted for their 'silosociality', context-dependent intelligibility, and increasing transience, allowing intense but short-lived community building, often 'under the radar'. In other words, we come to inhabit vastly different worlds, often unknown and even mutually incomprehensible. We are easily siloed by our social media into walled-off communities, which increasingly afford polarization,

incivility, and unreasonable views to prevail or shelter them from potential correction (Carter, Alford 2023; De León et al. 2024; Humprecht et al. 2024).

The impact of digitalization and connectivity on today's pluralism probably cannot be overstated. Bimber's (1998) prediction of an "accelerated pluralism" seems particularly prescient. Our polities are highly pluralistic and fragmented with "more rapidly changing issue groups, with less stability and less dependence on private and public institutional structures" (Bimber 1998, p. 155). The internet did not bring a revolution or qualitative change to the nature of our political disagreement, but it accelerated the already existing developments of divorcing group-oriented politics from their institutional underpinnings. Acquiring political knowledge (understood in the broadest possible sense) and collective political action was greatly simplified, since it became less dependent on the existing coordinating mechanisms and the gatekeeping elites responsible for the formulating, interpreting, and protecting the coherence and comprehensiveness of individual systems of thought.

Much the same can be said about the content and coherence of our pluralism. While we should not fall prey to the false nostalgia of an overly intellectualized past where comprehensive doctrines were supposedly discussed based on reasoned arguments, the immediacy available in the digital sphere also contributes to the more impressionistic and intuitive quality of our political disagreements. People increasingly sort themselves into different camps according to affective and immediate reactions to events, often based on aesthetic appeals or pre-existing group commitments. Instead of a pluralism of doctrines, what we observe today might be better termed a *pluralism of vibes.*

Scholars studying conspiracy theories have noted that we are increasingly seeing 'conspiracies without the theory' where evidence-free allegations replace explanations of events, ventilating more generalized feelings of distrust (Rosenblum, Muirhead 2019, 2024), but much the same can be observed about non-conspiracist, mainstream political discussions as they move away from distinct party-ideological programs toward individual issues and policies, offering voters a customer experience of picking a brand that suits them. This does not mean that we cannot have distinct ideological disagreements in politics, or that there is not extensive polarization of political competition. However, the often-discussed polarization in politics is more of a result of an alignment between coherent ideologies and party institutions (e.g., Noel 2013). The citizens responding to partisan cues do not necessarily share in their doctrines, nor do they arrive at their positions independently and then seek out their representatives. Quite to the contrary, they will be often incoherent in their outlook and will adopt voting intentions and ancillary party positions based on non-intellectual reasons (Lauderdale et al. 2018; Coppock, Green 2022). Once voters become attached to political parties and candidates, "party allegiances unconsciously bias cognition",

transforming "citizens into automatic partisan press secretaries" (Williams 2023, p. 2).

However, we do not mean to say that there is less theorizing and fewer potentially comprehensive and distinct doctrines out there – on the contrary, the unprecedented freedom and intellectual cooperation made possible by the digital sphere have led to an explosion of various systems of thought, which probably never before have had a greater chance to be more comprehensive and more coherent. However, the affordances of the digital sphere again favor superficiality in adopting and assessing such theories. For one, the attention economy makes it more difficult and time-consuming to make sense of the choices available. Second, even the evidentiary basis for assessing their merit is itself subject to second-order disagreements. Which brings us to the most interesting aspect of today's pluralism: what we might call the *politicization of our burdens of judgment*.

Rawls famously recognized burdens of judgment as the obstacles that prevent reasonable people from finding agreement. They involve the unavoidable uses of our reasoning and form the source of our pluralism – the source of disagreement in our considered judgments. One might focus on how different sources of unreason (bias, prejudice, self-interest, and so on) impact the judgment people make about political issues and lead them to unreasonable convictions. But even when we set aside the sources of unreason, there are still the questions of how we evaluate complex evidence, how we weigh conflicting considerations, how we define our concepts (including scientific concepts), how we select the values that shape our epistemic institutions we rely on to reason together; or how we do all of the above in light of very different life experiences. These are the sources of our reasonable pluralism, as Rawls maintained.

Recall there were two aspects to being reasonable. The first is the acceptance of freedom and equality for all involved in a mutual system of cooperation. The second aspect of being reasonable, according to Rawls, was "the *willingness* to recognize the burdens of judgment and to *accept* their consequences for the use of public reason" (PL, p. 54, emphasis added). But what marks contemporary pluralism, in our opinion, is the increasing unwillingness to take the burdens of judgment into account when explaining the differences in our positions and instead to move the issue of political disagreement one level up - in effect politicizing the burdens of judgment themselves.

This is not the question of whether epistemically unreasonable beliefs such as astrology, or flat-earthism should still be counted as politically reasonable (Kelly, McPherson 2001; Nussbaum 2011); here the issue is somewhat different: the extent to which our deep political disagreements are making us unreasonable by making us unwilling to recognize the specific burdens of judgment of our opponents. It seems that in the conditions of modern pluralism our ethical and political disagreements are increasingly brought one level up, so that we disagree

about an assessment and weighing of complex and conflicting evidence, about our concepts, our measures, and our experiences. For example, we not only disagree about the economic and environmental policies in response to climate change, but the very evidence of the problem is subject to political disagreement. Discussions about combating viral diseases can suddenly involve questions about the efficacy of vaccines or other public health measures. The question of immigration policy and integration of new arrivals into existing communities seemingly cannot be debated without questioning the motivations of either side of the debate.

This is somewhat similar to the dynamic Friedman (2023) described as an 'epistemic polarization' where disagreement is treated as an issue of improper motivation. In his version[2], what we are seeing is an epistemological crisis caused by varieties of 'naive realism' leading people to doubt each other's beliefs as genuine as opposed to being motivated by bias, prejudice, or self-interest. In a similar vein, Dorst (2023) recently suggested that rationally updating on ambiguous evidence can lead to more polarization.

So, what we are increasingly left with are not competing intellectual doctrines, but a pluralism of vibes, ideas, modes of assessment of evidence, and polarized intuitions gleaned from partisan conflict or algorithmic design. This is a far cry from the intellectual notion of systems of thought adopted and evaluated based on dispassionate reasons of rightly disposed persons living in a well-ordered society. We therefore need to ask about the impact of such pluralism on political liberalism.

4. OVERLAPPING CONSENSUS AND COMPREHENSIVE DOCTRINES

If the assertion made in the preceding sections holds true, namely that Rawls adopted an overly intellectualized conception of pluralism that does not descriptively fit the present world, then, in the second step, we have to inquire about the broader ramifications of this fact for political liberalism. As was already mentioned above, his specific understanding of "pluralism of doctrines" cuts very deep into both the basic formulation of the problem of political liberalism and its solution. In the rest of the paper, we will *not* argue that a flawed understanding of pluralism somehow disqualifies the entirety of political liberalism, or even any of its specific arguments and positions. Nevertheless, we maintain that several pivotal concepts within it warrant reconsideration, if not outright revision. This and the

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[2] Curiously, Friedman (2023) engages in a bit of false balance when he treats the first-person naive realists believing in their own 'common sense' and the third-person naive realists who believe in expert consensus as equally epistemologically complacent. However, relying on expert consensus does not preclude anyone from being epistemically vigilant. Relying on experts as opposed to 'common sense' does not ignore the potential for bias. Relying on experts, with the obvious caveats, is ultimately the only epistemically responsible option.

next sections will therefore attempt to reassess a few of them, starting with "overlapping consensus".

For Rawls, to reiterate, society is made up of people affirming different comprehensive doctrines. The pluralism of these incompatible doctrines can be mitigated by the fact that the reasonable ones are expected to reach an "overlapping consensus" on certain political values (especially regarding toleration and mutual respect). This consensus is not expected to be very deep ("reasonable political doctrines endorse the political conception [of justice] each from its own point of view", PL, p. 134), but nonetheless wide enough to cover the basic political arrangements. Consequently, the subject matter of the overlapping consensus, the political conception of justice, is supposed to be "freestanding" (PL, p. 10), acting like a "module" (PL, p. 12), which can be fitted, in various ways, onto all reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Citizens holding incompatible beliefs can therefore slot the set of principles and beliefs pertaining to the political conception of justice into their wider worldviews without compromising them.

Right from the outset, we can observe the architectonic ("freestanding") and engineering ("module") metaphors that Rawls is using to explain the ideas behind overlapping consensus. These metaphors very much underline the basic argumentative move: that one body of principles (the political conception of justice) is supposed to fit into a larger body of principles (the comprehensive doctrine), forming a unified whole, or at least a not-incoherent unit. To introduce a (rather famous) metaphor of our own, it seems that Rawls is thinking like a hedgehog rather than a fox (Berlin 2013, pp. 48–58). He assumes that people's worldviews consist of a multitude of independent but interconnected (or at least consistent) parts, very much like machines or buildings - that people tend to know "one big thing" and not "many things". Fitting the freestanding view of justice into comprehensive doctrines is presented in Rawls as a thoroughly intellectual exercise. The individual citizens review the specific theoretical commitments entailed by their comprehensive doctrines and then see if the political conception of justice can be "derived from, or congruent with, or at least not in conflict with, their other values" (PL, p. 11). In other words, Rawls is expecting the citizens to act like systematic thinkers – indeed like Rawls himself, who must have often pondered whether a specific theoretical position "fits" with his other views and what the specific connections are.

But expecting the citizens (of especially contemporary societies) to act like systematic thinkers is, as was demonstrated above, rather unrealistic. The beliefs of ordinary citizens (but even professional philosophers) are often underdeveloped, full of tensions, internal contradictions and conflicting intuitions. Many of us are foxes, with no urge to systematize our scattered beliefs and insights or even render them coherent. And even the hedgehogs among us might struggle to fully conceptualize their political intuitions (although, like Rawls, they may try). Consequently, the picture that Rawls presents is misleading, or at least incomplete.

We cannot think of overlapping consensus as a discrete body of principles that is designed to fit into other, larger bodies of principles in the mind of every reasonable citizen. Or, to be precise, such a description would only fit a limited number of cases. We still consider it worthwhile to establish whether for example Catholic doctrine (or the belief systems of other organized religions) is compatible with political liberalism (Bonotti 2011; Coetsee 2023). However, we also must be conscious of the fact that the "doctrinal" approach to overlapping consensus is inapplicable to most people. Because most of us do not hold any "doctrine", there is no body of worked out values and principles onto which a module of political principles can connect itself.

In our reading, Rawls comes relatively close to conceding this point in one passage where he acknowledges that the comprehensive doctrines people hold are rather loose and there is "lots of slippage", because "many if not most citizens come to affirm the principles of justice [...] without seeing any particular connection, one way or the other, between those principles and their other views" (PL, p. 160). As we understand this passage, Rawls basically admits that the "module" metaphor of the principles of justice interlocking with various comprehensive doctrines in different ways might be inapplicable in ordinary circumstances. People do not think in philosophical systems. They base their conclusions on discrete, contextual insights, intuitions and underdeveloped values that do not amount to any coherent theory or doctrine, much less a one that can be dissected into separate parts, one of which will be shared by all reasonable people.

But the non-systematic, non-doctrinal nature of people's political thought does not necessarily preclude the formation of an overlapping consensus. We just have to be realistic about its form. The overlapping consensus perhaps need not take the form of a "module" that slides into a number of worked-out systems of values. It might take the form of a set of firmly held intuitions, without any "doctrine" to hold them together. Perhaps people can be reasonable without holding reasonable comprehensive doctrines. This suggestion, moreover, would not represent a radical departure from the text of political liberalism, as in the passages quoted in the previous paragraph Rawls indeed seems to admit that people with disparate and unconnected values and intuitions could nonetheless be viewed as affirming the overlapping consensus.

An interpretation of overlapping consensus that would overcome the over-intellectualistic account of pluralism present in Rawls would, however, require further careful consideration. To only mention the biggest possible problem, Rawls would probably be quite uneasy with the idea of overlapping consensus of stable intuitions, as he would consider such consensus to be insufficiently "deep" (PL, p. 164). After all, if our intuitions are not anchored by a larger comprehensive or political doctrine, they might easily change and shift, making the consensus inherently insecure. In this way, the consensus of stable intuitions

would perhaps resemble the "constitutional consensus" but would lack "the conceptual resources" to secure the political conception of justice (PL, p. 165). Unfortunately, working out the detailed implications of this problem would go far beyond the scope of this paper. Our only ambition here was to show that the above-identified problems of the Rawlsian account of pluralism have important and non-trivial downstream consequences for some of his key concepts, including the idea of overlapping consensus. In the next sections, we will develop a similar analysis for his understanding of unreasonableness.

5. UNREASONABLENESS WITHOUT THE DOCTRINE

The heavy focus on doctrines in political liberalism also affects the treatment of unreasonableness. In one famous passage, Rawls explains: "That there are doctrines that reject one or more democratic freedoms is itself a permanent fact of life or seems so. This gives us the practical task of containing them—like war and disease—so that they do not overturn political justice (PL, p. 64n, see also PL, pp. xvi-xvii). As analyzed above, the implied picture here is one where several distinct, incompatible doctrines find themselves present in one society. Within this pluralism of doctrines, Rawls wants to separate the reasonable ones (that can form the overlapping consensus) and then make sure that "unreasonable comprehensive doctrines do not gain enough currency to undermine society's essential justice" (PL, p. 39). Imperceptibly but very importantly, the task to contain unreasonableness is interpreted as a task to contain unreasonable doctrines.

Moreover, the picture of discrete, independent doctrines implies that we can identify an unambiguous demarcation line between the reasonable doctrines that will form part of the constituency of public justification and the unreasonable ones that need to be contained. As was shown above, Rawls often uses established Christian churches as examples of both reasonableness and unreasonableness, as they possess an elaborated creed, with explicit positions on a host of metaphysical, social, and political issues. Looking at the church doctrines, we can therefore determine whether, for example, they subscribe to the idea of free faith, in which case they are reasonable, or reject it, and then they are not. In the range of examples set up by Rawls, the task of distinguishing and keeping apart reasonable and unreasonable doctrines is relatively straightforward.

This position, however, brings with it some difficulties. First, drawing a strict line between the reasonable and the unreasonable doctrines might be too exclusionary (Friedman 2000; Kelly, McPherson 2001; Ancell,2019; Sala 2013). There is a danger that if we meticulously apply Rawlsian criteria, too many people may end up on the unreasonable side. Consequently, the "legitimation pool" (Friedman 2000, p. 16) of liberal democracies might become rather shallow, with

whole segments of population finding themselves excluded from the constituency of public justification. Even the establishment of an overlapping consensus among reasonable doctrines will not be enough to achieve stability if large segments of population continue to be unreasonable and cannot realistically be converted.

Although Rawls himself seems to be rather optimistic about the possibility of converting unreasonable people into reasonable ones over time, he still only describes it as "a reasonable faith in the possibility of a just constitutional regime" (PL, p. 172). In the subsequent literature however, even authors sympathetic to Rawls seem to be much less hopeful. As a way to mitigate the problem, the recent scholarship on political liberalism seems to be moving away from the focus on unreasonable doctrines, towards unreasonable *people*, arguing that while some unreasonable people might indeed be immovable and uncompromising, this might not be the case for all of them, and there are some that the liberal society can work with or live with, without excluding them from the constituency of public justification (Kelly, McPherson, 2001; Sala 2013; Badano, Nuti 2018; Giovanola, Sala 2022). If we focus on unreasonable people instead of unreasonable doctrines, we may discover that "there may be more than one way to be unreasonable or, better, not to be reasonable" (Sala2013, p. 259), which means that the strict exclusionary logic sometimes implied in *Political Liberalism* need not fully apply. Indeed, Roberta Sala argues that some people that subscribe to unreasonable doctrines (she explicitly mentions Jehovah's Witnesses), might still be practically reasonable in their wider social attitudes. The implication of this argument is that if our understanding of unreasonableness becomes less doctrinal, it might broaden the appeal of political liberalism.

However, the unfortunate focus on doctrines is still present in much contemporary literature. To take just one specific example, Gabrielle Badano and Alasia Nuti in their 2018 paper distinguish unreasonable people that are truly inexorable (the neo-Nazis) and ones where the situation is a bit more complicated (supporters of what they call "right-wing populism"). The authors then claim that "unlike, say, neo-Nazis who proudly embrace racist views and explicitly strive for dismantling liberal institutions, many RWP [Right-wing populism] supporters do not regard themselves as enemies of liberalism". This is the reason why "Marine Le Pen—the leader of the Front National—has repeatedly invoked French liberal tenets (for example, women's rights and the rejection of homophobia) in her attacks against the Muslim population" (Badano, Nuti, 2018). These remarks are meant to illustrate that illiberal nativists (we prefer this term to Badano and Nuti's "right wing populists") like Le Pen and her supporters are perhaps not completely unreasonable and there is some liberal common ground that can be used to persuade them to change their mind and become more tolerant.

While we are broadly sympathetic to the argument of their paper, Badano and Nuti make the mistake of treating far right nationalism like a transparent doctrine, where we can take the pronouncements of Marie Le Pen at face value and deduce

from them a stable normative position. If we proceed that way, we could perhaps isolate the unreasonable components of the doctrine and strengthen the liberal ones. But is illiberal nativism such a doctrine? Can we treat it like a creed of an established religion, which is out there for everyone to see? It seems to us that we certainly cannot. The case in point here are the very examples that Badano and Nuti use to illustrate the liberal elements of Marine Le Pen and Front National: the protection of women's rights and the rejection of homophobia. If Le Pen indeed meant these seriously, they would establish a solid liberal ideological base. But we have reasons to be doubtful. Illiberal nativists in general, including Marie Le Pen, tend to deny LGBT+ rights, advocate against marriage equality, push for abortion bans, and are more than happy to question what they call "gender ideology" in contemporary society (Dietze, Roth 2020; Kuhar, Paternotte 2017). "Women rights" and "rejection of homophobia" just happen to be effective tools to fuel Islamophobia and, through that, boost their electoral appeal. But once the conversation is no longer about Muslims, Le Pen and other nationalist parties are quite happy to instantly forget about their "liberalism" and continue with other items on their illiberal and authoritarian agenda[3]. It other words, while Le Pen is more than happy to *say* that she cares about gender equality and LGBT+ rights when criticizing Muslims, we cannot use these pronouncements as if she were a philosopher building a consistent doctrine.

The Rawlsian idea of (un)reasonable comprehensive doctrines is therefore not the best starting point for analyzing contemporary illiberal nativism ("right-wing populism"). Many of these movements seem to only possess only a thin ideology (Stanley 2008), whose most constant feature is its opportunism, as it latches onto any topic or issue which finds traction in the electorate, be it opposition to immigration, protection of "free speech", or critique of mandatory vaccination. It is an open question whether such strategic opportunism is not itself a quality of the ideological outlook, a trollish commitment to an opportunistic tilting at whatever liberal egalitarian principle is expedient in a given context, but instinctively usually espousing an unspoken hierarchy (be it racial, religious, ethnic, gender, or whatever works in the particular political context). The views of illiberal nativists are not outwardly stable – they do not necessarily represent a "doctrine" –, though the underlying project is perhaps recognizable with a little ideological analysis. The task of reconstructing and systematizing the beliefs of contemporary illiberal nativists is therefore unenviable, if not prohibitively difficult. They are often ideologically shallow except for their vocal rejection of certain public liberal

[3]Modern far right tends to be authoritarian and nativist at its ideological core. Though not necessarily anti-democratic, it always objects to equality and pluralism (see Pirro 2023). This brings them in political tension with liberal democracy - but this tension precisely for its nature cannot always be made explicit. Indeed, mobilizing for gender equality (femonationalism) or LGBTQ+ rights (homonationalism) can be strategically useful for far-right actors in certain contexts (see Mudde 2019).

nostrums. In any case, the unreasonableness of the modern far right is, in many of its key instances, *not* doctrinal.

The issue of unreasonableness in the public sphere is made even more complicated by the inherent vagueness and playfulness of human language, where ideas, positions, or beliefs need not be explicitly stated to be understood. In contemporary societies, much if not most expressions of unreasonable positions come in form of dog whistles, coded language, or memes (Mendelberg 2001; Tuters, Hagen 2020), which might not be, for example, explicitly racist, but they nonetheless carry a racist message – or at least have racist undertones. This represents a further challenge to understanding unreasonableness as it remains hidden, or at least somewhat vague, and therefore harder to pinpoint.

Consider one still relatively clear-cut example from 2014, analyzed by Bhat and Klein (2020, pp. 154–56), and Číbik (2023, p. 586). US politician (and a future speaker of the House of Representatives) Paul Ryan noted that

> We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work, and so there is a real culture problem here that has to be dealt with[4].

This statement is typical for its use of non-explicit dog whistles, as "men from inner cities" are of course black, and they are coded as lazy and culturally incapable of productive work. The quote then ominously designates this as "a problem that needs to be dealt with". As such, we consider this statement to be almost a textbook example of unreasonableness, as it certainly does not promote "a society of equals that [...] stand ready to propose fair terms that others may reasonably be expected to accept" (PL, p. 54). Quite the opposite, it promotes racial resentment and makes peaceful social cooperation ever harder to achieve.

Several important observations can be made regarding dog whistles (and memes and jokes and allusions) like this one. First, the unreasonable content is of course only gestured at, it remains non-explicit. There is no racist "doctrine" that is revealed by these pronouncements. Indeed, apart from a limited number of hardcore neo-Nazis, very few people today would subscribe to any openly racist doctrine. Theories working with explicitly inegalitarian racial hierarchies are (still, thankfully) on the very fringe of the public sphere. Thus, the first important lesson from our example is that one can be unreasonable without the doctrine. A person can be racist without subscribing to any racist doctrine - which is true, we believe, also for Paul Ryan.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, there is a crucial ambiguity as to what "being racist" means in the context of dog whistles like the one above. "Being

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[4] Original news coverage: www.msnbc.com/politicsnation/ryan-generations-men-not-working-msna284561 and www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/03/18/paul-ryan-poverty-dog-whistles-and-racism/. Visited on 30.5.2023.

racist" can be interpreted both as "The person X is a racist" and "The person X is being racist". To clarify, this is the same important grammatical difference as between "Person X is mean" and "Person X is being mean". The former expression indicates a stable disposition (meanness forms a part of their character), while the latter is a mere description of a limited, local situation, which need not imply anything else. The difference between the two interpretive options is of course substantial.

As was mentioned above, the recent literature on political liberalism focused much more on unreasonable people than on unreasonable doctrines, which is a needed departure from sometimes overly intellectualized pluralism of Rawls. Nonetheless, we hold that even the analyses of (different kinds of) unreasonable people might still be too abstract. The tag of "unreasonable person" implies a stable disposition, a set of consistent beliefs or character traits. Even if the given person does not hold a "doctrine", their unreasonableness must be relatively deeply ingrained. However, people can often act unreasonably ("they are being unreasonable"), without it forming a stable disposition backed by firm beliefs ("they are unreasonable"). Statements from politicians like Paul Ryan are relatively typical in this regard, as they send out often borderline conflicting messages to curry favor with different parts of the electorate. In this way, Paul Ryan himself might be entirely reasonable, while issuing unreasonable statements. In this way, unreasonableness cannot only do without a doctrine, it also does not need an unreasonable person to be expressed.

The cases of unreasonableness without an unreasonable person are not just a specific feature of political communication. They are widespread in contemporary societies – or so we believe. When people tell racist jokes in public, share polarizing messages, or spread hateful conspiracy theories, this does not necessarily make them unreasonable. As was explained in the third section, instances of unreasonable speech or unreasonable pronouncements in the public sphere do not necessarily prove that their authors are unreasonable people *tout court*. The unreasonableness can be very shallow and unconnected to any deeper beliefs. Therefore, the very category of "unreasonable people" might become problematic, or, at the very least, our observation signals that there might exist a significant gray zone where, in certain contexts, some people might get comfortable with voicing unreasonable views without necessarily having stable unreasonable beliefs.

6.   CONCLUSION: REASONABLENESS OF WHAT?

The previous section set up a fundamental question: if reasonableness is a key political category, what should its primary referent be? As we argued, (un)reasonableness of doctrines is not a great candidate and even

(un)reasonableness of people has its problems. Both options require considerable abstraction and some higher-order judgements that are often difficult to make in real life. Therefore, the basic "unit" of unreasonableness has to be an *unreasonable act* or *unreasonable speech*. Going down to this lower level enables us to avoid the difficulties spelled out above. We do not need to establish whether a person acting unreasonably *is* or *is being* unreasonable. If the basic unit of analysis is an individual act or speech (in their many various forms), we can identify and denounce the unreasonableness regardless. Also, in the fractured, scattered information environment of contemporary societies, it may be difficult to establish whether, for example, a specific racist trope is connected to a more complex body of thought. But this need not matter. The usage of the trope is problematic in itself.

Importantly, even this minimalist starting point allows us to fruitfully formulate and interpret the basic concern that stands behind the analyses of reasonableness in Rawls. As we mentioned already in the introduction, the main motivation behind the entire project of political liberalism is the question of stability under the conditions of pluralism. This stability cannot be understood as a mere *modus vivendi*, where the individual parties would prefer to dominate, but do not have the power or the resources to do so. Social stability has to be deeper, more permanent than that. However, the Rawlsian "stability for the right reasons" might be too intellectualistic, requiring citizens to adopt an elaborated, theoretical viewpoint that is then expected to fit into a larger doctrine they hold. This, as explained above, is probably unrealistic to expect, especially in contemporary societies. But there may also be other possibilities. A further way of interpreting stability, not unknown in Rawls (although certainly idiosyncratic), is via the notion of *public culture*. A consensus on certain values can be considered stable when it is not publicly challenged or undermined – when a decisive majority of interlocutors in the public sphere respects it, so that its violations are immediately called out as out of place or wrong. In other words, a society might be seen as having reached an overlapping consensus when certain values (or modes of mutual engagement) are firmly entrenched in ways citizens interact with each other.

The picture sketched in the previous paragraph does not imply any intellectualized consensus. Public culture might be reasonable even if it is not dominated by reasonable doctrines or populated by (what we judge to be) reasonable citizens. If toleration, willingness to acknowledge other opinions and acceptance of equal social standing dominate in society (or, more specifically, if the individual challenges to them in form of various speech acts are either rare or are resisted in the public sphere), then the given society is stable is a way that goes well beyond a mere *modus vivendi*.

We would like to end this paper on a slightly speculative note. When studying history, it is often hard to resist seeing what might be called "the spirit of the

times", "intellectual climate", or "social atmosphere" as both defining certain periods and continuously evolving. The "mood" in society may change without it being attributable either to a specific intellectual current or a popular, organized movement. Sometimes, whole societies end up becoming more aggressive, intolerant, or outright cruel over time. Sometimes, on the other hand, they might become more welcoming, tolerant, or open-minded. The same is true, we believe, for reasonableness. However, seeing this requires restructuring of how we view "reasonableness" (and "public reason" or even "political liberalism"). In this paper, we argued that the old focus on "comprehensive doctrines" is misplaced. In the internet age, unreasonableness will inevitably be more fluid and harder to pin down, found in disconnected individual acts and speeches that only manifest themselves in aggregate, as changes in the "social atmosphere". Still, this understanding of pluralism (and of reasonableness) is both more accurate and able (after some revisions) to fit into the framework of political liberalism.

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