

# The injustices of global justice scholarship

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Duncan Bell (ed.), *Empire, Race and Global Justice*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2019; 284 pp. £75.00: ISBN: 9781108427791 (hbk)

## Abstract

Duncan Bell's *Empire, Race and Global Justice* is an edited volume that makes an important intervention in philosophical debates about global justice. Its contributors argue that global justice scholarship has paid insufficient attention to the role of imperialism and racism in generating global hierarchies. This review considers the contributions of this volume from three perspectives: as a critique of the global justice literature, as a guide for what methods global justice scholars should use and as a reconsideration of what texts should be incorporated into the global justice canon. *Empire* is an important book for anyone who researches and teaches in the area of global justice because it demonstrates both why a different approach to this topic is necessary and how a different approach is possible.

## Keywords

Compensatory justice, critical race theory, global justice, imperialism, political theory methods

I wish this book had existed when I was a graduate student. While studying for my PhD at Minnesota, I wanted to write on a project that combined the normative theorizing of my political theory classes with the pressing issues of global injustice I was learning about in my international relations classes. A sympathetic teacher suggested I read Charles Beitz's *Political Theory and International Relations*. I found the book, however, disappointing. Its account of the international

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system seemed dated compared to what I was reading in my IR theory classes, and its implied superiority of western democracies ran counter to what was happening in late 1990s and early 2000s America, with mass protests against the Washington consensus in Seattle and a fledgling anti-war movement on campus contesting the Bush Administration's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As my graduate school years went on, I found other classics of the global justice literature scattered throughout my class readings. Some ideas, such as Joseph Carens's call for open borders, were genuinely provocative, whereas others, such as Michael Ignatieff's defence of humanitarian intervention, seemed deeply compromised by the war on terror. While the idealism of some of this writing was deeply inspiring, much of the global justice literature also seemed too abstract. Part of this was a matter of methodological predilection. Most of the global justice literature draws on methods from analytical philosophy, whereas I was being trained in the methods of continental philosophy and the history of political thought. Part of it, however, was the sheer obliviousness of the global justice literature to perspectives that did not come from the global north. It lacked serious self-reflexivity about the role of the US and Western Europe in constructing the international hierarchies that were generating the global injustices all around me.

*Empire, Race and Global Justice* (hereafter *Empire*) explains why I found the Anglo-American analytic approach to global politics so wanting. Its contributors point the way to a better research agenda. It is significant that most of the contributors to this volume come from academic disciplines outside of philosophy. I suspect that one of the reasons for this is that they, like me, could not possibly justify their claims about global justice to their colleagues if they did not take the empirics of global justice seriously. While philosophy is useful for developing conceptual precision and clarifying the logic of justification for normative principles, this logical rigour often comes at the price of oversimplifying the nature of political problems. The debates between analytic political philosophy and other approaches such as history of political thought, and critical theory are well rehearsed at this point. What *Empire* provides its readers is a penetrating critique of the limits of analytic philosophy when it comes to global justice. It offers a road map for how an empirically informed approach to global justice is possible. In what follows, I will briefly consider the contributions to this volume from three angles: as a critique of the global justice literature, as a guide for what methods global justice scholars should use and as a reconsideration of what texts should be incorporated into the global justice canon. *Empire* is an important book for anyone who researches and teaches in the area of global justice because it demonstrates both why a different approach to this topic is necessary and how a different approach is possible.

## **A decolonial and anti-racist approach to global justice**

While there is significant variation in the criticisms raised by the contributors to this volume, they all share a common concern with the inadequacies of global

justice scholarship. Their target is the post-Rawlsian analytic approach to global justice that developed in the Anglo-American academy in the 1970s and 1980s (hereafter global justice scholarship). This approach treated issues such as global poverty and political violence from an ethical standpoint, often framing these problems in terms of the obligations of the wealthy global north to the deprived global south. The contributors to *Empire* argue that the particularly philosophical commitments of these global justice scholars blinded them to the crucial role that racism and imperialism play in structuring the global system. Part of the reason for this blindness is the tendency for analytic philosophers to ignore historical context when constructing ideal theory. Yet the preference for abstraction also leads to other problems such as ignoring the specific complaints of citizens from the global south when constructing schemes to alleviate global inequality, the marginalization of non-white philosophers from the global justice canon and a preference for solutions that focus on redistribution of wealth from rich to poor over solutions that restructure political and economic power on a global scale.

Charles Mills argues that the global justice literature since the 1970s has avoided any significant discussion on race and racism. This silence is remarkable because the principal source of global injustice is the practice of European imperialism, which at its peak saw over 85% of the world's population ruled by white European powers (Said, 1994: 8). A simple survey of pre-1945 writings on imperialism reveals that prior to the Second World War, both defenders of European imperialism and their opponents from the global south, understood imperialism as 'a matter of white domination over people of color' (Mills, 2019: 96). Mills argues that race should return as a key category for global justice scholars, but this time as a powerful critical rather than hierarchical concept. By ignoring questions of race, liberal scholars of global justice end up reproducing the racial hierarchies of their European imperial predecessors. Increased scholarly attention should be paid to the ways in which racial metaphysics have shaped the western canon of political theory. This means that political theory must incorporate critical race theory into the political philosophical mainstream. Once political theorists make these changes to their disciplinary practices, Mills argues that there will be a shift in our approach to global justice away from the post-Rawlsian focus on redistribution towards questions of corrective justice.

Samuel Moyn focuses on the first sustained philosophical treatment of human rights, Henry Shue's *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, to argue that the individualist egalitarian approach to global justice 'embraced an anti-political ethics of succor' (Moyn, 2019: 53). Shue and other liberal global justice philosophers of the 1970s and 1980s saw global inequality as a problem that one could treat, but not cure. This meant a focus on ensuring global subsistence for the world's poor while resisting calls (especially by activists from the global south) for a structural transformation of the global economy. Moyn demonstrates that Shue's focus on subsistence and individual egalitarianism foreclosed other more radical approaches to global justice. Of particular note was the proposal by countries in the global south for a New International Economic Order

(NIEO). The NIEO framed global justice in terms of the history of European imperialism and called for collective solutions. Moyn demonstrates that global justice scholars have focused on ethical rather than political solutions to problems of global poverty. As a consequence, they mistakenly frame inequality in terms of distributive justice rather than corrective justice.

Catherine Lu approaches questions of decolonization from a different perspective. Citing the Mohawk and Sinixt First Nations as examples of indigenous polities whose traditional territories cross the boundaries of the US and Canada, Lu raises two critiques of the contemporary international order. First, state-centric practices of global governance are themselves deeply unjust because they reinscribe colonial relations of rule. Second, the international order 'is alienating to many peoples and groups that were forcibly and arbitrarily incorporated into conditions of settler colonialism or postcolonial states' (Lu, 2019: 252). These critiques enable Lu to ask how indigenous transboundary claims shape their demand for self-determination. The classical model of self-determination is premised upon a contiguous territory with a peoples able to exercise sovereignty within its boundaries. Practices of settler colonialism make this form of self-determination impossible under the contemporary state-centric order. Lu argues that the rejection of transboundary rights claims by settler colonial states such as Canada and the US entails a distinct form of structural injustice that cannot be addressed by existing proposals in the global justice literature for open borders or self-determination.<sup>1</sup>

Anne Phillips begins with the observation that global justice scholarship has found little traction amongst scholars in the global south. She argues that this is because of a mismatch between the assumptions behind the global justice literature and the lived experience of colonial rule. Phillips notes a crucial similarity between the now discredited modernization theory and theories of global justice. Both theories rely on an implicit stages of development thesis that ranks cultures in a hierarchical manner. This schema dictates a single model of development that requires states from the global south to adopt the values of the global north in order to be admitted to the 'developed world'. As a consequence, global justice scholars gloss over the local causes of injustice. More problematically, the global north is posited as both the normative ideal towards which the global south should strive and the sole agent capable of delivery assistance to the global south. The modernist bias of global justice scholars, then, simultaneously deprives the global south of agency in addressing inequality, and imagines only one possible model (the liberal-democratic capitalist nation state) for the salvation of the global south.

### **The importance of history and context**

A second line of critique advanced by this volume's contributors is that methods matter. Global justice scholars draw on methods such as contractualism, reflective equilibrium, conceptual analysis and thought experiments. The contributors to *Empire* argue that the abstraction of analytical methods leads to a misdiagnosis of the causes of global inequality. Instead, the contributors call for a different set

of methods that are historically grounded, reasoning from the particulars of cases as a better means for diagnosing the problems of poverty, racial inequality and imperialism.

Forrester's chapter forcefully demonstrates the use of intellectual history for the critique of political theory. She considers the silence of contemporary political philosophy on questions of reparation for the legacies of colonialism and slavery. Through a careful reconstruction of 1970s debates in political philosophy, Forrester argues that after the publication of *A Theory of Justice*, liberal analytic political philosophers focused almost exclusively on questions of distributive justice. Claims for reparations, on the other hand, raised issues of corporate responsibility, compensatory justice and desert which did not fit into the post-Rawlsian analytic framework. Post-Rawlsian egalitarians argued that social inequalities that might have resulted from historical injustices could best be rectified through redistribution, thereby rendering reparations unnecessary. The sole major philosophical figure after Rawls to make a case for reparations was Nozick, whose concept of 'justice in holdings' argued that 'whether a distribution is just depends upon how it came about' (Nozick, 2013: 153). The Rawlsian objection to reparations was that it posited 'a realm of historical argument and transhistorical rights of ownership, property and inheritance that existed outside of social rules and agreements' (Forrester, 2019: 41). Global justice scholars marginalized debates about reparations for over 40 years, because claims for corrective justice did not fit within the post-Rawlsian focus on distributive justice.

Margaret Kohn's chapter makes a forceful argument for the inclusion of standpoint theory as a methodology in global justice scholarship. Standpoint theory is a feminist modification of Marxian ideology critique. Both Marxists and feminist standpoint theorists argue that ideology is a product of one's positional interests. For Marxists, the positional interest is class, whereas for feminist standpoint theorists the positional interest is gender. Kohn modifies standpoint theory, by arguing that in the case of global justice, the key positional interest is subalterity – i.e. that whereas the global justice espoused by analytic philosophers may look just from the perspective of global north academics, from the perspective of citizens of the global south calls for aid and wealth redistribution to the world's poor do nothing to address the power dynamics of the global institutions that generate these inequalities in the first place. In particular, Kohn argues that political theorists should pay more attention to manifestos, ethnographies, legal briefs and policy documents from activists in the global south. Through studying these texts, Kohn identifies crucial differences between the demands of the global south and the proposals of global justice scholars. Activists from the south are demanding democratic control of these institutions, a focus on sustainability and a dismantling of the neoliberal international economic order. Conversely, global justice scholars such as Pogge and Nussbaum cast elites from institutions in the global north as saviours through a system of redistribution. Standpoint theory compels northern academics to consider questions of global justice from the perspectives of those articulating them. Kohn argues that this method broadens both

the nature of the critiques raised in global justice literatures and the possible solutions to problems of global injustice.

Kimberly Hutchings's contribution to the volume considers the recent cosmopolitan turn in just war theorizing by scholars such as Fabre and McMahan. Building on post-Rawlsian cosmopolitan theorizing, these scholars have defended an individualist rights-based approach to war which argues that there is a continuation of ethical obligations with respect to violence across domestic and international boundaries, committed to 'the fundamental moral priority of individuals' (Hutchings, 2019: 214). Hutchings, however, offers a post-colonial critique of cosmopolitan just war theory, arguing that it reinforces the colonial imaginary of war by constructing a script in which only a subset of actors has the 'the global remit to conduct just violence', that blurs the line between war and other modes of violence, thereby subsuming war 'under a higher civilizational purpose' (Hutchings, 2019: 213). This colonial imaginary leads cosmopolitan just war theorists to defend a liberal imperial world order as exemplified through counter-insurgency, military interventions ground in the R2P doctrine and the proliferation of new modalities of warfare such as drone strikes.

Robert Nichols argues that global justice scholarship should take into account critical settler colonial perspectives. Implicit within the global justice literature is an assumption that the dominant hierarchy is between wealthy and powerful states in the global north, and poor and powerless states in the global south. Yet this perspective neglects the fact that many of the powerful states, most notably the US and Canada, are themselves settler colonies that have constructed internal hierarchies of wealth and power based on the dispossession of indigenous land. Nichols argues that part of this blindness is rooted in the story that Anglo-American political philosophy tells about itself. In order to unsettle this narrative, Nichols sets up two versions of the narrative, the first told by practitioners of Anglo-American analytic political philosophy, and the second told by indigenous peoples and scholars of settler colonialism. In the first narrative, Nichols argues that a 'commitment to an ideal, analytical, contractualist mode of argumentation may block critical analysis of the contested histories of Anglo-America as an ethno-nationalist geospatial marker' (Nichols, 2019: 232). To unsettle this narrative, Nichols turns to critical accounts of settler colonialism. In this literature, historical context is central. There is a distinction between extractive colonization in which a small colonial elite ruled over an indigenous population in order to extract resources, and settler colonialism in which a large number of settlers displaced pre-existing first nations. Nichols argues that this distinction enables global justice scholars to see imperialism as a problem for the global south, while turning a blind eye to the legacies of imperialism within their own countries, because they do not see their complicity in settler colonialism.

## **Decolonizing the global justice canon**

In recent years, there have been increased calls to decolonize the curriculum. While what exactly decolonizing the curriculum means is subject to some debate, part of

this necessarily entails incorporating more non-white and non-European perspectives into both teaching and research. Indeed, most of the canon of global justice scholarship is white, male and working at elite universities in the global north. One detrimental consequence of this is the silencing of voices who have experienced the impacts of imperialism and racism first hand. Yet, many scholars, myself included, while sympathetic to the calls to broaden the global justice canon, are often at a loss for where to start. We often uncritically reproduce the canon in our own teaching and research, because these are the texts we were taught as students, and these are the texts we are expected to cite by editors and peer reviewers if we hope to get published. *Empire* puts a counter-canon at the centre of its analysis. There are deep engagements with the ideas of postcolonial and critical race thinkers such as Du Bois, Fanon and Said. The footnotes throughout the volume offer rich examples of secondary literatures on settle colonialism, transnational black activism and anti-poverty movements from the global south that can point readers in the right direction if they want to learn more.

Jeanne Morefield's chapter demonstrates the importance of incorporating non-Anglo-American perspectives when formulating global justice theories. Morefield argues that the historical amnesia of global justice scholars ignores the crucial role that liberal internationalism has played in generating problems such as inequality and conflict. These scholars then claim that the solutions to these present problems must be more liberalism. To unsettle this narrative, Morefield makes the case for grounding global justice in Edward Said's contrapuntal methodology. This method reads western texts about European imperialism in critical tension with texts by intellectuals from the periphery. Said's approach demonstrates that there is always some form of active resistance to imperialism. Morefield argues that 'a contrapuntal response to global injustice...focuses on the critical process of writing "counter-narratives" that both illuminate the present and disclose different political possibilities for the future' (Morefield, 2019: 206). The advantage of this approach is that it draws attention to often-ignored political possibilities from the past, while resisting the call for quick 'solutions' to contemporary problems that abstract global justice scholars offer by unreflectively drawing on liberal imperialist tropes.

While she does not use the term here, one example of a contrapuntal reading in practice can be found in Sundhya Pahuja's chapter on the transnational corporations and international law. Pahuja considers debates around the role of corporation in international development in the 1970s and 1980s. She considers two clashing interpretations of the role of corporations in international development. The first is the critical view from the global south, as articulated by Fanon and Allende. On this account, race and development are linked as a means for justifying resource expropriation by corporations in decolonizing states such as Iran and Chile. The second view, articulated by Pogge and Kissinger, explicitly treated the history of corporate acquisition as a problem from the past. Instead, both argue that the crucial issue was how technical elites from the global north could share knowledge with the global south. Under this approach, international law became

an instrument for protecting the private property rights of corporations who had previously acquired their wealth through imperialism. Pahuja argues that the crucial issue in this debate was who has the authority to decide what counts as international law governing corporations and property rights. When the global north asserted its authority through international trade law, it concealed the racial hierarchies that it used to construct this order in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

Inés Valdez argues that the global justice literature disavows history in two crucial ways. First, it ignores ‘the transnational character of past and present injustice’ (Valdez, 2019: 121). Second, it does not acknowledge the role that transnational coalitions of marginalized groups from the West and non-West have played in contesting these injustices. Central to Valdez’s analysis is a crucial distinction between global and transnational. Conceptions of the global focus on processes of globalization and are culturally and politically homogenizing. Conceptions of the transnational focus on ‘how multiple sets of dynamically overlapping and interacting social fields that exceed the national’ shape seemingly national structures (Valdez, 2019: 124). Valdez recovers WEB Du Bois’s neglected transnational writings to illustrate how coalitions of activists from the US and Africa united to contest the imperial structures of international institutions in the wake of the First World War. From these texts, Valdez develops two concepts: an association for emancipation and an association for domination. Associations for domination are necessary to establish international regimes that exclude subaltern groups from participating in the international order. Associations for emancipation, such as the Pan-African movement of the early 20th century, are practices of oppressed groups from across the globe forming political alliances to resist the practices of associations for domination. To properly understand the role played by associations for emancipation, we must study the texts of their leading thinkers such as Du Bois.

### **Another global justice is possible**

The great value of this book is that the contributors show us another way of doing global justice scholarship. They reconceptualize global problems by incorporating critical race and decolonial perspectives. They demonstrate the utility of alternative methods from intellectual history, critical theory and indigenous studies. And they construct a counter canon of texts that gives voice to the concerns of citizens from the Global South. My one concern with the volume, to borrow a phrase from Kohn (2019: 167) that she in turn borrowed from Wendy Brown (1993), is that the volume as a whole suffers from a wounded attachment to analytical global justice. It pivots on a series of critiques about the inadequacy of analytic philosophy in understanding the root causes of global justice. But in doing so they set up this discourse as hegemonic, simply calling for it to incorporate other perspectives. Staking the value of the project on whether or not political philosophers recognize this version of global justice as global justice undersells its import. Who cares if Anglo-American philosophers at elite institutions read and draw upon these

concepts? In setting this particular body of scholarship as the object of critique, the contributors unintentionally make those global justice scholars the arbiters of its value.<sup>3</sup> Forget Rawls, Beitz and Pogge, I say, and build a different body of scholarship, in partnership with scholars and activists from the global south, indigenous communities and people of colour, that addresses problems of global justice from this perspective. A global justice scholarship that centres questions of race and imperialism, and diagnoses the historical causes of global injustice, will be far more successful at dismantling global hierarchies than one that ignores context and power in the name of so-called ‘rigorous’ abstract moral theorizing.

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### Notes

1. Lu has in mind the work of Stilz (2015) on decolonization and Carens (2013) on open borders. For a similar argument about the insufficiency of western notions of sovereignty in recognizing indigenous claims to self-determination, see Havercroft (2008).
2. For a similar call to decolonize international law, from the perspective of settler colonial societies, see Havercroft et al. (2020).
3. As Alisa Kessel pointed out to me, scholars who are marginalized by virtue of their identity have not been able to escape the clutches of analytic global justice scholarship because they have always had to justify their work in those terms *by virtue of the fact that* they likely are already contending with marginalization by their disciplines by virtue of their (mere) embodiment.

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