
Rawls's Law of Peoples

A Realistic Utopia?

Edited by

Rex Martin and
David A. Reidy

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Rawls's Law of Peoples

I contend that this scenario is realistic – it could and may exist. I say it is also utopian and highly desirable because it joins reasonableness and justice with conditions enabling citizens to realize their fundamental interests.

John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, p. 7

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For my mother, Cecelia Reidy, and in memory of my father,
David Reidy, Sr.

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Notes on Contributors

Catherine Audard is a Visiting Fellow at the Philosophy Department of the London School of Economics, where she has been teaching moral and political philosophy, as well as continental philosophy, since 1991. She is the Chair of the Forum for European Philosophy, based at the European Institute of the LSE. She has published translations into French of works by John Stuart Mill and John Rawls. Her most recent book is *Anthologie historique et critique de l'utilitarisme* in three volumes (1999), and her new book *Citoyenneté et pluralisme* will be published shortly. She is currently writing a book on Rawls.
c.audard@lse.ac.uk

Alyssa Bernstein is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Ohio University. She is a past Fellow of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University. As a graduate student at Harvard she worked with Rawls while writing her dissertation: "Human Rights Reconceived: A Defense of Rawls's Law of Peoples."
bernstei@ohio.edu

David Boucher is Professor of Political Theory in the School of European Studies, and Director of the Collingwood and British Idealism Centre, at Cardiff University. He has published in the area of international relations theory and political theory. His recent books include *Political Theories of International Relations from Thucydides to the Present* (1998), *British Idealism and Political Theory*, co-author (2000), and *Political Thinkers*, co-editor (2003). He is currently working on the development of human rights in their legal, philosophical and political guises.
boucherde@Cardiff.ac.uk

Allen Buchanan is currently James B. Duke Professor of Public Policy Studies and Professor of Philosophy at Duke University. His work spans issues in political

philosophy, economics and business, and medical ethics. He is the author of *Justice, Legitimacy, and Self-Determination: Moral Foundations for International Law* (2004) and *Secession* (1991) among other books, and of numerous articles. Buchanan was the John Medlin, Jr. Senior Fellow at the National Humanities Center (2001–2).

buchanan@pps.duke.edu

Andreas Follesdal is Professor and Director of Research at the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Oslo. He received his PhD (1991) in Philosophy from Harvard University, and publishes on issues of international political theory, with a focus on topics of European integration. He is Founding Editor of the series Themes in European Governance.

andreas.follesdal@nchr.uio.no

Samuel Freeman is Steven F. Goldstone Term Professor of Philosophy and Law at the University of Pennsylvania. He has published many articles and chapters in political, moral, and legal philosophy. He edited John Rawls's *Collected Papers* (1999) and, more recently, *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls* (2003). He is currently editing Rawls's *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, and a collection of his essays on Rawls is forthcoming.

sfreeman@sas.upenn.edu

Wilfried Hinsch studied philosophy at the University of Hamburg where he received his PhD in 1984. He was a Visiting Fellow at St. John's College, Cambridge, in 1986 and at Harvard University in 1987 and 1988. He taught moral and political philosophy in Münster, Leipzig, and Heidelberg and is currently Professor of Practical Philosophy at the University of the Saarland in Saarbrücken. His books include *Erfahrung und Selbstbewusstsein* (1986), *Zur Idee des politischen Liberalismus* (1997), and *Gerechtfertigte Ungleichheiten: Grundsätze sozialer Gerechtigkeit* (2002).

w.hinsch@mx.uni-saarland.de

Alistair Macleod is a graduate of Queen's University (Canada) and the University of Glasgow. He is currently Professor Emeritus and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Queen's University, where he was Head of the Department of Philosophy from 1986 to 2000. His most recent book is *Social Justice, Progressive Politics and Taxes* (2004); he is the author of numerous articles, mainly in social and political philosophy, on such topics as liberty, equality, justice, efficiency, markets, rights, and rational decision-making.

macleoda@post.queensu.ca

Rex Martin has held appointments in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Currently he is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Kansas and Honorary Professor at Cardiff University. He has held a number of visiting teaching positions, independent research fellowships, and fellowships at research centers, most recently a research fellowship at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina (as William C. and Ida Friday Senior Fellow, in 2004–5). His most recent books are *A System of Rights* (1997 in paperback) and a revised edition of R. G. Collingwood's *An Essay on Metaphysics* (2002 in paperback).

RexMartin@compuserve.com

David Miller is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Oxford and Official Fellow in Social and Political Theory at Nuffield College, Oxford. He is a Fellow of the British Academy. In addition to many articles and chapters in political theory, he is the author of several books, including *Social Justice* (1976), *On Nationality* (1995), *Principles of Social Justice* (1999), and *Citizenship and National Identity* (2000).

david.miller@nuffield.oxford.ac.uk

James Nickel is Professor of Law and Affiliate Professor of Philosophy at Arizona State University. He is the author of *Making Sense of Human Rights* (1987, revised edition forthcoming from Blackwell) and many articles and chapters in political philosophy, human rights, and normative international relations. He has held several visiting positions and several research fellowships including a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, a Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellowship, an ACLS Fellowship, and a National Humanities Center Fellowship.

james.nickel@asu.edu

Philip Pettit is L. S. Rockefeller University Professor of Politics and Human Values at Princeton, where he teaches political theory and philosophy. He is the author of many articles and numerous books in social and political theory. His recent books include *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (1997), *A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency* (2001), and *The Economy of Esteem*, with Geoffrey Brennan (2004). A collection of his papers, *Rules, Reasons, and Norms*, was published in 2002, and a collection of collaborations with Frank Jackson and Michael Smith, *Mind, Morality and Explanation*, was published in 2004.

ppettit@Princeton.EDU

Thomas Pogge, since receiving his PhD in philosophy from Harvard, has been teaching moral and political philosophy at Columbia University. His recent publications include *World Poverty and Human Rights* (2002) and the edited volumes *Global Institutions and Responsibilities* (2005) and *Real World Justice* (2005). He is editor for social and political philosophy for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and a member of the Norwegian Academy of Science. His work has been supported, most recently, by the MacArthur Foundation, the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, All Souls College, and the National Institutes of Health. He is currently a professorial fellow at the Center for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the Australian National University.
tp6@columbia.edu

David Reidy is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tennessee. He is the author of many articles and chapters in political philosophy and the philosophy of law and on Rawls in particular. He is the co-editor, with Mortimer Sellers, of *Universal Human Rights: Moral Order in a Divided World* (2005) and the author of *On the Philosophy of Law* (forthcoming).
dreidy@utk.edu

Markus Stepanians studied philosophy at the University of Hamburg and was a Visiting Scholar at Harvard from 1991 to 1993. He received his doctoral degree in Hamburg in 1994. Since 1998 he has taught philosophy at the University of Saarland in Saarbruecken. He is the author of *Frege und Husserl über Urteilen und Denken* (1998) and *Frege – Eine Einführung* (2001). Currently he is preparing a collection of essays on “Rights” as well as a new book, *Analysing Rights: A Defence of the Classical View*.
m.stepanians@mx.uni-saarland.de

Kok-Chor Tan received his PhD in philosophy from the University of Toronto (1998). He is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. He is a past Faculty Fellow at the Center for Ethics and the Professions at Harvard University. His area of research is in moral and political philosophy, with special interests in issues of global justice, nationalism, and human rights. In addition to many articles and chapters, his books include *Toleration, Diversity, and Global Justice* (2000) and *Justice without Borders* (2004).
kctan@sas.upenn.edu

Leif Wenar received his PhD from Harvard in 1997. Since 2005 he has been Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield. His work in political and

legal philosophy has appeared in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *Ethics*, *Mind*, *Analysis*, *Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, *The Columbia Law Review*, *The Philosopher's Annual*, and several edited collections. He has been a fellow at the Princeton University Center for Human Values, the Murphy Center of Political Economy at Tulane University, and the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs. Previous articles on Rawls include “*Political Liberalism: An Internal Critique*” (1995); “The Legitimacy of Peoples” (2002); and “The Unity of Rawls’s Work” (2004).

wenar@shef.ac.uk

Preface

Citizens and officials within contemporary liberal democracies face innumerable practical political problems every day. These include familiar issues of domestic economic, educational, cultural, environmental, and social policy. Of course, within liberal democracies citizens and officials disagree, often reasonably, over these matters. But their disagreements are, at least when reasonable, typically framed by a generally shared, even if also abstract and indeterminate, liberal and democratic moral vision. This vision makes possible between them a politics of public reasons.

But what about matters of foreign policy? Citizens and officials within contemporary liberal democracies daily face the practical political problem of whether and how to interact as corporate agents, through their states or governments, with individual persons as well as other corporate agents, states and governments, economic corporations, and so on, beyond their borders. Of course, citizens and officials within liberal democracies, and between them, will again disagree over these matters. Within and between the United States, France, Denmark, Australia, Costa Rica, and so on, citizens and officials disagree over many current matters of foreign policy. These disagreements often lead to different and sometimes conflicting foreign policies between liberal democratic states. This much is obvious.

What is less obvious is whether and how these disagreements, like those over matters of domestic policy, might be aired and resolved by the citizens and officials of liberal democracies within a politics, domestic and international, of public reasons. In liberal democracies, public discussion of the general principles of a liberal democratic moral vision has been rather robust for the last several decades. But it has been largely an inward-looking discussion focused on matters of domestic policy.

Only recently has a vigorous public discussion erupted over the general principles of a liberal democratic moral vision for matters of foreign policy. The 1989 transformation of the geopolitical landscape carried in its wake a wide range of new foreign policy challenges and opportunities for liberal democracies. These

have perhaps come too fast. Citizens and officials in liberal democracies still find themselves without much of a shared moral vision, even at the level of abstract and indeterminate general principles, when it comes to matters of foreign policy. Accordingly, disagreements are generally resolved not through a politics of public reasons, but simply through politics. The suspicion and distrust that follows is a substantial cost to effective international action, whether unilateral or multilateral.

Meanwhile, the practical political problems of foreign policy faced by liberal democracies continue to mount both in number and severity. Desperate poverty around the world and international terrorism are just the two most obvious problems. Global environmental degradation, growing economic inequalities, the absence of transparency, stability and nondomination within many global markets, the nonproliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, and systemic and regular human rights violations are problems perhaps less visible but equally pressing. All these are made more difficult by the fact that they arise within a larger context within which liberal democracies must determine how to interact with states either illiberal or undemocratic or both. And these states are a pretty diverse lot. They range from Afghanistan, Brunei and China through Cuba, Iran, Jordan and Nigeria to North Korea, Sudan, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. It's literally from A to Z.

What moral vision ought to guide the citizens and officials of liberal democracies as they take on the many practical political problems of foreign relations in a world that includes all these states? For what kind of world can liberal democratic peoples reasonably hope, and thus purposefully and rationally work?

These are demanding questions. Among the leading contemporary philosophers, John Rawls has attempted to outline an answer to them. In a series of important books he attempted to lay out a moral vision appropriate both to liberal democratic societies and to their place within the international community. Rawls's overall contribution is so ambitious and so important and his international theory is so contested, even by sympathetic readers, that David A. Reidy and Rex Martin organized two panel sessions: one for the World Congress of the International Association for Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy (IVR) in Lund, Sweden, in 2003; the other for the Conference on Global Justice held in conjunction with the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division, meeting in Pasadena, California, in 2004.

Because the public response to these sessions was so enthusiastic, a volume of papers focusing on Rawls's international theory, a volume that was both critical and balanced, seemed a good idea. Such a volume would carry the conversations begun in Lund and Pasadena to a much wider audience. Many of the papers from these sessions, all of them considerably revised after several drafts, are included in the present volume. In addition, the volume includes papers from a number of additional people – scholars and thinkers who would be numbered among the most distinguished political philosophers and theorists of international relations and international law working today. Taken together the papers here should serve

those, beginners and experts alike, working in philosophy, law, political science, international relations, government, and advocacy and with a serious interest in issues of global justice, human rights, and the nature and content of a proper liberal democratic foreign policy.

We appreciate the help provided to our editorial efforts by Dusan Galic, Donna Martin, Walter Riker, and Jeppe von Platz.

David A. Reidy and Rex Martin

List of Abbreviations used for Rawls's Books

<i>CP</i>	<i>John Rawls: Collected Papers</i>
<i>JasF</i>	<i>Justice as Fairness: A Restatement</i>
<i>LoP</i>	<i>The Law of Peoples</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Political Liberalism</i>
<i>TJ</i>	<i>A Theory of Justice</i>

Full bibliographical details of the books are provided in the notes in each chapter, along with any additional comments individual authors may wish to make regarding editions used.

Part I
Background and
Structure

1

Introduction: Reading Rawls's *The Law of Peoples*

Rex Martin and David A. Reidy

Background

The post-Second World War international order has not been a peaceable one. However, the great powers for the most part did avoid direct military confrontation, and for the last sixty years or so the world has been free of the scourge of world war that so troubled the first half of the past century.

After the Second World War a number of important changes occurred in the international state system, a system that had, by 1945, been in existence for about three hundred years. Among the most important of these changes were: (1) the gradual but increasing international recognition of human rights; (2) changing attitudes about war (with a growing recognition that wars are justifiable only in a limited number of cases – in self-defense, including collective defense, and, in extreme cases, in the protection of human rights); (3) the establishment and development of the United Nations and of other supranational organizations, such as the European Union (EU); and (4) concomitant with these developments, the demise of colonial rule.

One of the greatest challenges posed by this new international order has been that of providing appropriate standards of justice for this emerging system (including, of course, the attempt to characterize and to justify human rights). The theory of political justice developed by John Rawls, whose work has been enormously influential in the last thirty years or so, has been the source of one of the main lines of reflection on developing a solution, or at least the beginnings of one, to the problem of standards of international justice. However, as we shall see, there has been a good deal of controversy as to how, exactly, Rawls's theory is best to be applied and set out in an international or global context.

John Rawls

During the period since the original publication in 1971 of his book *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls (1921–2002) has been the dominant theorist of justice in the English-speaking world and in much of Western Europe. *A Theory of Justice* has been translated into twenty-seven languages, and Rawls has come to have a worldwide audience.¹

The heart of *A Theory of Justice* is Rawls's idea that two principles of justice are central to a liberal and democratic society, arguably to any society: (i) the principle of equal basic rights and liberties; and (ii) a principle of economic justice, which stresses (a) equality of opportunity and (b) mutual benefit and egalitarianism. This latter principle – of mutual benefit constrained by egalitarianism – Rawls calls the difference principle; it indicates when differences (inequalities) are acceptable. The difference principle, assuming a continuing conscientious effort at achieving equality of opportunity as backdrop, is designed to reach an optimum goal point at which no further mutually improving moves are possible; at this point the difference in income and wealth between the topmost and bottom-most groups would be minimized, and those least well off would here have their greatest benefit (without making any group worse off in the process).

What is distinctive about the arguments Rawls develops for his two principles of justice is that he represents them as taking place ultimately in an ideal arena for decision making, which he calls the “original position.” The features of the original position (in particular, the so-called veil of ignorance and the requirements of publicity and unanimity) taken together provide a setting for structuring the competition between potential governing principles (for example, the Rawlsian two principles versus various forms of utilitarianism) in a fair and objective way and then for determining a preference, if possible, for one of the candidate principles of justice over the others. Rawls maintained in *A Theory of Justice* that his two principles of justice not only would be unanimously chosen over alternatives in such an original position, but in time would also be universally or near universally endorsed by real persons in a real society governed by those two principles.

In time, Rawls came to feel considerable dissatisfaction with this approach and he began to reconfigure his basic theory in new and interesting directions. Rawls loosened things up in two distinct ways. First, he moved the focus away from his own two principles and toward a “family” of liberal principles (which included his two principles as one possible option). And, second, he developed for this family of principles a background theory for justifying them that did not require people to come to any sort of unanimous foundational agreement. In short, people didn't have to hold one and the same basic moral theory or profess one and the same religion in order for the family of liberal principles to be conclusively justified; rather, the issue of background justification (by moral or religious principles) could be approached from a number of different angles, and this would

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