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Pathologies of democratic deliberation: introduction to the symposium on A.E. Galeotti's *Political Self-Deception*

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ABSTRACT
This paper introduces the symposium on Anna Elisabetta Galeotti's book *Political Self-Deception*. After having explained the contribution of the book to debates in democratic theory and having highlighted its main arguments, the paper provides an overview of the different contributions to the symposium. The contributions range from philosophy, political theory and history and, thus, show the interdisciplinary interest of the book and critically engage with its various aspects.

Two widely debated topics in normative political theory are 1) which political decision-making processes work best in retrieving and using relevant evidence; and 2) the ethics of justifying political decisions to the general public, including the virtue of sincerity. Regarding 1), some scholars explore the ways in which the involvement of experts in political decision-making can be made consistent with democracy (e.g. Christiano 2012; Moore 2017; Richardson 2012), while others argue that democratic institutions are justified precisely because they can pool the most diverse knowledge and put it to good use when faced with difficult political problems (e.g. Anderson 2006; Landemore 2011; Talisse 2007). Turning to 2), considerable attention has been paid to whether sincerity, honesty or other similar attitudes should govern public officials when they deliberate about and then justify decisions to the general public (Carey 2017; Schwartzman 2011; Rawls 1997).

Interestingly, both sets of literature forget about the possibility of self-deception on the part of democratic decision-makers, i.e., the unintended 'distortion of reality against the available evidence and according to one's wishes' (Galeotti 2018, 1). However, as reconstructed in Anna Elisabetta Galeotti's *Political Self-Deception*, self-deception provides an independent source of misuse of the best available evidence and can therefore lead to spectacular political failures. Furthermore, it raises new questions about whether public officials can be insincere or dishonest first with themselves and what normative judgement we should pass on the resulting efforts at public justification.

The analyses of the epistemic powers of democracy and the literature over public justification are just two examples of the many debates that could benefit from engaging

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closely with the topic of political self-deception as analysed in Galeotti's book. To do justice to that topic, Galeotti brings together a variety of disciplines. Some of her argument's aims fall within normative political theory. Specifically, Galeotti aims to pin down the specific wrong of political self-deception, which has essentially to do with the disastrous consequences it can bring about, and outline recommendations as to how to redesign decision-making processes so as to avoid it. Those recommendations are centred around the idea of 'precommitment', on the part of governments' cabinets and other political decision-making teams, to the possibility of self-deception and therefore the institutionalization of impartial and insulated referees who are tasked to guard against any instance of it (Galeotti 2018, 70–74 and 109–113).

To prepare the ground for her normative analysis, Galeotti has to delve into political psychology and defend the very possibility of political self-deception. In brief, her idea is that self-deception by political leaders and their collaborators provides an economical unitary explanation for many cases where the public was fed information that later turned out to be false and also led to political failure (Galeotti 2018, 84–99). At an even more fundamental level, Galeotti embarks in a detailed philosophical analysis of the very notion of self-deception, both to distinguish it from dishonesty and honest mistakes and to provide an original definition according to which self-deception is neither lying to oneself nor mere biased reasoning (Galeotti 2018, 19–57).

An important source of appeal of Galeotti's book is the way in which she employs this complex framework to analyse in depth three real-world cases in recent US foreign policy, i.e. the Cuban missile crisis, the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, and the search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (Galeotti 2018, 115–223). Her goal is to suggest that these three cases are best understood as instances of political self-deception, and her focus on foreign policy is motivated by the idea that identifying and containing self-deception is particularly important in this area. This is because foreign policy decisions that are made against the best available evidence are likely to have disastrous consequences at a very large scale. Moreover, momentous foreign policy decisions are often made under time pressure and with fewer checks and balances than in other areas of political decision-making. This call to pay close attention to self-deception in foreign policy hints at a point of contact with another broad literature in normative political theory – the literature (or, better, sets of literature) in international ethics that focuses not on abstract principles governing the international realm but on more concrete ethical issues faced by foreign policy decision-makers from broadly liberal democratic states (e.g. Blake 2013; Fabre 2018; Pattison 2018; Welsh 2015).

The contributions to this symposium span the whole range of disciplines Galeotti touches upon. Working largely at the philosophical level, Neil Manson draws attention to the prominent epistemological framework of 'virtue epistemology' and, in particular, the so-called 'responsibilist' camp within it.[1] Responsibilists aim to map out a variety of character traits such as diligence, conscientiousness and impartiality that are conducive to knowledge. In so doing, Manson notes, they appear to share Galeotti's agenda of cautioning against attitudes that lead to the distortion of reality and ill-informed decisions. Moreover, very much like Galeotti, responsibilists believe that agents can be held responsible for displaying such attitudes. Manson argues that Galeotti's analysis

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[1]Two classic examples of responsibilist virtue epistemology are provided by Code (1987) and Zagzebski (1996).

of self-deception would therefore benefit if it was explicitly located against the background of existing responsibilist theories of epistemic vice. To think of self-deception as an epistemic vice among others would make Galeotti's explanation of the US decision to invade Iraq and other cases much richer, e.g. by opening the door to the possibility that different decision-makers fell prey to different epistemic vices or that the same decision-makers mixed self-deception with other vices.

Lior Erez and Alfred Moore discuss Galeotti's work primarily from the perspective of political theory. Specifically, Erez aims to criticize Galeotti's argument from a 'realist' perspective, therefore denying that the normative analysis of any political issue should consist in the mere application of general principles of personal morality (Rossi and Sleat 2014). Among several other points, Erez casts doubt on Galeotti's claim that realists would object to her political psychological point that self-deception is an important fact of political life. Classic realist Niccolò Machiavelli, for example, warned against the perils of ambition and flattery in a way that has important commonalities with the mechanisms of self-deception as discussed by Galeotti. However, realists typically stress that given the nuances, uncertainty and ambiguity of political problems, it is impossible for theorists to provide a universal theory of what makes good political judgement. Consequently, Erez argues for the surprising conclusion that political leaders may at times be exercising excellent political judgement while deceiving themselves.

Moore zooms in on the normative recommendation that to keep self-deception under control, decision-making teams should pre-commit to be checked, either continuously or periodically, by impartial and dispassionate observers. Moore doubts that a truly impartial and dispassionate perspective on a team's efforts to assess complex evidence is ever possible. Building on the literature on 'inductive risk', he points out that inevitable decisions concerning how much confidence is enough to accept a hypothesis and how to balance the risk of false positives against that of false negatives are necessarily value-laden (Douglas 2000; Wilholt 2009). Next, Moore suggests that the best way to fight the emotionally loaded motivated logic of self-deception might be to include in the decision-making process actors with a range of different emotionally loaded goals. In this way, the motivated reasoning and potential self-deception of some are pitted against and kept in check by the motivated reasoning and potential self-deception of others.

Writing from a historian's perspective, Shaul Mitelpunkt engages with Galeotti's discussion of cases from the recent history of American foreign policy. Mitelpunkt explains that Galeotti's focus on political self-deception dovetails with recent trends in history of US foreign relations that go beyond the paradigm of realist policy-making to stress the role of emotions and fantasy as drivers of political decisions (Costigliola and Hogan 2017).[2] Therefore, Galeotti's book should interest historians because it provides a theoretical framework through which to analyse how self-deception happens in politics. However, Mitelpunkt challenges Galeotti's choice to analyse the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Tonkin Gulf resolution and the 2003 invasion of Iraq by focusing on what the top of the decision-making circle did in the immediate build-up to these three

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[2]Frank Costigliola and Michael Hogan, 'Introduction', in Costigliola and Hogan (eds.), *Explaining the History of US Foreign Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 1–8.

decisions. According to him, this choice risks obscuring the importance of longer-term processes where self-deception might have been at play at a larger scale and giving the impression that instances of political self-deception are rare aberrations in an otherwise rational American political landscape.

In her contribution, Alice Baderin takes Galeotti's analysis of self-deception beyond the already capacious disciplinary boundaries of the book. Baderin sets to explore whether self-deception provides a plausible explanation for the numerous cases in which political theorists make empirical claims in order to offer further support to their preferred values without providing the necessary empirical evidence. She concludes that such cases can indeed be illuminated by Galeotti's model of belief formation 1) motivated by an emotionally loaded wish that a set of propositions are correct and 2) falling in between lying and honest mistakes, even though many such cases look closer to wishful thinking than self-deception properly understood. Also, Baderin suggests that Galeotti's prophylactic measures against political self-deception could be adapted to fight self-deception and wishful thinking by political theorists, e.g. by adopting a form of precommitment to greater interdisciplinary oversight.

All these contributions pose extremely interesting questions and challenges to Galeotti's account of self-deception. The main goal of her article in this symposium is to provide replies to them.

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