

*William Edmundson's* John Rawls: Reticent Socialist

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William Edmundson's book stands out in the vast array of secondary literature on Rawls. Several other authors offer a competent account of Rawls's work (e.g. Catherine Audard, Thomas Pogge, and Samuel Freeman [the most probing so far]). However, while these and other books on Rawls are not intended to offer new arguments, nor to shed a brand new light on Rawls's thought, this is precisely what Edmundson's book aims to achieve.

The central argument of the book, establishing Rawls as a *reluctant socialist undercover* (the wording is mine), comprehends two very different methodologies. The first one is based on textual analysis, particularly of Rawls's last account of his thought in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. The second methodology, which is to be found mainly in Chapter 11, is a form of psychoanalysis that draws on Rawls's psychology and attitudes. I will briefly refer to the former before focusing on the latter.

Edmundson innovates in textual analysis because, to start with, he is the first to take seriously Rawls's last statement of his theory. For many years, the prevailing convention among Rawlsian scholars has been that *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement (JF)* is merely an educational tool or a readers' digest of Rawls's political philosophy. By contrast, Edmundson claims that it is the true final version of Rawls's theory and that it includes important modifications of the early statements in *A Theory of Justice (TJ)* and *Political Liberalism (PL)*. In particular, *JF* would show a meaningful evolution in Rawls's views regarding what Edmundson calls 'the property question', i.e., the question of who should own the means of production.

It is clear that Rawls rejects state socialism – insofar as it does not respect basic liberties, including free choice of occupation – and that he also rejects *laissez-faire* capitalism – because it goes against the second principle of justice – as just socio-economic regimes. Moreover, although Rawls was never a welfare state liberal, in *JF* he makes more clear than before his opposition to welfare capitalism since this regime is compatible with very large inequalities, which are ruled out by the difference principle.

For most of his intellectual life Rawls was undecided between two property regimes: property-owning democracy (POD) and liberal socialism (LS). In the first case, ownership of the means of production is private but it must be spread, together with social capital, among citizens, avoiding concentrations of wealth. In the second case, the state owns the means of production, but basic liberties remain in place. Although only the latter of these two possibilities has historical instantiations – in European democratic socialism – in principle both could lead to the practical realization of a just society. However, Edmundson makes the claim that in *JF* property owning democracy is discarded and liberal socialism definitely favoured.

The central interpretive argument made by Edmundson turns around Rawls's concern with stability in a well-ordered society and the related requirements of publicity, reconciliation and reciprocity. In order to achieve stability for the right reasons, the

property question has to be decided from the outset and, what is more, the public ownership of the ‘commanding heights’ of the economy must be entrenched into the Constitution. Edmundson believes that this is what Rawls actually argues for in *JF*, albeit in a reluctant manner (not openly or clearly).

I offer here what I understand to be the main lines of the argument, which Edmundson attributes to Rawls: (i) the decision about the property question must be taken in the original position, when Rawls considers the special psychologies, in order to achieve stability in a well-ordered society of justice as fairness; (ii) POD would be destabilizing insofar as it requires continuous – and necessarily controversial – intervention by the administration to ensure justice; (iii) instead, LS favours stability amidst pluralism because it relies on background institutions, not on continuous corrective intervention, to build a well-ordered society; (iv) the public ownership of the means of production is a constitutional essential and it should be entrenched into the Constitution; (v) this way, the property question is removed from ordinary political disputes and social reconciliation may be properly achieved; (vi) LS also fares better than POD insofar as the idea of co-ownership of the means of production is a quasi-natural corollary of the idea of cooperation among free and equal citizens, in a permanent relationship of reciprocity.

Let us take these ideas for granted. The most interesting problem in this book, then, becomes the following: if it comes out, from textual analysis, that Rawls was a reluctant socialist, why did he not say so and remain, as it were, undercover? To answer this question Edmundson moves to an intriguing psychological analysis that draws on Rawls’s life and personal convictions.

Edmundson suggests a connection between Rawls’ muffled style of writing and his personality as a tortured man, marked by the premature death of his two brothers with infectious diseases they contracted from him. He goes on to say that Rawls was a man with a marked aversion to public exposure and to controversy, giving the impression of someone “[...] who always had far more on his mind than he was ready to discuss” (2017, 172).

Edmundson further claims that “Rawls was aware that voicing advanced moral opinions could impose a personal cost while achieving little” (2017, 172) and he draws an interesting parallel between Rawls and John Stuart Mill. Both Rawls and Mill were socialists holding progressive moral and political views, which could easily have been misinterpreted by their contemporaries if it had not been for their cautious attitude and style of writing.

Edmundson stresses that, in his youth, Rawls was deeply influenced by his Christian faith developed in the framework of the Episcopal Church. For him, egotism was the major sin, whereas salvation was to be found in the community of love between human persons. Traces of these beliefs can be found in the construction of the original position, in the rationality and reasonableness of parties in Part One of the argument (in *JF*), but also in the consideration of special psychologies, of what may be seen as egotism, in Part Two of the argument. In Rawls’s intellectual development, corresponding to *TJ*, the community of believers united by mutual love is secularized and replaced

by a scheme of mutual cooperation according to fair terms defined by the conception of justice as fairness. Completing his evolution with *JF*, Rawls establishes the need to decide the property question in favour of socialism from the outset, i.e. from the argument of the original position, instead of leaving it open to the future.

However, Rawls did not want to associate specific comprehensive doctrines to his new secular socialist convictions, insofar as he was well aware of the relevance of religion in the United States, as well as in his own youth. Thus, according to Edmundson, Rawls's move to present the conception of 'justice as fairness' as a political rather than comprehensive view, particularly in *PL*. Following his temperament, Rawls did not consider it necessary nor advantageous to justify his secular socialism as a comprehensive view and he preferred to present it as a freestanding conception, which could be endorsed by people holding a variety of both secular and religious comprehensive doctrines.

I think that Edmundson's argument, including both the hermeneutical part and the psychological aspects, is extremely interesting and that it deserves to be carefully examined. Here, I can only offer some brief thoughts on the second part of the argument, although I believe that my misgivings about it will also affect the way one looks at the first part of the argument (the interpretive one).

Perhaps involuntarily, Edmundson engages in a Leo Strauss-like analysis of Rawls that leads him to distinguish between what Rawls explicitly wrote and what he really meant. In other words, Rawls's hidden teaching is to be read 'between the lines' of what he actually wrote. Like in other epochs (according to Strauss), Edmundson seems to believe that, as a political philosopher in the United States in the seventies and after, Rawls needed to resort to an 'art of writing' that aimed at concealing the philosopher's true convictions in order to avoiding persecution or, at least, academic and social ostracism, because of his socialist preferences.

This step given by Edmundson is perhaps too speculative, although I do not know enough about Rawls's personal life to properly assess it. Nevertheless, Edmundson's conclusion about Rawls being not only a reluctant socialist but also an undercover socialist raises several and serious problems for the understanding and assessment of John Rawls's political philosophy.

Rawls' general outlook, although influenced by his early religious convictions, is also very much influenced by Enlightened or rationalistic views. Perhaps the single most relevant aspect in this is the importance he gives to the idea of publicity. Rawls is clearly against the view that the philosopher has a privileged access to truth, as in the platonic tradition. He strongly opposes the idea of 'the noble lie' and he believes that political philosophy should be a public philosophy, raising citizens' concerns in a democratic society to a proper level of abstraction. Furthermore, Rawls thinks that the principles of justice that shape the institutions of a well-ordered society must also be public and publicly acknowledged.

The idea that someone who endorses these strong ideas regarding the principle of publicity is hiding what he really thinks about 'the property question' and the public ownership of the means of production raises a problem of integrity. If Edmundson's

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central thesis in this book is right, if Rawls was indeed a reluctant socialist and, what is more, if he did not want to say it explicitly, then Rawls clearly compromised his intellectual integrity, given the relevance he gives to the principle of publicity both in the content of his theory of justice and in the way he envisages the public role of political philosophy.

From this, some harsh questions arise: is Edmundson ready to go as far as to claim what I have just stated and to raise doubts about Rawls' intellectual integrity? Or should he rather re-examine the view that Rawls was hiding his socialist convictions? But if Rawls was not hiding his beliefs about the property question, why should one think that he was a reluctant socialist, rather than someone who remained truly and sincerely undecided between liberal socialism and property owning-democracy as two possible instantiations of justice as fairness (as he explicitly states)?

Perhaps, in the latter case, the preference for democratic socialism over property-owning democracy is to be attributed to the interpreter of Rawls rather than to Rawls himself. But that is not Edmundson's point. He rather makes the much more interesting and thought-provoking claim that Rawls *was* a liberal socialist, albeit in a reluctant way, and that he felt the need to hide it.

Although I would like to know what Edmundson has to say about my questions and remarks, I also believe that they do not diminish in any aspect the intellectual seriousness and interpretive sophistication of his remarkable book.