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REVIEW

Cosmopolitanism and The Politics of Untethered Loyalty

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Bruce Robbins. *The Beneficiary*.

Durham: Duke University Press

Every other day, news and media outlets abound with stories of global economic inequality and poverty, the effects of which have stimulated substantial scholarly discussion of the viability of cosmopolitan models of global justice. We might then wonder if there is room to claim new ideas in this well-canvassed arena. The good news is that Bruce Robbins succeeds in providing fresh thinking around the question of global justice by exploring it from the standpoint of the ‘well-intentioned beneficiary’ (5). The beneficiary, in Robbins’ understanding, is the privileged person from the prosperous centre who recognizes that their economic well-being and advantage comes at the expense of—is ‘causally linked to’—the fate of individuals consigned to a distant and less-prosperous periphery.

But the recognition of global injustice and unequal resource distribution presumed to be the bedfellows of capitalism is only part of the beneficiary’s story. Robbins’ distinct and novel move is a sustained consideration of the anguish felt by the figure of beneficiary having perceived her or his degree of complicity in global injustice. Specifically, this figure develops an awareness of the ‘causal relationship between her or his advantages and someone else’s suffering’ and simultaneously struggles to deal with the unease that that recognition provokes (9). Central to Robbins’ analysis is the idea that the ‘discourse’ of the beneficiary is always directed *at* those who benefit from the injustice *by* a ‘fellow beneficiary’ (7). We of the developed West are doubtless *all* beneficiaries, though only some of us will denounce the system of economic privilege that empowers them. It is these folk that Robbins is ultimately interested in.

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Robbins launches into his subject by identifying that the norm that underwrites claims for social justice is that no one country's wealth should be disproportionately greater than another's, our own included. He argues that this norm or presumption of economic equality owes more to a 'narratable history or practicable moral' tradition than to the hard facts or statistics favoured by economists (3). Rather than contribute to the literature on cultural cosmopolitanism, Robbins aims to give an account of the lesser-known 'economic cosmopolitanism' by tracking the trajectory of 'moral concern' over the causal linkages between lucky-beneficiaries and unlucky-victims in the system of global capitalism. To do this, he turns to the texts of a series of well-known authors—George Orwell, Adam Smith, Jamaica Kincaid, Virginia Woolf and Naomi Klein—who creatively 'grapple with the dilemmas of global economic injustice' (9). All of these figures can be considered to engage the discourse of the beneficiary insofar as they have both an awareness that their own economic advantage is based on the suffering and disadvantage of others 'out there', and the capacity to call out similarly privileged others.

As a political theorist, I was initially sceptical about whether Robbins' literary analyses would add anything new to the literature on systematic conditions of global injustice and the developed world's role in their creation and sustention. However, these concerns were short-lived. Robbins is upfront that the book 'offers precious little moral guidance' on how beneficiaries might navigate for themselves a more suitable place in this economic order (3). With each successive chapter, Robbins thoughtfully engages key moments in time in which the beneficiary—no longer content to remedy the status quo through the usual élan of humanitarian empathy and fairness—estimates his or her *dependency* on such relations of inequity to be morally reprehensible. This facet of the beneficiary's cognizance of living not *in* but *on* an unjust system presents as the most pressing issue for Robbins (47). It leads him to push beyond conventional scholarship on cosmopolitanism and injustice by giving consideration to the *potential* for beneficiaries to collectively imagine—or better, enact—political alternatives to the status quo on a global scale. The question then becomes: 'What would it take to stop *being* a beneficiary?' (141). Throughout, Robbins gestures towards an honest assessment of, and engagement with, the ethical and political dilemmas that self-aware beneficiaries try to negotiate when it comes to globalized human interdependence.

Robbins opens his discussion with Larissa MacFarquar's treatment of Peter Singer's utilitarian argument about the moral obligation of the affluent to divest their wealth in order to relieve the suffering of others. For Singer, that obligation holds irrespective of the proximity or distance between to the wealthy and the person in need providing that nothing of comparable moral importance is sacrificed by the divestiture. Robbins likens Singer's demanding version of humanitarianism to the paradigm of the Good Samaritan: we are connected to unknown suffering others through our common or *mere* humanity, hence the moral obligation for each of us to respond liberally and charitably to others in need. Robbins argues that what is missing, or rather, abstracted, from Singer's moral parable are the causes of third-world impoverishment and our 'collective interests, our own collective conduct' in creating and sustaining this condition (23). Thus, Singer's utilitarian humanism, which is often critiqued for demanding too much, in Robbins' account demands *too little* (21). Robbins shrewdly demonstrates that the moral stringency of Singer's argument obscures many of the political causes associated with harm or disadvantage in the first instant. More specifically still, Singer sidesteps the question of the present and ongoing interests flowing to the beneficiary who is asked to remedy the situation at hand. What is instead required, Robbins asserts, is that we question the naturalness of the fundamental economic divide between 'the

lives of the compassionate and the lives of the suffering' rather than presuming it as a given (31). Robbins' critique of humanitarianism is that, while it can work to alleviate suffering, it remains instrumental in naturalizing the divide between the economically privileged and the precarious. In staking out this claim, Robbins joins Didier Fassin, Miriam Ticktin and others in asking hard questions of humanitarianism and the frameworks of morality and justice it operates within. Ultimately, Robbins is not convinced that coaxing humanitarian 'rescuers' to recognize their causal connections in the production of the suffering of others would be sufficient to imagining creative alternatives according to which we might act.

This line of enquiry into the beneficiary's capacity to rupture the givenness of economic inequality is pursued with gusto throughout the book. In chapter three, Robbins elaborates on the beneficiary's potential to effect changes within the global economic system having perceived the 'scandal' of their dependence on the undercompensated labor of others (58). The task of critical self-perception is made infinitely more challenging because the prevailing common-sense view is that people are responsible for their own industry and subsequent economic well-being. As Robbins lays out, this neo-liberal assumption has a long moral and cultural history such that global poverty, then, as now, is not considered an altogether 'undeserved fate' (60). This is where Robbins' discussion pushes beyond conventional scholarship on global justice and factors in the cultural and moral history of the goods we consume. Concerned to elucidate what, if any, political alternatives lie within reach for the tormented figure of the complicit beneficiary, Robbins argues that any exploration of cosmopolitanism is inadequate to the degree it ignores the significant cultural and moral factors of systemic inequality that 'underlie or facilitate' the political (59).

To further his case, Robbins introduces readers to a series of 'commodity recognition scenes' that consider the social processes involved in the production and trade of everyday goods that flow from periphery to core: coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate, tobacco, and, in the example of Thomas Friedman, Dell laptop components (53). These material goods have sparked literary moments of either great wonder at the virtues of the global capitalist system, or distaste at its exploitative edge. As Robbins writes, the resulting scenes or allegories entail 'a sort of mild epiphany in which some familiar consumer good is suddenly recognized as coming from a distant place of origin and from the labor of the distant inhabitants—potentially, as least, their coerced or otherwise unpleasant labor' (56). Robbins captures the moral bind in which the consumer-as-beneficiary is placed: he or she can't do without such goods, but the reality and truth(s) associated with them makes the act of consumption morally repugnant.

I found the insights drawn from these scenes to be valuable and convincing, particularly in regard to gender. Robbins contends that the cultural logic of misogyny has historically seen women condemned for consuming luxurious commodities that men seemingly have within their power to do without (63). He draws on eighteenth-century diatribes against lavish female consumption, but arrives at the conclusion that the household consumption of certain commodities ultimately connected women to the labor of distant others around whom they politically rallied (58). The all-important example cited is the 1791-2 sugar boycott which was driven by female literary figures at the height of the abolitionist campaign. These women realised that sugar—a commodity in no short supply and in all other ways suited to their taste—was slave-grown.

The central insight that Robbins wishes to impart pertains to the question of power in the discourse of the beneficiary. To 'denounce the system on the grounds that things could be otherwise' is to assume that it lies within one's power to do so (68). Robbins makes a strong case that any meaningful change must also contend with the parallel fantasy of power

embedded deep within the history of humanitarianism. His chief ethical objection with humanitarianism as viewed through the prism of history, is its tendency to reify a simplistic division of the world into an affluent 'West' and a less-affluent 'Rest'. Worse, to his mind, is that the logic of the beneficiary is wholly predicated on the veracity of such a divide.

So, what are we, as fellow beneficiaries and the intended audience of Robbins' book, to do towards eradicating global economic inequality? Short of completely erasing the geopolitical schism (too difficult a task, even to Robbins' mind), we beneficiaries can make a series of moves in the right direction. Beyond simply acknowledging our collective interest in unequal relations of power, Robbins directs us towards several options within our reach. The most convincing suggestion is to de-naturalise the logic of the beneficiary as most readily applied to *past* injustices and wrongs. Many beneficiaries regard themselves as having predominantly accrued benefits from *past* atrocities. An unhappy offshoot of this legacy account of privilege is its tendency to produce guilt and a desire for redemption that can result in paralysis in the here and now. This is especially true, Robbins holds, the more past atrocity is deemed non-erasable, an act of founding violence, for example, that is considered beyond reparation. The temporal dimension embedded in this discourse obscures continuity between 'past injustice and present suffering' (146). Attending to the criterion of continuity engenders a moral imperative to presentism or the need to confront 'debts to the dead that really *are* debts to the living' (148). Presentism thus staves off anguished self-accusation as a form of 'inward-turning paralysis' that relies on keeping the past past and derails the possibility of genuine political initiatives to tackle inequity on a global scale (147-8).

This takes us to another, perhaps the most ambitious, of Robbins' moves, which is directed at a reformulation of cosmopolitanism to account for the debts owed to distant and suffering others who continue to make our 'good times' and 'life worth living' possible (152). Traditionally, cosmopolitanism speaks to the moral duty to care for fellow humans everywhere. To this Robbins adds the consideration of *loyalty*, an underlying ethos that remains dislocated from questions of the border, self-interest or nationalisms. 'Perpetual loyalty', to borrow from the title of Robbins' previous book, sets out our simultaneous responsibility for and obligation 'to the poor at home and to the even poorer abroad' (153). More to the point, Robbins attributes to cosmopolitan loyalty the capacity to bridge humanitarianism and politics and thus unsettle the common-sensical, status-quo of economic determinism.

It is by advancing this claim that Robbins assists those of us that know ourselves to be beneficiaries in navigating the ethical and political dilemmas of the global inequalities of the present. Putting the focus on loyalty, Robbins encourages us to start work on a 'less perfect to-do list' and to derive some satisfaction in the 'knowledge that our awkward ambitions do not come from nowhere and that they are widely if still insufficiently shared' (154).