

# Do we need an anti-oligarchic constitution?

European Journal of Political Theory

2022, Vol. 21(2) 399–411

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DOI: 10.1177/1474885121996281

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Camila Vergara, *Systemic Corruption: Constitutional Ideas for an Anti-Oligarchic Republic*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2020; pp. 288; ISBN 978-0-691-20753-7, US\$35.00/£30.00 (hbk)

## Abstract

Camila Vergara's *Systemic Corruption* is an extraordinarily rich, provocative and original work of political theory, which makes several compelling interventions in the normative literature. It develops a forceful critique of overly narrow definitions of corruption, insisting that a more 'systemic' conception is required in order to grasp the scale of oligarchic domination in contemporary democracies. It also points out the limitations of the 'proceduralist' model of contestation adopted by neo-republicans, and outlines a persuasive conception of the people as a partisan actor with specific interests to defend. Yet Vergara's alternative vision of how popular power might be institutionalized is less convincing. Though she rightly insists on the importance of organized counter-vailing power and plebeian solidarity, the system of nested local assemblies that she proposes is not well-suited to foster the development of either.

## Keywords

Corruption, democracy, oligarchy, popular power, republicanism

Many casual observers are content to lay the blame for contemporary democratic crises at the feet of a few unscrupulous actors such as Trump, Orbán, Modi and Bolsonaro. More sophisticated students of democracy will duly acknowledge the social upheavals and economic dislocations that enabled their rise, as well as the

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failure of democratic states to meet those challenges effectively. Indeed, some would argue that both phenomena are the inevitable consequences of decades of neoliberal reform, which may in turn be traced back to such deep causes as the capitalist mode of production or the structure of the US Constitution. Yet few go quite as deep in tracing the roots of our present condition as Camila Vergara in her excellent new book, *Systemic Corruption: Constitutional Ideas for an Anti-Oligarchic Republic*.

There are many senses in which Vergara's approach may be called 'radical', but perhaps none is more appropriate than its original etymological meaning, which is about getting to the *root* of things. In narrating the history of ideas about political corruption, for instance, she takes readers all the way back to ancient Greece and Rome. In analysing political institutions, meanwhile, she is an avowed materialist, insisting that political outcomes are driven by underlying social and economic power structures – and in particular by the ineliminable tension between a wealthy ruling elite and the mass of ordinary people.

What Vergara suggests, in other words, is that the roots of contemporary challenges may lie not in 2015, or 2008, or 1979, or even 1789, but with the hierarchical structure of civilization itself. Following Machiavelli, she views mass and elite as permanent 'socio-ontological' categories, transcending all cultural, economic and political contexts. Similarly, she sees the 'systemic corruption' afflicting contemporary democracies – identified as the 'slow oligarchization of power' – as fundamentally the same problem that faced ancient Greece and Rome, Renaissance Italy and pre-Revolutionary France. The domination of the many by the few, she argues, is 'inescapable' and 'endemic to all forms of government' (p. 43).

She thus eschews the classic liberal-egalitarian ideal of a final state of perfect or sufficient equality, devoid of such distinctions. Instead, her avowedly realist and republican aim is to protect freedom by empowering the many to better contest this domination. More specifically, she claims, this goal can be achieved only through a mixed constitution that incorporates designated 'plebeian' institutions like the Roman tribunate. While she does not advise getting rid of representative institutions, she follows other recent theorists of plebeian democracy in arguing that rule by representatives is an inherently elitist practice, which must be checked by institutions devoted exclusively to plebeian concerns. Even the apparently modest goal of limiting oligarchic domination thus turns out to require very radical constitutional reform.

All in all, *Systemic Corruption* is an extraordinarily rich, provocative and original work of political theory. It drifts seamlessly between exploring broad trends in intellectual history, re-interpreting canonical texts, critically engaging with empirical social science and elaborating detailed institutional proposals. The way Vergara constructs these proposals over the course of several chapters, through sustained engagement with Machiavelli, Condorcet, Luxemburg and Arendt, is especially elegant. Indeed, the fact that she draws a coherent set of insights from this rather surprising sequence of thinkers is the mark of a highly skilled and creative interpreter.

Vergara also makes several compelling interventions in the normative literature. For one, she develops a forceful critique of overly narrow definitions of corruption – insisting that a more ‘systemic’ conception is required in order to grasp the scale of oligarchic domination in contemporary democracies. She also points out the limitations of the ‘proceduralist’ model of contestation adopted by many neo-republicans, which fails to account for elites’ outsized capacity for collective action, and is therefore incapable of addressing those systemic forms of corruption. Finally, she outlines a persuasive conception of the people as a partisan actor with specific interests to defend, rather than as a universal subject to be tasked with self-rule.

It is in explaining how her alternative vision of popular power might be institutionalized, however, that the cracks in Vergara’s approach begin to show. At its heart is a nested system of local assemblies, whose judgments can be aggregated to ascertain a genuinely collective popular will. And while this scheme merits attention as provocation and thought experiment, I believe it ultimately betrays Vergara’s purported materialism, and thus fails to provide the most promising model for institutional reform. In what remains, I outline the claims and contributions of the book more systematically, before returning to explore these reservations.

## **The elements of plebeian constitutionalism**

*Systemic Corruption* can be understood as making seven distinct contributions, roughly tracking the chapter structure. The first, both logically and organizationally, is the argument that addressing contemporary challenges requires a systemic understanding of corruption. Embarking on a rapid tour through the intellectual history of the concept, Chapter 1 observes that ancient thinkers generally saw corruption as a kind of systemic political decay, but that modern thinkers have largely abandoned this conception in favour of a strictly juridical one, limited to cases of public officials violating the law. Contemporary scholars such as Michael Johnston (2005), Dennis Thompson (2005) and Zephyr Teachout (2016) have rightly offered more expansive definitions, often including any instance of public power being used to serve partial or private interests. Because they refrain from defining the true public interest in substantive terms, however, Vergara still sees their accounts of corruption as insufficient for identifying the most troubling forms of political decay plaguing contemporary democracies.

In her view, we must ‘move away from intention and toward the consequences of political corruption’, identifying it in any ‘rules, procedures, and institutions that [have] the effect of benefiting the wealthy at the expense of the majority’ (p. 40). This outcome-oriented conception thus presupposes Machiavelli’s ‘socio-ontological’ division of the citizenry into the few and the many, and holds that corruption consists of the domination of the latter by the former. Crucially, this implies that systemic corruption is not the preserve of failing or underdeveloped states, but can co-exist perfectly well with liberal freedom and the rule of law. Similarly, its presence may be indicated not only by laws that actively favour the

wealthy, but also by ‘the negligence of lawmakers and policy makers to counteract oligarchic outcomes’ (p. 41).

I heartily endorse the spirit of these claims. For one, the outsized power of oligarchs is clearly central to the challenges facing contemporary democracies. More controversially, I also agree that we cannot appreciate the extent of their dominance by focusing only on those discrete *mechanisms* of influence – such as lobbying and campaign contributions – which can be conclusively documented: in addition, we must also ask whose interests are served by larger patterns of *outcomes*. Still, in a book on systemic corruption, I would have appreciated more engagement with the significant body of empirical research that has explored and differentiated between these mechanisms. As we shall see, this becomes important later on, when it comes time to evaluate which anti-corruption reforms are likely to be most effective.

A second distinct contribution, pursued in Chapter 2, is to introduce new categories into the history of republican thought. Where others have stressed the divergences between ancient and modern or Greek and Roman republicanism, Vergara emphasizes two further divisions: one between the partisans of elites and plebeians, and another between materialist and proceduralist approaches to the mixed constitution. The original aim of all mixed constitutions, she argues, is to combat systemic corruption by institutionalizing ‘different forms of power that are in constant expansion and limitation, checking each other following their own expansionary tendencies rather than purely out of virtue or legal obligation’ (p. 43). In achieving this end, materialist approaches aim to institutionalize contestation between the many and the few. And while most materialists have been elitists, seeking to structure this contestation in ways that privilege the few, materialist constitutions may also be plebeian, giving ‘final’ power instead to the many. By contrast, proceduralist constitutions rely on mechanistic checks and balances among elites, and thus – despite appearing neutral – can in practice only favour elites.

It is this proceduralist and elitist variety of constitutionalism, which found its most influential advocate in Montesquieu, that is most familiar to us today. Indeed, Vergara argues that modern representative government is best seen as an effort to disguise the oligarchic character of the polity: by moving from elitist materialism to proceduralist forms of constitutionalism, ruling elites were able to adopt the pretence of formal neutrality while preserving a highly unequal socio-economic order (p. 107). The US Constitution is a case in point, retaining Montesquieu’s proceduralism and elitism while eschewing all acknowledged distinctions between mass and elite, in favour of the liberal fiction of universal equality (p. 87). In Philip Pettit’s neo-republican account, similarly – which is considered as the contemporary heir to this tradition of elitist proceduralism – contestation is confined to expert-driven juridical bodies that are structurally biased in favour of wealthy elites. For Vergara, by contrast, the only way to address the deep roots of oligarchic domination is a designated plebeian institution where the mass of ordinary people can ‘assemble and exercise direct collective power’ (p. 95).

This line of argument, which runs throughout the first two chapters, can be understood as the third major contribution of the book. 'From a collective action perspective', she observes, it is simply 'wishful thinking' to expect 'aggrieved citizens to stand up for their interests' without any institutional or organizational support. 'To put the burden of keeping corruption at bay on individual agency is thus a recipe for disaster because it allows for the silent, gradual, apparently consented-to slip into oligarchy' (p. 35). Pettit and other proceduralist republicans fail to recognize the implications of pervasive inequalities in access to the means of collective action – and as Vergara notes, this is deeply concerning for any (neo-) republican project which aims to channel contestation entirely through formally neutral procedures such as courts and legislatures. While I would have liked to see it developed more comprehensively, this line of criticism thus strikes me as a significant contribution to contemporary republican theory.

What is the alternative? In contrast to the elitist-proceduralist model we are used to, Vergara proposes a plebeian-materialist approach to constitutionalism, and the fourth major task of her book – spread across Chapters 2 and 3 – is to introduce it. As noted, all materialist mixed constitutions try to limit systemic corruption by institutionalizing contestation between the many and the few, but this contestation may be structured in ways that privilege either element, and in practice, all ancient constitutions favoured the few. In Vergara's account, Machiavelli is the first materialist constitutional thinker to privilege the many, and he thus becomes a primary touchstone for her own efforts to articulate a plebeian constitutionalism.

This brings us to the fifth contribution, constituting Part 2 of the book (i.e. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7). In this Part, Vergara devotes a chapter to each of four key thinkers in the tradition of plebeian, materialist, republican constitutionalism – beginning with Machiavelli and proceeding to the Marquis de Condorcet, Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt. As noted, the connections between these figures are not initially obvious, and there are clearly many differences between them. Yet as Vergara plausibly argues, they appear to converge on the idea of a materialist mixed constitution that empowers the plebeian element with certain 'censorial' powers: i.e. the ability to monitor elite decisions and to make the final judgment about whether to accept them. Each chapter thus has two main goals. On the one hand, showing that each author really endorses such an idea requires Vergara to revise canonical interpretations – in some cases more than others. On the other hand, each chapter also lays key pieces of groundwork for the constitutional proposal she presents in Part 3.

To begin with, Vergara's reading of Machiavelli introduces the basic principle of materialist mixed constitutionalism: i.e. that a constitution should aim not to eliminate conflict between the permanent socio-ontological categories of the many and the few, but rather to channel it towards the maintenance of freedom through designated plebeian institutions. She then turns to the 'primary assemblies' proposed by Condorcet, which she interprets as playing just that kind of role, and which eventually form the basis of her own constitutional proposal. With these

core elements in place, she then turns to Luxemburg and Arendt, whose contrasting analyses of revolutionary councils in the early years of the American, Russian and German revolutions help to enrich her own account of the role to be played by the plebeian element – vis-a-vis elite-driven representative bodies – within a modern mixed constitution. Especially important for Vergara's own scheme is Arendt's division of constitutional labour between administration, as the designated task of the few, and judgment, as the task of the many.

Before laying out her proposal in full, Chapter 8 takes a slight detour to consider the merits of existing plebeian theories of democracy. Demonstrating their limitations can thus be considered the book's sixth distinct contribution. To begin with, Vergara argues that Martin Breaugh (2013), Jeffrey Green (2016) and Jacques Rancière (1998) are too detached from institutional concerns. Despite the differences between their accounts of plebeianism, all confine it to occasional disruptions of the established order rather than seeking to regularize mass–elite contestation. In aiming to sustain plebeian power through class-specific institutions such as a neo-Roman 'tribunate', John McCormick (2011) and Lawrence Hamilton (2014) come closer to Vergara's approach. Ultimately, however, she argues that they are not ambitious enough in giving plebeians *final* authority to judge the actions of representative bodies.

The book's many lines of argument converge and culminate, finally, in Chapter 9, with Vergara's signature constitutional proposal. As noted, this proposal does not eliminate representative bodies, but rather supplements them with a separate plebeian political structure. The centrepiece is a system of local councils modelled on Condorcet's primary assemblies, each of which is open to anyone living within a set geographical district who 'does not rule', i.e. anyone who holds no position of political or religious authority over others. Any council can resolve by majority vote to veto a decision made by representative bodies, propose a new law or even initiate procedures to revise the constitution itself. If a resolution is approved by a majority of councils in the appropriate jurisdiction (i.e. city, province, nation, etc...), it is considered to be the 'will of the people', and is to become law. In order to ensure the will of the people is carried out, the constitution also provides for a tribunate selected by lot.

### **Class, solidarity, and the challenges of plebeian politics**

Vergara's constitutional vision is profoundly creative and impressively bold – and in my view, it gets a great deal right. This includes her diagnosis of oligarchic domination, as well as her claim that the institutions of representative democracy are insufficient to undermine it. Though formally neutral and open to all, both electoral competition and extra-electoral contestation depend on one's ability to deploy persuasive, mobilizational and organizational resources, so it is unsurprising that wealthy elites are generally able to translate their vast advantages in private power into success on this public terrain.

Vergara is also right to insist on grappling openly with the inevitability of this predicament. In any reasonably complex society, some people will always have significantly more power than others. As I have argued elsewhere, the best hope for those of us with egalitarian commitments is therefore to minimize the degree and permanence of the advantages possessed by whoever those elites turn out to be (Bagg, 2018b). And in doing so – as other plebeian thinkers have recognized – it is far better to openly acknowledge their existence. Simply put, the fiction of universal equality enables elites to conceal their advantages, while accepting a horizon of perpetual contestation allows us to continually seek out and oppose them. And in my view, the nearly ubiquitous idea that ‘the people’ can and should collectively exercise autonomous self-government – sharing equally in rule – is yet another manifestation of this fiction. Vergara’s realist vision of popular power as a kind of censorial judgment about actions and decisions taken by elites thus strikes me as extraordinarily refreshing and vitally important.

Vergara is right, finally, to focus on the *organization* of popular power as the key to limiting oligarchic domination. Given that their interests and resources are far more widely dispersed, it will always be difficult for the many to match the organized power of the few. Yet it is not impossible. How, then, can ordinary people build and sustain such countervailing power? In my view, that is the most essential question of democratic theory, and Vergara’s book makes a profoundly valuable contribution simply by raising it in such a forceful manner.

For all that, however, I cannot bring myself to be persuaded by her answer. Simply put, she gives us no reason to think that a system of local assemblies would be any less vulnerable to manipulation and capture by wealthy elites than representative and contestatory institutions. A major refrain of the book is that the only way to genuinely resist oligarchic domination is to implement specially designated plebeian institutions. This, in turn, seems to be motivated by a deep conviction that representative institutions – being necessarily composed of elites – will always exhibit strong pro-elite biases. Historically, however, there is significant variation in the extent to which different representative institutions have seemed to favour the few at the expense of the many. In particular, certain parties really have defended popular interests more consistently and effectively than others. By contrast, designated plebeian institutions have rarely existed in practice, and as Vergara acknowledges, even the vaunted Roman tribunate was eventually captured by oligarchic interests. Her confidence in the superior ability of ‘plebeian’ institutions to resist oligarchic domination thus seems rather weakly supported.

Actually, there are two ways we might understand her claims in this regard. On one reading, key terms like ‘oligarchic’ and ‘plebeian’ are purely political, involving no socio-economic component whatsoever. Categories such as ‘oligarchs’, ‘elites’ and ‘the few’ should thus be understood to include any person who occupies an official position of political authority, regardless of their own class background or the material interests they actually serve. Meanwhile, even extremely wealthy and privileged people are properly counted among ‘plebeians’, ‘the mass’ and ‘the many’, so long as they do not occupy any such official position. In her



constitutional proposal, indeed, that is how Vergara interprets the idea of plebeians as ‘those who do not rule’ – rejecting McCormick’s wealth-based eligibility criterion in favour of one based on the possession of official political authority.

If we take these definitions seriously, Vergara’s claims about representative and plebeian institutions turn out to be true – but only trivially so. Since representative institutions are, by definition, composed of people with official positions of political authority, they necessarily count as ‘oligarchic’ and biased towards ‘elites’. They cannot help favouring the ‘few’ over the ‘many’. Yet this result is simply an artifact of the peculiar definitions we have given these terms, and it tells us very little about the substantive variation in outcomes we are interested in. That is because those definitions distort the ordinary meaning of terms like ‘oligarchic’ and ‘plebeian’, which typically carry *both* political *and* socio-economic connotations.

When people claim that contemporary democracies are trending in an oligarchic direction, for instance, they usually have something more in mind than the tautology that representative institutions are composed of people who possess official political power. Instead, they mean that political outcomes are increasingly *driven by* and/or *favourable to* people who possess extreme wealth, at the expense of the vast majority who do not (Arlen, 2019; Winters, 2011). And at other points, Vergara clearly does have something like this in mind – not least when she articulates her outcome-oriented account of systemic corruption. Indeed, it would be nearly impossible to make a compelling case for ‘plebeian’ institutions as a corrective to ‘oligarchic’ domination without drawing liberally upon the socio-economic connotations of those terms.

Once we include material interests in our definition of terms like oligarchic and plebeian, however, Vergara’s argument must face the sort of challenge I began to raise above. If plebeian institutions do not achieve plebeian ends simply by definition, then it is presumably an open question as to whether the formal institutions she proposes would better serve the sort of substantive material interests she clearly aims to support. We must ask, for instance, whether a system of local assemblies is more likely to veto legislation that entrenches the advantages of wealthy individuals and corporations, and to approve new initiatives that would constrain and tax them at higher rates. Unfortunately, it is far from obvious to me that they would.

Incidentally, this is where greater detail about the mechanisms of oligarchic domination in contemporary representative democracies would have come in handy. If wealthy elites get their way primarily by occupying official positions of political authority, for instance, we can presume that plebeian institutions which exclude anyone in such positions would be reasonably immune to oligarchic influence. If their preferred mechanism is to exert pressure on a limited number of key officials, similarly, we may have reason to suspect that a decentralized network of plebeian assemblies involving millions of participants might not be quite so susceptible. In this case, however, there are also countervailing considerations. Even if there are more people in agenda-setting roles, and even if they are more widely distributed throughout local assemblies and the tribunate, there is still a finite number of them – and since they would not be accountable to any organized



groups with a sustained presence or well-defined ideology, it is possible that they would actually be easier to influence than career public officials.

Finally, and most crucially, if it turns out that wealthy elites in contemporary democracies owe their remarkable success in defending their material interests to their ability to influence the character of popular participation, there is no reason to think that assemblies would make things better at all. Here we must consider basic structural tools for influencing participation, such as gerrymandering districts and manipulating turnout, as well as a range of more complex tools for controlling information and media narratives, spreading advertising and propaganda, or sowing disinformation and distrust. Indeed, these are only the most easily traceable arrows in the quiver of ideological power: its most potent forms may be barely perceptible in any given moment, and its most profound impacts may be felt only over the long term.

The point, of course, is that all of these tools for oligarchic manipulation and capture could be equally effective – if not more so – in the context of a decentralized system of local assemblies. After all, referendums have often been hailed with similar enthusiasm, as a way of engaging people directly and thereby circumventing the forms of elite capture that are endemic to representative legislatures. Yet while there are always encouraging anecdotes one can cite in this regard, systematic research suggests that these mechanisms of ‘direct democracy’ tend to make it even easier for wealthy interests to get their way (Weale, 2018). Vergara might protest that ordinary people would exhibit better epistemic practices when they are gathered in local assemblies than when they are isolated in the voting booth. If so, they would be less susceptible to the distortions of ideological propaganda and fake news, and correspondingly more likely to take action that supports the material interests of plebeians. Given what we know about the profoundly motivated, partisan character of political cognition, however, I am doubtful that more discussion will solve the problem (Bagg, 2018a).

It is possible that, despite all of these concerns, implementing a network of local plebeian assemblies really would reduce oligarchic domination. Yet there are also good reasons to worry that such a drastic and unpredictable shift would not improve on representative institutions – and could even make things worse. As such, I cannot share Vergara’s bold confidence that any constitution which lacks these assemblies is simply ‘not a free republic’ (p. 263). More importantly, I also doubt that her proposed constitution provides the most useful model for more piecemeal (and realistically achievable) reform. One reason is simply that it is probably impossible to implement in full – even under the most favourable circumstances we can imagine. My primary worry, however, concerns the broader priorities that adopting an assembly model would seem to promote.

Let us suppose, following Machiavelli and other materialist constitutionalists, that there is a fundamental socio-ontological split in any reasonably large and complex society between the many and the few; between wage labourers and capital owners; between the plebeian mass and the oligarchic elite. Suppose, further, that the best way to protect freedom and other valuable public interests is to

encourage tension between these two ‘humours’ or ‘classes’. How can this be achieved? In ancient Rome, where the division between patrician and plebeian was already quite salient, the tribunate proved to be a reasonably effective way of channelling this tension towards political stability rather than violent conflict, and for a time, it may even have helped plebeians resist oligarchic domination. Following other plebeian theorists, therefore, Vergara suggests that contemporary democracies could get comparable results by implementing institutions with a similarly specific plebeian purpose. Under present circumstances, however, such reforms are neither necessary nor sufficient to encourage the desired political tension.

The key difference is that the citizens of modern pluralistic democracies do not usually see themselves primarily as members of a well-defined socio-economic class. Instead, a wide range of people identify as broadly ‘middle class’, and may attach more weight to their affiliation with their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, region, lifestyle and/or occupation. If the goal is to encourage a productive tension between the many and the few, then, the most crucial political task is not to craft *institutions* which reflect that tension, but to encourage *people themselves* to recognize and act upon it. If they did, a plebeian political party could presumably win a resounding victory even within a representative system, such that additional plebeian institutions would be unnecessary. Given that they do not, however, implementing the plebeian institutions Vergara proposes is unlikely to yield radically different outcomes. As materialist thinkers have long recognized, that is, the key challenge of radical politics is to create *solidarity* – i.e. to forge a common identity among ordinary people that emphasizes their shared material interests – and not to transform the formal procedures through which their preferences are aggregated.

Of course, Vergara would surely agree with that general sentiment. After all, she rightly accuses proceduralists like Pettit of wishful thinking for relying on ‘civic virtue’ among the many, without explaining how it might be generated. In the end, however, I am not convinced that she has a more plausible story about how to foster the necessary plebeian spirit. Though she does not make it very explicit, her idea is presumably that once they are allowed to deliberate together in designated institutions – and to exert real power through collective decisions – plebeians will come to recognize their common interests and begin to defend them.

Yet the sort of solidaristic transformations we are talking about here are extremely difficult to create. Experienced organizers are nearly unanimous in reporting that building solidarity and collective power requires patient, long-term relational work, in the context of a durable union or community organization, along with powerful experiences of struggle in pursuit of concrete victories (Han, 2014; Inouye, 2019; McAlevey, 2016; Payne, 1995; Phulwani, 2016; Stout, 2012; Woody, 2021). By contrast, the participants in Vergara’s assemblies are not unified by any clearly shared interests, organized around any clearly shared goals or oriented towards any shared ideology. They meet only three times a year, on a voluntary basis, to make judgments on a wide range of issues – some of which they

may initiate themselves, but most of which will be sent to them for consideration by other assemblies around the country. As such, these assemblies are not particularly well suited to encourage a genuine plebeian consciousness.

To be clear: I believe there is an important role for extra-electoral institutions that enable ordinary people to judge the decisions of political elites. In fact, I have defended something quite like Vergara's tribunate – composed by lottery and tasked with fighting corruption – as a way of limiting elite capture in the administrative state (Bagg, forthcoming; Schulson and Bagg, 2019). Meanwhile, I also believe that building collective power among ordinary people is crucial for resisting oligarchic domination. Yet where wise judgment demands impartiality, effective resistance demands solidarity in opposition to concrete foes – and it seems to me that these two tasks call for quite *different* institutional forms. When it comes to developing solidarity around shared plebeian interests within a long-term oppositional struggle, in other words, mass political parties – as supported by labour unions and other local organizations based on sustained face-to-face contact – may still be the most promising tool at our disposal.

## What does plebeian politics require?

There is clearly a great deal to be learned from *Systemic Corruption*. To begin with, Vergara makes many independently valuable advances in the study of corruption, intellectual history and republican theory. Woven throughout, meanwhile, is an even more significant contribution. As sharply as anything I have read, she insists that our only hope for creating more democratic and egalitarian societies lies in building collective countervailing power among ordinary people. The core insight of materialist constitutionalism, as she elaborates it, is that the tension between a ruling elite and a well-organized many can be essential grist for the mill of freedom.

As I have argued, however, class-based solidarity and mass–elite tension must be created rather than presumed. Vergara waxes poetic about the ‘people-as-network’, and the emergence of a collective plebeian will through the exercise of judgment by millions of people in thousands upon thousands of local assemblies. However, she does not explore what this process of emergence might actually look like. More importantly, she does not explain why the aggregated judgments of a majority of assemblies ought to be trusted as a more genuine reflection of the collective will than the decisions of representatives elected by those very same citizens. Some may be persuaded by Vergara's Arendtian arguments for the intrinsic value of ‘political action’ by ordinary citizens, but that is quite a separate issue from its instrumental tendency to shape those citizens into reliable defenders of plebeian interests. In my view, at least, achieving that transformation is the most crucial task for any anti-oligarchic project.

## Acknowledgements

For feedback on earlier drafts, the author is grateful to Camila Vergara and Lior Erez.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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