

The Significance of Rawls to China

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Abstract: Rawls is one of the most important philosophers in American and Western thought in the 20th century. His main theoretical contributions are the reappropriation of the social contract and natural law doctrines in political philosophy, a comprehensive exposition of his basic theory of "justice as fairness," and a profound and comprehensive criticism of utilitarianism. The two principles of justice that he repeatedly discusses highlight the basic equality that citizens should enjoy in a well-ordered society and their theoretical implications, while at the same time providing unique theoretical criteria on how to deal with economic and social differences, and making a rather innovative argument for the ethical basis of the theory of justice.

Keywords: Rawls, Justice, Political philosophy, Social contract

1. Introduction

Rawls takes a new approach to answering these old, enduring questions of political philosophy: "What is a just political order?" and "What does justice demand of us?" In conceiving his theory of justice, Rawls was inspired by the traditional social contract theory represented by Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. But in Rawls' theory, the role of the social contract is no longer to establish a particular form of government; rather, deriving from the social contract some principle of justice required by society becomes his dominant idea. Rawls' emphasis on independent institutional justice prompts us to think about institutional virtue as distinct from individual virtue in order to compensate for the weakness of institutional virtue in our traditional thinking.^[1] Rawls's elaboration of the first principle of justice and its priority over the second principle of justice, which seeks real profit and gain, as well as his emphasis on society as a cooperative system, are also very instructive to us. Rawls' design of the idea of justice has attracted a wide range of attention. This attention has come not only from (political) philosophers, but also from legal philosophers, political scientists, economists, scholars in the field of public policy, and experts in the field of justice. Rawls' ideas have not only had a great influence in academic circles, but his reflections on "what justice requires of us" have also influenced theories of government and played a role in public political discussions among and within political parties about what policies should be developed for the so-called welfare state. It should be noted, however, that Rawls himself seldom expressed his views directly in the discussion of political issues. Moreover, Rawls was never a sort of "philosopher of partisan politics," and, more importantly, Rawls did not even focus directly in his writings on the debate over everyday political issues or on the claptrap of political propaganda.

Rawls' theory of equity and justice is the most important theory of justice in contemporary political philosophy. His theory has two principles: the first principle of justice refers to equal freedom, and the second principle concerns the principle of equal social opportunity and the economic distribution of equal tendencies.^[2] The key to understanding these two principles is the concept of "primary goods," including "social good" such as rights, freedom and opportunity, income and wealth, and self-respect, and "natural good" such as air and water. The concept of "primary goods" includes rights, freedom and opportunity, income and wealth, as well as "social good" such as self-respect and "natural good" such as air and water. Justification is the principle of distributing the former, i.e., the basic social good. It is a theory of distributive justice based on a contractual approach, and its theory of distributive justice is a theory of distributive equality of resources based on the fundamental good. Its premise is based on the assumption that human beings are free and equal due to the equality of moral ability (the concept of goodness and the sense of justice) and rational ability (the ability to judge and think and reason about both), and thus its contractual approach and social cooperation system contain the possibility of not including congenitally disabled people in the scope of justice issues.^[3] All of this puts two questions before us: First, why are Rawls's writings considered among the most important classics of moral and political philosophy ever written? Second, how and in what ways can political movements, political parties, and

the role of "you and I" as citizens be informed by Rawls's theory of justice? In what ways have these Rawlsian ideas of justice contributed to contemporary public political discussions of how a liberal democratic society with a plurality of religious, philosophical, and moral beliefs and opinions can be organized in a way that maintains social stability, peace, and justice at the same time?

The first principle of justice will ensure that all citizens enjoy equal and fundamental freedom to make a wide range of life choices and to pursue the life they believe is worth living. Based on the plurality of human natures and circumstances, the free practice of human rational capacities inevitably leads to a plurality of religions, cultures, and values. Rawls argues that such pluralism is normal and reasonable, and that public power should not intervene to require all people to accept the same set of holistic religious and life views.^[4] As long as people are given full freedom, they will live different lives, and this is the result of the full development of their individuality and abilities, which is good for both individuals and society. This is the basic consensus of the liberal tradition. Rawls's lifelong project was to develop a theory of justice that would design a rational and practical political philosophy for a just constitutional democracy, and that would provide a rational systemic alternative to utilitarianism. Rawls cautions us that the political thinker Isaiah Berlin famously asserted that we can pursue many values, but among them "freedom" and "social justice" are the core values that are incompatible with other values. Fundamentally, we cannot give up "freedom" and "social justice" for any other values. The system of values that human beings need is so vast that they cannot all be adapted to the needs of a social world. As Berlin has long insisted, the obstacles and tragedies that liberalism and its ideas have brought to humanity in the choice of freedom show that "any one choice can cause an irreparable loss. Of course, Rawls would agree that "any system of social institutions is limited by the range of values it can accommodate, and thus must make certain choices from within the full range of moral and political values that may be realized. This is because any system of institutions seems to have only a limited social space." We simply cannot find any existing system of social institutions that are capable of satisfying all human value needs. No social world, even a just and free society, can choose one value without also suffering a corresponding loss.

Rawls' main purpose was to construct a set of moral principles that are morally worth pursuing and at the same time practically feasible, as a means of regulating the basic structure of society, determining the rights and duties of citizens, and the rational distribution of social resources. Such a set of principles is known as the principles of social justice. On the political spectrum, Rawls' theory is often regarded as left-liberalism aka liberal egalitarianism. Its most characteristic feature is that it emphasizes the priority of individual rights on the one hand and the fair distribution of social resources on the other. To be more specific, a just society must fully guarantee every citizen the equal right to enjoy a series of fundamental freedoms, while ensuring that everyone has a fair and equal opportunity to pursue his or her career and life plan, while in terms of economic distribution, it opposes excessive inequality between the rich and the poor and emphasizes that any unequal distribution of wealth must be most beneficial to the most disadvantaged in society in order to be acceptable.

2. Rawls' significance for China

In today's world of nationalism and populism, what is the contemporary significance of Rawls' discussion on justice and fairness? For a country like China, Rawls' significance seems to be more worthy of discussion. This short essay tries to talk about Rawls' significance for China in three aspects: distributive justice, political theory, and public discourse.

First, Rawls uses the principle of difference to define a world that he considers just: a world is just if the gap between rich and poor is such that the least fortunate receive the most care. This idea of his embodies the moral ideal of seeking the greatest economic equality, and contains an ethical concern for the weak at the bottom of society, which is a great inspiration for building a more fair and just harmonious society in China. Since the reform and opening up, people's material living standard has been significantly improved, but "inequality" is still the reality of wealth distribution in Chinese society, and China has become one of the countries with the fastest economic development in the world.^[5] According to Rawls, the "principle of difference" requires that social goods be distributed in favor of the least beneficiaries. This requires the Party and the government to improve the distribution system and increase the macro control of income distribution, which can be achieved through the levy of progressive income tax, property tax and inheritance tax to redistribute national income to protect the interests of the disadvantaged groups. In addition, in the layout of the overall national economic development, it is necessary to focus on the development differences between regions to prevent further widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, and to promote the implementation of precise poverty alleviation to

truly achieve common development with the rich leading the poor. At the same time, a series of initiatives to benefit the weak, such as improving the social welfare system, should be implemented to promote social equity and stability.

Second, in terms of political theory, although a significant number of countries in the world today do not rely on liberalism as the main source of political legitimacy, they must at the same time recognize some liberal claims, such as civil rights, democratic politics, limited government, and so on. For these core ideas of liberalism have become the consensus of modern society. For China, then, Rawls' significance lies in the fact that his thought experiments, such as the "original position" and the "veil of ignorance," can inspire Chinese people's civic consciousness. How should people in society think about their relationship with others and their relationship with the state? ^[6] When there is a conflict of interest between people, it is apolitical literacy that a modern citizen needs to develop in order to be able to offer a solution as an individual, apart from the intervention of public power. That is, the relationship between citizens and the state is not one-way, and citizens have the right to reflect on the legitimacy of government actions and actively participate in government decisions (even if only to think about them), which is also part of the duties of modern citizens.^[7]

Third, in terms of public discourse space, public opinion in China has long tended to be polarized, with little communication between the left and the right. Discussions of public issues are often constrained by positions, and discussions have gradually shifted toward personal attacks. This is partly due to the lack of an open and egalitarian public opinion environment in China (this situation is improving), and partly due to the shortcomings of Chinese intellectuals, such as the clear-cut boundaries in political positions, the lack of standardized language in public discussions, and the lack of tolerance for those with different positions. As a "left-wing liberal", Rawls provides us with a model. There is no doubt that he is a liberal, but at the same time, isn't his pursuit of social justice and labor rights the same as that of the Marxists?^[8] On many public issues such as social welfare and resource allocation, Rawls is very close to mainstream Chinese thought, but he is also a liberal, which is not contradictory. Therefore, what China needs is an equal and inclusive public opinion space, where all views should be treated as provable opinions and entered into the "opinion market", and where people can choose to defend or criticize what they agree or disagree with among many different opinions. This is the normal state of public discussion in modern society.

In the third part of his Theory of Justice, Rawls asks a Platonic question: Most people have a sense of justice in normal circumstances, but people also care about their own happiness. If our pursuit of happiness conflicts with the principle of justice, do we really always have a reason to be just and to give priority to justice? Rawls argues that if a theory of justice cannot give a satisfactory answer to this question, the society regulated by this theory is unstable and therefore enormously flawed.^[9] He believes that in a "good order society" where justice is fully realized in an equitable way, justice and happiness can be consistent, because to act in accordance with justice is to realize the highest human values, and therefore from the point of view of instrumental rationality, we are justified in being just.^[10] Rawls' entire social justice theory begins with the answer to two questions. First, in what kind of social system would rational people choose to cooperate without denying or abandoning their individual goals? Second, what rules of behavior in interpersonal relationships do people voluntarily identify as rules of cooperation, and which rules are people willing to act in accordance with to the greatest extent possible, even if those rules somehow prevent them from achieving their individual goals? A unique feature of Rawls's theory of justice is that in answering these questions he thinks of two things in combination. On the one hand, Rawls proposes a particular set of principles of social justice; on the other hand, he proposes a particular approach, an approach that shows us how these principles of justice can be justified in a way that we, the readers, are convinced is reasonable. Rawls needed a set of social justice principles to regulate the proper distribution of interests and responsibilities in social cooperation. Rawls has a broad understanding of "social justice". The fact that many "things" are distributed is an important aspect of Rawlsian thought that distinguishes it from other theories of social justice. As we have mentioned, Rawls argues that social cooperation produces not only a material good (income and wealth), but also the right to fundamental freedoms, opportunities, powers and privileges of office and position with responsibilities, and various social bases of self-respect.

3. Conclusion

It is a return to classical political philosophy and ethics, and marks a major shift in the theme of Western political philosophy from "freedom" to "justice". Rawls sought to inherit the tradition of contractarianism, criticize the utilitarian view of justice, and establish a comprehensive, universal and

necessary theoretical system that regulates the basic structure of society from equality of starting point to equality of outcome, so as to realize universal justice. This also has certain contribution significance for China in the new era.^[11] Common prosperity is the goal pursued by socialism, China's income distribution system, as well as efficiency first, taking into account fairness, allowing some regions and people to get rich first, the first to drive the latter to eventually achieve common prosperity. Socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, and the main contradiction of our society has been transformed into the contradiction between the people's growing need for a better life and the unbalanced and insufficient development. The problem we are facing now is no longer one of efficiency, but of fair distribution and between efficiency and distribution, vigorously promoting the reform of the income distribution system, establishing a sound welfare protection system, regulating the excessive income disparity, paying more attention to the disadvantaged groups, making every effort to guarantee equal opportunities for everyone, and realizing true fairness and justice.^[12] An important reason why Rawls's work has had such an enormous impact, and why it has stirred such strong interest outside of academic circles of political philosophers, is that Rawls presents a robust and coherent theory through his arguments, a theory that provides us with a tool for systematically reflecting on the options for a just political order. In a thorough and definitive way, Rawls shows us how, from a position that affirms innate distribution, we can come to reflect on the fundamental interests of citizens, especially the interests of the least advantaged in society. In doing so, Rawls provides us with an unprecedentedly nuanced insight into moral and social phenomena. It is not the breadth of Rawls' ambition that makes him an important philosopher, but the depth of his perception. It is also this ability to see the difficulty and complexity of (political) philosophical problems that he has given us. Although we cannot guarantee that a just people's society must or could exist, how can one guarantee such a thing? Nevertheless, it makes sense to talk about the possible existence of such a society. "By showing how the social world has achieved a kind of realist utopia, political philosophy provides us with a long-term goal for the political enterprise, and, in the process of continually contemplating this goal, political philosophy reveals what we can do today." There is, of course, the alternative of not recognizing the existence of the possibility of achieving a free and expedient political and social order. However, Rawls asks us to think carefully about the costs of this option: "If it is not possible to achieve a rationally just people's society that subordinates power to rational goals, and if, although not yet thoroughly cynical and egocentric, human beings are nonetheless largely amoral, then one can ask with Kant: Is human life on earth is still worthwhile.

Rawls assumes that those who participate in cooperation are free persons. In particular, he emphasizes that free persons are defined by two moral capacities. The first is the ability to self-reflect and plan one's life, to autonomously construct, revise, and pursue one's own goals in life, and to take responsibility for one's choices. The second is that people have the capacity for a sense of justice, and thus can autonomously understand, apply, and obey the requirements of the principles of justice. Rawls further assumes that people have a higher order of purpose to fully develop and practice these two moral capacities. By higher order, I mean that because these interests are so basic and important, they are in a higher order in people's motivational systems that govern their thoughts and actions. In other words, Rawls affirms that each person has the capacity for moral and personal autonomy and sees the development of these capacities as his or her highest good. While people have different life plans and value beliefs, "they do not regard themselves as necessarily bound to, or equivalent to, the pursuit of any particular fundamental interests at any particular time, though they aspire to the right to promote them." Rather, free people see themselves as agents with the capacity to modify and change their own ultimate goals. Why is there such an emphasis on developing human autonomy? Rawls's earlier and later theories have different explanations and arguments for this. In the early period, Rawls was convinced that the ability to choose one's own path in life is a necessary condition for living a happy life and reflects the nature of human beings as rational agents. And the fact that people can autonomously accept and obey the rules of social cooperation enables them to become active members of social cooperation.

Political philosophy is an ideal reflection on the practical life of society and politics. Along with the deep exploration of the reform of China's socialist political system since the reform and opening up, the study of political philosophy with Chinese characteristics has also shown a development trend from non-existence to existence, from fragmentation to prosperity, from hesitation to active construction. Although the Rawlsian theory of justice, which is the starting point of contemporary Western political philosophy, has its roots in the Western liberal political culture tradition, it has attracted the deep attention of Chinese scholars with independent rational character, the ideal of fairness and equality, and the spirit of worldly application during the specific historical transition period of building a socialist market economy in China. Of course, an objective and comprehensive reading and study of Rawls's political philosophy is an indispensable foundation work for realizing the good expectation of the nation to integrate Rawls's political philosophy.

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