

Minority Politics

by Benjamin Boudou

Bruno Perreau explores the concept of minority by analyzing what separates democracy from majority domination. Based on experiences of injustice, minority ethics is the foundation of more emancipatory political relations.

Reviewed: Bruno Perreau, *Sphères d'injustice. Pour un universalisme minoritaire*, Paris, La Découverte, 2023, 336 pp., €24.

The term minority is ambiguous and relative. It refers to a group that is small in number, relative to a majority, or the state of a person below the legal age. Its adjective "minor" suggests a certain quality of lesser importance: a quantity, a status, or a quality, all expressing the same idea of inferiority. And yet, the shift from quantitative inferiority to political inferiority, from legal inferiority to moral inferiority—in short, from inferiorization to exclusion—can occur easily with a few acts and words from the majority. Bruno Perreau's new book, *Sphères d'injustice*, examines these different threshold effects, between a legitimate power relationship in a democracy that gives greater power to the more numerous, and a domination of the majority over the minority that sustains forms of exclusion.

Building on his previous work on the politics of adoption, republicanism and conservative activism¹, the author makes an important contribution to theories of justice and democracy. He proposes three methodological, political and ethical shifts:

¹ *Penser l'adoption : la gouvernance pastorale du genre*, Paris, Puf, 2012; *Les défis de la République. Genre, territoires, citoyenneté*, Paris, Sciences Po, 2017 (with Joan Scott); *Qui a peur de la théorie queer ?*, Paris, Sciences Po, 2018.

1) rather than labouring over the construction of a theory of justice, we need to think in terms of people's experiences of injustice—he thus continues the attacks levelled by critical theory against the liberal tradition; 2) rather than exclusively studying the rules of majority or the struggles of minorities, we need to focus on the fragile structures and the links between the majority and the minority; 3) rather than considering political change only in terms of rights, we need to conceptualize a new minority ethic in order to build emancipatory political relations.

Majority-minority configurations

The book builds on a series of semantic, legal and political tensions. At least four can be singled out: 1) minority movements always run the risk of essentializing the group, repressing any dissenting voices and further isolating the group by reifying its identity; 2) anti-discrimination laws and policies are founded on a definition of criteria for identifying the discriminated group that must be both clear and consistent over time; this can typify an identity that depends on a constantly evolving social context, and overlook the circulation of individuals within social groups, thus assigning them to identity markers; 3) we must both create our own identity and resist being reduced to fixed identities; 4) it is possible to be a minority without being a numerical minority (women, the black population in South Africa), or a majority minority (economic and political elites, for example).

These tensions add a certain degree of complexity to the common-sense opposition between majority and minority. No one is naturally or ontologically a minority or a majority; we are all caught up in what I would describe as a majority-minority "configuration". According to Bruno Perreau, we are also individually permeated by the presence of the minority, which we must understand and welcome within ourselves in order to better redraw our ties of interdependence. This is the book's core theme. The question, then, is not one of essence (what is a minority?), but of coexistence on an equal footing: to what extent is the majority-minority configuration a source of injustice?

Following his usual practice, Bruno Perreau draws on a substantial body of literature, letting himself be guided by his subject rather than by any particular discipline with strict boundaries. Indeed, to analyze discrimination, anti-discrimination law and policy, the social experience of oppression, the modalities of

voting, inclusion and representation of minority groups, conservative mobilizations, or the lived experience of the minority body, from a Franco-American perspective, it is necessary to draw on law, sociology, political science, moral and political philosophy and literature. The book's strength is its ability to tie all these threads together coherently, and to form a clear argument against the reactionary nonsense that imagines the tyranny of minorities, wokism, deconstruction or intersectionality as the end of democracy, the republic, the Enlightenment or Western civilization.

The perspective of injustice

While justice has inspired the most ambitious normative architectures in political theory, injustice has been given less prominence. On the one hand, because it limits speculative theorizing by calling for a more material analysis that is open to individual experience; and on the other, because it offers only contextual solutions. Injustice is always an evil to be fought, but the real task is to reflect on justice. Bruno Perreau proposes to turn this paradigm on its head, by taking experiences of injustice as our starting point.

In so doing, he builds on the tradition of political realists such as Iris Marion Young, Judith Shklar and Ian Shapiro, who are concerned with the major principles of freedom, equality and solidarity primarily as specific democratic levers for combating domination, i.e. collective structures that undermine the fundamental rights and interests of individuals.

Bruno Perreau adds an essential dimension: the possibility of domination is already a form of domination, especially for minorities. When a racist militia goes on a rampage of terror, it could potentially attack everyone, thereby exerting its dominance over all; but this would mean relativizing those on whom it is exerted more systematically and intensely. In simple terms, we are neither all equal before this domination, nor all receptive to the disciplinary spectacle it stages. A minority experience is therefore the sum total of specific vulnerabilities when confronted with a range of potential dominations. Not all of them are always exploited or activated in every situation, but they all serve as reminders of the majority order.

A minority is certainly not a perpetual vulnerable victim; it can acquire influence and develop modes of action in order to gain power. However, this power

is always indexed to the minority-majority configuration, i.e. to the social world as shaped by the majority. If a minority acquires influence, its transformation into real power is entirely dependent on the majority (chapter 2).

Minorities and counter-minorities

In terms of political action, minority issues have paved the way for new repertoires of action that circulate throughout the world, from mobilizations for social justice (woke culture) to cancel culture (p. 79). The entire logic of the majority ("the law of numbers", chapter 3) can thus be called into question: majority rule which, without institutional guarantees, can give full legitimacy to the power of the majority; the algorithmic society which, through standardization, ultimately perpetuates a majority norm; and finally, consensualism, based on an ideal of commonality and polite conversation, which we know lends itself poorly to minority political expression. As analyzed by Abdelmalek Sayad in relation to immigrants in France², or by Elizabeth Anderson in relation to the demands of African Americans during segregation³, demands for civility or discretion are often the prerogative of the majority seeking to limit the debate.

Minority vigilance is not without "counter-minority interventions" (p. 111). Just as the "Manif pour tous" demonstrations in France demanded "parity" (one father, one mother), invoked the imagery of the resistance (against the invasion of gender theory) and that of labor movements (to delegitimize a struggle that was more "societal" than social⁴), we are shown how minority discourses are appropriated and hijacked for illiberal ends: the white man, as victim of a new tyranny, is used to conjure up a minority enemy; minorities are pitted against each other to turn affirmative action against itself; equivalence is drawn between discourses demanding rights and those seeking to abolish them; anti-discrimination law, freedom of expression and the language of diversity are used to justify daily discrimination and harassment; and the right of minority citizens is asserted to close national borders.

² Abdelmalek Sayad, *La double absence*, Paris, Seuil, 1999, pp. 496-497.

³ Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010, pp. 98-99.

⁴ See his specific criticism of this distinction on p. 151 and, more generally, *Qui a peur de la théorie queer ?*

To safeguard the precious protections of anti-discrimination law, this "minority hermeneutic" must be opposed by condemning its misappropriation by the majority and its tendency to subjugate people to rigid categories of identity. Chapter 7 in particular, and its proposal to extend "analogical reasoning", addresses this very issue:

"An analogical reasoning will not consider that ableist violence is *the same as* sexist violence, but will put what concerns the one (its intensity, temporality, form, etc.) at the service of understanding the other. For one exists *with* the other. In this way, analogy makes it possible to assess complex situations without excluding from the scope of the law (and therefore from the application of the principle of equality) those people who do not have the "right difference" as far as public policy is concerned."

The author goes on to explain the importance of this reasoning for recasting a minority democracy not in terms of identities, but in terms of the effects of the majority-minority configuration: "What is calibrated are not identities and cultures, but the discriminatory consequences of a given social context on individuals" (p. 212). As we turn from one case to the next, we hear a "resonance" that binds together minority bodies and experiences. The point is not to reduce one specific form of discrimination to another, but to expose the discriminatory structure that binds minority destinies together—something the author calls "*intra*sectionality".

Minority ethics

However, if minorities are interlinked in this way, it is precisely by the same analogical reasoning that they can be subjugated one after the other: "the chain of protection can become a chain of destruction", writes the author (p. 222) in reference to the new majority on the U.S. Supreme Court, which intends to challenge in turn the right to abortion, contraception and same-sex marriage. How, then, can we consider the links between minorities without binding them to a common destiny?

The solution is set out in the final chapter, which gives the book its subtitle, "For a minority universalism". The idea is to base law and democratic politics on ethics: "What minority experience teaches us is that the self is composed of a set of other lives that we redeploy in our demand for global responsibility" (p. 241). In contrast to empathy or benevolent altruism toward the vulnerable, identity must be reinterpreted as an unstable, temporary equilibrium between majority and minority positions.

We are not fixed or closed entities, but a nexus of relationships and allegiances. The author has developed a vocabulary of non-sovereignty, dispossession and incompleteness that fundamentally expresses the possibility of a reactive community, not united by shared, excluding values, but which actualizes itself against the domination we perceive thanks to minority voices, in ourselves and in the collective.

Environmental ethics has brought to light the continuity between our bodies and the world, deconstructing the sovereignty of the human subject and raising our awareness of the harm we do to the world, and therefore to ourselves. Similarly, an ethics and a politics of the minority (and by no means of minorities) counter the hegemony of the majority by reminding us that we are always already constituted by the existence of others. The author concludes with practical suggestions for translating such ethics into public policy.

Questions of representation

Considering the ambitious scope of *Sphères d'injustice*, one might wonder why the author chose political theorist Michael Walzer as a focal point. If this is a historical argument, about how the fear of communitarianism was constructed, why does the author not focus instead on the reception of more systematic and proclaimed multiculturalists, such as Will Kymlicka⁵? If the argument is theoretical, as is suggested on p. 53, it seems limited by Bruno Perreau's otherwise pertinent critique. The little that remains in common between Walzer and Perreau does not quite justify this association. While the title appropriates Walzer's 1983 book *Spheres of Justice*, I have my doubts as to its real relevance to the book's conceptual and normative framework. In which case, where exactly does the history of its reception in France, proposed in Chapter 1 for the rest of the book, fit in? The dialogue between the social history of ideas and political theory does not seem to be well defined in these early pages.

The thematization of presence may also leave readers perplexed. On the one hand, the author recognizes the populist risk of refusing all forms of representation (p. 128), while on the other he makes presence the bedrock of minority politics, against

⁵ *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996.

representation as a form of appropriation (pp. 185-186). While the majority subject will always find his/her interests represented in one way or another (that is what it means to be a majority), the minority subject has no such confidence. Presence must therefore prevail, but this oscillates between the presence of representatives and of minority interests, and the presence of minorities themselves. The author is clear, however: presence implies legitimate existence, the assumption of coexistence, even within oneself. But does this demand for presence, this specific responsibility to assume that "presence is, always, an event" (p. 191), not place too heavy a political burden on minorities? Is there a demand for minority presence, and if so, what are its preferred forms? After all, the shortcomings of a representation that captures, reifies and homogenizes the voice of minorities are not the prerogative of representation, but of a bad politics of representation. The author addresses these questions at the very end of the book (pp. 260-261), but does not resolve this particular dilemma.

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