

## Book Reviews

*The Idea of Justice* by Amartya Sen. London: Allen Lane, 2009. 468 pp., £25.00 hardback, 978-1-846-14147-8

It may be far too obvious a beginning to start with thinking about the title of Amartya Sen's dense but highly readable and thought-provoking book on justice. Yet it is through reading and re-reading the title that the reader is challenged to think about whether we are being delivered the definitive idea of justice. I propose three readings of the title that lets us make sense of Sen's account of justice as a fundamental political and social concept that defines our world. The three accounts that emerge out of these readings form the distinct but interrelated parts of the book. The first reading is a question about the idea of justice. What follows is not an argument about the 'nature of perfect justice' but about 'the identification of redressable injustice'. The second reading questions the validity of Sen proposing the idea of justice. In his work we find that Sen argues for a pluralism of reasonings about justice, open to comparative and critical inquiry. Third, are we being presented with an idea of justice or more? Sen's inquiry into the nature of justice, framed by an understanding of injustice, is intimately linked to the advancement of justice and just causes in practical ways reflecting long-standing as well as current concerns about the state of the world and the societies we live in.

In a world of crises and manifest injustices, with no obvious institutional arrangements that provide immediate and lasting solutions, this book is a respectful but timely critique of Rawls and Rawlsian theories of justice. It is of course only a partial and not full departure from Rawlsian theories of justice that are primarily focused on transcendental concepts of justice and the search for those institutional frameworks that are seen to lead to the realization of perfectly just societies. However, in *The Idea of Justice*, Sen offers an alternative reading to the question of justice. Partly building on key ideas of the importance of concepts such as fairness, impartiality and liberty, Sen's work moves between a rigorous analysis of Rawls's theory of justice and an original account of his own reason-led comparative theoretical and empirical perspectives on justice. His arguments swing deceptively easily between Western and Indian accounts of justice, but with a strong focus on 'the voices of reason.' In drawing on a reason-led comparative method of thinking about justice, this book serves to open up the debates on justice and proceeds by moving between different poles of argument: between content and method, between institutional structures and peoples' behaviour and between big questions of global justice and detailed analyses of the problems Sen associates with what he calls the contractarian approach.

Sen professes to be part of one of the two main historical traditions of thinking about justice. To be more specific, he aligns himself with one of the two dominant approaches within European Enlightenment thinking, namely with those that highlight a comparative approach to justice. Sen views the works of Adam Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jeremy Bentham, Karl Marx, as different as they are, as part of an alternative approach to justice by basing thinking about justice on the interplay of institutions and the actual behaviour of individuals and social groups. This approach therefore responds to injustice in the world, and is viewed by Sen as a defensible and desirable way of departing from the contractarian approaches of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and in the twentieth century, John Rawls, to whom the book is dedicated. The departure from transcendental institutionalism that carries within it the notion of a perfectly just society is defensible because of the pluralism of reasonings about justice and it is desirable because of the work this approach does in thinking about injustice in the imperfect world as we experience it.

Quick to argue that the intellectual background of the book does not make it a particularly 'European' work as it is part of a universal tradition of reasoned argument, Sen rather elegantly weaves two concepts developed in ancient Indian jurisprudence, *nyaya* and *niti*, into his approach. Although both concepts stand for justice, the inclusive and broader concept of *nyaya* is rooted in a realist philosophy and is concerned in the main with the world that emerges. In terms of justice, *nyaya* stands for the idea of realized justice, as compared to *niti*, which refers to a narrower view of justice that is based on ideal codes of conduct and organizational propriety. In his departure from transcendental institutionalism, using a comprehensive term such as *nyaya*, Sen finds a compelling lever to critique Rawls' influential concept of justice that is heavily biased towards finding one set of fundamental principles of justice, and one set of institutions that serve to realize the aim of a perfectly just society. The interplay of *nyaya* and *niti* is part of Sen's argument for opening the debate on justice to take account of a pluralism of reasonings about justice, which may converge or differ, and which may each be critically subject to the question of impartiality. In short, Sen argues that it is logically and empirically indefensible and unfeasible to look for a single set of answers to the complexity of justice as an idea and injustice as an experience.

It is in line with Sen's search for an approach to injustice that he provides us not only with a comprehensive theoretical account of justice but in the second half of the book also draws on his and others' work that focuses on capabilities, resources, freedoms and rights as the material foundations for creating more just institutional structures and enabling individuals to overcome inequities and deprivation. It is only through the multiplicity of theoretical and other voices and through the multiplicity of spaces and means of redressing injustices that we can begin to think about justice and injustice in a comprehensive rather than narrow, geographically and intellectually bounded way. Moving across boundaries – from the nation-state to the global level – and opening up positional confinement, as Sen calls it, *The Idea of Justice* cannot but be an account that will be developed further by theorists and practitioners alike. This book is indeed a comprehensive account that speaks with the authentic voice of Sen – embodying historical traditions, departing from dominant twentieth-century thinking of justice, and inviting new and comparative modes of thinking. We may disagree, contest, and

argue, but we will find much engagement with this invitation to re-think our notions of justice, moved forward by Sen's formidable yet accessible reason-led arguments.

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