Book review

Social Justice and Public Policy: seeking fairness in diverse societies.

G. Craig, T. Burchardt & D. Gordon (Eds.)
Bristol, the Policy Press.

You know the old saying, 'never judge a book by its cover'? When I received this volume I was captivated by the image that takes centre stage on the front: activists dressed in green boiler suits and baseball caps holding a multilingual 'peace' banner heading up a march, with smaller placards and the massed banners of unions dimly visible in the distance behind them. Given the picture, and the book's title, I expected to find myself reading stories of coalitions between policy-makers, practitioners and activists from around the planet, all working in the common cause of a more equal and sustainable world. What I found, instead, was an extremely challenging and thought-provoking dialogue between academics (principally political philosophers) and policy commentators, each grappling with the development of a policy-literate philosophy of social justice.

When introducing this edited collection of papers, the editors note that 'in the context of a globalising world social justice is becoming more complex both theoretically and in practice'. They point out that political philosophers have a tendency to construct ever more elaborate theories to try to explain and illuminate this complexity, but that their theories can be remote from the policy and practice context in which social justice and injustices are lived, contested, articulated and addressed. Policy-makers, argue the editors, may by contrast be guilty of producing policies the logic of which is at best naïve and lacking in a convincing theoretical rationale. In the view of the editors, this lack of cross-disciplinary and cross-sector dialogue, where the respective discourses of academics and policy-makers are allowed to slide past each other, produces a fuzziness from which it can be difficult to challenge with appropriate conviction the claims of politicians at all points of the political spectrum to be the champions of social justice. In response, the editors emphasise the importance of promoting sophisticated engagement within and across academic disciplines and policy and practice communities. The aim of this volume is to contribute to such engagement.

As might be expected, many of the contributions take the work of John Rawls as their starting point. Rawls is commonly associated with a distributional view of social justice, and his 'difference' principle that social and economic inequalities should be arranged to benefit the least advantaged has been a dominating idea in discussion of social justice since the publication of *A Theory of Justice* in 1971. In his chapter, political philosopher Jonathan Wolff usefully points out that, for Rawls, this principle was secondary to his 'liberty' principle, that every individual should have the right to the most extensive freedoms compatible with similar freedoms for all, thus locating social justice within a debate about rights and liberty. Wolff draws on the work of Sen and Dworkin to provide a liberal pluralist critique of Rawls: first, that his difference principle elides the question of what causes disadvantage, and masks the possibility that some individuals

might be responsible for the condition in which they find themselves. Second, that it does not take adequate account of the fact that some people's needs may be more expensive than others – for instance, the needs of profoundly disabled people for specialist equipment, medication and paid support. Using Dworkin, he suggests applying the idea of redistribution within a threefold grouping of factors that affect people's life opportunities: 'internal resources' (such as strength and skill), 'external resources', including wealth and income, but also family support and social networks, and thirdly, the social and material structures within which these resources operate. There is an attraction in this analysis for educators. It is possible to envisage a redistributive role for teachers in which we are concerned to enable students to maximise their internal resources. Indeed, we could see ourselves as part of our students' external resource bank. By separating resources from the structures within which they operate, educators might imagine ourselves as operating independently from those structures, and thus absolved of responsibility to engage seriously with them.

A liberal analysis, however, is problematic for all sorts of reasons, not least because the pieces with which we play the game (to use Wolff's analogy) are both shaped by the rules within which we play, and in turn are part of the production and reproduction of those rules. For me, a more fruitful analysis is provided by Iris Marion Young's chapter, published posthumously. Working as I do in the field of dis/ability and education, I have long struggled with versions of what is sometimes called the redistribution/recognition dilemma. Put simply, redistributing resources often involves identifying and naming individuals as part of a disadvantaged group which deserves a greater share. The identifying and naming may not be done by the individual concerned and may lead to what Nancy Fraser calls misrecognition: for example when a child is diagnosed with a developmental disorder such as autism, and the diagnosis then colours how they are seen by themselves and others, and what opportunities are subsequently open to them. Many of the papers in this book look at aspects of this redistribution/recognition dilemma, considering how differences of many kinds shape what people are able to make of their lives. Young's paper concentrates on what she identifies as two versions of a politics of difference: a politics of positional difference, and a politics of cultural difference. Crucially, she emphasises that both of these share a critique of difference-blind approaches, and start from the belief that a commitment to equality involves attending to difference and its consequences. A politics of positional difference argues sees people as unequally positioned through multiple structural axes of inequality that permeate both public and private spheres, producing unequal opportunities for self-development, unequal access to decision-making processes and an unequal share of material and relational resources such as money and respect. A politics of cultural difference focuses on disproportionate representation within the state and policy-making arenas by one, usually dominant, group, at the expense of marginalised groups, and with the consequence of reproducing marginalisation. Both politics have much in common. Young favours a politics of positional difference,

arguing that a politics of cultural difference does not make structural inequalities adequately visible, ignores civil society as a site for addressing injustice, and elevates particular group-based standards as normative, for example by attending to (male) religious leaders as representatives of their communities, uniquely able to speak for them. As an educator, I find Young's analysis productive, in that it leads me towards a fuller understanding of the interrelationship of my work with the multiple and intersecting indices of difference along which students are positioned. Her analysis does not, however, lead towards a paralysing sense of inequality being 'out there' and beyond my remit: instead, she offers a cautiously optimistic view that education is potentially part of students' identity projects, and that students are actively re-positioning themselves, albeit within structures not of their own making or choice.

Given many politicians' insistence that education is an important part of the 'solution' of inequality, I was surprised that education policy barely appears in this book. Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift's chapter considers social justice and the family. They set out the problems Rawls had with the family, seeing it potentially as a problem for social justice, and an engine for the reproduction of inequality. This is a philosophical paper which examines the limitations of what parents ought to be able to do for their children. Brighouse and Swift argue that some of the actions parents take tend to produce unjust inequalities between children, but should be allowed on the grounds that they produce relational goods which it would be impossible (or at least very expensive) for society to try to emulate. I was not consistently convinced by where Brighouse and Smith chose to draw the line. For example, they argue that reading bedtime stories is allowable, and does not count as an unjust transmission of advantage in the way that leaving an inheritance would do. However, given what we know about the subtle ways in which educational advantage is transmitted, I was curious to know how far the bedtime stories principle could be taken. It could be argued that the parent who reads to their child transmits knowledge and dispositions which give the child an unfair advantage upon starting school. Would the bedtime stories principle extend to listening to a child read, discussing their homework over a leisurely evening meal, showing them appropriate research techniques for their coursework assignments, and other similar practices?

Brighouse and Swift's paper is followed by David Gordon's consideration of children, policy and social justice. This is a more directly policy-focused analysis of child policy in the UK since 1997. Gordon describes a policy package 'designed to achieve distributional justice for children through paid work for parents and some redistribution via cash benefits and improved services'. However, he goes on to argue that economic theories of distributional justice are unhelpful in that they take little regard of children, seeing them as citizens-in-waiting rather than citizens now. He claims that the economics of child poverty 'are very simple and are entirely concerned with redistribution'. This may well be the case, but I found it extraordinary that in his paper he takes so little account of recognitional aspects

of child poverty, or what Lister, in her chapter, calls the psychological consequences of the Othering of the poor by the non-poor. It is useful that he points out the absence of children from Rawls's work, but I was left thinking that a redistributive set of policies such as he appears to recommend would not, on their own, be equal to the challenge of challenging the conditions that produce child poverty.

Inevitably, I have left a great deal out. In particular, several of the papers engage with Sen's capabilities framework: in some papers, such as Paichaud's overview of social policy, the stance is critical, whilst in other places, notably Adebowale's examination of environmental justice, there is an emphasis on what a capabilities approach can offer. I have also left out Lister's thought-provoking piece on social justice, voice and participation, despite having been intrigued by her proposal for 'poverty awareness training' for trainee social workers: working as I do in teacher education, I found myself wondering whether novice teachers might also benefit. However, a short review cannot do justice to this wide-ranging collection.

Would I recommend the book? The answer is a resounding yes. Once I let go of my initial misperceptions of what I might find between its covers, I found the collection absorbing. As an educator, I think there were some missed opportunities: the papers on children and families would have been stronger, I think, for some discussion of educational policies and practices, and there was remarkably little about community participation, with a silence about the part that informal education might play in participative democracy. Given a title which flags 'diverse societies' I also found the contributions rather UK-centric, with only one piece on globalisation, and many that were entirely based in the UK. These, perhaps, are relatively minor quibbles. As I read, I found myself forced to think about principles of social justice that I have come to take for granted. Several of the papers challenged me to come out of the groove into which my thinking has slipped over the past few years. Taken as a whole, it is fair to say that the volume is not an easy read, and needs commitment and energy. I found it well worth the effort.

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