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Resisting the global neoliberal economy

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Benjamin McKean, *Disorienting Neoliberalism: Global Justice and the Outer Limit of Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2020, 296 Pages Hardback, ISBN: 9780190087807, £47.99

Abstract

As a Western citizen, am I responsible for the serious injustices, such as sweatshop labour, characterising our global economy? Benjamin McKean's terrific new book, *Disorienting Neoliberalism: Global Justice and the Outer Limit of Freedom*, shows why this is a misleading question – one that will not properly orient us in relation to the neoliberal economy. McKean argues that we need to recognise that we are unfree under unjust transnational economic institutions and thus we have a shared interest in resisting neoliberalism. This means that we should become disposed to heed the calls for solidarity by others across the world whose freedom is also impaired by neoliberal institutions. McKean's book offers a powerful and persuasive new account of global (in)justice and solidarity; it is an inspiring call to arms for egalitarian theorists. Although I will raise two friendly critical observations about McKean's argument, I recognise that this book is a major contribution to international political theory and that it sets a superb example of how to combine scholarly rigour with what might be called activist theorising.

Keywords

Activism, freedom, global justice, neoliberalism, solidarity

Many persons holding broadly egalitarian values and commitments often feel paralysed and powerless when faced with the serious injustices that characterise our global economy. You might rightly feel outraged and horrified when hearing

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about another catastrophic fire at another sweatshop in some part of world, but it seems so far away from you, so distant and disjointed from your life and your networks that the initial discomfort quickly turns into resignation and – be honest with yourself – passive acquiescence in the status quo. After all, if you are a citizen in the United States, the UK or a European country, what can you do to address the terrible working conditions in the Bangladeshi garment industry?

Benjamin McKean's terrific book, *Disorienting Neoliberalism: Global Justice and the Outer Limit of Freedom*, takes to heart those feelings of impotence and confusion and offers a powerful account of how we should understand the global economic institutions that we are subjected to and realise that those injustices that might seem disconnected from our lives are actually impairing our own freedom. According to McKean, although political theorists and philosophers have been debating global inequalities for at least the last 20 years, they have misconceived the problem of global injustice as an issue of unequal wealth, resources and opportunities between so-called developed and developing countries. In so doing, they have failed to realise that, in our neoliberal globalised economy, there is a deep and complex connection tying together workers and consumers in different parts of the world and that 'many people in both Bangladesh and the United States have an interest in changing the institutions that govern the global economy' (p. 5).¹ McKean argues that we need a theory of global justice that offers 'an account of how people should orient themselves to the most important features of the global economy, help[s] us to identify shared interests and build[s] coalitions that can actually achieve global justice' (p. 5).

McKean's rich and ambitious book advances this new orientation through different argumentative moves. First, it puts forward an account of how it is through neoliberalism that those subjected to global economic institutions make sense of them and accept them as legitimate (Chapter 1). By closely engaging with the political thought and politics of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, McKean shows that neoliberalism, which, in his astute reconstruction, frames politics as a realm inferior to the economic yet necessary to its function, has proved to be so successful and difficult to challenge because it 'offers a complete orientation to social life, one that explains how institutions work, what legitimates them, and the values one's actions ought to promote' (p. 30). By conceiving of market outcomes as unpredictable and mysterious yet always good in the long run, neoliberal subjects can reconcile themselves with the unintelligible complexity of the global economy and regard themselves as free actors in the global economy in control of their lives; they can think of themselves as consumers and entrepreneurs. McKean takes seriously the appeal that neoliberalism has to many, including those who might seem most penalised by it; after all, if you were, say, in a zero-hour contract delivering food or parcels all day with no paid holidays, sick leave or job security, would it not be attractive to think of yourself as someone on an entrepreneurial adventure who has mastery over their life?

Second, McKean ingeniously shows that, under closer scrutiny, crucial features of the global economy do not work as neoliberal theory describes it, opening up

opportunities for political contestation (Chapter 2). Zooming in on transnational supply chains, he argues that '[they] are better understood as political entities that claim the authority to govern us rather than as approximations of free exchanges between individual entrepreneurs' (p. 49). McKean's analysis of transnational supply chains is truly illuminating; it brings to light how neoliberalism shapes the subjectivities of consumers and workers by creating an experience of separation and disconnection that does not match the reality of hierarchical interlinkages characterising supply chains. When both workers and consumers see supply chains in this way, they can reconceive their relation to one another and start challenging together the authority that supply chains claim over them.

Third, McKean argues that we need a specific account of freedom that can drive persons to contest and mobilise against the injustices characterising the global economy (Chapters 3 and 4). By building on a compelling Hegelian interpretation of John Rawls's conception of freedom, he contends that, because the human condition is inevitably socially and historically situated, freedom can never be about full self-determination; instead, we are free when we are capable of affirming the unchosen institutions shaping us as those we would have freely opted for (in Rawlsian jargon, when we reach the 'outer limit of our freedom'). McKean observes that while in a well-ordered society we can experience freedom because we acquire certain dispositions by living under just institutions, we need to move beyond the resources offered by this Hegelian-Rawlsian account in order to guide the actions of those who find themselves in unjust circumstances. To do so, he draws on the work of WEB Du Bois and Theodor Adorno, not only to theorise how we 'are habituated to injustice and will often normalize unjust relations and incorporate this into [our] self-conceptions' (p. 111), but also to show that the outer limit of freedom can serve as a critical ideal to guide efforts to resist the real-world injustices of the neoliberal economy. We can recognise that we are unfree and have a shared interest in joining others as partners to fight against transnational neoliberal injustice. According to McKean, 'participation in such social movements both promotes freedom by working to change existing social arrangements and expresses freedom by facilitating new relations and consequently new identities that can be more readily affirmed' (p. 145).

Fourth and consequently, McKean recasts our duty of justice as stemming from the experience of being unfree that we share with differently situated agents (Chapter 5). McKean stresses that our 'natural' duty of justice should not prescribe any specific action to individuals. Individually boycotting brands such as Nike and Gap that are infamous for their exploitative employment practices as a way to discharge one's own duty of justice might be ineffective. However, McKean's argument is that deciding on your own (for example, as a consumer) that boycotting is what justice demands from you in response to sweatshop labour conditions in the transnational garment industry fails to treat workers in those supply chains as equal political partners and reduces them to passive objects of concern. Instead, according to McKean, in the context of the unjust global economy, individuals meet the demands of justice 'when they are disposed to solidarity with others who

share an interest in resisting and replacing the unjust institutions to which they are subjected' (p. 150). For McKean, justice requires us to support and participate in transnational social movements that (i) promote solidarity between differently positioned actors who are all subjected to neoliberal institutions and (ii) aim to denounce and rectify the injustices of the neoliberal global economy. The transnational nature of McKean's analysis of the injustice of the neoliberal economy is an important and powerful alternative to attempts in political theory and politics to re-energise state sovereignty in order to (domestically) offset the coercive power of neoliberal institutions (Chapter 6). McKean provides an insightful and timely reply to an array of positions across the left–right political spectrum, from the chauvinist nationalism of populist radical-right parties to so-called Lexiters and other egalitarian advocates of unconstrained sovereignty, including those 'statist' scholars of global justice who defend, in McKean's wry yet apt words, 'Rawlsianism in one country' (p. 189).

McKean's account puts forward a new orientation to the global economy which encourages us to see one another as equal political partners having an interest in mobilising together to resist neoliberal transnational institutions that impair our freedom. It shows that transnational solidarity, rather than 'reactionary resentment' and humanitarian 'compassionate concern', should drive our response to neoliberal injustice. McKean's book is a major scholarly achievement which joins a recent exciting wave of contributions in international political theory in (i) placing the issues of power and disempowerment centre stage (for example, Goodhart, 2018), (ii) underscoring the transnational nature of injustice (for example, Valdez, 2019), (iii) recognising the agency of those most affected by neoliberal inequalities and acting in solidarity with them (for example, Ackerly, 2018; Deveaux, 2018) and (iv), more generally, radicalising normative theorising (for example, Bell, 2019).

However, what is unique and truly inspiring is the specific way McKean deliberately carves out an account of freedom for orienting us towards the global economy that can be endorsed by different and, at first sight, idiosyncratic egalitarian philosophical traditions, including liberal egalitarianism, critical theory, feminist theory and critical race theory. This move does not only add complexity and richness to McKean's analysis – though it is quite rare to read a work in political theory drawing on and combining the thought of Rawls, Du Bois, Adorno, Gloria Anzaldúa and Young with such depth, sophistication and rigour. It is also refreshing and compelling for at least two other reasons. First, very often political philosophers and theorists dismiss traditions of thought different from their own, getting stuck in methodological divides and prejudiced against certain positions. This narrow-minded stance often undermines real progress in normative theorising. Second and more importantly, in effectively calling to arms such a wide array of political thinkers, all sharing a commitment to equality and freedom, McKean proposes what one might call 'egalitarian coalition building', which prefigures the kind of egalitarian politics that he advocates. To be sure, although McKean emphasises the shared interest that such diverse egalitarian traditions have in resisting the neoliberal economy,

he does not spare (at least some of) them from astute and serious criticism. For instance, while recognising the merits of Rawls's liberal egalitarianism, he also highlights what he believes are the limits of a Rawlsian approach to politics. However, McKean's stress on commonalities is refreshing, and his attempt to theorise what he would like to see realised in practice is a truly inspiring model of political theorising.

It is hard to argue with McKean's impressive accomplishments. However, I would like to offer two friendly critical remarks. While putting forward an account of freedom which highlights our interest in living under just institutions, McKean seems to maintain that some individuals do not have any interest in dismantling the neoliberal economy. I am not persuaded that this conclusion is entirely consistent with the conception of freedom that McKean so persuasively lays out.

To see why, let's take a step back. McKean's book is mainly addressed to those who hold egalitarian beliefs but are sincerely unsure what, if any, action they should take against neoliberalism. However, it is unclear whether his own account of freedom applies only to this category of persons – a category that is arguably quite narrow even if, as he suggests, it might be broader than we tend to assume (p. 4). To be sure, if a person is already committed to egalitarian values, they should experience a particularly deep alienation when realising not only that the institutions they live under run counter to their beliefs but also that such institutions have shaped their own self-conceptions in problematic ways. As McKean, building on Du Bois's reflections on white persons sympathetic to the plight of African Americans, puts it, both white and Black individuals 'have been shaped by forces that they would reject if they have egalitarian convictions and, as a result, cannot experience the outer limit of freedom' (p. 134). But, on several occasions, McKean pushes his argument further and suggests that even those white workers and consumers who might not hold egalitarian beliefs are unfree under neoliberal economic institutions. Reflecting on the conditions of poor whites under white supremacy and American consumers (and workers) who opt for racial or national loyalty over cross-racial and transnational solidarity, he argues:

By choosing the material and psychological benefits of unjustified hierarchy over partnership in solidarity and the outer limit of freedom, they have been satisfied with fewer material benefits than they would otherwise accept and, in the process, denied themselves the benefits that come from living in a just society and warped themselves to justify what they've done. With respect to global injustice, American consumers who eagerly defend their status arguably do something analogous, choosing the psychological wage of nationalist identification with American hegemony over transnational partnerships to resist neoliberalism. (p. 176)

In other words, whether egalitarian beliefs are already an integral component of one's self-conception does not make much difference in determining whether one is free under unjust institutions. After all, how is it possible to enjoy authentic freedom if injustice has so markedly distorted one's own sense of self? It seems indeed reasonable

to suggest that if injustice had not so profoundly shaped their identities, those who are not committed to equality would realise that they cannot affirm current institutions as those that they would have freely chosen. Therefore, even workers and consumers who do not (yet) hold egalitarian beliefs share an interest in resisting neoliberalism and recognising that 'An Injury to One Is An Injury to All' (pp. 156, 160).

Notwithstanding this capacious account of freedom, McKean wants to maintain that there are some limits to solidarity based on a shared interest in freedom because 'some people have genuinely antagonistic interests' (p. 172). According to McKean, supply chain managers, for instance, receive too substantial benefits from the unjust neoliberal economy and have too crucial a role in perpetuating its injustices to be said to have an interest in countering neoliberal institutions. McKean's aim is understandable and admirable in that he wishes to acknowledge the different positions occupied by individuals in the global economy and hold accountable those who commit serious wrongs while having real power to effect change.

Although I share this intuition, I am not persuaded that this argument can be made by appealing to interest, *if one endorses McKean's account of freedom*. Consider, for instance, the difference between supply chain managers in the garment industry and white American workers employed in the US-based warehouses of an apparel firm. Although McKean is perfectly aware that white supremacy has profoundly shaped the self-conceptions of the latter, he also suggests that, unlike the former, they can identify shared interests with non-white workers at garment sweatshops in, say, Bangladesh. However, it is unclear why *interest* should justify this difference in assessment. We should not underestimate (i) the tangible benefits that white workers receive within a racially stratified global economy (even though they are significantly marginalised and exploited in it) and (ii) the white working class's racial (and national) affective attachments that support racial capitalism (Valdez, n.d.). Moreover, from within McKean's account, it seems that supply chain managers do have a strong freedom-based interest in resisting the neoliberal economy. The identity of supply chain managers has been so profoundly shaped by injustice that it is impossible to separate their full self-conception from the unjust transnational economic institutions they live under. Therefore, one can conclude that they cannot experience the outer limit of freedom because they have 'denied themselves the benefits that come from living in a just society and warped themselves to justify what they've done' (p. 176).

This does not mean that we should realistically expect them to prioritise their interest in freedom over the substantial benefits they receive from being in such a privileged position within the global economy; I am not naively suggesting that it is foreseeable that a supply chain manager at Nike will scale the barricades at an anti-globalisation demonstration. Nor am I implying that we should not recognise the different role played by supply chain managers in the global economy compared with that of white workers in the United States. What I am arguing is that, if we endorse McKean's account of freedom, we should accept that, under injustice, there are no individuals who have genuinely antagonistic interests. Everyone – including perpetrators of injustice – has an interest in experiencing the outer limit of freedom; whether it is likely that they will realise that they have such an interest is another matter. To be sure,

accepting this implication of McKean's account of freedom does not mean that supply chain managers, CEOs and other agents who have institutional decision-making power in our global economic institutions do not have other and more stringent responsibilities based on their direct contribution to injustice. Indeed, they should be held accountable on that ground. However, though this might sound unexpected, or counterintuitive, they also have a shared interest in resisting neoliberalism.²

Another set of questions arises from McKean's account of how individuals can acquire the capacity to be disposed to heed the calls for solidarity by others with whom they share an interest in dismantling unjust institutions. McKean is quite vague on this point, but he seems to suggest that it is precisely by participating in social movements struggling against global inequalities that we can cultivate such a disposition in an unjust world. The stress on how being a member of social movements can profoundly transform one's identity and self-conception (p. 221) is important. However, McKean is also adamant that very often initial participation in social movements is accidental and motivated by curiosity and boredom (p. 224). This conclusion is a bit underwhelming for an argument that cultivating a disposition to heed calls for solidarity is of great importance for achieving justice. Although a book cannot cover all bases and some relevant issues must be left unpacked, it is difficult not to be keen for more details on how participation in social movements can be encouraged and, in general, how the disposition to heed calls for solidarity can be nourished.³ For instance, if political theory should really play the orientation role that McKean argues it should, how shall we reconceptualise our role as political theorists? Shall we, for instance, politicise not simply our research but our teaching as one of the most effective ways to resist neoliberalism? How shall we envisage our duty of justice in the context of the neoliberalisation of higher education?


These questions are important because McKean's work also reads as an attempt to mobilise political theorists in the resistance against neoliberalism. So far, political theorists looking at egalitarian social movements have mainly conceived of 'engaged theorising' (p. 19) as a unidirectional relation between normative theory and already-existing political practice in which the former theorises and systematises the demands of justice underpinning the latter. Young's (2004) influential account of political responsibility for global labour injustice, for example, is precisely framed as an attempt to 'make sense of the claims of the anti-sweatshop movement' (p. 366). McKean's argument opens new avenues to rethink the relation between political theory and political practice in a more dialectic and active fashion, even though it does not fully explore them.

In sum, McKean has written a fantastic and inspiring book which offers a compelling alternative orientation to the unjust global economy. It is now up to us to listen to his call for solidarity and join him in this crucial fight.

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Notes

1. Note that McKean is aware that not all scholars of global (in)justice have neglected the importance of interconnectedness in the neoliberal global economy as a source of obligation. For instance, he aligns with the work of Iris Marion Young and, especially, her account of responsibility for global labour justice (Young, 2004, 2011). However, unlike Young, McKean does not frame interconnectedness in terms of individual participation in unjust transnational economic structures that cause injustice but thought-provokingly recasts it as a shared interest that many have in not being subjected to transnational freedom-hindering institutions (pp. 166–70).
2. If we endorse an account stressing our shared interest in freedom, there are alternatives to (i) arguing that some individuals have genuinely antagonistic interests, as McKean suggests, and (ii) ending up with ‘not tak[ing] too seriously the distinction between victims and non-victims of injustice’, as Thomas J Donahue-Ochoa (2019: xiv) suggests in his interesting and in some respects similar account of injustice.
3. There is a substantial literature on how to acquire a disposition of solidarity towards ‘distant others’. See, for example, Erez (2020) and Scholz (2015).

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