

# Book Review

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*Politics against Domination*. By Ian Shapiro. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016.

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Ian Shapiro has made resisting domination a leitmotif for decades. In *Politics against Domination*, he integrates and deepens this work, providing, inter alia, an extended consideration of majority-rule political institutions and their public-choice and republican critics. The result of these efforts is a forceful realist case for minimalist democracy as the best defense against what Shapiro casts as the worst bad in politics. Shapiro complements this with a modest but cogent agenda for combating domination in contemporary global affairs.

Shapiro avoids positing a “watertight” definition of domination. It is best, he says, to think of domination concretely, focusing on the particular abuse and persons threatened. Still, Shapiro describes domination as “involving the avoidable and illegitimate exercise of power that compromises people’s basic interests” (5). So domination, for Shapiro, is not just disproportionate power itself but certain exercises of it. Accordingly, he criticizes Philip Pettit for worrying about domination, defined as just the capacity for such abusive exercises. Yet arguably Shapiro arrives at nearly the same practical conclusion by setting democratic politics the task not just of responding to dominating acts but of creating “a world that no one can dominate” (6, 24).

The democratic institutions equal to this aim would prevent abuse by those who wield state power and encourage participants in politics to split divisible goods with rivals rather than seek permanent dominance over them. For Shapiro, these goals can be accomplished best within Westminster model institutions, with their single member plurality elections and government by a parliamentary majority. And in his view, the theorist who best grasped the essence and value of this minimalist model was Joseph Schumpeter. In Shapiro’s telling, Schumpeter was “distrustful of political elites” (99) and saw continual electoral struggle for state power, and the resulting alternation in office, as mechanisms allow-

ing ordinary voters to check the potential for domination, holding politicians accountable in much the way that, as consumers, they held businesses accountable. There are good reasons to doubt this interpretation of Schumpeter, who was corrosively skeptical about the ability of either consumers or citizens to hold anyone accountable and who saw democracy as the latest historical form of elite preeminence—rule by professional politicians—taking the place of aristocratic domination. But Shapiro’s democratic vision does not need Schumpeter’s imprimatur, in part because it is shaped by encounters with arguments Schumpeter never engaged.

Shapiro’s case for accepting the primacy of majorities rests neither on the epistemic claim that this results in correct decisions nor simply on the idea that other decision rules violate formal political equality, but on the view that majority rule “minimizes the chances of domination when compared to the going alternatives” (44). Supermajority requirements, like those favored by James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, might seem to protect minorities from domination, but they allow smaller groups to impose their preferences—often the status quo—on larger groups. Shapiro is similarly dubious about Madisonian checks and balances, designed to restrain aggrandizing wielders of state power. Arguments that the US Senate or the US Supreme Court counter domination, in Shapiro’s view, are based on poor readings of history. Divided powers just create veto points that the relatively more advantaged can exploit. Finally, Shapiro argues that “consociational” arrangements that permanently divide power among ethnic or religious groups serve to entrench the focus on indivisible goods, when the goal should be to promote continual redistributions of divisible ones.

Shapiro’s next chapters venture into international relations. The first of these argues, contra varied interlocutors, that global government is neither inevitable nor particularly feasible and that there is little reason to think—even if it were achieved—that it would tend to diminish transnational inequalities that promote domination. The experience of the campaign against slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, in Shapiro's view, supports the view that a long-term, pragmatic, transnational movement that forged temporary alliances around proximate goals could win could win objectives like a global minimum wage. The second of these chapters builds on Shapiro's *Containment* (2007) to argue for an updated version of that policy—"Do what is needed, but only what is needed, to face down threatening aggression" (135)—as a means for the United States to check dominating aggression abroad while not acting as a dominating power itself. Judged against this standard, Shapiro sees not just President George W. Bush's Iraq War but also President Barack Obama's interventions in Syria and Libya as failures.

One of this book's finest qualities is its articulation of an "adaptive" or "reactive" approach to politics that "tells us to start where we are, not with a blueprint of where we want to end up" (63). As Shapiro notes, this is a characteristically Deweyan way of thinking, recognizing that democratic efforts begin not with the clear perception of ideals but with the need to redress concrete present evils—especially, for Shapiro, domination. Theorists, like everyone else, always find themselves in the middle of a process that is never going to issue in pure justice or freedom. The measure of their success is not their ability to envision ideal conditions but the relevance of their reasoning to present, practical difficulties.

In *Politics against Domination*, Shapiro makes a compelling case that the sort of familiar electoral institutions he favors are crucial—perhaps even necessary—to counteract domination. But are democratic minimalism and the forms of political action associated with it also sufficient for Shapiro's adaptive democratic ambitions? Can they restrain the most prevalent forms of domination? Shapiro's references to domination in this book tend to highlight particular political episodes, usually described in language that is mathematical,

strategic, or psychological: "minorities" and "majorities," "veto-players," or fondness for "indivisible goods." He only gestures at what concrete social formations may lie beneath these phenomena. Domination, he notes, "can be embedded in structural relationships" (21)—and that is surely correct. For example, the most destructive indivisible goods are characteristically rooted in enduring (and deeply unequal) relations of race or ethnicity (51–52). The successes of business interests and the wealthy at using veto-points to resist increases in the minimum wage or rigorous financial regulation reflect the fact that "extreme [economic] inequalities subvert democratic politics to the point of facilitating domination" (89). Years ago, Shapiro's *Democratic Justice* (1999) focused on the need to restructure significant civil realms, including the workplace and marriage, to overcome domination. But what form of democratic politics would help reshape these social relations and mitigate their baneful effect on politics? To approach this issue from a different angle, what frames Shapiro's intriguing discussion of a campaign for a global minimum wage is the fact that, on the transnational level at which many economic forces play out, minimalist electoral institutions for fighting domination simply do not exist. In this domain, some other democratic approaches to combating domination are required. All of these considerations suggest a democratic anti-domination agenda that goes beyond minimalism, but in this book we get only suggestions of what this might entail.

## REFERENCES

- Shapiro, Ian. 1999. *Democratic Justice*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Shapiro, Ian. 2007. *Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy against Global Terror*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.