



Ethnic Politics and Global Justice

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Abstract

This entry outlines the major theories of global justice from those that emerge early in the history of the concept to more contemporary conceptions. It also discusses the connection between global justice theory and practice and the larger process of globalization. The entry explains some of the many concrete problems global justice theory and global justice activism seek to address such as global poverty, environmental justice, migration justice, and other forms of social and political oppression and exclusion in both national and international contexts. Finally, this entry discusses the role global justice theory and activism can and does play in ethnic politics and ethnic political struggles against oppression of the forms just mentioned along with many others.

Keywords

Global justice · Globalization · Distributive justice · Representation · Ethnic politics · Philosophy

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Justice and Global Justice

While there are many theoretical and practical definitions of justice, for the purposes of this entry, I will identify the main goal of justice to be the conditions under which individuals and groups are accorded material and moral consideration in such a way that each is, to the extent possible, given the opportunity to lead a life that allows for flourishing and is free from various forms of oppression. Thinking through this conception of justice and its proper application then involves making sense of what kinds of considerations we owe each other, what our obligations are to one another, and what structures (social, legal, economic, environmental, etc.) and forms of rights and responsibilities we might put in place, protect, or get rid of in order to achieve justice both between individuals and groups and at the level of wider social relations.

Broadly, global justice is the study of, and recommendations for justice on a worldwide scale and with regard to international institutional arrangements and relations between individuals and groups within and as a part of those institutions. The emergence of global justice as a named subdiscipline in fields such as philosophy, political science, sociology, and global studies as well as in activist circles is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is in the 1970s that we begin to see this term used in relation to questions of justice and the international sphere (Steger and Wilson 2012). The emergence of this subdiscipline tracks also the emergence of the concepts of the “global” and “globalization” at a time in which the processes that these latter terms name were also beginning to be recognized and discussed in a variety of academic, political, economic, and activist circles (James and Steger 2014). For this reason, we cannot understand the global justice movement apart from theoretical and practical developments in relation to the processes named by the term globalization.

Globalization

Globalization is commonly understood (also broadly) as the recent acceleration and deepening of global interconnectedness of peoples and nations in regard to economic processes, human migration, climate conditions, communication, and culture along with the weakening of the power of the nation-state as sole political actor on the international stage (Sassen 1998; Ohmae 1996; Steger 2017). This latter development, namely, the weakening of the power of the nation-state, is evidenced by the rise of extra and non-state regimes of governance, regulation, human rights, finance and trade, also the emergence of international corporate businesses with no single territorial home, and mass communication technologies that put power in the hands of some individuals in ways that did not exist in the past, but are also not distributed in such a way as to allow equal access to all in the world community (Sassen 2006; Castells 2015).

It is the recognition of this repositioning of the nation-state vis-à-vis such international institutions, issues of climate, economy, and technological connection

that gives rise to the question of global justice. How, in a globalizing world, can there be justice for all peoples in relation to the questions raised at the outset? For many who thought about questions of justice in the past, it was assumed that such questions were solely, or mostly, national in character – that the seeking of social justice required things like gaining juridical and other forms of recognition for folks as citizens of particular nations that were not receiving them in various ways and also the thinking through of the right ways of equitably distributing social goods such as education, healthcare, housing, access to wealth, and so forth. Prior to the emerging recognition of the global interconnectedness described above, these questions and discussions took place in the context of what Nancy Fraser calls the “Keynesian-Westphalian framing” of social justice as applying within the confines of the nation-state system and Keynesian redistributive economic programs (Fraser 2009). When discussions of justice across international borders were had, they were usually framed in ways that made it the responsibility of nations as the sole international actors to enforce and regulate justice between national communities mostly via strategies such as international law, economic sanctions, and the like (Sen 1999).

While it is the case that issues of social justice within the confines of given national communities still exist and are still being worked on in a variety of ways, with the rise of globalization, this framing of the question of justice is disrupted, and such theoretical and practical discussions of globalization contribute to this disruption. Scholars and activists, recognizing the changes brought about by the age of globalization, begin asking questions about the linkages between individuals, groups, and communities across geographic and national borders, not only as members of national communities, but apart from and beyond them, and also the effects on those groups of various practices and policies that span these regions in ways that do not necessarily bottom out solely in the confines of the nation-state. I will detail a few of these cross-borders of “global” issues below and then turn to responses to them offered by global justice frameworks. We will see, in the context of this, the ways in which global justice conceptions and activist struggles are relevant to ethnic politics.

Global Justice Issues: A Snapshot

As many have pointed out, it is because of capitalist economic globalization that we see a massive increase in economic inequality on a worldwide scale. Not that there did not exist such inequality prior to the rise of globalization, certainly there did. The colonial and neocolonial world of the fifteenth through the early nineteenth centuries saw their resources and peoples exploited in a variety of ways in order to enrich the colonial powers. In this period, the flow of capital, goods, and services was primarily from the colonized world toward the colonial powers. It is in the age of decolonization beginning in the nineteenth century that the global era emerges as newly decolonized communities began competing with the colonial powers for economic

prosperity and social goods. As this process proceeds and the advanced capitalist economies become ever more globalized in the middle to late twentieth century, manufacturing moves from its center in the global north to the global south, and those latter economies become the production zones for not only raw materials and cheap labor but also commodities to be used primarily in the more affluent global north (Sachs 1998; Harvey 2007; Fraser 2016). In this process, the global south also becomes the dumping zone for the waste generated in mass production and consumption on a global scale. This process has led some scholars to talk of globalization as a kind of recolonization (Harvey 1995). To be sure, there are still many communities in the global north that also find themselves located in such dumping zones, and I will discuss this more below, but the majority are found in the global south and so demands for various forms of global justice also track environmental justice demands on a worldwide scale (Davis 2003; Schlosberg 2004).

The United Nations reports that as of 2016, 783 million people live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 US dollars a day. This amounts to almost 10% of the world's population. This affects more women than men globally, and one in four children worldwide is affected by some form of poverty-related issue. The most affected regions of the world are in the global south: the African continent, Central and South America, and so forth (United Nations). There are also, however, pockets of extreme poverty in countries in the global north as well, and such economic inequality has only grown over the last few decades as a result of the same globalized economic processes (Sassen 2014; Temin 2018).

Fossil fuel production and consumption in the global north has also led to further environmental degradation worldwide and negative effects of the accompanying problems associated with anthropogenic climate change such as increased frequency and severity of storms such as hurricanes and typhoons, drought conditions, and sea-level rise are primarily (though not solely) also visited on those same communities that are the most impoverished under globalization. This is, as with poverty, true not only of communities in the global south but also those impoverished communities in the global north as many of the most poor living in countries like the United States live in zones that are also the most affected by these negative effects (Klein 2014; Ciplet et al. 2015).

These are just some of the many examples of interconnection between communities in the global era across geographies and national borders. Global justice theorists ask questions relating to these issues and institutions including (but certainly not limited to): How and in what ways are certain nations and individuals responsible for global economic inequalities and what can be done to alleviate them? What are the duties of the global north to the global south in terms of the effects of fossil fuel production and consumption and the effects of anthropogenic climate change as a result? What are the rights of migrants – many of whom are forced into migration in the global era as a result of climate change and economic inequality on a global scale – and what are the duties of states in relation to them? Given that as noted above, around the world, women and people of color tend to be more affected by unjust conditions caused by the above issues and questions, what does global gender, ethnic, and racial justice look like? And so forth.

Theories of Global Justice: Rawls and Distributive Justice

In many of the mainstream contemporary philosophical debates about global justice, the general concerns are around the proper mode of distributive justice. That is, debates tend to be about what constitutes the most equitable distribution of social goods such as those mentioned above (i.e., education, healthcare, wealth, mobility, and so forth), given the responsibilities of governments and individuals across national and international lines. Various theories come down differently on questions of responsibility in this way. John Rawls' work, in both his development of a distributive model of justice more broadly and his famous "Law of Peoples," tends to be the starting point for these mainstream views in philosophical discussions (Rawls 1971, 2001).

Rawls argues that any notion of distributive justice outside of the confines of the nation-state or across national boundaries is unnecessary. This is because, on his view, as long as there is justice inside the confines of national communities, and as long as that justice affords people the opportunity to lead good lives, then that is all that is needed (Rawls 2001). In other words, differential economic inequalities between peoples within different communities within different states and different institutions are unproblematic on Rawls' view – even if it can be demonstrated that such inequality is enforced and reinforced by practices in one community that affect another. This is because the pursuit of justice is, for Rawls, always found within the institutional frameworks within communities and as a result of a contractual institutional framework there that offers citizens the opportunity to lead decent lives (Rawls 2001). For Rawls then, just relations between states require respect for state sovereignty, with the caveat that states should also respect the rights of their peoples and allow them access to the goods provided by liberal democratic institutions and structures. There are a number of responses to Rawls' view and theoretical developments that emerge in dialogue with its ideas and arguments. One broad category of response is the cosmopolitan human rights-based approach to global justice, and a second is a more internationalist approach. I will say a few words about each of these two broad types of responses and developments in turn before turning to a third position which I take to be much more robust and which tends to dovetail more with approaches to global justice outside of the theoretical realm and in the practical activist one.

Theories of Global Justice: Cosmopolitanism

The cosmopolitan response to Rawls has its foundations in a Kantian claim to the equality of humanity across social, economic, geographic, and political domains (Kant 1983, 2002). Cosmopolitans argue that individuals are primary bearers of rights (and are so equally) regardless of where they are positioned in social hierarchies and regardless of which part of the world they are found. So, in this view, global justice entails respecting those rights and when thinking about how to properly distribute social goods, services, and possibilities for human flourishing,

the cosmopolitan position requires of us that we respect the claims of all individuals equally and act accordingly. This requires then in turn not just working to ensure equal access and distribution of social goods within national boundaries but also across them if we are to achieve global justice. Of particular importance for some cosmopolitans is ensuring that certain human “capabilities” are achievable for all human beings (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011). These capabilities include things like being healthy which includes access to healthcare but also adequate housing, clean water and healthy food, not dying prematurely from preventable causes, freedom of movement, reproductive choice, living in a world in which the environment is conducive to this, access to economic well-being, and so forth (Nussbaum 2011). On the cosmopolitan view of global justice, state borders are not a factor in determining whose capabilities are respected and advanced; the argument is that all individuals should have access to these and so global governance structures should promote the advancement of capabilities for all humans in this way.

Further, as Thomas Pogge argues (2001), we need to ensure that the global institutional order that exists does not benefit one group to the detriment of others, and given that the current situation is such that the institutional order as it exists now does in fact do this – it emerged out of the brutal history of colonialism which transferred wealth and resources from the colonies to the colonial powers, and the global financial order is a continuation of this process – we have not only a positive duty to global redistributive justice as a corrective to this but also a negative responsibility in the continuation of an unjust global order. That is, insofar as the history of the current global order positions some as winners and some as losers economically and socially, the winners bear responsibility for both this history and its perpetuation. For this reason, as some cosmopolitans argue, correcting this may require the strengthening of global institutions and the weakening of state sovereignty if it is such sovereignty that perpetuates global inequalities (Pogge 1992).

For example, from the cosmopolitan perspective, that there is anthropogenic climate change and that there are some nations and peoples more affected by this than others, requires a global response that makes all nations responsible for the well-being of everyone in ways that weaken national sovereignty around decisions such as levels of carbon emissions and such (see, for instance, Caney 2005). Though there are differences in the ways that various cosmopolitan theories of global justice make sense of how equality among peoples should be determined, the basic view is that because of the fundamental equality among individuals at the most basic level, and because this equality means all have equal claim to human rights, the goal of achieving equality of capabilities at a practical level is the guiding principle regardless of state or national boundaries.

Theories of Global Justice: Internationalism

A second position taken up in relation to Rawls’ view, what we can, to use Nancy Fraser’s helpful framing, call the more internationalist one, responds to the Rawlsian privileging of the role of distributive justice inside the bounds of the state by arguing

that Rawls is correct to an extent – the demands of justice in the social are specially governed and adjudicated within the realm of national communities, but internationalism argues that there should also be weaker duties of justice between national communities (Fraser 2009). One prime example of this approach is given by David Miller in his 2007 *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (for other similar approaches, see Onora O’Neal 2000 and Kok-Chor Tan 2004). Here, Miller argues that global justice is important, but it cannot be a matter of applying the demands of social justice – like those articulated above in the cosmopolitan capabilities approach – as they exist within national boundaries to communities and individuals across such boundaries. Miller seeks to show, in this way, that there is a difference between social and global justice. This is because as Miller argues, national communities have histories in which they have long-running cultural traditions that ultimately construct particular and localized notions of the good and of justice. Miller’s further point here is that these traditions and norms are different from one another precisely because they are culturally and historically bound (Miller 2007). He claims that this is a problem for any conception of global justice that simply seeks to apply the principles of social justice writ large (like the cosmopolitan view) because there is no common, cross-cultural/cross-national notion of social justice that can be used as a foundation for such application (Miller 2007). Nations and cultures construct and rank their notions of what counts as social justice and fairness differently (Miller 2007). Furthermore, as Miller argues, even if we could find such a common conception, national preferences for how to achieve such equality will differ as will the paths different nations choose in working toward those goals and will differ in such a way that they cannot be held to account (because they are preferences) in any universal global egalitarian theory we could construct (Miller 2007).

Ultimately, Miller’s view is that, given these problems, we should not see global and social justice as making the same demands or offering the same conditions as they are two separate realms. The former demands a weaker set of conditions than the latter. The demands of global justice are such that we can (and should) claim that individuals and communities should have access to basic sets of resources and also that we should work toward ending global forms of poverty. Such a theory does also include the recognition that some nations can be held responsible for violating these two core values (both in their actions in the present and also in their actions in the past), but any more robust conception of justice and equality remains the provenance of the nation and the state (Miller 2007).

Theories of Global Justice: Young and Fraser, More Than Just Distribution

As we have seen, the three broad philosophical versions of global justice discussed so far – the strictly Rawlsian, the cosmopolitan, and the internationalist – spend their time thinking primarily through the lens of distributive justice and argue in various ways for a just redistribution of wealth, capabilities, and opportunity, as well as redistribution of responsibility for various past and present actions that contribute to

the preponderance of various forms of global inequality. In connection with this responsibility redistribution, these theories argue that we also need a redistribution of benefit and burden on a global scale. There is another set of theoretical and practical global justice arguments that claim that simply focusing on redistributive justice is not enough.

Iris Marion Young is an early critic of the distributive model-only style discussions of justice described above and offers one version of a reimagined model that takes seriously not only issues of just distribution but also questions of power and oppression that underlie and produce unjust distribution so as to offer a more robust notion of justice (Young 1990). Young's main concern with the distributive model as the sole foundation of thinking about justice is that when we only think of justice in these terms (as redistribution of material goods such as wealth, resources, access to healthcare, etc.), it obscures larger, and perhaps more important, questioning of the power structures – both historical and presently persistent – that create and perpetuate unequal distribution of the various goods described above. Further, Young argues that even when distributive models do consider this and other nonmaterial social goods such as access to certain nonmaterial capabilities as in the cosmopolitan model, or the protection of cultural goods for minoritized populations, or access to power structures for those historically locked out, these things tend to be conceived of as “static things, instead of a function of social relations and processes” (Young 1990, 16).

In relation to the first charge, that distributive-only models of justice fail to understand power structures, Young argues that solely focusing on redistributive justice leaves oppressive social institutions and structures in place. For instance, if we look to a commonly argued for redistributive model of spreading the burden and responsibility for global inequalities in relation to climate impacts like those argued for in distributive “carbon tax” models, we find a means of spreading the “responsibility” for the effect of carbon use but no way of shifting carbon use in ways that change long-standing institutional and power structures (see, for instance, Miller 2008). That is, as long as carbon users and polluters can continue to pay the tax, they remain in control of the structures, and so, in relation to the second problem identified by Young, in this example those who lack such means and power are left out in ways that they have always been insofar as they are given little ability to make polluters stop and hold them accountable in ways outside of the economic.

For instance, enforcing accountability for the negative and marginalizing effects of climate change on culture and tradition on various indigenous communities around the world is impossible and potentially ignored under such models (Adger et al. 2013; Rush 2018). Native Americans and their descendants in the Southern United States who live in coastal communities are, for instance, especially threatened by rising sea levels and have seen their way of life in these communities slowly eroded and disappeared – ways of life that have been subjected to historical repression by the US government such that they were pushed into coastal living in the first place (Rush 2018). Carbon tax-based, distributive justice style climate mitigation strategies do nothing to address these injustices. In this way, Young argues that an expanded model of justice must take account of not only distributional

issues but also issues of oppression, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism (Young 1990, 2006). Ultimately, for Young, justice requires social and political (and not just material) equity. This means that we must take account of differences between groups and individuals, and their histories and experiences as well as the ways institutions both in the present and in the past have privileged some at the expense of others.

In a similar vein to Young, Nancy Fraser also argues for a more complete theory of justice and hence of global justice. Building on Young's criticism of distributive models of justice, Fraser argues that what is needed is not only just distribution of social and economic goods but also just political representation for all who are affected by various issues and unjust social relations on a global scale, as well as a form of democratic cultural recognition. For Fraser, this constitutes what she describes as a "three-dimensional" notion of global justice (Fraser 2005, 2009). As Fraser argues in this three-dimensional model, there are a variety of ways that individuals and groups suffer injustice – at the economic distributive level, individuals and groups are marginalized, oppressed, or otherwise excluded by economic structures that disallow them the resources for full participation; at the cultural level, individuals and groups may lack social standing via what Fraser describes as "institutional hierarchies of cultural value" which confers a kind of "status inequality" such that those on the lower end of the cultural hierarchy are excluded and marginalized (Fraser 2005).

We have already seen much about the first set of issues of exclusion/marginalization around the economic. For the second set, we can think here of the various ways around the globe that the status of women suffers under patriarchal social relations or how racial and ethnic hierarchies also enforce exclusion and marginalization across geographic and political contexts. For concrete examples of racial and ethnic hierarchies, we can think about the ways in which the Palestinian community faces repression and marginalization at the hand of the state of Israel and the ways in which communities of color in the United States face similar structures of repression – a fact which both Palestinian activists and Black Lives Matter activists have recognized and so begun to work together to understand each other's struggles (Bailey 2016; Malloy 2014). We can also, in this context, think about the ways in which indigenous activists around the world have come to understand their struggles for justice as bound up together in particular ways and so have begun to act together in seeking justice on a global scale around issues of representation (Choudry 2007).

These latter examples are of the ways in which various local movements – for racial and ethnic rights, for movements for indigenous peoples' rights, and for women's rights – connect with one another in order to form larger movements to combat this exclusion and gain power (Fraser 2005; Choudry 2007). Fighting cultural hierarchies in this way is also a form of gaining just representation – the third of the three dimensions in Fraser's account of a proper global justice for the present. It is not only this though, as justice in representation also includes on her accounting of it, the establishing of criteria for membership in the larger community as well as procedures for resolving conflict and injustice among community members (Fraser 2005). As Fraser points out here, the political dimension is that through

which questions of distribution and recognition are articulated and so it cannot be neglected in our construction of theories of justice. To be sure, as just noted Fraser does not privilege the representative and the political over-against the economic as the economic is one of the main ways the other forms of injustice are enforced and extended – minoritized and oppressed populations worldwide are also often economically excluded as well and any global justice program must think all three forms of exclusion and injustice at once if it is to succeed in its goals.

As can be seen by the above, conceptions of justice and injustice are integral to various forms of ethnic politics that are concerned with seeking redress for a variety of forms of injustice at the political, social, and economic levels of social structure. And given that much of these struggles take place not just within a bounded national context but in the context of globalized social, economic, and environmental conditions, conceptions of global justice can and do also play a central role.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Capitalism, Colonialism, and Slavery](#)
- ▶ [Ethnicity, Class, Nation in a Changing World](#)
- ▶ [Immigration, Borders, and Refugees](#)

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