

M. O'Neill and T. Williamson

Property-Owning Democracy: Rawls and Beyond (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 336 pp. ISBN 9781444334104 (hbk). Hardback/Paperback: £50.00/-.

It may come as a surprise that new work promising to add to our understanding of the ideas of John Rawls is still emerging. Even more intriguing, however, is a collection of essays purporting to restore Rawls's significance as a radical egalitarian with plenty to say about the failures of the capitalist welfare state. Editors Martin O'Neill and Thad Williamson argue persuasively that Rawls's race is not run because questions about the realisation of the institutional arrangement he recommended remain criminally underexplored. For the sake of brevity I will outline the shape of the book and then confine my discussion to O'Neill's engaging treatment of Rawls's controversial claim that only a property-owning democracy or liberal socialism are consistent with his two principles of justice, and Alan Thomas's insightful attempt to blend Rawls's political liberalism with Philip Pettit's theory of republican freedom as non-domination.

When Rawls came to restate and reaffirm his commitment to the theory of Justice as Fairness as his favoured conception of justice, he took the opportunity to clarify and revise certain elements. One important change that has, until now, received little attention is the emphasis he placed on the distinction between a property-owning democracy and a capitalist welfare state. Indeed, he described it as a "serious fault of *Theory*," (*Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 139n) that he had failed to do this adequately in the first place.

So, what then is this critical distinction? The idea is that capitalist welfare states are organised in such a way that they allow a small number of private individuals to amass levels of productive assets that lead to the political exclusion of those who lose out in the marketplace. Even though everybody's basic needs are met, the likelihood of the emergence of a politically-disadvantaged underclass shows that welfare-state capitalism fails to secure the fair value of the political liberties, fair equality of opportunity, and recognise the principle of reciprocity. It is, therefore, unjust. A property-owning democracy, by contrast, shifts the focus from redistribution of income to the widespread dispersal of assets and human capital. The goal is to prevent large inequalities from emerging in the first place, thereby nailing down a fair framework within which individuals can pursue their conceptions of the good. While this could also be achieved, Rawls thinks, by liberal socialism, property-owning democracy appears to be a better historical and cultural fit (p. 76). The unambiguous rejection of the standard liberal-democratic model is striking, and it is based

on a claim that appears to speak to at least one familiar objection to Rawls's work. If he succeeded in imposing robust limits on the inequalities that the difference principle permits, then it may not be so objectionable from the standpoint of strict equality.

O'Neill and Williamson divide the discussion into three sections comprising, respectively, the theoretical foundations, institutional implications, and the possibility of realising Rawls's vision of a property-owning democracy. Highlights include contributions by Corey Brettschneider (on the legitimacy of property rights), Stuart White (on republican citizenship), and Ingrid Robeyns (on care and gender in a property-owning democracy). The collection is well-balanced and benefits from cross-pollination with a number of more recent ideas that have eaten into Rawls's share of the contemporary landscape of political philosophy.

Turning now to O'Neill's chapter on free and fair markets without capitalism, he begins with a defence of the achievements of the welfare state, thereby putting the onus back on Rawls. His contention is that Rawls provides "insufficient support for the claim that control of political life must always go hand in hand with control of unequal amounts of productive resources" (p. 81). If welfare states can insulate the practice of politics from corruption by those in possession of economic might, then a concern for the fair value of the political liberties is not decisive in favour of property-owning democracy. And things may get worse for Rawls because O'Neill suggests that if we adopt a reading of the principle of fair equality of opportunity that mandates only that individuals with similar talents and abilities have similar prospects over an entire lifetime, irrespective of their social class of origin, then we could allow wealth to be accumulated, or lost, as lives are lived. Aggressive redistribution between generations, rather than between and within generations, will not amount to a property-owning democracy.

O'Neill concludes that Rawls's claim is only plausible when it comes to the harmful effects that social inequality can have on self-respect, which can be eroded by dependency on redistribution from the winners to the losers: "the recipient of such *ex post* transfers may experience these transfers as the *source* of his diminished status, and thereby as the mechanism that undermines his self-respect" (p. 89).

While I agree with O'Neill that Rawls attacks a 'straw man' (p. 83) version of welfare state capitalism, there is an important concern that he fails to address. This is the worry that Thomas raises in his essay, that the "better off, when they act in concert, or when large concentrations of wealth develop, will not be public spirited when they take control of public office or the political process... they will act to further their narrow sectional interests." (p. 117) So, whether or