Review - Distributive Justice Debates in Political and Social Thought
Written by James Wakefield

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Distributive Justice Debates in Political and Social Thought: Perspectives on Finding a Fair Share
by Camilla Boisen and Matthew C. Murray (eds.)*,*
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1.Political theory in the Global North

The idea of distributive justice, concerning who ought to get what and why, is one of the central pillars of modern political theory. It is easy to forget that much of the conceptual apparatus we take for granted when discussing it is the product of specific traditions and controversies, both academic and political, mostly in European and American history. The ways we frame and argue about problems have been determined by such historical and cultural contingencies at least as much as by the progress of clear-sighted reason, which may itself be just part of our inheritance. This may seem obvious. Yet the very contingency of our modes of thought should matter especially to we theorists who, given our discipline's tendency to lofty abstraction, might be tempted to imagine that our subject matter is universal and our ways of thinking about it are the only ones worth taking seriously. It is convenient*,* though in some respects badly misleading, to imagine the history of philosophy as a clear, straight path, with canonical texts and thinkers as milestones marking our progress along its course, and the current state of things as a provisional endpoint in which all these culminate. Other schools of thought may be accordingly thought of as paths that branch off from ours and lead, for the purposes of our analogy, to dead ends.

2. The aims of *Distributive Justice Debates in Political and Social Thought*

Camilla Boisen and Matthew C. Murray take up this theme in their edited collection,*Distributive Justice Debates in Political and Social Thought*. They acknowledge that certain thinkers and texts have become 'dominant forces in our field' and serve as 'touchstones in thought' enabling today's philosophers to gain a sense of 'siblinghood' with their peers and predecessors. We have all read Plato's *Republic,* after all. All the same we must be conscious that while these canonical thinkers keep us company on our way up the 'unending mountain of questions' to which political theory gives rise, pointing out routes we might plausibly follow, their very familiarity also 'keep[s] us from looking for a new way to climb' (p. 2). We can, in short, be complacent, and often are.

Metaphors aside, this is a promising theme for a book. Boisen and Murray have picked out a genuine though little-discussed issue which political theorists will doubtlessly recognise. Contemporary political theory can sometimes appear a little stale, to say the least; certain thinkers and themes have been discussed so exhaustively that newcomers to the discipline are faced with a choice between micro-specialism in some mainstream topic or else striking out from the conventional path and publishing work that no one reads. There is nonetheless a difficult question of how we should avoid complacency. Boisen and Murray suggest an ambitious solution. They intend

[t]o bring to light under-represented perspectives on distributive justice in the history of political thought that question the direction, scope, totality, complexities and even the limitations of the practice of distributive justice in historical and emerging debates;

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and '[t]o… giv[e] these perspectives contextual relevancy through discursive illustrations of framing through an African and global lens' (p. 4).

By locating the intersections between more and less familiar ways of thinking about distributive justice, we stand a better chance of realising the aims that theory enables us to articulate. Ideas from or specifically tailored to regions of the Global South deserve further consideration because these 'exemplify many of the conflicts and factors which make distributive justice arguments contentious, difficult, pertinent and important' (p. 4). If we are open to a wider range of ideas about distributive justice and are attentive to the contrasts and commonalities between mainstream political thought, i.e. that rooted in the more developed countries of western Europe and North America, and the relatively neglected political thought coming out of other parts of the globe, though especially African countries, we should come to recognise which of the familiar ways of doing things are just artefacts of particular traditions, relying on distinctively western assumptions that political actors in other places and cultural settings might not share, and which are in fact widely, even universally, applicable. The value of this exercise is at once philosophical, in that it deepens our consciousness of the contingency of our own ideas, and pragmatic, in that it may suggest new ways of framing and presenting ideas so they make better sense to policymakers and actors in cultural settings besides our own.

3. The contents in outline

The task Boisen and Murray have set themselves is plainly a hard one, not least in a volume of some 273 pages. The book's twelve essays are divided between three parts, each concerning a separate aspect of the problem described. The first four have historical themes; the contributors offer new interpretations of the canon. David James, for example, finds that J.G. Fichte articulated the modern notion of 'distributive justice' some 171 years before John Rawls, who is usually credited with the innovation, while Matt Zwolinski shows that running through the history of libertarian political philosophy, even as described by such hard-nosed folk as Herbert Spencer, there is a well-established strain of progressivism that its critics have tended to overlook. The essays of the second part address contemporary political theory, touching on the ethics of care, the recent trend for 'political realism' and conventional wisdom about conservatism, before in the third part contributors suggest ways in which political theory might be better tailored to the specific needs, concepts and values of people in the Global South, challenging familiar assumptions about, for example, the state's supreme authority in questions of territory and the relation between what is good for the individual and for the community.

4. Criticism

As should be clear from the range of topics just mentioned, the contributors do not address Boisen and Murray's stated problem directly. Instead, modestly but sensibly, they provide discrete examples of how we might look at things differently. In this respect the book is a great success: there is not one bad essay in it, and every one will give an attentive reader much to think about. Zwolinski's careful reading and interpretation of Spencer, for instance, serves to correct some common misunderstandings about Spencer in particular, the history of libertarianism in general and further to illustrate what can be gained by re-evaluating the historical canon. The downside to the contributors' indirectness, at least so far as the book's *raison d'être* is concerned, is that we are given no indication of whether the problem identified in the introduction is any nearer to being solved by the end of the volume. There is little overlap between the themes of essays even in a given section, so what each implies for the stated problem is left for the reader to decide. This is hardly a decisive complaint; there is something to be said for a collection of partial solutions to smaller problems, provided that these together constitute a larger, more amorphous problem, at least if the alternative is to try to cover it entirely by spreading the available resources too thin. But I was left to wonder what to make of the book as a whole, and more especially whether it provides any kind of solution to (or even a full articulation of) its central problem, or a coherent set of problems, over and above the narrowly particular answers to subsidiary problems described in each essay. Even from one section to the next, the book's division into parts means that the threads connecting the essays of one section do not tie together with those of the other two.

Despite the stress placed on the neglect of non-mainstream, especially non-western points of view on distributive justice, few of the essays in the book would look out of place in a mainstream journal of intellectual history (Part I),

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political philosophy (Part II) or international ethics (Part III). The idea of a set of neglected perspectives separate from those best represented in mainstream theory is only really addressed in the third section, and even there somewhat inconsistently. The strong representation in all sections of scholars from African universities, especially the University of Johannesburg, is not sufficient to make clear a distinctively African perspective on theory, even if African politics prompts considerations that theorists ought to take into account. (Thaddeus Metz does describe such a perspective in 'An African Theory of Social Justice', one of the highlights of the volume. It is a stimulating piece which hints at the need for more work to develop strains of theory from other regions and cultures. However, it is unclear what such a perspective has to do with the other essays in the volume, even those from contributors based in Africa).

I do not think that Boisen and Murray quite meet the aims they set themselves at the beginning. Still, shooting for the moon as they are, their attempt to meet them is admirable. Definitive solutions to these hard problems would take at least a few volumes of this size to articulate. Nonetheless, I wondered if more could have been done to make clear exactly what they understood by the issue at the heart of the book. To give just one example, it is notable that little space is given over to questions of what the prevailing 'hegemony' of western political thought actually entails, how and why it has come to be the way it is and what this implies for the status of political thought founded on its presuppositions. These are big questions, which Boisen and Murray perhaps wisely set aside for lengthier treatment in the future. For all its disjointedness, then, *Distributive Justice Debates in Political and Social Thought* is a worthy and frequently suggestive contribution to modern political theory. Every one of the essays is independently interesting, so whether or not the book contains a coherent message about the problem of western hegemonic discourse, there is much in it that merits close attention.

This is not the place to review the book that might have been. Still, it would be fascinating to see that third section enlarged to something the size of a book, further developing the theme of non-mainstream perspectives on distributive justice and incorporating ideas from other regions and traditions. As it stands, the book is a salutary reminder that much mainstream political theory, for all its claims to universality, reflects concerns more parochial than its advocates would like to think. The more clearly we see this, the greater our chances of rising out of the rut.

About the author:

James Wakefield teaches political theory and intellectual history at Cardiff University and Swansea University. He is the author of *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism* and co-editor, with Bruce Haddock, of *Thought Thinking: The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*. His research interests are in political and moral theory, and include the ethics of education, liberal perfectionism and the role of the emotions in reasoning.