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An Emancipatory Interpretation of Property-Owning Democracy: Rawls, Wright, Sen, and Politics

THAD WILLIAMSON

In *Justice as Fairness*, John Rawls clearly poses “property-owning democracy” as an *alternative* to capitalism.¹ But because Rawls never followed through with a full-blown account of the political and economic institutions of a property-owning democracy, there has been some disagreement among subsequent commentators about whether the idea of distributing wealth and capital broadly is to be understood as a system distinct from social democratic modalities of capitalism, or alternatively as a reform strategy *within* what Rawls terms “welfare state capitalism.” Complicating this question is the fact that as a practical matter, movement towards creating a property-owning democracy, even if motivated by the desire to create a systemic alternative to capitalism, almost certainly must begin in large measure precisely as a reform strategy within existing forms of welfare state capitalism (be it the neoliberal Anglo-American model or more social democratic continental versions).

In this essay, I explore that question by relating it to two alternative ways of thinking about how to build a just (or “more just”) society: the “emancipatory social science” proposed by neo-Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright in his recent book *Envisioning Real Utopias* and the “comparative” framework for understanding the “idea of justice” proposed by Amartya Sen.² At first glance, these approaches seem like starkly different ways of thinking about what justice requires, and in this essay I will argue that Sen’s comparative approach, taken alone, runs the risk of badly obscuring fundamental issues of power and control over capital—precisely the issues Rawls

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insisted on raising in his talk of property-owning democracy. Nonetheless, there is an important role for the comparative approach to play in thinking about how to advance justice, particularly in the international context—just so long as it is not confused for the whole of justice. In the closing section, I relate Rawls’s “realist utopianism” to the political orientation of the recent Occupy Wall Street movement, arguing that the Rawlsian framework can both help make sense of the movement and also offer it a positive direction looking forward.

Emancipatory Social Science

I begin with a brief account of Wright’s *Envisioning Real Utopias*. Wright’s book is widely interpreted as an effort to re-cast Marxism for the twenty-first century, but that description suggests a sectarianism of vision that is no part of Wright’s project. He is simply very honestly asking if there is a way forward to advance strong egalitarian ideas given the collapse of older ideas about statist socialism and given the undesirable features of capitalism.

I begin with Wright’s framing idea: the idea of an “emancipatory social science.” There are two possible meanings of this term. One is the idea of conducting social science research that is motivated by the aim of contributing to “emancipation”—i.e., the expansion of human freedom and the liberation of suffering persons from oppression. Research intending to document income inequalities, the persistence of racial stereotypes, and many other features of the social world could be considered “emancipatory social science” on this interpretation. Research of this kind can contribute to the critique of the existing social order. Wright certainly marshals evidence of this kind in his own recently published critique of American society:³ documenting basic sociological facts about contemporary society and the causal processes that generate those facts is essential work. To “emancipate” ourselves, we must understand how society functions, and this is an ongoing task.

The second possible meaning of “emancipatory social science” is that it refers to conducting a social science *of* emancipation. I take this to mean

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disciplined thinking about possible future alternative trajectories, and specifically about the possibility of developing alternatives to existing forms of capitalism. The ideas that quasi-scientific, rigorous thinking about what social futures are available to us is possible, and that such thinking can make a positive contribution to how the future actually unfolds, are each quite bold claims in themselves. Hence most of this paper will be concerned with “emancipatory social science” in this second sense.

How then can we think rigorously about future alternatives? Here the word “science” has an uncomfortable connotation. Traditional left accounts of how an egalitarian society might actually come into being in the advanced countries have been heavily shaped by the Marxist premise that capitalism is both preparing the conditions for its own demise and creating the historical agents (the proletariat) capable of bringing a classless society into

existence. This account, for reasons that have been well-articulated by Wright, G. A. Cohen, and others, is seriously inadequate.⁴ There is no compelling reason to believe that capitalism *inevitably* is unsustainable over the long term, and even less for believing that capitalism produces a working class interested in and capable of being the revolutionary agents who will bring about a classless society.

Wright—and it goes almost without saying, Rawls—rejects the determinism of the traditional Marxist account of the future collapse of capitalism. But what Wright wishes to retain is a sense of *possibilism* about the future—that is, the idea that significant reforms, perhaps even truly systemic alterations,

to the political-economic system might be possible over the coming one or two generations, in response to the failures of existing capitalist democracies. Twenty years ago, when Wright first launched the Real Utopias Project at the University of Wisconsin, this would have struck many mainstream observers convinced of “the end of history” as a very bold claim.

But subsequent developments have raised this possibility: insisting on systemic reforms may not simply be the best way forward in terms of realizing norms such as equal liberties, equal opportunity, and meaningful democracy—it may be the *only* way forward. The key developments are first, the long-term growth of inequality of income and wealth—in the U.S. over the past three decades the top 1 percent has claimed over one-third of all income growth; second, the recent financial crisis, which has resulted in

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a prolonged period of high unemployment and stagnation; and third, the failure of anything resembling a “social democratic” solution to these developments to emerge in the U.S. (or the U.K.). This last failure in turn speaks, especially in the U.S. context, to the capture of the political system by the wealthy and by corporate interests, especially the financial sector.

These developments are widely recognized, and liberal and left thinking to date have supplied two primary ways to think about them. The liberal version, articulated regularly by economist public intellectuals like Paul Krugman, Dean Baker, and Robert Reich, places heavy blame on a toxic mixture of free market mythologizing and strident anti-government politics, with both themes used as political cover for corporate takeovers of the instruments of government and policy.⁵ The neo-Marxist version, associated with *Monthly Review* economists Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Michael Yates, interprets the crisis as the result of inadequate demand in the economy, driven at root by rising inequality.⁶ To keep the economy going despite stagnant wages for ordinary citizens, a variety of bubbles have been constructed, each of which has led to a more severe crisis when they have burst.

These accounts, taken on their own terms, are not really in conflict, though the *Monthly Review* version sometimes flirts with a determinist account of the development of the crisis. These accounts also illustrate what has been missing from the American scene: a strong social democratic politics oriented around organized labor and broader class issues with sufficient strength to both block right-wing and pro-corporate policies, and the capacity to implement the standard pieces of the presumed alternative: government-provided full employment, heavily progressive taxation, strengthened pro-union labor laws that can lift wages and reduce long-term inequality. The politics to produce a full-blown Keynesian solution, or anything like it, simply are not there.

The next, tough question is this: what if that sort of politics isn’t coming back at all? That is, what if there is no way to rebuild or build the political coalitions sufficient to sustain a powerful social democratic politics? What way forward then?

Here is where Wright’s explorations, as well as related work by David Schweickart, Gar Alperovitz, and other market socialists, and finally the idea of property-owning democracy itself come in.⁷ All of these ideas place front and central property and wealth, rather than simply income, as the object of our political and normative concern. The core ideas connecting the “social empowerment” economy favored by Wright, the “pluralist

commonwealth” model of Alperovitz, and what I take to be Rawls’s version of a property-owning democracy, are twofold: first, that a broad distribution of capital and property is in itself a primary question of social justice, and that steps should be taken to assure capital and property are not dominated by a small group of people; and second, that severe inequities in the control of capital and property will systemically distort the content of democratic politics, to the disadvantage of those excluded from meaningful property ownership.

A Contrasting View: The Comparative Approach of Amartya Sen

I now turn to a competing way of understanding the topic of justice in the modern world—the “comparative” framework of justice offered by Amartya Sen and elaborated in his recent book *The Idea of Justice*. Sen argues that “ideal theory” of the kind offered by Rawls is neither sufficient nor necessary to advance social justice. Instead of an account of the ideal institutions, we need to begin with a robust account of human well-being, freedom, and flourishing. Once we have such an account we will be in position to develop effective metrics of well-being. Those metrics can in turn allow us to judge the effectiveness of institutions and policies, and make comparative judgments about which kinds of arrangements and policies are more just.

This view is alluring, and certainly is a great advance over the default views of the mainstream economists with whom Sen is in dialogue. Further, Sen garners considerable moral traction in his work by placing the real problems of real people at the center of our consideration, rather than abstract philosophical thought experiments. His attention to the fact of widespread human deprivation provides both a moral anchor and reality check to our thinking about justice.⁸

That said, Sen’s view is also seriously flawed as an account of justice. “Justice” refers not just to the realization of individual capabilities, and individual well-being, but to a particular quality of *social* relationships. Justice refers most fundamentally to *how we treat one another*. And because modern theories of justice aim at accounts of how we treat one another on a larger scale than that of the family or local community, they necessarily include accounts of institutions and how they operate. Such institutions express and constitute the kinds of relationships citizens have with one another. A theory of justice aims then at an account of how proper, fair, and reciprocal relationships can be institutionalized on a large scale.

Measures of well-being of the kind Sen favors are important in tracking the well-being of society at large, and findings of deprivation may be important evidence that some sort of injustice or unjust treatment is in play. But such evidence does not in itself illustrate what the substance of that injustice is—that is, in what way one group of people is maltreating (directly, indirectly, or by neglect) another group of people.

That is what I take to be the proper “idea of justice,” and something like it underwrites Rawls’s entire theoretical project.⁹ Sen’s view, in contrast, aims at replacing accounts of how just and unjust relationships between persons can be embodied in institutions and institutional practices with sophisticated measurements and rankings (often “partial” rankings) of well-being, realizations, and (more generally) consequences, which in turn are to underwrite comparative judgments about practical policy choices.

That view does more than just offer a truncated idea of justice. It also, in ways Sen does not seem to recognize, blinds us to the fundamental sources of deprivation Sen rightly decries. To offer a telling example, the term “capitalism” does not appear in the index of *The Idea of Justice*. Neither, importantly, does the term “property-owning democracy.” Those concepts simply are not discussed within the book. In principle, almost no one can object to the point that theorists of justice should pay attention to real world consequences and not focus only on construction of the ideal institutions. But Sen’s elaboration of this thought is problematic insofar as it carries the implication that we ought to be satisfied with the basic framework of existing capitalist democracies. Sen’s writing gives little implication that we ought to be wrestling with capitalism and its consequences as a system, or that we should be exploring how and why capitalism(s) have been producing the social results they do.¹⁰ To be sure, Sen is unafraid to challenge the presumptions of mainstream economists, often on very solid grounds, and often he appeals to the example of the socialist Indian state Kerala as a positive example of the gains to be made from prioritizing the realization of capabilities for all over blind pursuit of economic growth. But while Sen offers a major challenge to the predominant paradigm of development, he does not appear to be willing to call capitalism itself into question.

To be fair, Sen may be well-motivated, in terms of his immediate aims, in avoiding such an inquiry. For one thing, it is not especially clear to many

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people what it would mean to have something else besides “capitalism.” Even among contemporary socialists, thinking about alternatives to capitalism is generally confined to the question of how to organize some version of socialism in one country; while some socialists (and others) have excellent ideas about how to reform the global political order, almost no one has even attempted to draw a plausible picture of what a global post-capitalist system might look like.¹¹ And indeed, the most plausible account that could be given is that we might have a world in which nation-states employ a variety of different development strategies with a mix of “capitalist” and “socialist” features—hybrids—rather than adhere to one central model. This of course would be a huge advance over the era of enforced

universal neoliberalism. And in a world like this, the question of how to make good comparative judgments—across societies—between different possible institutional and policy paths becomes very compelling.

But the need to make comparative judgments—and the acknowledgment that the Rawlsian framework taken alone is not always an adequate machinery for generating such judgments, especially across societies—hardly makes the project of thinking about what justice looks like in one country irrelevant or unimportant. As noted above, Sen does not discuss capitalism or possible alternatives to it in his book. But equally telling, he also provides almost no discussion of the problems of injustice found in advanced capitalist nations today: massive inequalities of wealth and income, the disproportionate

political influence of the wealthy on democratic politics, the social and economic exclusion of the unemployed, educational systems that (at best) operate to perpetuate racial and class inequalities, stagnant wages, and declining faith in the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic institutions.

To be sure, Sen recognizes democracy and public reason as critically important in advancing justice, and explicitly says—drawing primarily on the example of India—that a democratic culture of active civic participation, an open media, and the use of protest to highlight injustices are crucial in advancing justice. Nonetheless, Sen says far too little about the implications of large-scale economic inequality for the operations of democracy in the advanced capitalist nations.¹² While Sen is surely correct to say that

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the success of democratic institutions depends on not simply institutional design per se but the way citizens actually use (or fail to use) the tools of democracy,¹³ it is a mistake to conclude that either the details of institutional and constitutional design or the distribution of effective political influence are unimportant. Active cultures of protest and an open media will not in themselves correct the everyday workings of fundamentally flawed, systematically biased institutions (though they might facilitate long-term institutional change).

Activists in the global “Occupy” movement—largely concerned with these sorts of issues—will in fact find more guidance in the Rawlsian tradition of thinking about the requirements of domestic justice than anything to be found in Sen’s *The Idea of Justice*. Indeed, for Sen, the question of “what sorts of political arrangements should a country like ours regard as just?” is potentially dangerous, insofar as it may lead to a parochialist disregard of the perspectives of the rest of the world. Given the interdependency of nations and the global nature of many injustices, this is a welcome corrective to too-literal readings and applications of Rawls’s thought experiments. But it hardly comprises a decisive objection to Rawls’s project given the continued fundamental importance of domestic politics, particularly in the great global powers. For instance, whether or not nations launch wars of aggression (Sen starts his book with a critique of the Iraq War) is centrally related to basic questions of (domestic) social justice and how political institutions are organized.

That said, Sen’s skepticism concerning purely domestic conceptions of justice does not weaken the Rawlsian case for preferring property-owning democracy to welfare state capitalism. Indeed, taking Sen’s view on board seems more likely to strengthen rather than weaken the case for distributing property, wealth, and opportunity more widely in the developed nations. Plausibly, persons in the developing world might benefit in three kinds of ways from richer nations moving to property-owning democracy. First, the greatly added security and material position the majority of citizens would gain from a full-blown property-owning democracy plausibly could enhance the willingness of citizens of rich countries to share resources with the global poor, since the needs of the global poor need no longer be pitted against the needs of the domestic poor in either/or fashion. Second, the revised moral understanding of the nature of wealth and income that would necessarily be a central component of a Rawlsian property-owning democracy would be more rather than less conducive to accepting principled arguments for the redistribution of resources globally and/or the

adjustment of global institutional arrangements to benefit poorer countries, compared to the moral ideas about wealth prevalent in existing capitalist nations (particularly the U.S.). Third, if existing global corporations based in the developed world were no longer owned by a narrow elite but instead were either publicly owned, worker-owned, or owned by a wide consortium of small-holders, that could have beneficial consequences on the orientation and behavior of such corporations towards the developing world. At a minimum, the activities of such corporations in the developing world (and in shaping international institutions) would more readily become matters of wide public concern, and it would be easier for citizens in affluent nations to comprehend the ways in which they are morally implicated in the behavior of such firms.

There is no reason to think, then, that taking on board a concern with the perspectives of other nations would alter the judgment Rawls makes about the choice between property-owning democracy and welfare state (and laissez-faire) capitalism. But the puzzling part of Sen's account is exactly that he does not take up this choice at all. Ironically, for all Sen's focus on the importance of comparative judgments in evaluating institutions and policies, it is in fact Rawls who provides the clearer statement of what sorts of alternatives we should be comparing. Sen is indeed concerned with big issues such as famines, but the "comparative" framework offered in *The Idea of Justice* appears to point us towards relatively-small bore questions regarding the impact of marginal policy changes, at least when evaluating domestic justice. My worry with this approach is that it threatens to both short-circuit a serious debate about capitalism and its properties—a debate the late Rawls in particular practically begs us to have—and to jettison the emancipatory character of ideas of justice within the developed societies. Readers of Sen will find little inkling that we might aim in developed societies not just at incremental improvements in human well-being, but at *emancipation* from oppression and from the way of life that is imposed on the majority of the population—especially in a country like the U.S. where labor conditions and the economic condition of the working class and poor have been backsliding towards 19th century standards over the past generation.¹⁴

This worry need not entail the further judgment that Sen's approach is wholly without value. The idea that we can come to robust judgments about particular injustices even in the absence of complete moral agreement about the ideal of justice is surely correct. The insistence that academics engaged in justice discourse keep very much in mind the question of

how such discourse might actually improve the lives of the disadvantage is compelling. The insistence on a complex conception of human well-being and capabilities and rejection of simplistic tools such as GDP is an important advance over standard economic approaches. Further, the capabilities approach is extremely useful in describing the harms of poverty and injustice in ways that both recognize the complexity of deprivation and honor the poor as agents whose freedom should be valued. Finally, the suggestion that a Rawlsian-style framework taken alone may often be inadequate to make practical judgments about the desirability of dramatically different policy and development strategies is reasonable (though overstated).

But there need not be one single modality for thinking about justice. The comparative framework arguably is the best way to proceed in making international comparisons about institutions, policies, and practices, particularly when the goal is to make practical judgments about alternative courses of action in the short to medium term. But for the still-central problem of domestic justice, the comparative approach and its rejection of “transcendent” conceptions of justice, at least as presented by Sen, seems to lead us away from critical examination of capitalism and its relationship to justice and democracy. To evade that question, in turn, is to evade what Rawls (and others) have rightly judged to be the crucial question of the twenty-first century.

From Theory to Politics

Sen, however, might play one trump card in response to this exposition. He might reply that discussion of “property-owning democracy,” or of alternatives to capitalism, can be properly excluded from a discussion of justice understood comparatively, simply because such alternatives are not currently on offer. Elaborating, he might add this means not simply that they are not currently being practiced by any nation, but that it is simply not plausible that such an alternative could be tried and evaluated in the foreseeable future.

In reply, we might answer that here exactly is where ideal theory, and what might be termed the “realist utopian” strand of Rawls’s thought, has great relevance and value: it causes us to look beyond the choices now on offer in the political arena and to forge new possibilities.¹⁵ In an illuminating recent essay, Paul Weithman calls attention to the deeper motivations for Rawls’s work and his attention to providing an *ideal* account of a

just regime: namely, that faith in the possibility of a just regime is itself a prerequisite of building a world that so far as possible is not simply dominated by power relations among self-interested actors.¹⁶ In this sense, Rawls is engaged in a project analogous to that taken up by Socrates in Plato's *Republic*: responding to the cynical view offered by Thrasymachus that "justice" is no more than the laws self-interested rulers put in place in a particular regime in order to advance their own interests and solidify their own rule. Rawls apparently believed that if one could at least show the practical possibility of a just constitutional regime not obviously dominated by class or private interests, that possibility could motivate practical actors to bring such a regime into being (or as close as possible), rather than retreat into despair and cynicism.

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Bearing that train of thought in mind, consider the case of the Occupy protests of Autumn 2011, beginning on Wall Street and spreading to cities worldwide. The protests have called attention to the ways the top 1 percent have created a deleterious cycles in which excessive wealth leads to exert excessive political influence, in turn reinforcing unjust inequalities of wealth and power. The rhetoric of the Occupy movement coheres almost exactly with Rawls's critique of existing forms of capitalism. But the question for the Occupiers remains: what exactly is it they are *for*? At the most basic elemental level, we might reply that what they are for is a world not dominated by money and concentrated political power, and a world in which there is not a small ruling class governing largely on its own behalf.

With a bit more reflection, we might add that Occupiers probably do not seek simple unrestrained majority rule either. What they seek, implicitly, is a significantly reformed constitutional regime that nullifies or contains the excessive power of economic and political elites. That is, more or less, what Rawls wanted as well, and his thought about what that would require in practice led him to the conception of property-owning democracy. Far from being politically irrelevant or useless, the implicit ideal of a more just constitutional regime underlies much of the Occupy protests.

We might add here that Sen's description of Rawls's project as "transcendental institutionalism" is potentially misleading, to the extent that it carries

the implication that Rawls aimed at describing institutions applicable anywhere and everywhere. Taking into account the totality of his work, Rawls is much better understood as offering an interpretation of what our own commitments to liberty and equality, as inheritors to the Western tradition of democratic thought, require; these commitments to liberty and equality are taken as background assumptions. Indeed, as numerous recent commentators have pointed out, Rawls can be usefully read as a kind of a republican.¹⁷ To be sure, there is a distinction between Rawlsian republicanism and those forms of republicanism inspired by the need to achieve a balance of power between different class interests in order to maintain liberty, equality, and effective democratic rule,¹⁸ a distinction that in turn maps on the difference between political theories which take ideal theory and those which take prevention of tyranny as their starting points. But both kinds of republicans have expressed considerable interest in property-owning democracy,¹⁹ and hence interest in a form of constitutional regime not currently realized anywhere.

The question then, is whether it is possible to take meaningful steps towards the realization of such a regime in the politics of our time. Here we return to the idea of a social science of emancipation—or as I prefer, logical thinking about future possibilities connected to informed judgments. The question for property-owning democracy and related emancipatory ideas is whether we can imagine a plausible scenario by which the ideas might be brought to life in practice. What would it take for “property-owning democracy,” understood here not just as small-bore initiatives, but as involving a much larger re-distribution of capital and property, to get off the ground as a political idea?

One seemingly intractable obstacle has already been removed. For decades, mainstream commentators in the U.S. have argued that Americans are generally indifferent to rising inequality, on the basis of poll data but also because they saw little evidence of Americans taking to the streets in protest of long-term trends. That has changed. Further, the recent protests have also shifted the framework for thinking about inequality, by targeting the top 1 percent of society. (Arguably the target should be narrowed to an even smaller group.) A successful politics of redressing inequality cannot be a politics of asking the upper-middle class and mildly affluent to pay more taxes to assist the poor—a strategy that will fail, again and again. It must

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be a politics aimed tightly at the very top, and that places the wealthiest on the defensive. If nothing else, the Occupy protests of 2011, with its brilliant framing of the 99 percent versus the 1 percent, shows that such a politics is possible—indeed, already here.

But for this sort of populist politics to endure, it will also have to offer positive possibilities, writ small and writ large. Specific examples of democratic, egalitarian forms of economic organization of the kind highlighted by Wright, Alperovitz, and related authors are important illustrations of what kinds of alternatives are possible and feasible.²⁰ At a larger scale, Wright offers the metaphor of the “socialist compass” to describe a hybrid economy in which economic power is anchored in and shaped by broad-based civil society and social institutions, rather than by narrow capitalist interests or an overpowering state. Rawls’s property-owning democracy can be interpreted as a specific conception of that general idea, mandating a program to disperse private assets widely as well as to develop more collective forms of ownership of large firms.²¹

We are now in position to return to the question posed at the outset: is property-owning democracy best understood as an alternative regime, or is it best understood as a reform strategy within capitalism? In my view, to be worthy of being taken seriously as an idea, property-owning democracy *must* be viewed as an alternative regime. Broadening property for its own sake, for instance, may or may not be the best way to go about relieving poverty and enhancing capabilities in the near and medium term, and if those are our primary aims it’s difficult to see why we should focus primarily on property as opposed to stronger welfare provisions (particularly in nations like the U.S. with very weak social safety nets). But if the aim is to build a different constitutional regime characterized by reciprocity and non-domination, then a focus on redressing the massive inequalities of wealth, property, and economic power characteristic of contemporary capitalism is well-placed.²²

We cannot know whether property-owning democracy offers a suitable “compass” for moving beyond the impasse of an era in which both capitalism and traditional reform strategies are struggling without making a serious effort to engage the public with the idea. Showing that recent popular protests against the workings of capitalism are not just quixotic screeds, but point to the need for a reformed constitutional regime (property-owning democracy) that is both desirable and feasible, would be a major contribution by political theorists to the politics of our time. If there are ever times in which new ideas potentially matter, it is times like the present; but these ideas must be the topic of public discussion, not of academic discourse alone.

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NOTES

1. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

2. Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (New York: Verso, 2010); Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

3. Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, *American Society: How it Really Works* (New York: Norton, 2010).

4. G.A. Cohen, *If You're An Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

5. Robert Reich, *Aftershock: The Next Economy and America's Future* (New York: Vintage, 2011); Paul Krugman, *The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009); Dean Baker, *False Profits: Recovering From the Bubble Economy* (San Francisco: Berrett Koehler, 2010).

6. Fred Magdoff and Michael Yates, *The ABCs of the Economic Crisis: What Working People Need to Know* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009); John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff, *The Great Financial Crisis: Causes and Consequences* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009).

7. David Schweickart, *After Capitalism*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011); Martin O'Neill and Thad Williamson, eds, *Property-Owning Democracy: Rawls and Beyond* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Gar Alperovitz, *America Beyond Capitalism*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Dollars & Sense, 2011).

8. Arguably, he gains this traction by creating a straw man opponent—theorists who are *only* concerned with institutions and not also with the “realizations” (of human capabilities and freedom) such institutions produce. Sen correctly notes that Rawls himself is clearly concerned with realizations, but nonetheless blames him for moving the focal point of thinking about justice to questions of institutional design rather than developing a discipline of comparative judgments about justice. As argued below, there are in fact excellent reasons, from the standpoint of realizations, to focus on institutional arrangements, insofar as they systematically generate such realizations. Clearly, however, the best strategy for rebutting Sen's argument is not to argue the case of institutions taken alone as opposed to realizations, but to reject Sen's dichotomy altogether.

9. Note here that the capabilities approach need not be interpreted as underwriting a comparative approach to justice. Martha Nussbaum's work frames capabilities as essentially an extension of Rawlsian accounts of justice. See Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). My thanks to Thom Brooks for raising this point.

10. A possible exception: Sen enlists Karl Marx in the pantheon of thinkers he claims represent the “comparative” tradition of thinking about justice, citing for instance Marx's remarks on the superiority (from the point of view of workers) of wage labor to

slavery. But Sen does not develop this further to suggest that Marx's agenda of comparing capitalism with a radically different arrangement is still, or should be, in play. In a 2009 essay, Sen considers and rejects the idea that the economic crisis demonstrates the need to move to a "new capitalism," and questions the continuing usefulness of "capitalism" as an analytical concept. Instead, he argued, American policymakers should focus on intelligent responses to the crisis that both address short-term concerns and long-term failures to provide key public goods like health care and mass transit. See Amartya Sen, "Capitalism Beyond the Crisis," *The New York Review of Books*, February 25, 2009.

11. As Sen sardonically notes, "I would like to wish good luck to the builders of a transcendently just set of institutions for the whole world." 263.

12. In a critical sentence, Sen writes: "A theory of justice has to rely fundamentally on partial orderings based on the intersection—or commonality—of distinct rankings drawing on different reasons of justice that can all survive the scrutiny of public reasoning." 399. Many important ideas are packed into this sentence: the notion that we do not need comprehensive rankings to make comparative judgments; the notion that it is desirable to have multiple metrics in play speaking to different normative aims; and the notion that it is public reasoning and the democratic process that at the end of the day is the arbiter of comparative claims about the more and less just course of action. But this account of how reasoning about justice is to proceed highlights the fundamental importance of assuring that democratic processes are not dominated by special interests, and that impartial deliberation rather than special pleading is the driving force behind complex comparative judgments. That concern in turn leads us into Rawls's worries about the impact of concentrated wealth and high degrees of inequality on democracy (a worry shared by many other commentators writing in the republican tradition).

13. Sen, 354.

14. Stephen Greenhouse, *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for American Workers* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

15. Samuel Freeman, "A New Theory of Justice" (Review of Amartya Sen's *The Idea of Justice*), *New York Review of Books* 57:15 (October 14, 2010).

16. Paul Weithman, "John Rawls and the Task of Political Philosophy," In Catherine Zuckert, ed. *Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

17. Andres de Francisco, "A Republican Interpretation of the Late Rawls," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 14 (2006): 270–88; Alan Thomas, "Property-Owning Democracy, Republicanism and the Egalitarian Ethos," in O'Neill and Williamson, eds. *Property-Owning Democracy: Rawls and Beyond* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Stuart White, "Property-Owning Democracy and Republican Citizenship," in O'Neill and Williamson, eds. *Property-Owning Democracy: Rawls and Beyond* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

18. Stephen L. Elkin, *Reconstructing the Commercial Republic: Constitutional Design after Madison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

19. Richard Dagger, "Neo-Republicanism and the Civic Economy," *Politics, Philosophy, & Economics* 5 (2006): 151–73.

20. Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*; Gar Alperovitz, *America Beyond Capitalism*.

21. In drawing this connection, I do not mean to imply that Wright's favored version of the good society is identical with Rawls's "property-owning democracy."

Wright offers a schematic account of different strategies for re-balancing social, state, and economic power, but does not decisively advocate for any particular alternative regime. He would, I believe, recognize the redistributive proposals of recent iterations of property-owning democracy, as well as Meade-inspired proposals for developing local economic alternatives incorporating cooperative ownership, as part of a family of strategies for advancing “real utopias.”

22. In the long term, I—with Rawls—would contend that the “least well off” would indeed be better off and have more secure prospects in a property-owning democracy, even compared to a generous welfare state that did not redress the imbalance of political and economic power. But it is important to acknowledge that this is not obviously true over the short and medium term; for instance, a transition to a property-owning democracy probably would involve redistributing significant resources to groups not in the “least well off,” as opposed to lifting the position of the least well off as quickly as possible.