Democracy, domination and the distribution of power: Substantive Political Equality as a Procedural Requirement

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The origin of the modern idea of democracy can be described as theoretically intertwined with a normative critique of the role played by power in political societies. The democratic ideal, as emerging from the work of Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau, is intrinsically related to a certain interpretation of the ideal of a limitation of power. The doctrine of the separation of powers, introduced by the first two authors, as well as the notion of the sovereignty of the *General Will* at the basis of Rousseau's political thought – as opposed to what he describes as a situation of alienation and enslavement of the people, inevitably resulting from monocratic government (2008: 17) – are attempts to provide normative guidelines for the creation of a legitimate society. At the basis of the idea of democracy there is, then, the idea of the dispersion of power. However, the value of democratic institutions is not to be found in the achievement of an equal distribution of power among the citizens of a society *per se*: The distribution of power is instrumental to more fundamental goods, such as the protection of individual freedom and, even more prominently, the 'equal consideration of individual interests' (Dahl 1989: 86) in the collective decision-making process.

In practice, the ideal of the dispersion of power (or of a particular distribution of power) has been implemented in the progressive extension of rights of political participation. All the citizens in a liberal-democratic society are entitled to the right to vote and, in most of cases, to be elected. However, despite the equal possession of political rights, certain individuals in our societies are seen as more powerful than others, and certain are seen as benefitting more in the advancement of their own interests than others. Certain individuals or groups' interests, moreover, seem to be systematically ignored in the political decision-making process. Despite the presence of representative institutions and civil and political liberties, contemporary liberal democracies are far from being describable as relying on an equal distribution of power. The inequality in the distribution of power does not seem to depend on the presence of a particular

power elite, as suggested by Mills (1956), that is able to intentionally prevent the advancement of the interests of less powerful individuals. It seems rather to be an intrinsic feature of our societies, in which democracy, rather than being a system of procedures for the equal advancement of the interests of all citizens, seems instead to amount to a method for the replacement of one ruling elite with another (Schumpeter 1942); a system for which the label 'polyarchy' – and not 'democracy' – may be considered more appropriate (Dahl 1971).

The aim of this article is to propose a more demanding interpretation of the ideal of *democracy as equal distribution of power*, based on a theoretical analysis of the conditions that prevent the equal advancement of individual interests of the citizens in a society. In this view, democracy, to be in place, should be able to limit and prevent relations of domination within but also outside the political sphere. The achievement of a more equal distribution of power in a society, however, is not to be understood as a goal of the democratic process, as a value that democratic states should promote. It should be rather understood as a necessary condition for democracy, and, more specifically, as a *procedural* requirement for democracy. This means that, in order to be fully democratic, political decisions should be the result of a procedure in which every citizen substantively enjoys an equal chance to 'have a say'; a condition that can only be attained by relying on a richer interpretation of the notion of political equality.[1] Formal political equality, based on the equal attribution of civil liberties and rights of political participation, gives every individual in a society equal *impact* (Dworkin 2000: p. 191) on the decision making-process. However, it does not grant them an *equal opportunity of political influence* (Knight and Johnson 1997: 293), since different individuals' power to affect political decisions depends, among other things, on relations of power present outside the political sphere, which are ultimately based on differences in the possession of a variety of social resources. Accordingly, a democracy based on the ideal of the equal distribution of political power should rely on a notion of *substantive*, rather than formal, *political equality* (Knight and Johnson 1997: 304). This does not mean, however, that in order to fulfill the democratic ideal, every kind of inequality in the distribution of social resources needs to be leveled: Substantive political equality does not need the full realization, for example, of economic equality in order to be at place. It only needs the elimination of those severe inequalities in the distribution of social resources that give rise to relations of domination. In this sense

1. A procedural interpretation of the value of political equality has been argued by Charles Beitz (1990).

the ideal of *democracy as the equal distribution* of power could be replaced by the ideal of *democracy as non-domination*: it is not perfect equality of power that needs to be sought, but severe inequalities that need to be avoided.

The first section of this article will be devoted to an attempt to clarify the very notion of domination. I shall deal, more specifically, with the conceptual distinction between 'power' and 'domination' and with the proposal of an understanding of domination able to take into account our intuitions about the term as well as to explain the relation between domination and the possession of social resources. In the second section, I shall give reasons to suggest that contemporary democratic institutions are not sufficient for the realization of the ideal of democracy as non-domination. On the basis of the account of domination proposed, I shall argue that severe social inequalities present outside the political sphere play a substantive role in undermining the attainment of an equal opportunity for political influence. I shall suggest, accordingly, that to fulfill the ideal of democracy as non-domination we should rely on a notion of *substantive political equality*. In section three, lastly, I shall sketch a particular interpretation of the requirements for the realization of the ideal of democracy as non-domination. I shall contend, more specifically, that in order to offer to every individual an equal opportunity to see her interests considered in the political decision-making process, the severe inequalities in the distribution of social resources that give rise to relations of domination need to be redressed. Mechanisms directed at redressing cases of severe economic inequality and to promote more inclusive forms of political representation will be described as a possible strategy to promote the ideal of democracy as non-domination.

1. Distinguishing power and domination

A necessary step in the formulation of the ideal of democracy as non-domination is the formulation of a definition of domination that accounts adequately for our linguistic and moral intuitions about the term and offers a well-founded basis for our normative claims. After introducing, in this section, a few influential interpretations of the distinction between power and domination, in the next two sections I shall propose an understanding of domination on the basis of the so-called social exchange theory (Homans 1958).

Although power and domination are frequently used as synonyms, the latter term seems to carry more normative weight. The contemporary literature seems to agree in understanding 'power' as a value-free concept, which may refer both to situations in which the power-holder benefits or harms the power-subject,

while 'domination' seems to be generally considered as an intrinsically negative evaluative concept, always implying the presence of detrimental effects for the power-subject(s)[2]. Accordingly, the distinction between power and domination has been mainly described in reference to their effects on the *interests* of the power-subject(s). Domination, thus, in contemporary literature has been mainly defined as a subtype of power, referring to those cases in which power is exercised in a way which is detrimental for the interests of those subject to it (Allen 1998; 1999; Lukes 2005; Pettit 1997a; Wartenberg 1990). A notable exception is Jonathan Hearn (2008; 2012), who claims that domination, just like power, should be defined as a normatively neutral concept:

> If relationships of domination are common features of our social landscape, then we need to be able to describe, analyze, and comparatively study these, dispassionately, prior to any normative evaluation of the relationship in question (2012: 30).

In line with Hearn's position, the analysis proposed here will suggest a value-free interpretation of domination.[3] Distinguishing domination from power on the basis of the (detrimental) effects of an exercise of power on the power-subject's interests seems to constitute a risky strategy for two main reasons. Firstly, this is so because domination seems to consist in the particular structure of a relation among individuals, rather than in a particular *ad hoc* exercise of power: What seems relevant in the definition of an instance of domination is not so much whether the interests of the power-subject are actually harmed by the power-wielder, but rather the fact that they may be harmed in some future occasions depending on the will of the power-wielder. Accordingly, domination should be described as a particular kind of relation that may be potentially – but not necessarily actually – harmful for the interests of the power-subjects. Secondly, describing domination in terms of its effects on the interest of the power-subjects would require a strong engagement with a particular notion of 'interest'. A law passed by a democratic Parliament which obliges corporations to reduce their environmental impact may be described as actually detrimental for the corporations shareholders' interests (when interests are defined in terms of their subjective interests, in this case as their expected profits), although it will

2. Pansardi, Pamela. 2012. 'Power to and Power over: Two Distinct Concepts of Power?', *Journal of Political Power* 5 (1): 73-89.
3. Assuming a value-free intepretation of domination, however, does not imply that instances of domination in a society are not to be subject to moral (negative) evalutation. It only implies that the moral evalutation of the instances under scrutiny does not depend on the definition of domination itself, but it is to be based on the commitment to a particular normative theory, like the ideal of democracy as equal distribution of power expounded in this article.

be very unlikely to be described as a normatively relevant instance of domination. Accordingly, defining domination on the basis of its detrimental effects on the interest of the power-subjects would require a specification of the 'kind' of interests which is at stake (whether 'subjective', 'objective', or both) or the even more demanding engagement with a particular notion of 'fundamental' or 'basic' interests.

A promising line of analysis of the concept of domination can be obtained by relying on two criteria offered by Thomas Wartenberg in his account of the concept. According to Wartenberg (1990), the presence of harmful effects on the interests of the power-subjects is not a sufficient condition for domination. In order to describe a power relation as an instance of domination, two other conditions should occur: firstly, the relation under scrutiny should be a *stable* relation; secondly, it should be 'constituted by the existence of a *power differential*' (1990: 117). Wartenberg suggests that not every exercise of power which is detrimental for the power-subjects' interests is to be seen as an instance of domination. Accordingly, domination seems to indicate a more specific subfield of 'harmful' power, defined on the basis of certain particular aspects that the *structure* of a power relation can present, namely, stability and the existence of a power differential.

1.1. A social-exchange account of domination

Undoubtedly, the reference to the detrimental effects that domination has on its subjects covers many of the moral intuitions we commonly have about it. Since we normally use domination as an intrinsically negative term, a 'consequence-based definition' (Lovett 2010: 12) of it will probably offer a suitable solution to the problem of explicating 'why domination is a bad thing'. However, the interpretation of domination that will be proposed in this section will suggest that, *pace* Wartenberg, not only that the presence of detrimental effects is not a sufficient condition for domination, but also that it not a necessary condition for it. Moreover, since we assumed, with Hearn, that domination, like power, is to be understood in value-free terms, the elimination of the consequence-based criterion will allow us to suggest that the negative value of domination can only be attested to case by case.

A possible interpretation of the notion of domination can be proposed relying on the so-called social exchange theory of power. I previously suggested that when we talk about domination we do not normally refer to a single occurrence; rather, we refer to a particular *situation*. Wartenberg's reference to the *stability* and *power differential* conditions for domination is a step in a prom-

ising direction. But how are we to explain the notion of a 'power differential'? A possible line of explanation can be drawn from the social exchange theory. Social exchange theory, as introduced by George C. Homans, consists in understanding social relations between individuals as structured by exchanges of material and non-material goods (Homans 1958: 597). A caveat is needed here. Social exchange theory undoubtedly emerges from a strong commitment to methodological individualism, and accordingly, does not seem to be able to give an account of a number of cases that we normally regard as cases of domination but where we cannot identify 'who's responsible' (Lukes 2005; Hayward and Lukes 2008) for the condition of subjugation of others; in other words, cases where domination seems to refer to a structural property of the society and not to a specific and identifiable relation between a power-holder and a power-subject. However, if a social exchange-based definition of domination is understood not as a way to *describe* power-relations, but as a heuristic tool for *explaining* power-relations, its potential in the analysis of cases which do not immediately allow us to identify who's responsible for the instantiation, reproduction and perpetuation of domination will become clearer.

Understanding a power relation in terms of a social exchange allows us to connect the role of the differential in the distribution of social resources with the idea of an asymmetry of power. To offer a thorough account of the role of asymmetry in the definition of a power relation, it will be useful to make reference to Mario Stoppino's theoretical proposal (2001). Drawing extensively on Peter Blau's exchange theory of power (Blau 1964), Stoppino offers some useful guidelines for the distinction between power and domination. According to Stoppino, asymmetry in the relation between actors is to be sought in the differential of the resources they possess. Stoppino's understanding of resources includes goods and individual abilities, which he classifies on the basis of the *value* they have for those involved in the exchange relationship. He distinguishes between three ideal-types of resources: *resources of violence*, *economic resources*, and *symbolic resources*. In the case of perfect symmetry between the exchange value of the resources held by two actors, they find themselves in a situation of reciprocal power. In the case, on the contrary, in which one actor possesses all the resources salient for another actor, and the second actor possesses no resources to offer in exchange, we face a situation of extreme asymmetry of power, which, according to Stoppino, is to be defined as an instance of domination. Between these two extreme situations, we find all the cases in which an actor has power over another actor with respect to certain specific resources and specific behaviors.

Power, thus, is a matter of degree. The differential of power between two actors can be drawn on a continuum, where on the one side we find a situation of perfect symmetry, that can be defined as reciprocal interdependence and balance of power, while on the other side we find the maximum level of asymmetry, characterized by domination and total unilateral dependence. Between these two extreme cases, we find all the situations which range from a minimal level of asymmetry, which presupposes a low level of dependence, to those cases in which the level of asymmetry is higher though not so extreme as to constitute total unilateral dependence. Apart from these two cases, there is a third possibility: independence, which takes place when the two actors are not involved in an exchange of social resources, and when, accordingly, no relation of power occurs.

Following Stoppino, we can claim that the distinction between power and domination is not to be interpreted as a question of kind but as a matter of *degree* (Pansardi 2013: 621). The *stability* of a relation of domination (the other condition for domination mentioned by Wartenberg) can be understood as a consequence of the presence of an extremely high differential of power, based on an extremely unequal distribution of social resources (Pansardi 2013: 630): Being dependent on the power-holder for certain salient and non-replaceable resources, it is very unlikely that the power-subject would be able to forego the particular relation due to the presence of very high exit costs (Baldwin 1980: 499).

1.2. Domination and the arbitrariness of power

It is worth noting that another recent and significant contribution to the study of domination has put forward similar arguments. Drawing extensively on Pettit's theory of freedom as non-domination, as expounded in *Republicanism* (1997b), Frank Lovett (2010) defines domination in terms of three conditions: the degree of dependence of one actor on the other, the level of the imbalance of power between the two actors, and the degree of arbitrariness of the power of the dominant actor.

However, the social-exchange theory of domination that I have introduced in the previous section is able to substantiate Lovett's three conditions for domination relying on the more basic notion of resources. The concepts of dependence and differential of power have been described in the previous section. The concept of arbitrariness, and the suitability of the social exchange theory of domination for its explanation, are the subject of the present section.

Lovett defines arbitrariness following Pettit: an act of interference, in their view, is to be considered arbitrary 'if it is subject just to the *arbitrium*, the decision or judgment, of the agent; the agent was in a position to choose it or not choose it, at their pleasure' (Pettit 1997a: 55). Arbitrariness is thus intended not in a substantive, but in a procedural way: it does not account for the harmful or beneficial consequences of a certain exercise of power on the subjects' interest. An act of interference is arbitrary in virtue of its not being controlled or checked by anyone other than its performer. Accordingly, the notion of arbitrariness of power allows us to better interpret the reference to the power-subjects' interest that emerged in the first section: what is at stake in a relation of domination is not the *actual* detrimental effect of the action of the dominant actor on the power-subjects, but the *potential* harmful effect for the power-subject's interests that the dominant actor can cause 'at will': in other words, a relation of domination does not necessarily consists in the constant harming of the power-subjects' interests, but in the *possibility* for the dominant actor (in the case she chooses to do so) to harm the power-subjects' interests.

What, then, are the structural conditions that serve to explain the notion of arbitrariness of power? A reference to the interpretation of the distinction between power and domination proposed in the previous section can offer the ground for understanding the role of arbitrariness in the definition of the concept of domination. As I have argued, in line with the social exchange theory of power, the differential of power between two individuals can have different degrees. When an individual depends on another individual for only a few, replaceable resources, the latter has over the former a low amount of power. In the case, on the other hand, in which an individual depends on another for a salient and non-replaceable resource, the latter individual has an extremely high amount of power over the former, which can be described in terms of domination. Since, in this last case, *B* is totally dependent upon *A*, *A* can interfere at will with a considerable number of aspects of *B*'s life. Just as a monopolistic firm, which is not subject to external constraints on the decisions concerning the price of its products, can be claimed to have arbitrary power over the consumers which represent the demand for such products, in the same way a dominant actor has arbitrary power over the power-subject (Pansardi 2013: 628). The arbitrariness of power, then, can be considered as another consequence of a relation of extremely high differential of power. Moreover, as the relation between domination and power is defined as a matter of degree, the same can be claimed about arbitrariness: the higher the degree of power of one individual on another, the higher the arbitrariness of the former's power.

2. Democracy *as* non-domination?

Contemporary liberal-democratic systems are often described as implying higher or lower degrees of concentration of power, on the basis, among other things, of the different electoral system employed, of the nature of the relation between the executive and the legislative, of the centralized or federal nature of the system (Lijphart 1999). Despite the different institutional arrangements that compose contemporary democratic states, democratic institutions constitute in themselves a limit to the concentration of power. The presence of a system of basic liberties, universal suffrage and the possibility of public contestation have allowed for the presence of a certain degree of distribution of political power. Nevertheless, formal political equality does not seem to represent a sufficient condition for the equal advancement of the interests of all citizens. Not only is the political decision-making process always influenced by the distribution of power in spheres other than politics (often, but not exclusively, through what Bachrach and Baratz (1962) called 'non-decisions'), but also, and more specifically, the distribution of power in spheres other than politics often takes the form of domination.

The presence of democratic institutions and the equal entitlement to civil liberties and political rights does not seem to represent a sufficient condition for preventing domination. Domination, although being limited within the formal political sphere – since everybody is entitled (at least) to the *power to vote* – occurs undisturbed at many other levels, in the economic domain, for example, and in the private sphere. As Hearn points out, liberal societies are characterized by the continuous tension between '(a) defining the state as a public form of power in which the citizens have an interest and a say, and (b) defining zones of private power that are supposedly off limits to the intrusion of the state (2012: 143)'. Significantly, however, the different patterns of distribution of power in the areas concerning the private sphere undoubtedly influence the outputs of the political process: inequalities in the distribution of power in the society are reflected within the political system, where to the *formal political* equality attributed by law to all the citizens often does not correspond a *substantive political* equality in the consideration of individual interests.

It is worth noting here that the relations between democracy and domination have been the central concern of one of the most prominent recent attempts to offer a normative theory of democratic government, namely the Republican account as proposed by Philip Pettit (1997a; 1997b; 2012). In delineating the ideal of a Republican society as the system maximally able to promote freedom

as the absence of domination, Pettit suggests that the institutions of a constitutional democratic system (in particular, those which allow for a public contestation of political decisions) are a sufficient condition for the containment of domination. On the basis of the understanding of domination I have proposed in this article – which relates the existence or possibility of existence of instances of domination with the distribution of social resources – what emerges is, on the contrary, that constitutional limits and the existence of channels for public contestation are not enough to ensure the equal advancement of individual interests within the democratic process.

According to the view proposed in this work, a normative theory based on the ideal of democracy as non-domination needs to aim at a richer understanding of the ideal of political equality: one which takes into account the question of the minimization of extreme inequalities in the distribution of the resources for social power. Since relations of domination in a society undoubtedly affect the equal opportunity to actively participate and influence the political decision-making process,[4] I argue, consequently, that in order promote the ideal of democracy as non-domination, the minimization of extreme inequalities in the distribution of social resources needs to be sought. The ideal of democracy as non-domination, however, does not require the complete equality (probably unattainable and plausibly undesirable) in the distribution of social resources. It requires only the elimination of those cases of severe inequality which constitute relations of domination; those cases that we described as situations in which an individual (or group) is subject to the power of another individual (or group) to interfere 'at will' with her own actions and choices (Pettit 1997a; Lovett 2012). The kind of equality at the basis of an ideal of democracy as non-domination is of *political* nature, and refers to the equal opportunity of every individual in a society to influence the decision-making process (Knight and Johnson 1997: 293; Brighouse 1996). The procedural requirement for the realization of a non-dominating democracy is thus a substantive political equality which ensures every individual an equal chance to see her interests considered in the political decision-making process – as opposed to the formal political equality that only grants every individual an equal 'impact' (Dworkin 2000: p. 191), on the basis, ultimately, of the right to vote.

4. Along with other conditions, like different levels of political competence (Knight and Johnson 1997).

3. Towards a substantive political equality

In this section, I shall introduce a possible way to rethink the democratic ideal of the distribution of power, and I shall sketch a preliminary interpretation of the possible institutional strategies aimed at achieving the ideal of democracy as non-domination. It is worth noting that the present proposal does not contend to be definitive or uncontestable: its only aim is to illustrate the main obstacles to the achievement of a substantive political equality and to explore and integrate a few possible solutions offered by contemporary political theory. Questions about the validity or the empirical feasibility of the solutions pointed out, however, do not impinge on the validity of the ideal of democracy as non-domination. They only constitute possible means for the realization of the ideal, and accordingly they can be contested without contesting the ideal itself. In presenting them, I shall rely on the distinction between the three different ideal-types of resources of power introduced above: resources of violence, economic resources, and symbolic resources.

The approximation of a substantive political equality requires the minimization of instances of domination in the society. The analysis of the conditions that would allow for the realization of the ideal of democracy as non-domination implies, accordingly, an analysis of the material bases for domination. In this article I have distinguished, following Stoppino, three different, abstract and maximally general 'ideal-types' of resources of power: resources of violence, economic resources, and symbolic resources. According to Stoppino, resources of violence are those which threaten the power-subject's physical integrity and security in general. Economic resources, secondly, affect the power-subject's material well-being. Symbolic resources, lastly, operate on the basis on the power-subject's perception of her own (ethical and social) identity (Stoppino 2001: 163-164).

At the theoretical level, the relation between power and resources cannot be stated in universal terms: what counts as a resource of power can only be defined on the basis of the specific relation under scrutiny. The promise of a substantial reward, for example, can induce *B* to the performance of the illegal act *x* that *A* is requiring from her, while not succeeding in inducing law-abiding *C*. Nevertheless, at the empirical level of analysis of contemporary societies, it is reasonable to assume a certain degree of universality of the value of certain resources (like wealth, or physical violence, for example) and accordingly, to assume a certain degree of correlation between the possession of certain resources and the potential for exercising power of those who possess them.

The differential in the possession of a certain kind of resource, then, in certain cases, can be claimed to be proportional to the possession of power as a matter of empirical generalization.

Resources of violence, in liberal-democratic societies, are tendentially monopolized by the state. Single episodes of violence may take place, but their occurrence does not imply, in general, that liberal-democratic states do not endorse principles and laws aiming to condemn the use of violence. Their persistence indicates, rather, a lack of efficiency in the implementation of policies aimed at reducing episodes of violence, as well as the practical difficulties faced by the judiciary system and the police force. The incidence of relations of power based on resources of violence is, in our society, a significant problem, but (mostly) of a practical, rather than a normative nature. Exception is made for specific cases, where the incidence of violence is connected with the unequal distribution of other kinds of resources, namely symbolic resources, as in the case of domestic violence, for example, and racist or homophobic violence. As I shall contend later, however, only through the institution of mechanisms of redistribution of symbolic resources does it seem possible to offer an effective reply to the problem of private and discriminatory violence. Accordingly, the normative analysis of the requirements for a society containing domination should be primarily focused on the two other kinds of resources mentioned above: economic and symbolic resources.

As implied by the social-exchange theory proposed in this article, the difference in the distribution of economic resources may give rise to instances of domination. Cases of 'exploitation' in the labor market undoubtedly constitute instances of domination, but, in current societies, they are not only exemplified by the classical Marxist description of the relation between capitalists and unskilled workers: Exploitation is often at issue in jobs in the tertiary sector, in care jobs, in temporary jobs and illegal and clandestine work. In order to reduce the potential incidence of relations of domination, then, the question of the inequality in the distribution of economic resources should be taken into account. However, what is not at stake here, is the proposal of a specific normative theory of distributive justice. What is at stake, on the other hand, is the mere acknowledgment that, in our societies, inequalities in the distribution of wealth and other kind of goods are often great enough to perfectly fit the description of a potential for domination. As Rousseau points out, in expounding his idea of a legitimate political society, it is not perfect equality which needs to be sought, but extreme inequality which needs to be avoided:

> […] by equality, we should understand, not that the degrees of power and riches are to be absolutely identical for everybody; but that power shall never be great enough for violence, and shall always be exercised by virtue of rank and law; and that, in respect of riches, no citizen shall ever be wealthy enough to buy another, and none poor enough to be forced to sell himself (Rousseau 2008: 55).

The difference in the distribution of resources in our liberal-democratic societies, however, does not nearly approach the terms of Rousseau's proviso. As Lovett underlines, in current liberal societies: 'Domination arises through the free-market primarily because people can trade away freedom […] for other goods' (2009: 825). Since the differences in the distribution of economic resources among individuals are so great, and the allocation of the benefit of social cooperation is regulated by the unrestrained results of a free-market economy, domination in the economic sphere seems to be unlikely to disappear. If our task is to provide a normative theory of the society where domination is minimized, then, regulatory practices for the avoidance of extreme inequalities need to be envisaged.

According to Lovett (2009; 2010), a possible attempt in the direction of minimizing domination in the economic sphere may consist in the introduction of an *unconditional basic income*: 'This unconditional basic income might take the form of cash, or else a combination of cash and vouchers for certain defined benefits (health care, education, and so on); and the cash portion of the unconditional basic income might be delivered through regular government handouts, or else through some version of the negative income tax (Lovett 2009: 826)'. Although not aiming at the achievement of an economic 'equality' (theoretically problematic and possibly undesirable) among individuals, Lovett's proposal seems to provide the basis for a possible definition of the characteristics of a system of distribution of resources able to prevent domination. Whether the introduction of an *unconditional basic income* (or other kind of distributive strategies shaped in accordance to the same ideal) would constitute a sufficient condition for the elimination of domination in the economic sphere is hard to say, but, as Lovett underlines, policies shaped in this direction are probably a necessary condition for it (Lovett 2009: 827).

Attempts to redress inequalities in the distribution of economic resources, however, are not enough to eliminate the possibility of domination in our societies. Domination is often based on a different kind of resources; those that we have named, following Stoppino (2001), symbolic resources. Symbolic

resources refer to the symbolic value attached to a particular social identity, and may indicate a variety of non-material 'goods' such as status, prestige, and authority, that may be exchanged with other material and non-material goods.[5] While differences in the distribution of economic resources are easily detectable, due to the quantitative nature of the goods under scrutiny, what constitutes a symbolic resource is more difficult to ascertain. Unlike money and property, for example, symbolic resources are not tangible goods and are not quantifiable *per se*: they can only be investigated in relational terms. They depend on the individuals' reciprocal acknowledgment of belonging to the same group, and to the consequent reciprocal reinforcement of their own social identity. Accordingly, a distribution of symbolic resources in a society can only be attested to indirectly, through the investigation of the presence of one or more 'symbolic' majorities. Although highly correlated with the distribution of economic resources, social identities constitute in themselves resources of power: An equality of income between a man and a woman, for example, does not necessarily imply an equality of power in their reciprocal relations. Moreover, this asymmetry may result in not ensuring the woman an equal treatment of her interests in the political decision-making process, nor an equal access to political offices. The greater symbolic value attached to a particular gender, race, culture or religion does in itself represent a resource of power.

However, while the differences in the distribution of economic resources can be limited with the implementation of regulatory policies, the differences in the distribution of symbolic resources cannot: The law may oblige people to pay taxes, or to sign fair employment contracts, but it cannot change what individuals think about each other. What is possible to change, on the other hand, are the mechanisms which symbolically deprive certain groups of their collective recognition as equals. A possible way to attempt to restrain domination in the symbolic sphere is to provide minority groups with recognition as politically relevant actors. As Iris Marion Young writes:

> A democratic public should provide mechanisms for the effective recognition and representation of the distinct voices and perspectives of those of its constituent groups that are oppressed and disadvantaged (1990: 184).

5. Religious authority is the most prominent example of a power exclusively based on symbolic resources (Stoppino 2001). A social exchange theory of religious power has been proposed by Maciej Potz (2013).

A first step in this direction would be a reassessment of the concept of democratic representation. The embracement of the ideal of *descriptive representation*, according to which 'representatives are in their own persons and lives in some sense typical of a larger class of persons whom they represent' (Mansbridge 1999: 629) – as opposed to the predominant conception of *formal representation* (Pitkin 1967) which sees it as merely 'aggregation of individual preferences' – could prove an effective tool in order to mitigate the effect of the concentration of symbolic resources. Not only would the possibility of actual participation of representatives of a minority group – through the introduction of quotas, veto powers or other mechanisms of checks and balances – would allow for a real opportunity of advancement of the interests peculiar to the group. The introduction of mechanisms of descriptive representation would also allow for beneficial consequences in terms of both the group self-perception and its collective recognition:

> The presence or absence in the ruling assembly (and other ruling bodies, such as the executive and the judiciary) of a proportional number of individuals carrying the group's ascriptive characteristics shapes the social meaning of those characteristics in a way that affects most bearers of those characteristics in the polity (Mansbridge 1999: 649).

Accordingly, although descriptive representation may consist in a 'good' *per se*, since it provides a mechanism for the entrance of the interests of previously unrepresented groups in the political decision-making process, its greatest advantage may rely on its side-effects in terms of the potential for the obtainment of a more equal distribution of symbolic resources.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that liberal-democratic institutions based on the ideal of formal political equality are not sufficient, by themselves, to fulfill the ideal of democracy as non-domination. I have suggested, however, that the ideal of a more equal distribution of social power is not to be understood as a goal that democracy should promote, but rather as a procedural requirement for the realization of the ideal of democracy as non-domination itself. This means, in other words, that in order to be fully democratic, political decisions should be the result of a procedure in which every citizen substantively enjoys an equal chance to 'have a say'. In line with the proposed understanding of domination, I have claimed that in order to fulfill the ideal of democracy as non-domination democratic institutions should be shaped in a way such as to prevent the concen-

tration of power not only within but also outside the political sphere: If the ideal of democracy is the achievement of an 'equal consideration of individual interests' (Dahl 1989: 86), then democracy is not realized in the case in which different individuals or groups have different chances to see their interests considered. In particular, I have argued for a more demanding ideal of democracy, based on the value of substantive political equality, and I have suggested that the requirements for a political society where domination is minimized should be those which permit the achievement of the minimization of severe inequalities in the private relations among individuals and groups in our societies. I have claimed, more specifically, that problems of *political equality* are intrinsically problems of *socio-economic justice*: substantive political equality cannot be obtained without the elimination of extreme inequalities in terms of the distribution of economic and symbolic resources. The discussion of the relations between socio-economic justice and political equality with reference to distinction between formal and substantive equality is not new to normative political theory.[6] The value of the present analysis, however, is to explain the role of substantive equality as a procedural requirement for democracy on the basis of a theory of domination and its relations with power and social resources.

I have then tried to indicate a possible way to tackle the problem of the concentration of power in the economic and symbolic domains, pointing out a few strategies proposed by contemporary literature. The introduction of an unconditional basic income, as suggested by Lovett (2009; 2010), might allow for a reduction of the extent of inequalities in the economic sphere, thus limiting the incidence of domination. The introduction of mechanisms of descriptive representation, on the other hand, would allow for a practical legitimation of the symbolic differences among groups. The presence of institutions of 'checks and balances' based on the ideal of descriptive representation would enable the acknowledgment of the diversity of values and social and cultural identities embedded in our contemporary societies. If liberal democracy is to be thought of as the form of government which best guarantees individual freedom and the equal consideration of individual interests, it should be provided with institutions able to avoid domination, including in the sense of allowing for and promoting an effective equal chance to 'have a say' in the decision-making process.

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6. Most notably, Rawls (1999: 62-63) highlights the need to substantiate formal political liberties with *fair opportunities* to exercise them in line with his theory of social justice .

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