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Review

Just Democracy: The Rawls-Machiavelli Programme

Philippe Van Parijs. Colchester, UK: European Consortium for Political Research Press, 2011. 188 pp.

Joseph Bien *

Professor Philippe Van Parijs is attempting nothing less than to examine and resolve the age old question of how one might have a just democracy in a modern state, especially when one is referring to those member states of the European Union. This is at the very least difficult but admirable task.

To start with, he raises the question of whether justice and democracy are compatible. After presenting several definitions of the just democracy and a series of objections deciding against them all, Van Parijs introduces the concept of globalizing democracy. He as others suggests the example of gerrymandering in the South. What he forgets is the current struggle between conservative and liberals for control of the redistricting vote majority. Here to, a good thing is turned bad when the reactionary element takes charge. What appears to be missing in both cases is a strong balancing of motives that lead to an understanding and appreciating of what is going on. If we are to overcome federal/regional/ local separations, we need to learn from the failure of the multi-national states as well as reexamine the reconciliation of democracy and justice.

* **Joseph Bien** is professor of philosophy at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He received his doctorate from the University of Paris under the direction of Paul Ricoeur. He is the author, editor or translator of eight volumes including a volume dealing with Marx's theory of human natures and the English language translation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Adventures of the Dialectic*. His work has been translated into a half dozen languages. He is one of the directors of the international social philosophy gathering held each year in Dubrovnik, Croatia.

After all, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* while a masterpiece of a sort, was ultimately unable to resolve several of the issues raised. Van Parijs sees the way through "political institutions as instruments of social justice." For a society to be just, it must be democratic, with a democratic majority being the body making decisions. Such a society must go beyond the nation state to realize itself as a globalizing democracy. What is this? The author admits to a form of utopianism based on some variant of the position given by John Rawls in his *Law of Peoples*. If one is to follow Rawls here, it means to accept some sort of claim to the superior position of Western democratic nations. For such a move one would return to Mill's view of the superiority of a number of American and Western European nations. Rather than advancing the discussion such a stance returns us to pre-World War I assumptions. What then is to be done?

In chapter 3 Van Parijs contrasts his libertarian view with Professor Philip Pettit's republicanism. Three distinctions are drawn between republican freedom, formal freedom, and real freedom after using the example of how Belgium's constitution safeguards each linguistic community's power to reconsider a decision. Not being acquainted with that many European constitutional decisions, I side with the author's examples or arguments. While I am aware how this general discussion is leading to a sort of embracing of some form of the European Union as most important or at least most useful, I do not understand why it should be accepted as correct or necessary in some imperial sense.

Under the title of "The Children's Vote and Other Attempts to Secure Intergenerational Justice" the author gives us the book's longest if not most interesting chapter. A series of assumptions are introduced always with a general conception of social justice as a liberty constrained maxim. This leads to the highly questionable "Rawls-Machiavelli Programme" and its supposed testing. The testing in my mind, truly leads nowhere and in simply citing different groups as doing so does no advance the argument. Why should one begin voting at sixteen or younger? No serious reasons are given. Because x or y does it has little or no justification and in simply citing different groups or countries as doing so why should one continue along this line? The tough question of children voting or having others (?) represent them at the polls is mentioned at some length without coming to a realistic conclusion.

Professor Van Parijs continues with a helpful and interesting historical discussion of post-war population policy in the two Germanys. The comparisons are

revealing. Having spent many years in France I might suggest that the author add statistics about French birth rates between the two wars. This is in no way meant to criticize his work in this section. In concluding chapter one is left with the following: “There may sometimes exist quicker and safer institutional means for preventing serious injustice, for examples along the intergenerational dimension. And if they exist, they must be used.” Maybe, possible, depending on various other issues in society. One does not act from merely good will or are we speaking or imaging all citizen of whatever society to be so by necessity or by nature, good.

Professor Van Parijs asks “Is the status quo satisfactory?” and his answer is “no.” Certainly he is correct. Think only of the early days of the Euro and the more recent ones of the current European economic crisis. One needs the sort of stability that comes from carefully conceived and worked out arrangements that leave the ever-changing political/economic situation in good if not perfect hands. Will the European Union survive and prosper, growing into a humanistic future after over half a century of striving toward, working more often than not in that direction? I certainly hope so and it definitely has a fair if not strong chance of doing so, thanks to the efforts of the many fine scholars such as Professor Philippe Van Parijs.

The final chapters deal with things Belgian that for a non-Belgian but one that is often a tourist there is at best curious and in part informative. Why Belgian? Each chapter of this short volume is a paper from some scholarly meeting. But why must Europe be Belgian? Maybe it has something to do Belgian beer, or the size of the country or the linguistic/cultural divide or maybe it is simply the author’s native background? I am really not sure. Whatever the case, the book makes for an interesting if not original read.