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Where the Action Is

Clive Barnett

I want to acknowledge the care and generosity of spirit with which Josh Barkan, Jenni Fluri, and Kirsi Pauliina Kallio have engaged with *The Priority of Injustice*, and also express my thanks to Michael Samers in organizing this forum. For the sake of convenience, in responding to the issues they raise, I will structure my own comments around the two openings to *The Priority of Injustice* that Josh Barkan identifies, one relating to issues about doing theory, and one to do with ideas about critique in human geography.

Why Theory?

Responses to and reviews of *The Priority of Injustice* have noticed that it does not contain any empirical cases. It is a book *about* theory. Writing about theory is not merely a matter of exegesis. I think of *The Priority of Injustice* as a kind of essay, as a preliminary undertaking that imaginatively lays out ideas as a first step in refining specific problems and their analysis (see Tuan 1984, ix-x). In particular, the book works through the difference between action-oriented styles of social theory and subject-centric theories, and I want here to elaborate on some of the reasons why I think it matters.

The Priority of Injustice has a three-part structure. The first part, *Democracy and Critique*, considers how different concepts of meaning shape debates about the meaning of concepts like democracy - concepts that are both descriptive and normative in their application. As Kirsi Pauliina Kallio observes, it might be the second part of the book, *Rationalities of the Political*, which attracts most attention amongst geographers. It focuses on different interpretations of the distinction between 'the political' and 'politics', or some variant of that distinction. I seek to redeem an action-centred imagination of political life that is all too easily elided by the layered

ontologies of subjectification and affect that dominate readings of political theory in human geography. Rejecting the tired contrast between consensual and agonistic styles of political theory, I suggest that the real choice when thinking seriously about the value of democracy is between different ways of conceptualising conflict. In Chapter 5, I recommend Mary Dietz's proposition that political life involves an irreducible aspect of strategic action, as an alternative to inflated ontological claims about ineradicable antagonism and violence. This perspective shifts attention, as Jenni Fluri notes, squarely on to the task of better understanding how consent is sought and secured; or, if you prefer, to the relationship between the politics of power and the politics of support. It invites, in turn, a reconfiguration of key concepts, for example, throwing new light upon how the idea of governmentality can inform the analysis of democratization (e.g. Barnett 2017, 132-141). It is this action-oriented imagination that is then further elaborated in the third part of the book, *Phenomenologies of Injustice*, which outlines a programme of analysis that avoids the theoreticism associated with the paradigm of spatial politics that privileges the dynamics of closure and exclusion involved in the positioning of subjects in fields of meaning and affective force.

This action-theoretic perspective shifts understandings of persistent problems in democratic theory. For example, much of the work I consider in *The Priority of Injustice* is concerned with reimagining the normative dynamics of the claims to universalism that are an integral and irreducible aspect of democratic politics. Jenni Fluri wonders whether modes of theorising that aim to reconfigure the value of universality don't necessarily entail some form of illegitimate exclusion. I'm not sure that is the case at all. Thinkers such as Jurgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib as well as poststructuralist stalwarts like Judith Butler share in the idea of thinking of universalism as a horizon rather than a ground or foundation. This involves redefining the normative value of the universal away from claims to impartiality, towards thinking of universalism in terms of the dialogical dynamics of claims of inclusion. Universalism is thereby transformed from a prescriptive criterion of evaluation into the name for a worldly process of problematization. To fully grasp the significance of this transformation, one would certainly have to suspend one's credulity towards poststructuralist shibboleths about the constitutive movement of exclusion in the formation of identities and meaning (e.g. Barnett 2017, 152-156).

One would also have to reimagine how norms are thought to function: less as subject-forming normalizations, and rather more as varied modes of ought-ness that orient actions.

In *The Priority of Injustice*, the geographical significance of an action-theoretic perspective is most fully elaborated through the reconstruction of the theme of all-affectedness in democratic theory. I take Kirsi Pauliina Kallio's engagement with this theme as an important affirmation of how a book about theory can, indeed, inform empirical analysis not so much by providing answers but by helping reframe and refine problems. But she worries that the all-affectedness idea does not really work very well in relation to processes that are not contained territorially within the scope of nation-state. On the contrary, it is precisely those sorts of cases that help to clarify what sort of concept all-affectedness is. It is not meant to be an external norm of evaluation; affectedness is the genre through which very meaning of democracy is invoked, used, and stretched in worldly situations.

The principle that anyone affected by a decision should have some say in its formulation is a fairly intuitive aspect of the idea of democracy. The all-affected principle is traditionally discussed as an evaluative or prescriptive norm of one sort or another. In its revival in recent democratic theory, it is used to develop accounts of democratic inclusion that privilege relations of power over those of membership (consistent with the methodological globalism of a great deal of contemporary democratic theory). The problem with that shift of emphasis is that it lends itself to a view of affectedness as something that can be objectively determined by some form of causal analysis. This is why, for example, Nancy Fraser ends up rejecting the notion of affectedness as a democratic norm, on the grounds that it is an idea that supports monological forms of reasoning. It is an argument that geographers should take very seriously, given how far the idea of tracking relationships of causal interdependence now define the form and content of geographical pedagogy and research.

At first sight, the all-affected interest idea seems to contain two dimensions – one of being affected, and one of being able to affect outcomes in some way. In Chapter 6 of *The Priority of Injustice*, I argue that one can actually divide the first of these two aspects – the sense of being affected – into two, differentiating between a sense of having an interest in an issue in a kind of

objective way, and a sense of taking an interest in an issue, in a sort of subjective way. This refinement means that the idea of affectedness cannot be straightforwardly used as a principle to evaluate states of affairs. But, echoing Robert Dahl, it is a good place to start. Not least, it is good place to start investigating how claims of injustice are assembled - how they emerge and are expressed, processed and warranted.

Thinking of all-affectedness in this way, as a worldly register through which democracy is posited, problematized and contested as well as a place to start analysis, also underscores a sharp difference between two ways of thinking about why a geographical imagination matters to political analysis. Thinking of the geographically strung-out, heterogeneous, ‘relational’ constitution of social life is most often used to tell moral stories about the constitution of identities by revealing the fact of being bound into other people’s actions without knowing it. But as already suggested, that’s a way of thinking that entrains a series of monological forms of reasoning. A relational geographical imagination is interesting for a much more serious reason, but also perhaps a less all-encompassing reason – as writers such as James Bohman and Iris Marion Young demonstrate, it is a way of thinking that is only important in so far as it opens up questions about the relations between agency, consent and domination (see also Robbins 2017).

Changing the Subject

The second opening to *The Priority of Injustice* identified by Josh Barkan refers to the status of critique in geography and related fields. Recent ‘critiques of critique’ focus on the limits of procedures concerned with the relentless exposure of the constructedness of phenomena (e.g. Felski 2015). But they tend to avoid any serious treatment of the tradition of Critical Theory, with a big-C, in which critique involves a negotiation between facts and norms. They thereby continue to dodge the “justificatory dilemma” that is central to debates about the futures of critical theory, revolving around the double imperative to demonstrate both the *plausibility* and justify the *validity* of posited alternative visions of social life (see Barnett 2017, 39-43). The fundamental difference between an action-theoretic and a subject-centric perspective with respect to this dilemma turns on how the possibility of *change* is understood.

There is an internal relationship between concepts of subjectivity-as-subjectification, often articulated in strongly ontological registers, and the idea that power works through naturalization, essentialization, and universalization. From this set of associations arises a notion of critique as an exercise in defamiliarization that demonstrates the possibility of the change-ability of identities and practices that are, apparently, lived and experienced as eternal and inevitable. The assumption that this is how life is lived and experienced is a projection of the methodological and conceptual protocols derived from ontologized theories of subjectification and affect. In the associated paradigm of spatial politics, it is assumed that subjects are formed by being ‘enframed’, by being set-in-place - before a painting, a chain of signifiers, a field of perception, a structure of address, or just immersed in an atmosphere. It is also assumed that any individual or collective identity is constitutively posited against an abjected ‘Other’, so that subject-formation appears as a form of exclusionary territorialization. This is a paradigm in which it is assumed that people’s subjective dispositions are functional effects of mediated systems of malevolent power. You thereby arrive at a framework for analysing any and all practices as scenes for the reproduction of various exclusions and/or always potential sites for the creative reconfiguration of the emotional attachments and imaginary identifications before which people remain necessarily enthralled. The shared presupposition is that politics – both of the sort one doesn’t approve and of the sort one hopes to support – works through *changing the subject*.

The consolidation of this paradigm of analysis, with its specific sense of the marginal spatialities and eventful temporalities of political life, reflects an important shift in the way in which change itself is conceptualised in social theory. In all sorts of social science, it is taken for granted that change is an intrinsic feature of social life. The task of explaining how this feature manifests itself usually involves some procedure in which action is placed within a broader frame of context, or conditions, or constraint. With the ascendancy of subject-centred theories, under the sway of post-structural theories and the turn to ontology, one can see the emergence of a very different image of change. Whether it is theories of hegemony, or of the distribution of the sensible, or of ontological politics, or of assemblage, it is presumed that the task of theory is to account for the stabilisation, ordering, or fixing of the essential flux of life into patterns of serial reproducibility. Change, in these accounts, is extraordinary – the

overriding interpretative concern is to simply establish the very possibility of change itself. And so it is that subject-centric theories and ontologies of the political elide the problem of the validity of alternative futures into demonstrations of the plausibility of change. At best, they simply elevate openness to change and contestation as the highest normative aspiration available to us and as the very essence of democracy.

Thinking of change as an ordinary feature of life that is manifested in various ways, rather than thinking of change as a rare event that interrupts stable routines, is at the core of what I call in *The Priority of Injustice*, after Stanley Cavell's sense of this word, an *ordinary* understanding of the uncertain dynamics of democratic politics. It is an understanding that informs my argument that democracy is not just a contested concept, but that this contestability derives in large part from its status as an inherently evaluative concept whose meaning is shaped by the ways in which it applied in new contexts. This is not an argument about how democracy can be made to mean just what one wants it to mean (the complex words that help to express political life are not 'empty signifiers'). It is an argument in favour of attending to the observable range of applications of democratic practices, in order to better understand what it is that democracy is good for, and what its limits might be.

Experiences of harm, injury, and wrong – feelings of injustice - do not always get articulated through a vocabulary of democracy. The historical significance of political life being framed in and through democratic norms – of inclusion, accountability, representation, participation - should be a focus of further inquiry in geography. The action-theoretic imagination that I deploy in *The Priority of Injustice* is offered as a means of directing our curiosity towards that sort of inquiry. An argument about the priority of injustice can easily be misinterpreted as a call to favour practice over theory. But the sort of priority for which I argue in the book is a conceptual one – it is an argument about the need to think about injustice in its own terms, not against a background of ideal theories from which injustice shows up as a departure (see also Barnett 2018). This is a difficult task, and there is only a minor tradition of existing scholarship from which to draw upon in pursuing it. It is a task that challenges various shibboleths of critical analysis in geography: it requires an ability, for example, to take the concept of experience seriously in ways that might well be impossible for favoured styles of cultural

theory in particular; it interrupts many of the conventions associated with self-consciously activist strands of scholarship; it requires an acknowledgement that institutionalised responses to injustice are necessarily impure (cf. Barkan and Pulido 2017). But difficult tasks of thinking should be the ones we approach with enthusiasm rather than shy away from.

References

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