

Rawls Beyond the Rawlsistas: Towards a Modest Reading of A Theory of Justice

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A Theory of Justice was an instant success when it was published in 1971. The book was hailed as the work that would “resurrect” political philosophy as a scholarly discipline and as a public resource. The key to such triumph was to be sought not so much on the substantive contents of the book, as on the style of doing political theory that Rawls introduced. A Theory of Justice combined the grounding of normative claims on a reconstruction of the background political culture with the application of analytical philosophy to political matters. The more that communitarians, feminists and Marxists articulated their theories against Rawls, the more that a “Rawlsian bloc” emerged and displaced other approaches, making of A Theory of Justice a sort of “book zero” of the discipline. Fifty years onwards, it is time to draw a balance, not least in view of the drastic changes intervening in political cultures, and in the set of problems that we experience in urgent need of being analysed by political philosophers. Particular attention is paid in this article to the assumptions made by Rawls about the depth and breadth of the “overlapping consensus” as the foundation of his normative claims, and of the unstoppable academic success of Rawls’ egalitarian theory happening at the very same time that inequalities in income and wealth exploded in most of the world, not least in the US. On such a basis, I argue that it is only proper to emphasise that Rawls’ theory is only but one of the possible theories of justice, and that much will be gained by rendering explicit the rich implicit work undertaken by Rawls when elaborating and reconstructing the political culture of the United States, the actual fundamental basis on which his work rests.

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The rise of Rawlsianism is thus a story of triumph—the triumph of a small group of affluent, white, mostly male, analytical political philosophers who worked at a handful of elite institutions in the United States and Britain, especially Harvard, Princeton, and Oxford, and constructed a universalizing liberal theory that took on a life of its own.

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¹ *The Future of Political Philosophy*, «Boston Review», <https://bostonreview.net/philosophy-religion/katrina-forrester-future-political-philosophy>.