

Nenad Stojanović. *Dialogo sulle quote: Rappresentanza, eguaglianza e discriminazione nelle democrazie multiculturali*. Bologna. Il Mulino. 2014. 302 pp.

Reviewed by Federico Gobbo

This book is an Italian translation of Stojanović's (2013) revised doctoral dissertation written in 2008, about the spread of quotas in the public sphere, e.g., to guarantee a minimal presence of women in the Parliament parties can decide to have 50% of candidates of each gender. In particular, the book mainly deals with the use of quotas to protect linguistic minorities in multilingual contexts. Typical case studies, used by the author across the text, are Switzerland, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Belgium and Südtirol/Alto Adige. From a formal point of view, the author has chosen the unconventional format of a philosophical dialogue. This is certainly an unusual choice in contemporary philosophy. The author cites Bell's (1993) book as the only example (p.25, note 12). On the other hand, from Plato and Aristotle until the early days of modern science, e.g., Galileo Galilei and Francis Bacon, this format was widely used, so: why not? Stojanović presents the different positions through three fictional characters: first, Thérèse (a French-speaking Romand from Neuchâtel), who favors quotas, second, Cosimo (an Italian-speaking Ticinese, i.e., from Canton Ticino, Switzerland), who is skeptic, third, Solutio Informalis (Latin for 'informal solution,' a professor with a strong Swiss-German accent), who enters the discussion by the end of the fifth dialogue, and try to mediate between the two friends. While the author can be identified with no fictional character, he admits certain affinities with Cosimo, although his own skepticism is not as strong (p. 26).

The structure of the book consists of nine dialogues, each one dealing with quotas. In the initial dialogue, everything starts after a trip by Cosimo in Freedonia, a fictional democratic Republic settled in an island in the Pacific Ocean, where three linguistic groups share the territory. Within each group, there are followers of the "apolic" and the "turliman" cults. The majority of the population belongs to the "gigantics," who live in the countryside, while thirty per cent of the population lives around the capital city, Tiki, belonging to the "medians," and finally there are the "tiniests," who comprise fifteen per cent of the total population. The Parliament and the government are occupied only by apolic medians, a subgroup who forms 3.25% of the population. Beside this fact, the economy is prosperous and nobody complains. The reader thus understands that Freedonia is not unlike

the case-studies mentioned above, and this allows the author to address these matters objectively and dispassionately. Each dialogue is then followed by a comment written in a standard academic style, i.e., with all the necessary references to the extant literature, while occasional footnotes can be found in the dialogues themselves.

I will try now to summarize the main arguments for and against quotas. It is not an easy task because of the non-traditional format of the volume, and because it is difficult to define clear-cut positions, which makes the dialogic format a reasonable choice. The main problem with quotas is that they privilege a single identity axis (p. 18): for instance, a Catholic black woman can be part of the quotas of women, Catholics, or Blacks. Another aspect is the positive discrimination: what about an anti-Semite voting for a white man, who is manifestly incompetent for the position, because of the color of his skin? (p. 197)

Theoretically, this can be solved if quotas are kept flexible, temporary, and informal (p. 20). Unfortunately, what usually happens in the public domain is exactly the opposite: once individuals form a group around a concept of quotas, they become a lobby with their own interests and goals, trying to become formal, permanent, and fixed. Some traits are by their own nature more easily changed than others: you can change your place of residence far easier than your mother tongue or your sex (see Table 1, p. 173). Philosophically, accepting quotas implies the existence of collective rights, i.e., rights held by groups *qua* groups — which in concrete violate the democratic principle of ‘one person, one vote’ (p. 62). In Orwellian terms, in a democracy using quotas, all citizens are equal, but some citizens are more equal than others. The counterargument is that democracy is far more than ‘one person, one vote’: for the sake of governance, for instance, it is possible to violate that principle. The author refers as an example to the Canton of Geneva (p. 83), where political parties that cannot obtain at least 7.5% of the polls are excluded from the Parliament; is this law discriminating the Turkish minority, which counts less than 1% there? There is no easy answer.

Another problem is that often people do not want to be considered mainly as member of an (ethnic) group instead of ‘standard’ citizens, especially in post-war democracies (p. 40). In other words, are the beneficiaries of the minority language quotas willing to be considered as such? Or will they be considered ‘normal’? An extreme example is the first Swiss Member of Parliament, originally Slovak, who presented herself in traditional dressing, and singing the national anthem in the four national languages of Switzerland during the first meeting (p. 216).

Both positions lead the discourse to another philosophical point, namely the problem of essentialism, which states that personal identity is defined by the belonging to a group and its cultural traits, which are principal properties of the group itself. Let’s take the Swiss case as the reference point: the idea here is that

only a Ticinese can represent properly a Ticinese, never a Romand, because of the linguistic identity — respectively, Italian in the first case, French in the second one. Essentialism is challenged by the notion of linguistic justice as intended by Van Parijs (2011), who argues that political action should be directed towards common good, not the specific interest of linguistic minorities. In this view, translating official documents into English instead of in Italian, the latter an official and national language of Switzerland, can be accepted. Although, it is not by chance that only Italian speaking Members of Parliament denounced this fact as discriminatory, giving rise to the essentialist view again.

At the end of the fifth dialogue — which is in the middle of the discussion, and perhaps the most interesting — Cosimo seems to accept that territorial, non-ethnic forms of quotas are reasonable, following the models of Switzerland and the US (Dardanelli & Stojanović, 2011). An interesting discussion is offered on some key authors belonging to multiculturalism, who understand very well the dilemma of quotas, such as Mansbridge, Phillips and Kymlicka (2006). Basically the dilemma of quotas means that it is necessary for institutions to take linguistic and cultural diversity into account but on the other side that the application of quotas can undermine the social cohesion and in the long run they can even be harmful to the minorities that they claim to protect. The second part of the book (dialogues 6, 7 and 8 in particular) is devoted to the presentation of the possible strategies to solve this dilemma: the rigorous application of the principles of non-discrimination and equal opportunity; informal and formal practices of inclusion of linguistic minorities. Different language policies are considered, but unfortunately not systematically. One of the arguments for quotas is the lack of trust between the different linguistic groups, especially in the aftermath of war or conflict.

In the end, it seems that we live in a world full of quotas and we cannot avoid them. What we can try to do is to make them work by avoiding unwanted paradoxical effects. This book contains more questions than answers, and it causes the reader to consider possible answers to the complex questions posed in this book. However, the alternation between dialogues and comments is demanding, and different subtopics are reconsidered in different parts of the volume, which makes the task of the serious scholar more difficult than in a standard academic book. Even if quotas are not restricted to language matters throughout the volume, most of the volume is devoted to the public management of linguistic diversity, so it is especially recommended to sociolinguists involved in the relation between language, society and power. As most of the literature is written in English, I think that the author should seriously consider the opportunity to translate it into English in order to reach a broader public.

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