

The Priority of Injustice: Locating Democracy in Critical Theory

Stephen Przybylinski

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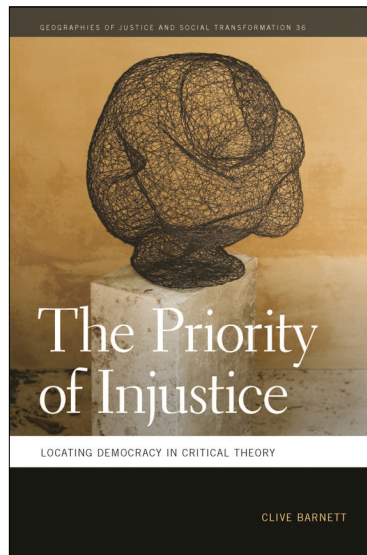


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The Priority of Injustice: Locating Democracy in Critical Theory

Clive Barnett. Athens, GA:
University of Georgia Press,
2017. xii and 360 pp., notes,
bibliography, index. \$28.95
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*Reviewed by Stephen
Przybylinski, Department of
Geography, Syracuse University,
Syracuse, NY.*



The Priority of Injustice is a heavy read. The book focuses on democracy as a mode of inquiry, by analyzing critical theoretical inquiry itself. It does so interpreting the normative concepts of democracy in political theory, examining how injustice emerges through everyday democratic political action. Above all, *Priority* values the process of democratic inquiry as a means of reasoning through political situations, not one merely upholding democracy as an ideal form of political practice. Although reading the book demands a certain discipline, the end reward is a revived sense of importance for addressing injustice in the critical social sciences. Barnett's theorizing pays dividends for the reader who is seeking to break through the definiteness of radical theories of "the political," as well as those of universal theories of justice.

Barnett's focus in *Priority* is not on reinterpreting and defining the proper etymology of democracy. He is instead interested in the ways in which critical theory informs how democracy serves as a mode of inquiry. Drawing on an impressive array of thinkers within liberal and radical political theory, Barnett analyzes the conceptual distinctions between deliberative and agonistic theories of democratic politics. In doing so, he argues for an approach that analyzes "the ordinary" within democratic

political discourse, rather than developing restricted ontological accounts of "the political." What results from his analysis is a reasoned assessment of how democratic inquiry can better address "the ways in which political agency emerges from situated experiences of injustice" (p. 7). He does so by establishing a geographically sensitive framework for recognizing and redressing injustice through the process of deliberative inquiry.

Barnett begins the book by suggesting that critical theories of democracy define the meaning of democracy politics too specifically. Such analyses are detrimental to political analysis, Barnett argues, in that they rule out everyday understandings of political action. To broaden political analyses, he urges we examine the normative meanings behind "ordinary" elements of democratic practice. Drawing on Stanley Cavell, Barnett identifies the ordinary as not simply the stuff of everyday institutional politics. Inquiry into the ordinary examines the variance in meanings of democratic concepts when applied from one political activity to the next. As democracy's meanings are ever contested, it is the appraisive qualities of democratic inquiry that make ordinary analysis of political actions necessary for Barnett (p. 72). His use of "ordinariness" is thus applied in distinction to more ontological theories of politics, which attempt to uncover the essential elements of "authentic politics." As such, his analysis well articulates the limits of radical political theories concerned with defining the proper constitutive elements of "the political." In doing so, Barnett's pragmatist approach avoids reducing democratic practice to singular meanings (e.g., agonism), urging that the task of critical theories of democracy is to inform inquiry by interpreting the normative conceptions of democracy for the very purposes of evaluating the application of such concepts in their

varying contexts, and from this, to interpret and provide judgment on their potential meanings.

The second part of the book addresses the “ontologization” of radical political theory. Building on his previous work in this vein (Barnett 2004), Barnett centers his critique on the paramount work of Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Ranciere. At the heart of the critique of these thinkers (and many more within radical political literatures) is the rigid ontological distinctions made between “politics” and “the political.” Such ontologies of the political, he argues, depict politics as a rare event, where radical political change is generated only by rupturing a stable order at particular spatial-temporal moments, thus reserving “authentic” democratic political action “for the disruption of identities, hegemonies, and settled formations” (p. 77). Barnett dismisses the notion that political action is solely contingent on relations of exclusion, hostility, or antagonism (p. 145), arguing that such ontological depictions render insignificant the pluralities of everyday political action in which democracy operates. Barnett rightfully denies the bounding of politics proper within radical political theories, suggesting that analyzing the plurality of political actions avoids predetermining what constitutes political action.

The third section of the book is the most intriguing, as it is where Barnett hones his critical analysis of democratic inquiry. It is here he develops the themes of injustice and nondomination as central to ordinary democratic inquiry. He does so working through several scholars of justice, such as Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, and Judith Sklar. It is Iris Marion Young’s critical accounting of structural injustice in which Barnett develops his own priority with injustice. Among his theoretical concerns with analyzing injustice is the deliberative process of making claims. “Claims-making” is pertinent to him for a few reasons. The processing of injustice claims allows for the situated analysis of power via those affected by domination (p. 209). Importantly, the processing of injustice claims discursively both evaluates the normative context of democratic concepts applied to situations and interprets the intended meaning behind the experiences of those asserting such claims.

Barnett suggests we focus on the process of making claims of injustice for another reason: to avoid essentializing theories of justice. He argues by analyzing claims-making through the lens of injustice, rather than evaluating justice through universally formed principles in a Rawlsian manner, that we avoid predetermining the criteria by which all injustice claims should be measured. Barnett suggests, therefore, that we better determine

what is “just” or “unjust” by scrutinizing the process of dialogue in which injustice is recognized and addressed (p. 270). To develop this line of thinking, Barnett draws from Habermas’s theory of communicative action, from which he identifies deliberation as a critical practice of democratic inquiry. The adoption of Habermas is somewhat precarious, as the deliberative forms of democratic practice espoused by Habermas have been criticized for the limitations of consensus formation through deliberation. Barnett does not overlook this point, and finds in Habermas not that deliberative consensus best expresses “the will of all,” but rather that the process of deliberation enables democratic inquiry that is necessary for contextualizing injustice claims (p. 196). In other words, Barnett is less concerned with the outcome of the deliberative process, as much as he is intent on ensuring there is deliberative interaction for those “affected” by a decision. Although Barnett’s conceptualization of claims-making affords more expansive and reflexive criteria for assessing relations of domination, he is less clear as to the “who” and “how” of assessment. If inquiry is at all to inform practice, a sense of who is doing the processing, and thus who even has the capacity to address such unequal relations of power in the deliberative process is critical.

Although much of the analytical focus in *Priority* centers on critical theories of politics and justice, Barnett builds a geographically sensitive approach to analyzing injustice that culminates in the book’s final section. Little time is spent assessing geographers’ contribution to spatializing democratic politics, however. Alternatively, Barnett examines how “spatial grammars” are employed more generally through political theories. Moving to assess spatial grammars—a concern with how space is implicitly referenced in theory, instead of through explanatory use by way of spatial concepts—avoids prioritizing physical spaces as “the primal scenes of authentically ‘political’ political action” (p. 10). Theorizing democracy geographically for Barnett includes examining the emergence of claims of injustice. To do so, topological analysis of the “situated contexts” in which claims of injustice are made and processed becomes key for critical inquiry.

The geographic significance of analyzing claims-making is exemplified by Barnett through the all-affected principle, generally understood as a tool for defining who is affected by a decision, and who is thus included in a given polity. As the argument goes, those who are affected by any democratic decision should have the option to participate in making that decision. Barnett suggests, however, that such a view is wrongly used to justify a causal

approach to demarcating the boundaries of a polity, as it determines who has an “objectively identifiable interest” (p. 196) in a given issue. By doing so, the all-affected principle deemphasizes the situated or emplaced contexts of political action. Barnett therefore argues for an expanded notion of *affectedness*, whereby those who are taking an interest, having an interest, or those with the capacity to affect decisions, should also be included in a polity (p. 203). “Learning to be affected” as Barnett sees it, likely emerges, although not necessarily, in response to claims-making. As he argues, this “requires us to take seriously not only the deterritorializing effects of globalized chains of cause and consequence but also the geographies in which dispositions to affectively acknowledge claims of others are learned and capacities to act on these claims are embedded” (p. 206). In other words, taking seriously Barnett’s view of affectedness means analyzing the settings in which claims of injustice emerge, how this might affect their reception within society, and the manner on which claims are acted.

Given the conceptual richness of *Priority*, it seems almost unfair to criticize the book’s dearth of empirical support. That there are no case studies grounding the modes of inquiry Barnett works through has its drawbacks, however. One area deserving such grounding is with Barnett’s critique of spatial theory. Barnett argues that ontological accountings of space reduce geographical analysis of radical politics to identifying “the correct ontological view of space or spatiality” (p. 278), rather than generating geographic insights from political actions themselves. Although this critique is not unwelcome, we are given no examples articulating how spatial concepts could be used heuristically, and not for developing ontological accountings of spatial politics. Only one paragraph in the book’s conclusion idealizes using spatial concepts heuristically, merely referencing potential connections with concepts such as the production of space or accumulation by dispossession (p. 278). Such an important critique, which disrupts much of geographical

theories of radical democracy, would be more palatable with empirical illustration.

To be sure, Barnett explicates that *Priority* is about critical theoretical inquiry, saying as much when introducing the book. With this in mind, it is perhaps more effective to say that this book is well suited for a reader steeped within the debates of democratic theory, particularly with an attention to social theories of justice. A related apprehension with the book regards the dense manner in which its ideas are communicated. At times, the book’s phrasing tends to complicate, rather than clarify, its reasoning. This very well could be due to the lack of empirical support grounding its arguments. As such, the book might not suit undergraduate readers. Without prior engagement or interest in democratic political theory, specifically with theories of justice, the book’s arguments might disorient readers casually interested in democratic politics and justice. That the book reads complexly is less a criticism, however, than it is a notice of commitment for its readers.

With that said, what makes *Priority* excellent, and worth investing in, is that it provides fresh perspective for those disillusioned (or even preoccupied) with the assuredness of radical democratic theory and “postpolitical” argumentation, as well as those enticed by debates over justice. By shifting his analysis from theorizing justice to focusing on situating claims of injustice, Barnett explicates the value of critical inquiry for addressing the concept of democratic justice, foregoing the trap of presenting democracy as a static process necessarily guaranteeing equality. *Priority* guarantees only that democracy is ever contested, and as such, it critically advances debate regarding its possibilities and limitations.

Reference

Barnett, C. 2004. Deconstructing radical democracy: Articulation, representation, and being with others. *Political Geography* 23:503–28.