The All Too Human Geographies of Justice

"We would have no hope of dealing with the subject if we had not a rich observable practical knowledge from which to extract the theoretical."

William Empson, 1951, p. 438.

I want to acknowledge the generosity with which Juliet Davis, David Featherstone, Jack Layton, Cristina Temenos, and Jane Wills, have engaged with *The Priority of Injustice*, and also express my thanks to Samuel Kinsley for organizing this review forum. *The Priority of Injustice* has been called 'a heavy read' (Przybylinski 2018), a theme reiterated in commentaries in this Forum. In my defence, I am tempted to invoke Kant's line to the effect that "many a book would have been much clearer if it had not been made so clear" (Kant 1998, 104). It has also been noted, for example by Dave Featherstone, Jack Layton, and Christina Temenos, that the book does not contain much empirical analysis or methodological discussion. Others have identified resources for opening "new lines of inquiry", as Juliet Davis puts it. There are two points worth making with respect to these concerns. First, if one the cardinal sins of social research is *theoreticism* (appealing to examples to confirm ready-made philosophical perspectives), then another is *empiricism*. Things do not just present themselves for unmediated observation; you need concepts to pick out the things that have significance (and there is nothing especially academic about that, it's just how life is). Doing empirical work is just one way of working with concepts, through guesswork, testing, observing, and thinking about consequences and implications and relationships. Second, I see *The Priority of Injustice* as "an empirical study in the analysis of social thought", to borrow a formulation from Talcott Parsons (1968, vii). It is a book that approaches the writings of various thinkers as *documents* that "present problems of understanding and interpretation". It is, as Jane Wills puts it, a book about "the importance of our ideas about ideas".

The Priority of Injustice is certainly an argumentative book. In it, I am making an effort find my own voice in amongst the cacophony of ideas that now circulate in and through spatial disciplines such as human geography, urban studies, and wider fields of cultural studies and political theory. The argument I present revolves around the proposition that the meaning of normative concepts like democracy is grasped not by appeal to etymological derivation, but with reference to the application of existing meanings and practices in new situations. I refer to this way of thinking about the meaning of concepts as 'ordinary'. In order to grasp the *kind* of argument I am making in the book, and since this complex word is liable to be misconstrued, I want to say a little more about the sense in which I use the term 'ordinary' in *The Priority of Injustice*, and how this sense is related to the argument about reorienting critical theory squarely around an action-theoretic perspective.

In making my case for thinking of political life in ordinary terms, the term 'ordinary' carries a certain sort of philosophical weight derived from the work of Stanley Cavell. Acknowledging ordinariness, in a Cavellian spirit, is a matter of affirming that the distance between the given and the possible is not experienced as extraordinary nor rare. It does not require a crisis, or a rupture, or some disruption of routine for this distance to be felt or apprehended. With respect to arguments about the critical

vocation of academic analysis, this affirmation throws into new relief the political interpretation of contingency. Seeing all settled or inherited patterns of action, identity or meaning as arbitrary (and interpreting arbitrariness as basically the same as 'changeable') rests on a stark contrast between theoretically derived assertions of the possibility of change on the one hand and projections of placid routine acceptance on the other. A whole theory of power is constructed around this contrast, in which malign forces fix and naturalise fluid relations of becoming. Following Cavell's discussion of the ordinary, I argue that this whole way of thinking cannot acknowledge that "an ever-present condition of action" is "the vulnerability to doubt" that pervades human life (Barnett 2017, 275). The figure of the ordinary therefore suggests thinking of newness not as a dramatic rupture from settled patterns, nor as an extraordinary departure from established norms, but just as a matter of making 'moves in new directions' from what we have done before (Diamond 1991, 33-34). In short, the sense of the ordinariness of political concepts at work in *The Priority of Injustice* is derived from this philosophical position that having a concept involves being able to apply it in new situations, an application that is also a translation.

The theme of the ordinary is, in turn, central to my treatment of the 'justificatory dilemma' faced by critical theory (see Barnett 2017, 39-43). Ontologies of the political and subject-centric cultural theories consistently elide the problem of *justifying* visions of alternative futures into theoretical demonstrations of some singular source of negativity or excess or disruption that allows one to posit with certainty the *plausibility* of change. In so doing, they elevate the fact of contingency into the highest normative aspiration available to us and as the very essence of democracy. This is just one example of how theory can go astray by resisting the ordinariness of life. But the Cavellian account of the ordinary also has a deflating implication for theoretical traditions that do dwell at more length on questions of normative justification. Here, the lesson is simply that acting in the world is inherently normative, just ordinarily so, and it does not require a philosophically robust transcendental authorization.

It is this understanding of the ordinariness of having a concept that underwrites the reconstruction of the theme of all-affectedness in the third part of *The Priority of Injustice*. The idea of affectedness is presented not as a prescriptive principle to determine what does or does not count as properly democratic, but as a worldly register through which democracy is posited, problematized and contested. Thinking about affectedness is therefore also a 'good place to start' in investigating how claims of injustice are expressed and articulated and processed and warranted. The theme of affectedness also helps to draw out the centrality of a reconfigured notion of domination in recent critical theories of democracy, where domination is derived from a political sense of being subjected to arbitrary rule. And in turn, this account of domination informs the discussion of the conceptual priority of injustice in the final chapter of the book. This argument, too, needs to be grasped in light of the account of the ordinary qualities of concept possession. It involves, first, the proposition that judgments of injustice can and are made independently of prior constructions of justice. Second, injustice is therefore not the absence of justice; justice and injustice are conceptually distinct ideas. Injustice has its own texture, a phenomenology of its own, and not a singular one. Third, before it is rationally apprehended by reference to principles, injustice is experienced; it is felt; in one sense or other, it is suffered. Negative feelings – anger, resentment or revenge for example – are therefore crucial

in animating struggles against injustice. However, according priority to the expressions of injustice by victims cannot mean simply affirming those claims. Doing so might generate injustice of its own. It might also misunderstand how the recognition of and response to injustice actually works as a mobilising process (see Robbins 2017).

The approach to theorising injustice ordinarily that is elaborated in *The Priority of Injustice* requires a reconsideration of the assumptions that often guide critical academic analysis, not least assumptions about the concept of 'structure'. In standard models of critique, providing a structural explanation involves presenting an observable phenomenon as a mere symptom of an underlying cause. 'Theory' is presented as the key to revealing this more fundamental level of determination. The strongly ontological interpretation of the distinction between politics and the political, which has become so prevalent in theories of spatial politics, is just a refined version of this mode of thought. We might, instead, do well to think of this distinction as simply one variant of a whole array of possible ways of thinking about the *ratio* between action and its conditions (see Burke 1945). My argument is that the theoreticist invocation of underlying causes misplaces 'the significance of conflict': a political analysis of causes and conditions needs to be supplemented by an appreciation of what conflicts actually mean to those involved, from the inside.

In arguing in favour of an action-theoretic perspective on political life, *The Priority of Injustice* therefore proposes a reassessment of the relationship between observed patterns of action and their conditions. An operative concept of structure is certainly a basic requirement of any form of social science analysis. Iris Marion Young, for whom structural analysis is a genre of storytelling, best expresses the sense of structure I endorse in *The Priority of Injustice*. On her account, a structural form of analysis seeks to identify the factors that position people in relationships that in turn help to shape their understandings, their capacities, and their desires. Structure, on this understanding, is a concept of possibility, not of necessity. This view is consistent with the argument presented in *The Priority of Injustice* that what defines political life is an irreducible dimension of strategic action. There are two analytical avenues that follow from this proposition.

First, there is no need to locate the much-vaunted ineradicability of contestation and conflict in ontological layerings, constitutive movements of closure, or forces of becoming. It is more productive to focus on the conflicts that arise from coordination problems associated with trying to square different rationalities of action: imperatives of distribution and recognition and representation, for example; or the forces that differentiate arguing from bargaining; or the relationships between convincing and persuading. The terms are heuristic guides to investigating the different aspects of action that can be combined in different ways.

The second dimension of the analysis of political life associated with an action-theoretic perspective bears more directly on the theme of structure. In *The Priority of Injustice*, I develop Albert Hirschman's ideas about analysing the "structural characteristics" of different programmes of action. This involves attending to the path dependencies that determine the degree of "latitude" and "discipline" on the scope of discretion enjoyed by participants in a situation. Attending to the structural characteristics of political conflicts is, then, a matter of cultivating a contextual

sensitivity to the qualities of situations out of which those conflicts arise and through which they unfold.

The contrast between thinking of structural analysis, on the one hand, in terms of a contrast between the superficially observed and fundamental dynamics, or, on the other, in terms of a sensitivity to the latitudes and disciplines characteristic of situations is quite crucial to differentiating between two models of critique that are considered throughout *The Priority of Injustice*. In one version of critique, being critical is all about revealing that malevolent power always lies behind observable phenomena, through a debunking manoeuvre of defamiliarization of one sort or another. Alternatively, being critical can be thought of more modestly – more ordinarily - as a matter of clarifying the pressures and limits that orient possibilities of action in particular situations.

In closing, I would reiterate that I think of *The Priority of Injustice* as a kind of space-clearing exercise, as an attempt to clarify problems that require further investigation. There are various trajectories such investigation might follow, alongside those suggested by the contributors to this Review Forum. One would involve exploring the geographies through which democratic practices are translated across different situations - tracing the articulation of the emergent conflicts, claims of injustice, and the development of instituted practices of redress, redistribution, and rights. A second trajectory would involve further work on theorising injustice as a thoroughly public phenomenon. This requires investigating how the double sense of claims-making outlined in *The Priority of Injustice* is enacted in practice: looking at how the sense of injustice emerges against a background of shared expectations; and looking at how emergent claims are processed and warranted in and through the strung-out spatialities of public life (see Barnett 2018).

The idea of the prioritization of injustice presented in *The Priority of Injustice* is not therefore offered as a solution, but rather as a way of opening up of a whole new set of analytical problems. In the last instance, *The Priority of Injustice* rests on the assumption that justice and democracy are all all-too-human phenomena. The argument for the conceptual prioritization of injustice in the analysis of political life implies that we should not think that democratic justice is an ideal, but nor should we think that it is a mere illusion. Justice is something that is done, as a response or remedy to some wrong or other. It is not a pure phenomenon poorly realised. Its manifestation is an index of an imperfect world and a symbol of the possibility of betterment.

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