

Editorial Note

Rawlsian Engagements with Difference: Postcolonial Reflections

In a bid to address the abstract and Western rootedness of his theory, John Rawls attempts to balance the claims of socio-cultural diversity with those of freedom and equality. He, thus, explores ways of accommodating “reasonable pluralism” (Rawls 1996, xliii), rather than just a pluralism (Rawls 1996, 36) of world views and cultures in a “well-ordered society” (1996, xviii). The latter, he believes, is governed by liberal institutions of justice towards a “fair and stable system of cooperation” (1999, 44). For Rawls, basic political institutions shape the social world through “care, nurture and education, and no little good fortune” (1999, 43) maintaining a space for free and equal citizens. In tune with a modern democratic society, they enable the proliferation of multiple and

even irreconcilable religious and philosophical perspectives that could nevertheless be reasonable (Rawls 1996, xvi, 36). Conversely, a singular comprehensive doctrine or worldview is not reasonable and is coercively imposed through state power (1996, 37). Thus, free political institutions are crucial for plural worldviews and cultures that tolerate each other's differences, while state domination typically encourages insular, singular homogeneous world views (1996, 37).

On this tone of reasonable pluralism, in his *Political Liberalism*, Rawls focuses on the coexistence among citizens from diverse socio-cultural, religious and metaphysical persuasions or what he terms as "comprehensive doctrines" (1996, 13) that might not have the features of freedom and equality characteristic of liberal institutions. Such coexistence, he believes, can be achieved through an "overlapping consensus" (1999, 43) of reasonable comprehensive doctrines with facets of liberalism. A reasonable doctrine offers theoretical and practical reasons for its stance, while leaning on doctrinal traditions (Rawls 1996, xlii, 59); it, therefore, lends itself to discussion and debate taking points of view of others into consideration. Reasonable doctrines are not constrained by narrow interests of self or community or class (Rawls 1996, 37). Reasonableness upholds a conception of justice, while the rational a sense of good as the latter spells out an appropriate means for a given good (Maffettone, 203-4). The reasonable and the rational could complement one another without necessarily being opposed to each other (Maffettone, 203-204).¹ Thus, philosophical, religious or cultural notions grounded in reasons can open up to discussion to overcome conflicts. Moreover, liberal principles could also be affirmed from the location of comprehensive doctrines. Rawls subordinates the rational to the reasonable (Rawls 1996, 48-54; Maffettone, 195-96) while upholding the centrality of the public reasonableness with reference to doctrines, persons and people in a liberal context. Accordingly he maintains that "The problem of

¹ Rawls's account of reasonable can be likened to Kant's categorical imperative, while his notion of rational to Kant's hypothetical imperative (Richardson).

political liberalism is to work out a political conception of political justice for a constitutional democratic regime that a plurality of reasonable doctrines, both religious and nonreligious, liberal and nonliberal, may freely endorse,...” (Rawls 1996, xl). A society, according to Rawls, cannot be reduced to an association, for one does not enter it voluntarily nor does it have any predetermined *telos* (1996, 40-43). Moreover, he distinguishes a society from a community owing allegiance to comprehensive doctrines (1996, 42).

On a similar note, Rawls attempts to be universal and inclusive, while exploring prospects for global peaceful coexistence among “peoples”² with cultural, religious and political diversity. He does so by examining the possibility of peoples with liberal and “decent” governments forming an international “society of peoples” as per the *law of peoples* (1999, 6). “Decent peoples” do not have liberal constitutions, but have a “decent consultation hierarchy” (1999, 4)³. Rawls names his conjectural idea of a “decent”, but not liberal society, as Kazanistan (1999, 74-78). He describes Kazanistan as following a spiritual and accommodating Islam, rather than a militaristic or imperialist version. It, thus, affirms liberal commitments such as respect for women, space for non Islamic cultures and non-violence, but from the framework of its tolerant Islam, rather than liberal theory. As a decent society, for Rawls, Kazanistan also gives impetus to liberal societies to affirm their own reasonableness (Idris, 2).

The possibility of a social agreement or consensus extending to contexts of diversity of both citizens and peoples, moves beyond ideality and abstraction of Rawls’s theory to a somewhat concrete grounding. He attempts to shift beyond the sequestration of a

2 Following Rawls, “people” does not have the standard notion of sovereignty characteristic of a political state or even nation (1999, v, 23-27); but then they are in tandem with their respective governments.

3 Rawls also mentions “outlaw states”, “societies burdened by unfavourable conditions” and “benevolent absolutisms”, while keeping them on “reserve”(1999, 4)

closed society- which his Theory of Justice- seemed to imply- to relationships between citizens and peoples (Hatzenberger, 108). Moreover, there is an implication that the internal context of harmonious citizen interaction paves the way for an external harmony through a “law of peoples” (Hatzenberger, 108). Rawls tries to step out of the abstraction and Western rootedness of liberalism, to dialogue with alternate cultural contexts. Such dialogues, between domestic citizens divided by diverse comprehensive doctrines and global peoples, both liberal and the decent residents of Kazanistan, endeavour to cement stability and cooperation in the face of conflict.

Rawls’s accounts of dialogues between citizens and peoples raise the question of the relationship between abstract principles of the political and concrete contexts of the social world. He explicitly maintains that political philosophy does not turn its back to the tangible historical world nor is its methodology divested of references to philosophical histories and practical contexts(1996, 45). Indeed, political thought orders generalities in relation to the particular, instead of superseding the latter as political ideals of society and personhood emerge from a back and forth reflection on the practices and ideals of public culture (1996, 46). For Rawls, general principles and particular judgements have a complementary relationship of coherence. Hence, according to Rawls, political philosophy emerges in contexts of “deep political conflicts” (1996, 44). Rawls notes that one turns to political philosophy when there is a collapse of “shared understandings of lesser generality” (1996, 46) or even an internal conflict. Conflicts can occur between political values, such as between capitalism and socialism or between political values such as freedom for private choice and non-political ones such as the inherent value of life upheld by antiabortionists. Rawls alludes to the exchange between Abraham Lincoln and Alexander Stephens during the American civil war, when Stephens upheld the shared tradition of slavery in the South as a concrete counterpoint to Lincoln’s norms

of abstract freedom (1996, 45). He suggests that this exchange is a catalyst for political philosophy.⁴ Since, the backdrop of conflict offers the framework for articulating reasonable arguments for various points of view, critics have maintained that Rawls subordinates liberal principles of freedom and equality to historicizing specificities of reasonable comprehensive doctrines such as Buddhism or Christianity. However, Rawls also claims that non-political values of comprehensive doctrines do not determine liberal political values, although they are inextricably linked in moulding personal identities and ways of life. Thus, “On the road to Damascus Saul of Tarsus becomes Paul the Apostle. Yet such a conversion implies no change in our public or institutional identity, nor in our personal identity” (1996, 31). On this note, Rawls has been understood to defend a context transcending approach to justice.

Yet does Rawls historicise adequately? Charles Mills thinks otherwise. He points to Rawls’s neglect of race despite living in the United States through periods of racial segregation and the struggle for racial equality in the 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement was at its peak (Mills 2017, 156). According to Mills, Rawls offers an ideal theory without acknowledging the history of racial inequality in the tradition of Western political thought. On the other hand, in historicizing philosophical problems Rawls has to contend with the dangers of determinism⁵ and communitarian immersion in cultural contexts. Thus, Rawls’s critics such as Okin (2004) uphold that he concedes excessively to communities to open the space for their patriarchal perspectives in his later accounts of liberal theory. Moreover, in encapsulating a concrete instance of a non-

4 See Idris 2021 for an account of the evolution of Rawls’s thought on Kazanistan in the context of responding to both empirical events and conceptual debates. He relies on archival material for his argument. Also see Bevir & Gališanka 2012 who turned to Rawls’s archives to comprehend his intellectual development in the historical context of learning selectively from philosophical texts. They question what they term as “folk narratives” that isolate his thought from its history of learning from philosophical positions to interpret it as either positivist or antipositivist. They discern both aspects in his evolution.

5 See Okin 2004

western decent society in the instance of Kazanistan, Rawls has to grapple with the problem of essentialising unfamiliar societies by adhering to hegemonic narrations. As Idris and Hatzenberger note, Rawls's reading of a nonliberal but decent society through spiritual Islam introduces the Orientalist problematic of othering Islam that Edward Said has critiqued via the "Muslim question" (Idris,4). It considers Muslims to be foreign to the West with cultural differences that tend to be divisive and which have to be reined in through assimilation (Idris, 4). They argue that with this Rawls simply reproduces the assumptions of a Eurocentric political theory which assumes its universality through false historicity. However, these inhibitions notwithstanding, there have been several attempts to unravel the extent to which Rawls can speak to situations of difference and postcoloniality. Japan has had a history of Rawls reception from multiple disciplines engaging with its cultural and social specificities (Fukuma 2014). Mills himself has argued for connecting back to Rawls's vision of situating an ideal theory in the specificities of the empirical present, such as race. He has explored the possibility of decolonizing Rawls by introducing the race question, "we need to use a contract that registers rather than obfuscates the nonideal history of white oppression and racial exploitation: the domination contract" (Mills 2008, 1386; Mills 2013). Okin similarly reconstructs Rawlsian theory from the perspective of gendered difference (1994) and Eva Kittay (1999, 75-113) from that of dependency.

Can postcolonial interpretations of Rawls emerge through such attempts that explore his oversights and examine the potential of liberalism? Does this imply that liberalism transcends historical contexts? What then are we to make of the Rawlsian need to connect political philosophy with the conflicts of its time? These questions also raise the problem of continuity between Rawls's 1971 work *A Theory of Justice* and his later works in the 1990s such as *Political Liberalism* or *Law of the Peoples*. This question is particularly significant since *A Theory of Justice* has completed

fifty years of influence. Thinkers like Maffettone argue for a continuity between Rawls's works (190–91), while others such as Okin maintain a rupture (2004). As the essays in this volume reveal, there are no set answers to interpreting Rawls and his relationship to history, differences and postcolonial contexts. The papers engage with liberalism and Rawls from postcolonial contexts of multiculturalism, religious pluralism and social differences, such as caste and disability. Some of them argue for reconstructing the core tenets of Rawlsian liberalism in "full" ways, while others uphold that liberalism's ability to speak to diverse contexts emerges from its being "thin".⁶ Sambhāṣaṇ in collaboration with the Ambedkar International Research Centre (AIRC), University of Mumbai, dedicates its second special issue (volume 2, issue 4) to Rawls's centenary (1921–2002), as well as, fifty years of his pathbreaking work *A Theory of Justice*. The collaboration with AIRC is most apt because Babasaheb Ambedkar departs from liberal individualism in reconstructing notions of freedom, equality and democracy in ways that relate the individual to society. In this respect, he especially focuses on the Indian context. The papers in this volume reflect the complex trajectories of Rawlsian scholarship and liberal theory. Arudra Burra looks at the rich consequences of reading Rawls in the Indian context, while exploring whether historical/empirical concerns have to necessarily constitute philosophical readings. Neera Chandhoke examines the relevance of liberal theory through the tension between individualism and collectivism in the Indian context. Jeff Shawn Jose brings in the dimension of dialogue between Rawls and Gandhi via the integrity critique against Rawls's notion of public reason, where religious citizens are compelled to enter into public reason on its terms rather than their own. Biraj Mehta Rathi explores the limits of Rawlsian liberalism from the perspective of persons with disabilities, while

6 The difference between "full" and "thin" are derived from Rawls 1971 (397–398) where he regards "full" as having attachments to substantive worldviews and values, while "thin" is bereft of such attachments. Hence, for Rawls a "thin" theory would be able to fit into wider contexts.

engaging with Kittay's critique and reconstruction. Aakash Singh Rathore examines themes of political theology in political liberalism while articulating its postcolonial critique. Thomas Schmidt focuses on whether the Rawlsian framework can do justice to religious pluralism, while working through its tensions with Jürgen Habermas's postsecular approach. Sebastiano Maffettone in the final paper examines the notion of the Rawlsian era and its implications for a legacy based on this. Though the reviews in this issue do not directly focus on Rawls's writings, they do attend to the postcolonial theme of inclusiveness. Sanil Neelakandan's response to Neeraj Ghaywans's film *Geeli Pucchi* and Indrani Bhattacharjee's review of Vinay Lal's 2020 book *The Fury of Covid-19: The Politics, Histories and Unrequited Love of the Coronavirus* reveal the need to work with differences, while going beyond Eurocentrism. The four obituaries catalogue the enormous losses of formidable thinkers that 2021 had in store for the worlds of feminist thought and philosophy: Sonal Shukla (1941-2021), Kamla Bhasin (1946-2021), bell hooks (1952-2021) and Jean luc Nancy (1940-2021)

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