



LETTERS

Vilifying Remarks Misrepresent Rawls's Ideas

The op-ed "[Justice and Inequality](#)" by David Lewis Schaefer (July 23) purports to trace the views on inequality of the current candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination to the 1971 book "A Theory of Justice" by John Rawls. But the op-ed misrepresents that book at key points. In fact, the book powerfully opposed the very views of which it is now accused.

The book neither argued nor posited that "absolute economic well-being. . .matters less than. . .relative position." It never even speaks of relative income or shares. In Rawls's theory, justice requires reducing the deprivation of the working poor to the maximum extent feasible -- subsidizing their employment in order to raise their take-home pay to the maximum. This means tax rates on wage earners farther up the ladder would be set at levels to yield maximum tax revenue. This was a sharp break from the radical left. They sought tax rates set at still higher, punitive levels, in spite of the resulting loss of tax revenue available to help the working poor, with the aim of impoverishing the more advantaged. Their justification was that it would reduce the "relative deprivation" of the poor, as it increased their absolute deprivation.

Rawls would have none of that. His understanding was that the working poor have lives to lead -- even children to raise -- and fret little about the rich. True or not, he did not let "envy" have any part of his conception of the good life: the "primary goods" that are instrumental in people's quest for "self-realization." Immanuel Kant was his idol and he enjoyed quoting Kant's dictum that "envy is the vice of mankind." How surprising, then, it is to read that Rawls held "it is rational to envy people whose superiority in wealth exceeds certain limits." If he said that in his last years, it is nevertheless not part of his theory of justice.

It is misleading to summarize Rawls's book, as many do, by saying "inequalities are allowable only to the extent that they improved the condition of the least advantaged in society." He often indulged in loose approximations. But the book repeatedly makes clear that his acceptance of inequality goes farther than that approximation suggests. The goal is to reduce poverty among the less fortunate in a developed economy, not to reduce the higher incomes among the more fortunate. Rawls views the ability of the more fortunate to earn more not only as a source of welcome tax revenue with which to boost the rewards of the working poor. He also implies that if two states of the economy were feasible, both with the same net wage at the bottom of the ladder but one having even higher wages up the ladder than the other has, the former would be better. The increased self-realization of the advantaged is also valuable.

The above approximation neglects another feature of Rawls's position: His conception of justice does not allow that tax rates on those who earn so much as to be ineligible for the low-wage subsidies may be so very high as to leave them worse off than if they got together to form another society without the working poor. Rawls supposes that the "social dividend" that comes from the productive collaboration of the advantaged and disadvantaged is so large that such a secession would not be gainful. In short, the advantaged are left with a net gain from working with the less advantaged.

Rawls embarked on his book in the late 1960s, when the country gave signs of coming apart -- the radical right oblivious to the deprivations endemic among the working poor and blaming them for their dysfunctional lives; the radical left mindlessly believing that the solution lay in outlawing inequalities and devaluing bourgeois notions of personal growth and responsibility. Much is owed to Rawls for working out and pointing us to a vision of an economy that is both just and enterprising. His peers long ago recognized him as one of the greatest moral philosophers of all time. Now he can be seen as one of the heroes in 20th-century American history. It is grotesque that his contribution should now be vilified.

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