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## REVIEW ESSAY

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# A PROGRESSIVE VISION OF JUSTICE AND DEMOCRACY

**Rob Watts**

**Mike Berry**

## **Justice and Democracy: A Progressive Agenda for the Twenty-First Century**

*Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2021, vii+296pp., hardback, \$185.15*

Mike Berry is a distinguished Australian urban political economist who in the past decade has crafted a far-ranging critique of economic and political theory. His new book *Justice and Democracy: A Progressive Agenda for the Twenty-First Century* is a book for our time. Berry goes well beyond his two earlier books: *The Affluent Society Revisited* (2013) and *Morality and Power: On Ethics, Economics and Public Policy* (2017). These books offered a critique of the inability of market economies and utilitarian economics to deliver anything like a just society. The new book suggests Berry is prepared to get political, which is something that modern political parties and political economists are often not good at doing. By ‘political’, I mean what Jacques Rancière means when he answers his own provocative question: what can be thought of specifically as politics? Rancière makes a distinction between ‘policing’ and ‘politics’. By ‘policing’, Rancière means the work of politicians, assemblies and parliaments, bureaucrats and lawmakers which constructs and upholds the

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hierarchical organisation of society. ‘Politics’, on the other hand, involves the disruption of the police order, rendering visible what a social order wishes to keep invisible. Politics is therefore ‘dissensus’, the disruption of the given order of society. Berry offers a dissenting account of the actual mess we now confront. Berry also takes Raymond Geuss’ realism (2016) seriously, since this involves understanding precisely how the way unequal power works in our institutions if political interventions are ever to be successful.

The election of a Labor Party government in Australia in May 2022 offers a salient backdrop to think about Berry’s project. This was a surprising win for Labor because an historically low percentage of voters (32.6%) gave their primary vote to the ALP. Only a huge swing to the Greens and independents made the Labor victory possible: at 31.5% of the total primary vote, electoral support for the minor parties and independents was at its highest level ever in Australia. It was also surprising because the ALP had decided not to bring any big, transformative policies to the people, justifying its ‘low-policy profile’ approach on the grounds that being bolder might spook the punters. Yet, for decades, the ALP hasn’t had any really big new ideas capable of addressing our current situation.

In these circumstances, it is timely to ask three questions. What should the Albanese government do? Why should it do it? How should it do it? Berry’s book is a vital resource for thinking about these questions. As so-called liberal-democracies like Australia gradually emerge from the disruptions set loose by the global COVID pandemic, they must engage with an unwieldy mess of COVID-related problems, as well as a much larger morass of problems that had been accumulating well before COVID struck.

The COVID-related problems include the consequences of emergency fiscal measures adopted ostensibly to protect citizens from the worst effects of COVID and the recourse to lockdowns. As Adam Tooze (2021) tells us, this fiscal stimulus essentially magnified the already radical increase in economic inequality evident since the 1980s. The recourse to ‘quantitative easing’ as central banks buy securities on the open market, to release billions even trillions of dollars into economies as well as keeping interest rates at around zero percent, simply encouraged more and more people to get into debt, especially housing-related debt, and triggered a major inflationary wave. Meanwhile, the problems already in place before

COVID haven't gone away. We now confront an unprecedented political-social-economic-ecological crisis.

Firstly, there is the 'crisis of democracy'. Plenty of evidence points to widespread declining political engagement and a growing disconnect between citizens and their governments. Representative democracy - understood in terms of voter turnout, party membership, trust in politicians and once-dominant political parties, and interest in politics - is declining dramatically. There is a revival of deeply anti-democratic, right-wing populist movements and parties. The disposition to nationalism *and* populism has encouraged political leaders of many kinds to embark on invasions and military adventures. Secondly, entangled in that political crisis are social-economic problems, including an unprecedented global refugee crisis, a looming problem of inadequate food and potable water, dramatic increases in income and wealth inequality, rising household debt, precarious employment and underemployment, and increasing homelessness, all driven by decades of neoliberal policy making. Finally, there is clear evidence of a *deep crisis in 'carbon capitalism'*. As Bruno Latour (2018) insists, we live now in a 'new climactic regime' in which nature is pushing back at us - think floods, viral pandemics, global warming and a crisis of displaced people: of the 100 million displaced people in 2021, 14.4 million were victims of war and 23.7 million were the victims of 'weather related events'. Put together, this is an unprecedented constellation of political problems.

If we are to form a view about what the Albanese ALP government (or a Biden administration or a potential British Labour Party government in 2024) might do, we can do no better than look back for clues to what these ostensibly 'social-democratic' parties did when in office over the past few decades. In each case, the 'progressive' parties pushed a neo-liberal policy-agenda, whether this was about ignoring global warming, addressing problems by privileging a 'free market logic' to address health, welfare, aged care, child-care, law and order, employment and unemployment, tax and fiscal policy issues (as a test of political acuity, Australian readers should ask themselves if they understand the ways the National Disability Insurance Scheme is a neoliberal policy).

In Australia, the Hawke-Keating governments (1983-1996) unleashed a neoliberal revolution which the Rudd and Gillard governments (2007-2013) tweaked. In the US, Clinton (1992-2000) and Obama (2008-2016) recalibrated the Reagan-Bush Sr. model. In the UK, Blair's New Labour

Party (1997-2010) turned neoliberalism into a New Labour project. Relying on an historical assessment would therefore suggest that 'progressive' parties of this ilk are only likely to continue to be part of the problem, not the solution. We can have little, if any, legitimate expectation about the ability or the willingness of these 'progressive' parties to address the unprecedented political-social-economic-ecological crisis.

Mike Berry's latest book gives us a basis for considering what a more disruptive and forward looking political economic project could be. Political economists have not always been all that clear in spelling out their politics. By this, I mean much more than a failure to spell out the 'mechanics' of how they think their critique of the *status quo* can be turned into an effective political program (which proved a fateful *lacuna* in Marx's case). One aspect of the dissensus Berry is giving voice to engages fundamental ideas about justice and the good society. Whether you agree with Berry or not, he offers a basis on which we can start to think about what we want governments, markets and the community to do, and why.

That Berry's book presents an avowedly 'liberal-democratic' position will not appeal to those wedded to a permanently critical-theoretical attitude (think Slavoj Žižek), let alone those old comrades still engaged with the issues raised in the Stalin-Trotsky debates of the 1920s. However, for those of us who know that the greatest obstacle to change is the way things already are, his book is not a bad place from which to start.

Unsurprisingly, Berry's 'solution' is political. It is an argument grounded in an explicitly and fully articulated moral-political position. Following on the 'comprehensive consequentialist' conception of social justice he outlined in *Morality and Power* (2017), Berry argues that 'to move towards a more just world, in the actual circumstances of justice that we face, the weaknesses and threats to liberal democracy must be overcome through reconstructing robust, resilient social democracies' (p. 8). This rests on the strong intuition that justice and democracy are necessarily and intimately linked - that it is not possible to have one without the other - and this idea informs the book throughout.

In the first part of the book ('The Imperatives of Justice'), Berry outlines a 'consequentialist' theory of social justice. By consequentialist, Berry only means that to say that such theories do not rely on abstracted reasoning or principles, so much as insist that we judge whether an act is morally right by assessing the consequences of that act. We should note straight away that this simply makes any assessment of the consequences

reliant on establishing what criteria we will use to assess those consequences. Berry suggests that this will attend to two stipulations relevant to the social and economic preconditions that simultaneously require and make possible a theory of justice.

The first stipulation is that we must pay attention to the *ontology of inequality*, ie. the objective ways in which power is systematically distributed unequally. This puts him at odds with the kind of liberal theory of justice adumbrated by John Rawls, using a Kantian theory-method. Rather, Berry's theory of justice is informed by Amartya Sen's approach, emphasising that we cannot simply make the realities of asymmetric power or access to resources go away while establishing principles of just outcomes. Any theory of justice must first recognize and deal with the facticity of inequality, taking this as the point at which we insert the consideration of justice.

The second stipulation Berry makes is that we need to acknowledge the *reality of time*. To do that, he relies on the metaphor of the 'arrow of time'. Berry wants to stress the irreversible flow of time and the limited intellectual capacity of humans to fully grasp, for example, the consequences of individual interactions that come together in collective patterns. Berry makes this point – about needing to account for real time when thinking about justice – by inserting the dimension of time into Gerald Gaus' (2016) well-known two-dimensional account of justice. Thus, once we take into account the dimension of time, it becomes clear that insisting on an unchanging ideal of justice is a futile exercise: '[g]limpsed from the standpoint of the present, the future landscapes of justice are hopelessly, irredeemably, chaotically, unpredictably rugged' (p.55). This is something that conventional political scientists and economists have had trouble accepting, namely the fundamental contingency at work in all human action, a consideration that Hannah Arendt never tired of reminding us about.

As a critical realist, Berry therefore insists that we need to grapple with the main variants of actually existing advanced capitalism. He proceeds to offer an analysis of capitalism as part of theorizing about justice. This is an important move, given this has been missing in so many contemporary liberal theories of justice. Indeed, theorists like Rawls insist that we put on a 'veil of ignorance' so that we know nothing about what is actually going on, which seems like a self-defeating move.

In the second part of the book ('The Fragility of Democracy'), Berry returns to the evidence of increasing economic inequality and socio-political polarization, which he treats as an immanent threat because it is internal to the logic of capitalism. He is addressing the subversion of (representative) democracy by big corporations, promoting the rise of financial markets and new assets, as well as the rise of surveillance capital, and attacks on worker's rights, while treating climate change, nuclear weapons and viral pandemics as threats external to the logic of capitalism.

Berry's preferred approach to reimagining democracy while promoting social justice (spelled out in Chapter 6 of Part II) is to specify what a social democratic party or government should do. This involves an ecological two-step approach to renewal of a contemporary social democratic project. The first step is to restore the basic economic roles for government, including the effective allocation of resources. Berry relies on Sen's account of 'capabilities' to insist that every citizen must have access to all the basic merit goods, ensuring that everyone's basic needs are met. Secondly, such a government will engage in an egalitarian redistribution of wealth and other resources, relying on measures like universal basic income and radical progressive income and wealth tax reform. This contrasts with the pull back from policies promoting egalitarian redistribution that has been a stand-out feature of neoliberal policy making. Berry is very clear about the need for a radical break from that approach when he says that 'adequate allocation of resources to health, housing and health are non-negotiable' (p.226). Finally, such a government will move to stabilize the capitalist economy, using the affordances of Modern Monetary Theory.

The second step for reconstructing social democracy is 'to look for ways of encouraging and reinforcing the emergence of values supporting reciprocity, mutual esteem, self-esteem and communal solidarity' (p. 238). Here, I think we see a necessary amendment of Berry's consequentialist theory of justice, which is essentially an empty bucket until you fill it up with moral ideas which we can use to assess the consequences. Talking about moral goods, like reciprocity, mutual esteem, self-esteem and communal solidarity takes us towards Axel Honneth's theory of recognition or Hartmut Rosa's sociology of the good society (2021).

This is a very good book. Its many merits include a firm grasp of contemporary theories of social justice and democracy. Berry also writes clearly and accessibly. This doesn't mean I agree with him at each point

in his argument. But here's the thing: if I am critical, I need to make a substantive case for what I think; and that opens a dialogue, which is an essential part of democracy in action. The potential of this book will be fully realised if, and only if, it becomes a resource used by anyone who wants to address the radically entangled problems we now face.

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