

## Going Home in Peace: The Economy of Virtues, and Apathy as a Right\*

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This article proceeds from the premise that, even if you accept the principle that justice is impossible in the complete absence of virtue, a good political system ought to be parsimonious in any requirement of virtue as an input, so as not to impose undue restrictions on its own ability to function. Assuming a more or less random distribution of virtue through time and space, it would be preferable, all other things being equal, to have a system equipped to operate not only in periods of abundant moral and ethical virtue, but also — and particularly — in periods of scarcity, when such qualities seem depleted in human nature. This exigency grows critical in the context of a modern society, in which the ever-increasing complexity and impersonal nature of social relations will produce anonymity that would urge extreme caution in the presumption of virtue as an element of social relations — a caution that sociology unanimously teaches us. In such a context — one in which not all issues will involve everyone equally, nor will all voices be always audible — prudence advises and tolerance demands that political apathy — or, rather, mere abstention — should be recognized, if not as a new modality of virtue, at least as a basic right: in the exercise of which, I will respectfully silence myself whenever appropriate before the judgment of actors more intensely immersed than I, and let myself hope for silence from a few so as to be heard when I see fit to express myself.

Key words: Political apathy; political participation; political theory; rational choice; modern society.

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*Someone may wonder why I go about in private, giving advice and busying myself with the concerns of others, but do not venture to come forward in public and advise the state.*

Socrates<sup>1</sup>

Invited to write for a panel on “justice and virtue” in the context of a meeting of a work group on “republic and citizenship,” of which the overall topic this year is “the common good and apathy,” one finds it impossible to give off reflecting on the heritage of civic humanism as contemporarily received: an ideal of participatory governance, politically egalitarian, and supported on a principle of actively deliberative citizenship<sup>2</sup>. When these ideals are posited strictly in these terms, it is difficult to find many who would openly contest their relevance and pertinence to the contemporary world. I would like to explore nonetheless certain resonances associated largely by allusion with “the common good” and “apathy,” which are the focus of our meeting this year. Faced with these concepts in tandem, the habitual assumption is that apathy has grave implications for the common good, that the common good is seriously compromised in that apathy invariably involves the dissemination of a selfish outlook, one that seeks to shirk the “costs of participation” and to exploit the earnest efforts of fellow citizens in search of solutions for common problems.

Clearly, this can perfectly well be the case. But not necessarily. I want here to pursue other ramifications of this problematic — perhaps less evident, but seeming to me just as relevant. On one hand, it is amply evident that the universalization of a mindset of political apathy, of indifference to public affairs, would be fatal not only to the realization of the ideals of civic humanism, but even to the simple operation of a democratic political regime along contemporary lines: if no one were to show up to vote, or simply if no one were disposed to participate in political debate, the system would become unviable in its most basic mechanisms. By this perspective, political apathy appears a flagrant violation of the Kantian categorical imperative<sup>3</sup>, since not even those who elect not to participate could consistently desire the universalization of their conduct without fearing a collapse of the whole political system. In reflection on political apathy from the perspective of an inquiry into the relations between justice and virtue, it therefore seems clear that all abstention from political participation would be interpreted as non-virtuous action, with manifestly inequitable implications. In the more immediate frame, by the mere exploitation of stolen work by those who assume the burden of participation; in the longer range, by the “distortion” of the results of the political process that my failure to express my preferences (or my arguments) will tend to produce.

I fear that would be premature, however. Even from a strictly normative standpoint, and adhering only to what has been expounded so far, the conclusions in the above paragraph depend on two necessary premises. First, they accept without argument (or at least without alternative supposition) that participation is intrinsically burdensome, so that

those who participate are exploited by those who do not participate. In the current rational choice jargon, it would be said that those who participate are suckers to collaborate in the production of a public good (the political decision) that will be consumed equally by themselves and by the free-riders who abstain. I do not intend to deny that this view indeed captures one salient aspect of the issue, particularly as the number of persons involved increases — and the relative influence of any one grows infinitesimal, while the costs of the decision-making process rise. Yet we must always bear in mind that those who abstain from participation abdicate their portion of influence in favor of others, delegating to those participating the prerogative of deciding for them. Which is to say, those who take on the costs of participation retain thereby a *power* which otherwise they would not have. To assert categorically, therefore, that they would be exploited by the abstainers prejudices a question that is empirical in nature, admitting of various answers in various contexts. Unconditional acceptance of the first argument implies acceptance of the assertion that black South Africans under the apartheid regime, or English factory workers of the 19th century, excluded from suffrage, were the beneficiaries of the exclusion systems then in effect. Of course, everyone would agree that universalization of the *right* to participation is a necessary condition for plausibility of the exploitation thesis put forward here. But, unless it is demonstrated that such universalization of suffrage is also a *sufficient* condition for the exploitation of the participants by the apathetic (a highly implausible thesis, given that it would imply that the blacks of, say, Alabama under segregation were exploiting the whites as they refrained from registering to vote), then all would likewise agree that political apathy does not necessarily result in harm to those disposed to political action. (We will see below how it does not always result in harm to those who abstain, either, but for the present let us set that aside.)

The second undemonstrated premise of the prior argument is incorporated in the idea that the absence of some “distorts” the result of the political process — and is equally problematic. From the start, this proposition errs by omission of Arrow’s impossibility theorem, in that it assumes the existence of such a thing as a “non-distorted” (i.e., truthful, authentic) representation of the collective will, which could be established in an unequivocal manner<sup>4</sup>. But, even if one wanted to dispute the interpretation given to Arrow’s theorem, it remains apt to consider how much is arbitrary in the ease with which we think of distortion arising from the abstention by some, while we give no consideration to the possibility of similar distortion arising from *self-expression* by all. I am aware that here we touch on a delicate subject, and before I should be accused of treading on anyone’s political prerogatives, let me make due profession of democratic faith, and affirm that the pre-imposition of external impediment to any non-violent political manifestation constitutes an unacceptable misuse of power, intrinsically immoral and unjust. Once assured, however, the possibility that all may participate fully (and not merely in some formal or juridical sense, but effectively and practically), it does not seem to me self-evident that a system in which all indeed choose to express themselves

is inherently superior to that in what some opt — freely — for silence, or abstention, or mere absence from the forum of debate. Foremost, I am thinking about the serious issue of asymmetry as to the intensity of preferences. Given the impossibility of interpersonal comparisons of well-being, it seems impossible to invent a voting system capable of giving due resonance to the variations in intensity with which each of the members of a political community prefers this or that choice<sup>5</sup>. If it can be assumed that those with less intense preferences on a given political issue will be more predisposed to abstain from voting, this renders at least arguable the supposition that political self-expression by everyone will *always* be preferable to abstention by some.

Therefore, before making broad judgments on political apathy from the standpoint of moral philosophy, I would like to enlarge the discussion with a dose of historical and sociological realism. There is no need to re-explore here the well-known argument by Lipset (1960), according to which a given measure of political apathy would be no more than a symptom of the success of the political order in reconciling society's major conflicts<sup>6</sup>, or that of Huntington (1975), according to which an excess of demands would produce a "democratic distemper" with paralyzing effects on the operational capacity of the political system. Instead, here I just want to devote a few thoughts to some presumable effects of the process of modernization on the political dynamics of human societies during recent centuries — with important links to the subject addressed here. Additionally, I would like briefly to consider a structure of plausible incentives that surround the decision regarding political participation (more specifically, the decision whether to vote), that indicate how, under certain conditions, the decision to abstain can involve more than mere laziness or alienation — and that the expectation of a permanent universal mobilization may be not only unrealistic, but also counterproductive to the aim of producing politically representative and collectively rational decisions.

## The Historico-Sociological Argument

However one chooses to characterize the process of modernization, one absolutely salient line of its development, present in every sociological table from Karl Marx to Norbert Elias, is the expanding range of human interdependence, in the context of society's increasing complexity<sup>7</sup>. For technical or other reasons, the fact is that human history over the past millennium is dramatically characterized by an unprecedented expansion in the diversity and range of human contact. Throughout the period, people began to interact across constantly-expanding geographic ranges, within ever-growing populations. Naturally, political institutions could not pass through this process unaffected, and underwent profound transformations during the period<sup>8</sup>.

A crucial component of the adaptation made by political institutions in this millennium is connected to the fact that as the group increases in size, and the anonymity with which people move within the population increases, the less can be expected an uncondi-

tional adhesion to virtue (or, speaking generically, to collectively shared values) as unconditional motive for action. It is said that shame betrays itself on one's face. From Giges's ring in Greek mythology to the magical cap in *1001 nights*, legends of all peoples are unanimous in associating invisibility with knavery and deceit<sup>9</sup>. The most stalwart hero becomes a rat once he has turned invisible and freed himself from the restraints imposed by the opinion of his peers (even if that transformation takes place under the regime of good intentions).

What goes on in the modern world is analogous. Plunging into the multitude, the modern man does not throw off but lightens the yoke of alien expectations that weigh on him. The problem of collective action, so bluntly described by Olson (1965), while not finding universal empirical application (since normative restrictions persist, of course — and, after all, no one really turns invisible), does find growing application as numbers increase: opportunities to act as a free-rider multiply. It is not mere coincidence that the seminal formulation of the political problem of modernity, by Hobbes in *Leviathan*, stands on a conjecture about the clash to be expected through the coexistence of anonymous persons immersed in a multitude of strangers — wherein ceases the governance of any vestige of norms. Tocqueville explores another ramification of the same problem in a concise and eloquent chapter of *Democracy in America*, on individualism in democratic countries. Once broken the chains (vertical, in this case) that bound persons to others in aristocratic societies, the individualism typical of democratic societies isolates each person from his community, his descendants, and his forebears and — even if it integrates him more fully than ever to the species, to humanity — closes the individual ever more within himself in the course of day-to-day existence.

So, more than by an external perception of personal honor, as his peers judge his virtues, the modern man — protected by the relative social invisibility he enjoys — can increasingly let his conduct be guided by personal interest. A significant portion of modern literature bears witness to the contrast between the aristocrat detached from himself, oriented toward elevated (though not universal) values, and the avaricious bourgeois, devoid of values, his back turned on the world, counting his coins<sup>10</sup>. If this is so, then it is natural to imagine that political institutions, in this context, had to have passed through a slow and arduous process of adaptation, to become capable of functioning under a regime of low virtue inputs. In fact, this is an ostensible purpose of the contemporary democratic institutional framework, expressly stated in the *Federalist Papers*, in particular Article 10, on the problem of factions.

Contrary to what is posed by Rousseau at his *Social Contract*, for whom the survival of republics would depend on the virtue of the citizens and the elimination of all internal factionalism, Madison asserts that such elimination is incompatible with free government. And, while tradition altogether would appeal to virtue as the foundation of popular government, the modern world seems especially unpropitious for such an expectation. As we know, he would prescribe the opposite approach, and in doing so set the tone for 20th Century political science: a proliferation of factions, so as to impede any from attaining a

hegemonic position, and so ensuring their relative and reciprocal neutralization<sup>11</sup>. In a similar mood, Bobbio (1984/1986, 22) points out expressly that democracy is born of an individualistic conception of society: from free competition for positions of power to universal and secret suffrage, the citizen is constantly called upon by the democratic system to consult his personal aspirations and interests, notwithstanding admonitions to the contrary that the constituted authorities or media of communication see fit to make.

Yet to go on with this individualist adaptation, with low input of personal virtues required of political actors, we must entertain the possibility that modern democratic institutions not only adapt themselves to an exogenous independent tendency, but reinforce this tendency as well, endogenizing it in great measure. Thus the question that follows is far from trivial, and becomes essential: how far do we want to go in search of virtues? Posed in the opposite direction, this question enables a different formulation, perhaps oriented more frontally with respect to our concerns: how far do we want to go with democratic institutions? But these are, I insist, two versions of the same question<sup>12</sup>.

While I do not have the intention of providing here a full answer to a question of such extensive reach, it would not be possible either just to leave it hanging, simply to refer to it as formulated. So I am going to try to enunciate, in summary, my basic position. In a manner broadly independent of an effort to determine whether a “perfect” political system (“justice”?) would require virtuous citizens (even granting provisionally that the more virtuous people there might be, the better for the operation of the *polis*), it would be wise for any political system to reduce the amount of civic virtue *required* for its operation. I think that, in a large measure, my very professional status as political scientist (who takes political institutions as a subject matter and poses questions about their capacity to organize normatively the peaceful coexistence of people in society) leads me to the basic view that, all the other variables held constant, the lower the input of virtues a political system requires to function, the better the political system — by dint of the simple fact that this means a lesser operational requirement. If I cannot take for granted the virtue of my fellow citizens, better that I should not assume its existence when legislating.

In fact this is one of the lessons Machiavelli most stresses in *The prince*<sup>13</sup>; it is found — as we saw — ostensibly applied by Madison in *Federalist* no. 10; and it has produced ever since, as an historical consequence, democratic institutions as we know them today. Ackerman (1988, 156-74) christened this lesson the principle of the “economy of virtues.” Its stronger version takes full expression in *The wealth of nations*, by Adam Smith, which postulates not only the prudential desirability of not counting on the virtue of strangers, but — going much farther — affirms the superiority, from the point of view of collective happiness, of the generalization of self-interested behavior. I do not mean here to endorse Smith’s thesis, especially because — as game theory has shown by way of the “prisoner’s dilemma” — it cannot always be expected to hold. Yet Weber (1922/1978, 635-40) has called our attention to the unparalleled role of the market as a vehicle for socialization among strangers<sup>14</sup> — and it is important not to minimize the relevance of the link between

the legitimacy of this individualistic self-determination of our personal priorities and many of our most cultivated humanistic values. The legitimation of self-interest sanctions the conduct of the bourgeois in the market, but also — in marked contrast — that of the free spirit who does not conform to convention and seeks self-expression in great deeds. The same reasoning that would obligate everyone to civic duty, attending and acting in political deliberations they have no interest, demanded of the avant-garde artist who chose to live in Leningrad that she fulfill her obligation towards society in a factory community in Central Asia. It may be true that, in contrast to the isolating chill of mercantile society, life in a community with strong internal standards of conduct seems very reassuring — but only as long as you do not affect exotic habits. Living in Salem must have been a great experience, but just to the point that your cherished neighbors decided to believe that you believed in witches. In every accounting of the positive potentialities for human existence offered by collective engagement (and they are many, and evident), it is crucial not to forsake the requirement of engagement by free choice — or we encounter not modern “civil society” but burnings at the stake or goblets of hemlock<sup>15</sup>.

### The Philosophico-Analytical Argument

The presumption that political participation, beyond being a right, is almost a duty of the citizen proceeds perhaps from simplistic premises according to which all persons have (or should have) some opinion on all matters of public import — and that they would value their individual opinions above the individual opinions of everyone else<sup>16</sup>. Yet these premises are flagrantly unrealistic, and do not apply even to professional politicians. Fortunately. Let us just imagine for a moment a political community whose members have, all of them, clear ideas about all issues. One of the two: either they all have (or a clear majority have) the same opinion on all these matters, constituting the oppressive communal experience to which I referred above, or this will be forever on the brink of civil war, since it will face extremely narrow limits to mutual persuasion and bargaining, and all deliberation will be tremendously hard. It should be noted that as an opposing scenario, I am not thinking simply of a population divided, dichotomically, between the apathetic and the non-apatetic, the informed and the non-informed, but also that — even among the politically active — it is to be expected (and desired) that some persons would involve themselves more intensely in some questions than in others, having more intense preferences with respect to some issues than to others.

From this it follows as well that there is no rational motive whereby I should value my opinion more highly than that of any of my fellow citizens. After all, there are subjects of public interest that arouse my personal curiosity, and about which I consider myself reasonably well informed — and (with or without justification) feel confident in my opinion to the point of being eventually disposed to influence the opinions of others on the matter. Yet there are likewise subjects that do not seem to me so important (or simply

strike me as dull or “difficult”), about which I am poorly informed, turning myself over entirely to the judgment of my fellow citizens. Moreover, there will be those subjects on which — while I may deem them consequential, even interesting — for a variety of reasons I do not have confidence in my judgment, and on which I delegate willingly and in good faith the representation of my will to another person (or group of persons) whose opinions I value above my own, and which I draw on as a source of information on the subject, or even adopt as being my own. It is important to emphasize in passing that, concretely, the distinction between the first case and the third is not so easy to delineate as it may seem here — in that in both cases at some point I have to take recourse to information provided by third parties<sup>17</sup>.

At this point, it should be noted how far we find ourselves now from the simplicity of the considerations framed at the outset of the present task. In moral condemnation of political apathy outlined there, there is an implicit premise of informational symmetry among citizens, who serve as base for the thought experiment on universalization of the antithetical precepts of “participation” and “non-participation”. At this point it would be trifling to cite inadequacies of this premise. In a minimally realistic approximation of the problem of specifying the political effects of apathy, as well as of the individual calculus that underlies it, it is necessary to admit into analysis some form of informational asymmetry.

In this context, I believe it could be illuminating to take recourse to the theorem of “the swing voter’s curse,” by Feddersen and Pesendorfer (1996)<sup>18</sup>. Here the old problem of voter turnout comes back, this time in view of asymmetrical information. As is widely known, voter turnout constitutes a famous paradox, from the vantage point of a rational elector who valorizes solely the outcome of the election: as the probability that any individual voter will come to determine the outcome is infinitesimal, tending toward zero, any cost he has to incur in voting should be sufficient to cause him to abstain<sup>19</sup>. In fact, rational choice models are a much more reasonable approximation of empirical phenomena when the costs and benefits associated with choice are high enough to justify the presumption that the actor will take on the burden of the calculation involved. In the case of the decision whether to vote, some are as residual as others, and the application of the method sounds extravagant — so much so that the more recent literature of public choice has been inclined to dismiss the paradox on these bases, citing low costs involved and/or the simplicity of the act, and to move in the direction of an effort at formalization of what it has been called “expressive action.” More than an “investment” on which a return is expected (as in Downs), under this perspective the vote would be, in normal circumstances, an act of “consumption”: rather a matter of realizing a projection of one’s public self-identification, in an act that would be valorized in itself<sup>20</sup>.

Be that as it may, just as Downs does, the subsequent literature takes as self-evident the arbitrary supposition that every voter values his opinion more than that of any other, without taking into account that under scrutiny in light of asymmetrical information this is an irrational postulate. If not by force of some authoritarian irrationality, why must I



give greater value to the vague impression I come to have about a given subject, in prejudice to the opinion of a person (or group) whose standards of judgment I trust, and whom I believe are more informed than I myself? Even though this may not always be the case, and there exist voters who may always put higher value or greater faith in their own opinions, the very possibility of observing the contrary alters the terms of the question: to the contrary of what Downs indicates, in the presence of informational asymmetries, the rational voter will *not always* positively assess the probability that his vote makes a difference in the election. What Feddersen and Pesendorfer show is that, under asymmetrical information, the voter who believes himself comparatively little informed maximizes the utility of his exercise of the franchise by abstention or voting null, even when he is not indifferent among the candidates, and *even when the cost of voting is zero*.

The rationale for the act remains here strictly tied to the production of the result. But, in contrast to prior models, in which the voter would positively valorize the utility of her own vote in direct proportion as she might see it making a difference in the outcome, in this model the person who considers himself less informed — while he wishes to express himself, given no cost to voting — seeks to *avoid* the remote possibility of finding out he made a difference, due to his uncertainty about his own preferences, and his belief (whether founded or not) that others of his fellow citizens are better informed than he himself<sup>21</sup>. In this case, the interest of the citizen who considers himself uninformed would be better served if he were to refrain from voting and thus avoid the possibility (remote, but in any case undesirable) that his “uninformed” vote should come to decide the election<sup>22</sup>.

If the theorem advanced by Feddersen and Pesendorfer is indeed correct, and my interpretation of it makes the least sense, this result opens the surprising theoretical possibility that, beyond being another individual right to be asserted against the pressures and interests of others, abstention becomes an act that could, in certain cases, be called... “civical”.

What I have in mind is that, by this conclusion, political apathy is no longer merely a form of idiosyncratic behavior, perhaps just laziness, adopted by someone who simply does not want to carry the burdens of participation (regardless of the plain right of such a person to do so). It can be now an ironic variety of “civic virtue”, to the extent that you increase the probability of a collectively superior decision from abstention on matters about which you consider yourself relatively uninformed, independent of the costs of participation (that is, laziness by definition is excluded). In this case, political apathy is not just an individual right, a “negative liberty,” but also can take the form of a kind of “political etiquette” clearly akin to the “positive” dimension of liberty<sup>23</sup>, perhaps providing a roughly spontaneous mechanism for dealing with the old — and apparently intractable — problem of allowing differences in intensity of preferences to express themselves somehow.

Under this perspective, you should remain silent whenever an issue really does not matter to you, expecting to be heard when you actually *want* to say something. Naturally, the citizen, and only the citizen, can be the judge of this — and, therefore, despite Hun-

tington, the political system shall be perfectly fit to process the occasional or contingent self-expression by all. But if, alternatively, all the people were always obliged to express themselves on all matters, it would likely be impossible that differences in intensity of preferences would find a way to manifest<sup>24</sup>.

Returning for a moment to the topic of exploitation: perhaps it can be said that the “swing voter” effectively exploits the rest of the body politic — for he lets himself remain uninformed and mute about an issue, and hopes to benefit from the information and deliberation provision made by his fellow citizens. But, for the sake of realism, we must recognize that, to the extent that the theorem assumes self-attribution as to a degree of being “informed” that will in principle vary depending on the issue in contention, the important thing is the incorporation of asymmetrical information as a given in any analysis of apathy, so as to guide freely-made decisions that different persons make in different tracks and different contexts — and that reciprocal tolerance will make viable, for the greater benefit of all. This way, the one who judges himself uninformed and opts to remain silent (and so to “exploit” his peers) on a given decision, will in principle judge himself informed and interested in convincing others, and eventually voting (and so allowing himself to be “exploited”) when another subject presents itself (or even is presented by him).

It is hardly irrelevant to observe, by the way, the perfectly universal character of the maxim guiding the behavior described above. Which poses anew, with altered vectors, the question of the morality of the acts of participation and abstention addressed at the outset. When we confront, in a very simplified form, the commandments “Thou Shalt Participate” and “Thou Shalt Not Participate” the first seems clearly more plausible as a universal maxim than the second. But when we confront the unconditional commandment “Thou Shalt Participate” with the form “Thou shalt participate when *thou* adjudge that you are informed and motivated with respect to the subject in view, but otherwise thou shalt hold thyself obsequiously silent,” it is unequivocally this formula, conditionally stated, that presents itself as passable, by will of those acting, into universal law. This formula involves the mental operation of placing oneself in the other’s position when evaluating a situation, and so embodies morality and justice in a more reflexive way — making it fit to preside over the political conduct of the just (or, if you prefer, the virtuous) man.

Indeed, any reference to “virtue” in this context should point above all to the virtue of tolerance (the modern political virtue *par excellence*), which incorporates and synthesizes in a profound sense all the four cardinal virtues: since it requires wisdom to make us curious enough to listen to others, temperance to doubt our own desires, courage to accept the possibility that in the end the opposing position may prevail, and justice to make us accept that which contradicts our will. Fundamentally, tolerance is also an actualization of these virtues in the context of the modern world. Being an intrinsically dialogical virtue, tolerance weathers our wrack in the relative invisibility of the crowd. The vice of intolerance cannot be cultivated invisibly, solitarily, within four walls — in distinction with obscurantism, intemperance, and cowardice. Tolerance or intolerance show in inter-

action. They will manifest themselves externally in a relation with another, and will remain always public, to be identified and denounced, whatever the size of the crowd<sup>25</sup>.

### Confluence: Some Final Considerations

Bringing democracy back to the conversation, my basic feeling is that if we begin — once again — to believe that this or that group of moral attributes on the part of the citizenry is necessary for democracy to function “appropriately” we will soon hear people cry in earnest for dictatorships. (And by the way, is there such a thing as the “virtuous dictator”?) To be taken as an acceptable moral requisite is a single virtue, broadly procedural, and necessary to the exercise of personal liberty in universal terms: tolerance. As for apathy, I have tried to show that, in certain circumstances, it can even be taken as a sign of underlying virtues. However, from the argument developed here, it can be inferred that, even if apathy is not a virtue in itself, it will have to be accepted unequivocally as a *right*, to be exercised according to the will of each person: I have the right to abstain from voting, or from speaking, or even from hearing debate on matters in which I am not interested, and instead to stay home with my kids or to go to the stadium for a football game.

I am perfectly aware that it may be problematical to refer generically to “political apathy” supported by an argument concerning electoral abstention. No doubt the first is a more forceful phrase, and I could cling to the second for the sake of semantic precision. But the fact is that the use of the phrase “political apathy” to refer to abstention is an absolute commonplace throughout the field of political science, and has by now been consecrated by usage. In any case, I accept the caveat, and am prepared to give up the usage of “apathy” in this context if we all agree to stop using rates of electoral abstention in modern democracies as proxies for “political apathy”. By the reasoning followed here, there is much to dispute in such an inference — and, accordingly, it is a highly dubious conclusion that over recent decades the populations of contemporary democracies have become more “apathetic” politically, independent of the rising indices of electoral abstention and distrust of institutions and governments. This last indicator in particular can just as well be read in the opposite direction; that is, as a sign of attention, vigilance, and greater information about the goings-on of government — more generically, as a symptom of decrease of automatic or compulsory subordination of individuals to existing institutions and organizations in society (Inglehart 1997, 206). Some could read the same process as a symptom of diminishing social cohesion and integration. I do not wish to dismiss in principle the possibility that there may be some problems in this regard, but not even for that reason should this process be seen as regressive or demobilizing: only a form of cohesion which is freely chosen by individuals, in a reflective and critical mode, can be emancipatory; and this free choice includes the choice of the manners, opportunities, and flags of one’s political expressions. It is worth recalling that Albania may well retain the world record in electoral turnout: 99.9%, on the occasion of the last reelection of Enver Hoxha.

In sum, “political apathy” (even if only occasional) may be put forward as perhaps the most trivial right with which any political system is forced to endow its citizens. In view of the third criterion for authority asserted by Dahl (1970, 40-56) — economy (above all, economy of time, that intrinsically scarce good), the polis has no real choice, if we want to enable the citizens to enjoy, beyond a certain fraternity among companions (perhaps personally unacquainted), love with those they choose to have near them in this fleeting existence. The right to go home in peace whenever it appeals to him is the minimal demand any citizen places on his political system.

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Translated from Portuguese by Jess Taylor

## Notes

- 1 Plato, *Apology* (trans. Benjamin Jowett at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>).
- 2 See Sunstein (1988) for a synthetic enunciation of the principal ideals of a “liberal republicanism”.
- 3 “I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.” (Kant 1900, 22).
- 4 Arrow’s theorem (1963) proves the impossibility of a system of collective decision-making, among three or more alternatives, which does not violate at least one of the following conditions: collective rationality, Pareto efficiency, unrestricted domain, independence before irrelevant alternatives, and non-dictatorship. Various proofs for the theorem, as well as a brief discussion of the meaning of each of the conditions indicated, can be found, for instance, in Craven (1992).
- 5 In a well-known passage (which, as far as I know, remains valid), Dahl (1956, 119) concludes that “the analysis strongly suggests, although it does not prove, that no solution to the intensity problem through constitutional or procedural rules is attainable”.
- 6 Still, it would be fair to say, regarding Lipset’s thesis, that it overreaches. In war, after all, no one has the chance (to say nothing of the right) of opting for apathy. It is, therefore, even if not always a desideratum in itself, certainly an attribute of the virtuous political order. When it is possible for many to hold themselves relatively indifferent to public affairs without inflicting noticeable harm thereby to themselves (or to others), it is because a “minimal conquest” has been achieved: the simple freedom to conduct life routinely, going about one’s own affairs, has been increased.
- 7 For those who wish to consult the sources alluded to here, the most cited references are, respectively, *The Communist Manifesto*, by Marx and Engels, and the “Synopsis” published as part IV of Elias’s *The Civilizing Process*, in particular its conclusion (1939/2000, 436-48). Naturally, the polar examples invoked here are arbitrary and possible not even the best. Comte, Tocqueville, Durkheim, Weber, Parsons etc. could as readily be cited.
- 8 For a minimally detailed discussion of that alluded to here, see B. Reis (1997, chap. 2).
- 9 Giges’s ring appears in Plato’s *Republic*, 359c-360d; the story of the magic cap that confers invisibility is beautifully retold by Naguib Mahfouz (1982/1995, 179-93).
- 10 Bendix (1970, 256-7) makes delightful note of the peculiar manifestation of these archetypes in Goethe’s prose: the fine-mannered but cold-hearted aristocrat (consistently with the particularism attributed to him by Tocqueville); the crass bourgeois, accomplished but shamefully narrow and specialized (“alien-

- ated from himself,” it would be put in a subsequent era); and the artist, dedicated to the “harmonious cultivation of his nature.”
- 11 Dahl (1956, chap. 1) elaborates a forceful criticism of the Madisonian model, but — with respect to the topics at hand — only to take the argument of the “Founding Fathers” farther than they took it themselves: his demonstration of the vacuity of the fear of a “tyranny of the majority” (the source of Madison’s worries) and of the inadequacy of separation of powers to prevent such a tyranny notwithstanding, Dahl radicalizes their argument, to the point of asserting that it is impossible to distinguish, in a non-arbitrary manner, a “faction” from any other political grouping. My impression is that, from the perspective of Dahl’s polyarchic model, all that remains of the Madisonian model is the pluralistic argument of *Federalist Paper 10*, referred to here.
  - 12 I would like to thank James Johnson for his suggestion of the feedback effect of democratic institutions on the dynamics of “dehydrating” the public relevance of personal virtues in modernity.
  - 13 “[...] because how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live, that he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation [...]” (Machiavelli 1908, 117-8).
  - 14 For a discussion of the Weberian argument concerning the market and its links with modern society, see B. Reis (2003, 56-60).
  - 15 A detailed discussion of these issues, in the light of elaborations made on the subject by William Kornhauser and Ernest Gellner, is found in F. W. Reis (2001, 5-8). In the context of our discussion, and of the idealization of Greco-Roman political life for which the republican tradition is often charged, it would be pertinent to underscore how Gellner (*apud* F. W. Reis 2001, 8), does not hesitate to extend to the ancient city — finding support in Fustel de Coulanges — the suffocating, oppressive characteristics he attributes to “communal society,” in contrast with modern “civil society”.
  - 16 Incidentally, if to this thesis – that people must have opinions on all matters — we add another, that those opinions are deducible from some objective sociological parameter, we arrive at the proposition that some persons will find themselves fit to teach others about the latter’s political consciousness.
  - 17 It is extremely opportune, in the context of this digression, to redirect the reader to Dahl (1970, chap. 1), where are masterfully discussed the three criteria for which someone comes to enjoy authority over others: by the personal choice of those disposed to obedience, by (presumption of) competence, and by economy (principally of time —perhaps the most valuable scarce resource).
  - 18 In the proof of the theorem there is an error that Fey and Kim (2000) claim to have corrected.
  - 19 The paradox is formulated in Downs (1957, chap. 14). It is important to include the proviso that Downs does not expound it as a paradox, having admitted in the model the possibility of a preference for making democracy viable to be included in voter’s calculations, this preference augmenting the probability that she will in the end decide to vote. Still, the introduction of this possibility does not solve the problem, given that the chance that any individual voter will end up saving a given democracy tends toward zero as well.
  - 20 See, for example, Fiorina (1997, 402-3) and Aldrich (1997, 389-90) for references to the problem of the low cost and the simplicity of the act of voting. The approach from the perspective of expressive action is briefly taken up by Aldrich (1997, 385-7), and receives a first attempt of full formalization in Schuessler (2000).
  - 21 Note that this result echoes very closely a paradox alluded to by Downs himself (1957, 274-6): if indifferent voters vote out of a sense of duty, they can “irrationally” decide an election. “Irrationally” because they *do not want* to decide that outcome. Otherwise, they are not indifferent. The difference is that Feddersen and Pesendorfer take this point much farther, as their argument does not require these voters to be indifferent to prefer abstention —merely that they presume themselves less informed than others of their fellow citizens.

- 22 And before I have leveled at me the customary accusation of elitism that is brought in the face of any reference to the importance of information to the quality of debate and political decision, I want to declare myself far from believing that those with more formal education are necessarily more informed on politically weighty matters. To the contrary, I prize the admonition attributed to Umberto Eco, that intellectuals should also know when to keep silent. In effect, were they properly Socratic, they ought to know — better than others — how to gauge the extent of their own ignorance.
- 23 The distinction — as famous as it is contested — between “negative liberty” and “positive liberty” is due originally to Berlin (1958).
- 24 Another caveat: before anyone might say that this constitutes an attack on the institution of mandatory voting as practiced in Brazil, I want to point out that the analogy does not apply, as the possibility of casting a null or blank vote permits anyone wishing to abstain to do so. In a country of such inequalities as Brazil, I am in favor of mandatory voting not by reason of the unsustainably elitist (and, at its limit, authoritarian) “educational” argument so often advanced, but for the simple fact that it is crucially important that the right to vote be absolutely unimpeded, and I see no means of preventing spurious intimidations against the exercise of this right other than to make voting obligatory.
- 25 It is possible to admit, therefore, that it is not necessary to put into practice a doctrine of “economy of virtues” in general, but only of a certain class of virtues, that would be replaced by others. This is the position of Holmes (1993, 227-8).

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