CRITICAL COMMENTS

Global justice, positional goods, and international political inequality

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In *Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency*, Lea Ypi sets out a challenging model for theorizing global justice. Such a theory should be robustly critical—and egalitarian—rather than swallowing sour grapes by adapting its ideals to what appears to be politically possible. But it should also offer concrete prescriptions capable of guiding reform of the actual—deeply unjust—world in which we live. It should learn from concrete political struggles and from those on the receiving end of global injustice, and also deliver principles capable of commanding support in a world of powerful nation-states. Thus one goal of the book, we might say, is to reconnect the *philosophy* of global justice with the *politics* of global justice—to persuade theorists, more specifically, to bridge the divide between theory and activism on global justice issues.

Though that goal is important in its own right, there is a second way in which an interest in ‘politics’ drives the account presented in the book, and I will focus on it here. To be precise, a concern to defend some kind of *political equality* at the international level is key to building Ypi’s account. According to Ypi, greater political equality between states at least is vital if we are to make a serious assault on global injustices. And—even though this part of the argument is rather more implicit—it appears that greater political equality at the international level will likely not be achieved in a world marked by huge economic inequalities. The drives to tackle political and economic inequalities at the international level therefore appear to be mutually reinforcing, and mutually necessary. In this paper, I will endeavour to reconstruct this part of Ypi’s argument, bringing its individual steps into sharper relief, before reflecting on what it tells us about the relationship between global justice and political inequalities generally. I will also offer some thoughts on how

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successful the argument connecting political and economic injustice is, and how it
might be made more complete.

GLOBAL EGALITARIANISM AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL
INEQUALITY

As far as debates on global economic justice go, the main target of Ypi’s argument is
what we can call the ‘globally sufficientarian position.’ This position holds that whilst
egalitarian distributive principles might be required domestically, the reasons why
they are required (shared citizenship, say, or shared subjection to coercive
institutions) do not pertain globally. What we need to be committed to at the global
level, rather, is the amelioration of absolute disadvantage. Advocates of global
sufficientarianism constitute a major camp within debates on global distributive
justice—think of Miller, or Rawls, for example—and as such Ypi rightly suggests that
enlisting them to accept any argument for global egalitarianism would constitute
major progress.1

Ypi believes global sufficientarianism to be deeply flawed because it fails to
recognise that we cannot, in practice, ameliorate absolute disadvantage without
reducing at least some forms of relative disadvantage (that is, some inequalities).
Consider the distribution of positional goods. The point about positional goods—the
reason they are positional goods—is that securing ‘enough’ of such goods, construed
in terms of absolute advantage, is not enough. In these cases, the very fact that some
have more than others is enough to worsen the position of the less advantaged, and to
sustain or deepen absolute disadvantage. As a consequence, even an approach which
claimed that only poverty mattered morally would need to produce a strategy for
reducing inequalities in those positional goods that contribute causally to producing
poverty. Otherwise it will be ineffective. We ought, actually, to (instrumentally)
favour an equal distribution of positional goods even if we are only (intrinsically)
concerned with trying to avoid absolute disadvantage.

Ypi indicates that parallel arguments could be made with regards to a variety of
positional goods—such as education, purchasing power, and so on—but the one that
is interesting for our purposes is political power between states. Endemic global
poverty is sustained at least in part by the decisions and rules of international
economic institutions, and those decisions and rules bear the traces of power
inequalities between states. The rich set rules of trade, for instance, that suit
themselves, and until they are prevented from doing so the drive to eradicate poverty
is going to be hopeless. Once dominated by the most powerful states, international
organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary
Fund and the World Bank are nothing more than engines for entrenching global
injustice. We have, in fact, a vicious circle. It is the economic might of major players
which gives them such excessive bargaining-power within such organisations. And
this international political inequality then produces and perpetuates absolute
economic disadvantage. If we care seriously about poverty (even if we only care
about poverty), we ought to try to break this circle, by tackling the underlying political inequality which gives rise to it. Any other strategy for poverty reduction fails to take seriously the relevant causal relations, and is therefore compromised as an account of global justice. This is why Ypi foregrounds the need for equalizing political power between states.

But if Ypi’s diagnosis of the vicious circle is correct, then an assault on international political inequality is not actually likely to be sufficient. International economic inequality will go on producing international political inequality. When we ask just how richer countries are able to exert undue political power, the answer of course turns out to lie with their very wealth. Ypi’s explanation of power differentials between states continually emphasises the role of economic might in making some states able to cajole or blackmail others, and to secure better information and legal/technical representation. So if my reconstruction of the argument rings true, the argument actually has two crucial steps: if we care about global poverty, we have reason to pursue international political equality. And if we care about that, then international economic inequalities must be seen as an important part of the problem.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRATISATION

If Ypi’s diagnosis of the vicious circle is correct, it has major implications for the relationship between global justice and the democratisation of global institutions. Whilst the argument does not necessarily target a full-blown global democracy, its advocacy of international political equality does appear to require at least the democratisation of existing global institutions. Notably, many leading adherents of global distributive justice have been rather tentative in their arguments for democratisation at the international level, if they have argued for it at all. One common move has been to say that our ‘moral cosmopolitanism’ needs to be distinguished from any variety of ‘institutional cosmopolitanism,’ and that a commitment to the first does not commit us to the second. As advocates of global distributive justice, we should favour whatever institutional set-up offers the best chance of delivering on the entitlements of distributive justice we believe people to have. That is what Simon Caney has called an ‘instrumental’ approach to democratisation, and it has been endorsed not only by familiar ‘cosmopolitan’ theorists of global justice, but also by theorists such as Iris Young, who argued that ‘The primary reason to democratize global institutions and processes ... is to increase the chances that these decisions will promote global justice.’ Recall, similarly, John Stuart Mill’s ‘protective’ argument for democratisation, which held that democracy is to be favoured in large part because it allows voters to defend their interests and entitlements against official indifference.

On this instrumental approach, if the best structure for delivering on global distributive justice is a regime of dispersed sovereignty and multi-level citizenship, say, then our beliefs about justice are likely broadly compatible with a commitment to something like a regime of trans-national or global democracy. But support for that
regime would be purely contingent: if it turned out that what would really deliver on entitlements of justice would be a benevolent dictatorship at the world level, the hoped-for compatibility would disappear. Caney himself does not make any grand claims; he simply suggests, at one point, that global justice does not rule out global democracy, but neither does it require it. We would need an independent account of why democracy is desirable if we were to decisively prefer it to the alternatives.8

What is interesting here is that the instrumental position described by Caney is instrumental in one direction: we should support greater global democracy (or, perhaps, the democratisation of international institutions) insofar as we believe it will lead to greater global justice. But Ypi’s argument approaches the relationship from the other direction. It suggests that our commitment to political equality—to something like the democratisation of international relations, at least—plays some role in conditioning our principles of global distributive justice. That is, if global economic inequality did not jeopardise political equality among states, we would have one less reason for calling for its mitigation. Given that it does jeopardise political equality among states, even those who would otherwise accept global inequalities should not do so. Call this the instrumental argument from democracy. Notably Caney rather downplays this possibility, at least as an argument for global egalitarianism. Examining David Held’s claim that global democratic participation requires economic redistribution, he suggests that ‘only very meagre economic rights are yielded by this democratic argument.’ When everyone has what they require to subsist, the material basis for democracy appears to be secured, and so all we should expect to get out of the instrumental argument from democracy are ‘minimal’ principles of distributive justice. Global democratic participation, in fact, is likely compatible with discrimination and inequality of opportunity.9 Ypi, on the other hand, appears to believe that even a modest programme for the democratisation of global institutions gives us an instrumental reason to favour greater economic equality. If she is right, we have another powerful reason for rejecting global sufficientarianism.

ASSESSING THE ARGUMENT

Ypi’s argument suggests, then, that there is a closer connection than we might have supposed between the two projects of global egalitarianism and the democratisation of global institutions. Although I am very sympathetic towards the argument, in this final section I will raise some critical questions about just what is established by Ypi’s account.

To begin with, I believe the claim that global sufficientarianism is seriously undermined by its blind-spot regarding positional goods is successful, and important. Consider the example of the migration of healthcare workers. On the account Rawls defends in The Law of Peoples, we need only concern ourselves, roughly speaking, with the ability of Peoples to run decent institutions and to maintain their collective autonomy. We ought not to care, that is, about any
inequalities that remain between societies that are suitably autonomous and well-ordered. But that position appears curiously self-defeating, because in a highly unequal world the ability of poorer countries to maintain even minimally decent institutions will regularly be compromised. Observe that poorer societies spend large sums of money training healthcare workers, but then lose them, in very large numbers, to better-off countries which are prepared to offer them higher wages. Surely, even if we only care (intrinsically) about communities’ ability to maintain minimally decent institutions, we ought to care (instrumentally) about the inequalities of purchasing power that drive the migration of skilled workers from poorer to richer societies.\footnote{10} As Ypi suggests, economic inequalities here appear to perpetuate absolute disadvantage.

But in responding to such cases, we have two options, not one. We can either tackle the material inequalities that sustain or leak over into absolute disadvantage—which I suspect is Ypi’s favoured solution—or we can seek to break the vicious circle by insulating parts of the circle from each other. In the case of healthcare workers trained in developing countries who migrate to developed countries offering higher wages, for example, we could either redistribute resources (the radical, egalitarian solution), or we could somehow prevent richer countries poaching the healthcare workers of poorer countries (either by insisting on closed borders—a decidedly autarkic and potentially illiberal solution—or by some other reformist ‘insulating’ strategy). If ‘insulating’ responses can be effective, we do not need to try and secure greater economic equality. To produce an argument for greater material equality we need first to show how material inequality works to sustain absolute disadvantage, but also, second, that we cannot break that chain without pursuing material inequality.

The first claim has been made robustly. What is not clear is whether Ypi has established the second. Let us assume that adherents of global sufficientarianism become convinced of Ypi’s argument that, within a broader context of global inequality, richer states are all too able to dictate terms within institutions such as the WTO, and therefore to prevent fair terms of international cooperation emerging in areas such as the regulation of trade. They could then accept that international economic institutions should be democratically run, that political power in that sense should be in some way equalized, but still refuse to recognise injustice in the distribution of economic goods and opportunities across the globe. If economic inequality produces political inequality (and political inequality produces poverty), the argument would run, then we should insulate institutions like the WTO from that economic inequality by instituting fair decision-making procedures within them. We could then still deny that global economic inequality mattered, whether intrinsically or instrumentally.

If this rejoinder is plausible, the instrumental argument from international political equality fails. To revive it, we would need to show that international political equality cannot be secured simply by insulating what goes on in international organisations from background economic inequalities. I suspect that Ypi believes such an argument can be made. Her explanation of power differentials between states, as I mentioned earlier, emphasises precisely the role of economic might in making some
states able to cajole or blackmail others, and to secure better information and legal/technical representation. Preventing richer states from benefiting from their economic power in this way might just be impossible, leaving an attack on their greater economic wealth or income as the only adequate option.

But if this is the conclusion Ypi wants us to reach, more needs to be said. There is after all a reformist argument which suggests that we ought to support and subsidise the representation of developing countries within the WTO, replace its apparently democratic procedures with properly majoritarian ones, and in short prevent the powerful having their own way. If we do so, a global sufficientarian might say, we can then arrive at fairer trade rules that would more effectively ameliorate absolute deprivation. Greater economic equality appears unnecessary.

Look, for instance, at what Rawls says about this question—very briefly—in *The Law of Peoples*. In domestic society, according to Rawls’s theory of justice, citizens are not only guaranteed their political liberties, but those liberties are meant to have ‘fair value,’ so that ‘everyone has a fair opportunity to hold political office and to influence the outcome of political decisions.’ This is taken by Rawls to require public funding of elections and of the political organisation of citizens—presumably state funding of parties is what he has in mind here. This is necessary to ‘keep political parties independent of large concentrations of private economic and social power.’ And the test of our success ought to be that wherever we come from, socially speaking, our chances of influencing government are approximately equal. Now Rawls simply asserts, in *The Law of Peoples*, that at the level of the Society of Peoples parallel measures—presumably, funding the representation of different Peoples in international organizations—will have the desired effect of avoiding unfair rules for international cooperation emerging. If not, then, in a famously vague phrase, any ‘unjustified distributive effects’ ‘would have to be corrected.’

If the claim is that only an attack on global economic inequality will safeguard political equality, Ypi owes us the necessary argument as to why the reformist strategy will be ineffective, as well as an indication of what the alternative—a direct attack on economic inequality—would look like.

We don’t yet know what her answer to that challenge will be. We can try, though, to anticipate some possible arguments. One would suggest that even ensuring the effective participation of the poorest countries in organisations like the WTO will not ensure that their poverty is adequately addressed through trade policy. It is quite conceivable that even a WTO reformed to include effective representation for all, and majoritarian voting procedures, for instance, would simply see packages of trade rules agreed which benefitted large rapidly developing countries at the expense of the (often demographically small) least developed countries.

Alternatively, we could focus on notions of exit and voice. Given their precarious economic positions, when trade packages are discussed within the WTO very poor countries are often tempted to accept even miniscule advances rather than no advances at all. Although poorer countries could reject the deal which emerges during any given Round, in reality they may confront a choice between accepting that deal and, effectively, withdrawing from membership of (and protection from) the WTO.

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altogether.\textsuperscript{15} It is understandable, then, that in the past poorer countries have—sometimes reluctantly—accepted deals which offered them very little in the way of progress in accessing global markets. We might consider this a good example of the dictum that the degree of voice a party achieves in a negotiation will partly depend on how real and significant the threat is that they might exit if they do not like the eventual outcome.\textsuperscript{16} In the case of individual developing countries, exit would damage their own interests substantially but would hardly, in all likelihood, appreciably damage the interests of developed countries. By contrast, wealthy countries can well afford to maintain the status quo, and threaten to walk away if major changes are made. Importantly, any threats they might make to exit the system entirely would be much more credible.

Both of these arguments, in effect, suggest that even a fairly robust form of formal political equality within international organizations will fail to appropriately address global poverty given a background of massive differences in economic might between actors. If some such argument can be made, then the really effective democratisation of international organizations would appear to require an attack on background economic inequalities.

**CONCLUSION**

Much of my attention in this response to Ypi’s rich and rewarding book has been devoted to making explicit an argument that appears to be central to its positive position on global justice. Such effort is, I hope, well spent because if Ypi’s argument about the connection between poverty, political inequality and material inequality is correct, then theorists of global justice have more cause to think seriously about the democratisation of global institutions than they may otherwise have thought. I have suggested in this paper that the argument is not yet a complete one. It might be too strong, for instance, to say that international political equality is a truly necessary condition for tackling global poverty, or even that it is a sufficient one. But in the real world, democratising international institutions might represent our best hope of short-circuiting the perpetuation of crushing global injustices. Knowing even that should give us cause to reflect more substantially on its demands and on its likelihood of emerging, and if Ypi’s book encourages us to do so, its efforts will certainly have been worthwhile.

**NOTES**

1. L. Ypi, *Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 103.
2. Ibid., 88–107.
3. Ibid., 126–7.
4. Ypi does offer more explicit support for projects of global democracy in ‘Cosmopolitanism without IF and without BUT’, in *Cosmopolitanism: For and Against*, ed. G. Brock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
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5. The loose relationship between cosmopolitanism about distributive justice and cosmopolitanism about democracy is discussed in G. Stoker, C. Armstrong et al, Prospects for Citizenship (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), chapter 7.

6. I. Young, Global Challenges (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 10.

7. Mill, of course, wanted to add two other reasons for favouring democracy: an epistemic one (which suggests that involving affected parties in policy-formulation will produce better policy), and an educative one (which suggests, essentially, that democracy is good for the character of the governed). J.S. Mill, Considerations on Representative Government, (London: Parker and Bourn, 1861).

8. S. Caney, ‘Cosmopolitanism, Democracy and Distributive Justice’, Canadian Journal of Philosophy 31.1 (2006): 29–63. Note that Caney does suggest that such an account is available, since democracy is intrinsically valuable.

9. Ibid., 38.

10. C. Armstrong, ‘Defending the Duty of Assistance?’ Social Theory and Practice 35.3 (2009): 461–82.

11. J. Rawls, Political Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 327.

12. Ibid, 328.

13. There have been many suggestions for organisational reform of the WTO, for instance, aimed at giving developing countries a greater voice in negotiations. The Helsinki Process—a consultation on global governance jointly founded by the Finnish and Tanzanian foreign ministries—recommended in 2005 that ‘The Annual Ministerial meetings of the WTO should be open to participation by non-state actors’ such as NGOs or representatives of relevant UN agencies, which might possess the expertise to advance the interests of developing countries better. It also recommended that ‘The negotiating capacity of developing countries should be strengthened ... with sufficient technical assistance.’

14. J. Rawls, The Law of Peoples (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1999), 115.

15. A. Brown and R. Stern, ‘Concepts of Fairness in the Global Trading System’, Pacific Economic Review 12 (2007): 293–318, at 294.

16. A. Hirschman, Exit, Voice and Loyalty (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1970).