

THE NEW MODES AND ORDERS OF DISRUPTION: WEB 3.0 AND REPUBLICAN RESILIENCE

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Abstract. The 2016 US Presidential election highlighted certain negative manifestations of Web 3.0 that points to sustained efforts at disruption as a political tool and a new kind of arbitrary interference aimed at undermining the prevailing culture and traditions of modern democratic nation-states. The growing importance of social media and the weaponization of big data and fake news signal that new forms of domination will be a significant challenge to democratic practices going forward. This paper explores these developments through the lens of republicanism and asks if this approach can offer an attractive way to address these threats. In particular, I argue that republicanism's focus on minimizing domination through its alternative conception of liberty contains a certain resilient form of antipower that serves to counter some of the arbitrary interferences that have emerged in the shift from Web 2.0 to 3.0.

Keywords: modern republicanism, Web 3.0, disruption, resilience, non-domination, social media

The plan of this paper is straightforward. First, I briefly sketch out the main tenants of modern republican political theory, highlighting its alternative conception of liberty. I then explore some of the aforementioned disruptive interferences facing modern nation-states. Finally, I return to the idea of modern republican liberty as non-domination arguing that the stress it places on resilience and control offers a way forward in combatting arbitrary interference.

I. REPUBLICAN LIBERTY AS NON-DOMINATION

It has been argued that republican liberty as non-domination features a resilient form of liberty (Pettit 1997 and 2001; Skinner

1997 and 2002). This way of thinking about liberty points to an ideal of assurance that liberty as non-domination is entrenched in the institutional structure of the republic. Furthermore, because this resilience is entrenched in this manner, the thought is that republican liberty can respond to the changing needs of the citizenry and, combined with properly constituted republican institutions, facilitate the active and contestatory nature of republican politics. Republican theorists argue that freedom consists neither in the non-interference of others, as in negative liberty, nor is it equated with self-mastery, as in positive liberty. Instead, individuals are free to the extent that they are not subject to any interference that arises apart from their own arbitrium or will. Seen in this manner, individuals are free to the extent that they live under the conditions where they count as “a ‘freeman’ rather than a ‘bondsman’, a liber rather than a servus” (Pettit 2006, 134 and 2008, 106-8). Thus, for republicans, individuals are considered to be at liberty when they are free from any interference that is not forced to track their common avowed interests. For Pettit (2008, 106-8), republican liberty is defined as the absence of alien or alienating control on the part of other persons that negatively affects an individual’s freedom of choice.

An attractive aspect of the republican approach is that it identifies arbitrary power as the nemesis of freedom, whether that power arises from the state or among the people. An agent (or agency) dominates another agent when the first is able to exercise arbitrary power over the other (Pettit 1996, 578). Seen in this way, republican liberty as non-domination can be thought of as a form of antipower, one that is obtained when institutions and practices actively eliminate dominating power hierarchies. For Pettit (1996, 589), antipower represents “a form of control that a person enjoys in relation to his own destiny - and such control represents one familiar type of power: the power of the agent who can make things happen.” Antipower in this sense resiliently serves to protect individuals against potential dominators by minimizing the capacity of others from exercising domination over them. When seen in this manner, modern republican antipower stops domination before it

emerges by removing the capability of the dominator to act with arbitrary interference. This is a crucial point, especially in light of Web 3.0's new modes and orders of disruption, one to which I will come back to in Section III to further explore.

For republicans, for antipower to be present there must be a constitutive relationship between non-domination and the citizenry, institutions, laws and values of the state. Lena Halldenius (2010, 12-3) argues that “republican freedom makes sense only in an institutional setting; it is institution-dependent”. Moreover, republicans think of freedom as a kind of status, one that is recognized by others and receives institutional support, which shields or immunizes individuals from arbitrary interference (Pettit 2006, 133; Honohan 2002, 184). Thus, republican institutional design, the rule of law, and the political virtues that support them, all point to a more robust form of liberty that seeks to secure citizens from arbitrary interference.

Similarly, Christian List (2006, 218) has argued that the modern republican approach has a built-in “rule-of-law” component that highlights the definitional relationship between liberty as non-domination, democracy, the institutional and legal structures that support it and the common good. Understood this way, an individual is free in the modern republican sense only if he is recognized by others as enjoying a kind of status that resiliently serves to protect him from any interference that does not track his interests and promotes his equal status as a citizen (Laborde and Maynor 2008, 9).

However, at first glance, relying on institutions and on constitutionalism may, in the shift from Web 2.0 to 3.0, present republicans a significant challenge. Namely, that this shift has weakened the very institutions and mechanisms republicans rely on to minimize domination. For Cécile Laborde, the modern nation-state is facing “complex new forms of unchecked arbitrary power” that flow across national borders and are exercised by distant and usually anonymous agents and agencies against vulnerable individuals who have little capacity to counter this kind of arbitrary

interference. Moreover, “instead of relationships of cooperation or interdependence, which would imply reciprocity and mutual benefit, the current international order is marked by one-sided and largely coerced domination and dependency” (Laborde 2010, 50).

What we are left with is an image of seemingly powerless individuals who are subjected to real and sustained instances of disruptive arbitrary interference without any means of effectively countering it. These individuals live at the mercy of others – others who do not track their interests and who exercise their power at will and with impunity – all without any effective means of fighting back and regaining their status as a free person. What this points to is a legitimization deficit in certain decision-making processes in instances where individuals are exposed to certain actions or decisions in which they have no ability to influence through the existing networks and norms of democratic participation. It follows, then, that republican institutions and constitutional mechanisms may have a diminished ability to shield individuals from certain sources of domination. In the next section, I want to highlight some of these threats in greater detail.

II. WEB 3.0 AND THE NEW MODES AND ORDERS OF DISRUPTION

In this section, I want to highlight some of the ways that disruptive interferences have impacted the recent US politics. There are at least five areas that I believe constitute the most disruptive interferences:

- foreign interference through online mediums
- social media bots
- fake news
- echo chambers and filter bubbles
- the weaponization of big data

While the points on this list are not exclusive or exhaustive, it is my belief that they represent the most disruptive threats from Web 3.0's new modes and orders.

By now, many will be familiar with Russian efforts to interfere in the 2016 US Presidential election. According to an indictment (USA vs. Internet Research Agency LLC et al) issued by a Washington, DC grand jury, the Russian government operated a three-year scheme, code-named the Translator Project, executed by the Internet Research Agency, to “spread distrust toward the candidates and the political system in general” (Shane and Mazzetti). A main goal of this campaign was to stoke controversy to foment discord and disrupt traditional democratic norms by exploiting social networks and media. Russian agents posed as American voters on social media sites like Twitter, Facebook and Reddit using trolls to rile up partisans by spreading false narratives and pitting sides against each other (Carabeno 2018).

Exploiting social networks and stoking controversy to foment discord and disrupt traditional democratic norms was perhaps the most effective aspect of this campaign. Russian agents posed as American voters on social media sites like Twitter, Facebook and Reddit spreading false narratives and pitting sides against each other. It is estimated that at least 126 million Americans were exposed to some aspect of this operation. Using trolls to rile up partisans became one of the most common tactics used by them. Planning and holding political rallies was another common tactic. The indictment, USA vs. Internet Research Agency LLC et al (2018), states that on August 16, 2016, a Facebook group known as “Being Patriotic” organized twenty rallies that took place simultaneously in Florida, including one that featured an imprisoned Hillary Clinton impersonator on the back of a flatbed truck (Cerabino 2018).

The IRC was also responsible for directing swarms of Twitter bots to push false narratives and fake news during this election. An example of one of the more prominent of these accounts was @TEN_GOP. According to the Indictment (2018):

Defendants and their co-conspirators also created and controlled numerous Twitter accounts designed to appear as if US persons or groups controlled them. For example, the organization created and controlled the Twitter

account “Tennessee GOP”, which used the handle @TEN_GOP. The @TEN_GOP account falsely claimed to be controlled by a US state political party. Over time, the @TEN_GOP account attracted more than 100,000 online followers.

These kinds of activities have continued. For example, in the wake of the Parkland school shooting on February 14, 2018, the top hashtags were #NRA, #guncontrolnow, #shooting, #teacher among others (Griffith 2018). Many of these hashtags were promoted by legitimate users focusing on the school shooting and the many complex issues surrounding gun control. There were, however, thousands of Twitter bots using the tragedy for disruptive purposes.

Twitter bots are artificial intelligence (AI) software-controlled accounts that use algorithms to generate content and establish connections. In general, these kinds of social bots perform certain useful functions like the dissemination of news, publications and the coordination of volunteer activities. There are, however, other malicious uses of bots such as to “emulate human behavior to manufacture fake grassroots political support (Ratkiewicz et al. 2011), promote terrorist propaganda and recruitment (Berger and Morgan 2015; Abokhodair, Yoo, and McDonald 2015; Ferrara et al. 2016), and manipulate the stock market (Ferrara et al. 2016 and Varol et al. 2017, 1). Varol discovered that of, the 300 million Twitter users, somewhere in between nine and fifteen per cent were bots. Facebook, too, has a problem with fake accounts. According to their own data, around 60 million accounts are thought to be fake (Confessore et al. 2018). An example of how bots can take fake news and push it to the top of the trending charts can be seen in the attempt to discredit Emma Gonzales, an outspoken survivor of the Parkland school shooting. Along with some of her classmates, Gonzales was featured in a Teen Vogue (2018) image ripping up a paper gun target like those found in firing ranges. The image that went viral had been doctored to show Gonzales ripping up a copy of the US Constitution.

This brings us to the issue of fake news and the way they have been used to tear down both politicians and institutions. Facebook is not alone in being the main culprits in the spread and use of fake news. Both Google and YouTube have fake news problems that they have been forced to address forcefully (Renner 2017). Although the spreading of false information is not new, the explosion of online media combined with the popularity of social media sharing has raised serious questions about the vulnerabilities of the modern democratic state. According to a recent report by the Harvard University's Shorenstein Center for Media, Politics and Public Policy (Lazer 2018):

Current social media systems provide a fertile ground for the spread of misinformation that is particularly dangerous for political debate in a democratic society. Social media platforms provide a megaphone to anyone who can attract followers. This new power structure enables small numbers of individuals, armed with technical, social or political know-how, to distribute large volumes of disinformation, or "fake news." Misinformation on social media is particularly potent and dangerous for two reasons: an abundance of sources and the creation of echo chambers.

Many users' social networks seem to have a self-reinforcing function where like-minded individuals simply help each other solidify their fixed preferences by cutting themselves off from any meaningful critique of their own beliefs and values. In other words, individuals tend to follow only those whose beliefs are similar to theirs. Moreover, many maintain that they do not want to engage in critical kinds of exchanges online, but instead use social media to seek out and interact with like-minded individuals.

What is at stake here is the potential for groups polarizing and entrenching themselves into factions, something that has long troubled political theorists and practitioners from Machiavelli to Madison. Members of factions tend to place their own narrow self-interests above that of the common good and can have a destructive effect on the political community (Maynor 2007). If social networks simply serve as echo-chambers of this or that point of view, there is

a risk that positions and preferences will harden and become more entrenched (Adamic and Glance 2005). Moreover, the same technology that allows users to access an infinite number of debates and news-sources also allows them to ignore and filter out those that may be critical of their own viewpoints (Harmon 2004). Often referred to as filter-bubbles, a related danger is that the lack of conflicting information means that falsehoods are not suitably challenged, leading to what Benkler et al. (2017) describe as a lack of shared reality, something that may prove dangerous for societies.

These troubling developments are accompanied by the weaponization of information through the harvesting of big data and the micro-targeting of social media users. Micro-targeting is a strategy that uses demographics and consumer data gained from a range of sources including tracking users' internet browsing history, social media activities, shopping habits, etc. The ultimate goal is to identify the interests of preferences of like-minded individuals to influence their thoughts and actions through both traditional and online advertising. Although micro-targeting has long been a standard tool used by political campaigns, the shift from Web 2.0 to 3.0 has seen an increase in the sophistication of coding algorithms that has opened up new opportunities to influence and potentially manipulate voters.

A good example of this is the now infamous Cambridge Analytica (CA), who were able to covertly obtain personal information on somewhere around 50 million Facebook users. Although there is some confusion surrounding the extent of their influence on the US 2016 election, there are some basic facts known. Initially hired to promote the candidacy of Senator Ted Cruz, CA worked on behalf of the Trump campaign during the general election, once Cruz had dropped out. It is said that they were able to covertly obtain personal information through the acquisition of data from a researcher who had collected it using a seemingly benign personality test app. The goal was, according to Christopher Wylie, a data science contractor turned whistleblower, to build an algorithm based on the Facebook data to construct a psychological

profile that would target voters with personalized political advertisements (Greenfield 2018). While it may be impossible to know the impact, if any, these kinds of advertisements had, there is evidence to suggest that this kind of micro-targeting is especially effective with low-information voters, which helped to form the base of Trump's winning effort (Fording and Schram 2017).

Not surprisingly, as mentioned earlier, there is a thought that these kinds of disruptive interferences are one of the many grave threats facing the modern democratic nation-state. So what does republicanism have to offer in the face of, to borrow a phrase from David Remnick, this "stress test of liberal democracy?" In the next section, I want to return to an issue that I raised earlier, namely the concept of republican liberty as non-domination, as a form of resilient antipower.

III. THE RESILIENCE OF NON-DOMINATION

Earlier, I argued that republicans understand liberty as non-domination as a kind of antipower. On the one hand, this approach tolerates certain kinds of interference – namely those that are not arbitrary and help to constitute it whereas, on the other hand, it seeks to eliminate interferences that are arbitrary. For republicans, certain interferences that help to secure liberty as non-domination such as the rule of law, properly constituted institutions and distinctive republican ideals serve to offer a kind of guarantee of being free in a particular kind of manner. What this points to is that republican liberty as non-domination has a resilient quality to it (Pettit 1997, 24). According to Brennan and Hamlin (2001, 47), the "idea of resilience is related to the idea of assurance - a resilient liberty is one that is assured in the sense that it is not contingent on circumstances, but rather is entrenched in the institutional structure". Thus, in this way, republican liberty should be understood as a resilient core of protection that allows individuals to determine which ends they will pursue within the context of non-

domination. It does this through two important strategies. The first can be found within a polity's institutions and policies as they aim to regulate potential instances of domination through the use of protective institutions and policies. The second aims to empower individuals by promoting their well-being and capability to enjoy their freedom. I now turn to these two strategies in turn.

INSTITUTIONAL ANTIPOWER

The first strategy to promote the kind of resilient antipower associated with republican liberty resides within a polity's institutions and policies and aims to regulate potential instances of domination through the use of protective institutions and policies. Republicans have long stressed the importance of constitutions and the rule of law as forms of protective institutions that help keep arbitrary power in check. Moreover, republicans also advocate aggressively regulating the resources of the powerful by utilizing traditional mechanisms like checks and balances; the dispersion of power across a range of legislative, administrative, and judicial levels; democratic contestation; and active civic engagement (Maynor 2003 and 2006). And, as mentioned above, it is important to note here the important role that democracy plays in republican political theory. In minimizing arbitrary interference, democratic institutional structures allow individuals to bring their interests out into political forums so they can be accounted for and tracked by others and the state.

Importantly, for republicans, what this points to is a specific kind of antipower that resides within democratic institutions and practices and transforms potentially dominating policies so they are not considered alien to the many individuals and groups that make up society (Maynor 2010). Moreover, what this also points to is that, for republicans, an individual's liberty is inherently linked to governing institutions that necessarily reside within their sphere of influence and which they control through democratic practices. To

minimize domination, citizens must know these institutions, how they work, and be able to engage with them in a positive manner to help shape the policies that emerge from them. In other words, it seems important that these institutions reside in close proximity to the citizenry – they need to be able to see them operate and, crucially, easily influence them to help minimize arbitrary interference. With respect to Web 3.0's disruptive interferences, there has to be a concerted state effort to force internet companies to adhere to certain best practices that increase individuals' control over how their online data is managed and utilized. But individuals, too, have a role to play. I turn to that next.

INDIVIDUAL ANTIPOWER

The second strategy to promote individuals' antipower can be seen in three advantages they enjoy when they are free from domination that is likely to boost their control over who or what interferes with them (Maynor 2003, 43-8). To be sure, in each of these there is an important individual responsibility that emerges. The first is that individuals are secured from any anxiety or uncertainty they may experience from those who seek to interfere arbitrarily with them. Maximizing freedom as non-domination will lower the degree to which individuals are subject to arbitrary interference and, because the interference that they experience tracks their interests and opinions, uncertainty and anxiety are reduced (Pettit 1997, 85). The second advantage is that it reduces the degree to which individuals have to be prepared to defend themselves against arbitrary interference. It follows, then, that the degree that individuals have to plan strategically to cope with arbitrary interference is reduced the more non-domination is maximized. In many instances, like those that may occur online, individuals lose this battle with arbitrary interference. However, increasing the range of options open to individuals to control their online data and presence will likely reduce their efforts to protect themselves from the arbitrary

interference of others. Finally, individuals who experience a decrease in their vulnerability to arbitrary interference may also experience subjective and inter-subjective benefits since they will be more or less on equal footing with others. This benefits both the way they view others and the way in which they view themselves. Measures like reducing the anonymity of many internet users may help level the playing field so that others can look at each other in the eye.

The upshot from both the institutional and individual forms of antipower is that agents retain a fair degree of control over what interferes with them and whether or not that interference is arbitrary. This is the key to resilience – the more control individuals have the more resilient their liberty is, the less control they have, the more their liberty is at risk. The key, then, to addressing Web 3.0's disruptive interferences turns on increasing individuals' control over them.

CONCLUSION

It is my contention that the most effective way to combat arbitrary interference is to vest republican liberty as non-domination within the current governmental technology of the modern democratic state. As Kymlicka (2001) has pointed out, at the moment the “only forum in which genuine democracy occurs is within national boundaries”. It follows, then, as the first line of defence against the disruptive interferences of Web 3.0, a nation-state's political institutions and ideals should reflect republican priorities so that citizens have more power and control. Nation-states are going to have to better guard themselves against outside meddling through online mediums. They are going to have to regulate social media companies to ensure that users data is secured and not being used for malicious purposes; and they are going to have to work to develop and promote critical thinking and information literacy. As a second line of defence, social media companies have a role to play

addressing these kinds of interferences. They are going to have to make it easier for users to manage their personal data; they are going to have to be more transparent in how they use this data; they are going to have to do a better job working to identify and weed out social bots; and they are going to have to work harder to filter out fake news from their networks. Finally, as a third line of defence, individuals are going to have to up their game, too. They are going to have to work to seize control of their online data; they are going to have to do a better job critically engaging with online content; they are going to have to reduce their reliance on anonymity; and they are going to have to interact on social media in a non-dominating manner. For modern republicans, it comes down to control. The more control over interference an agent has, the less arbitrary these interferences are. So with respect to Web 3.0's disruptive interferences, the more control individuals have over them, the more resilient their enjoyment of republican liberty will be.

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