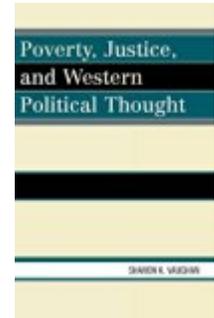




Sharon K. Vaughan. *Poverty, Justice, and Western Political Thought*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008. ix + 223 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7391-2268-6.



Reviewed by James M. King

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“The number of people who live in poverty has always far exceeded the number who do not” (p. 1). This is the statement that opens Sharon K. Vaughan’s *Poverty, Justice, and Western Political Thought*. With this fact in mind, she posits that the treatment of the poor “goes to the heart of the idea of justice,” thus making poverty “an essential element of political theory” (p. 1). A study focused on the relationship between poverty and justice, then, is necessary—especially since such a formal study has yet to be undertaken. She even goes so far as to claim that “the demands of justice necessarily entail that the political theorist engage with the problem of poverty,” arguing that an approach to justice must grapple with the issue of poverty (p. 2).

While Vaughan’s introduction clearly lays out what she wishes to accomplish, that is, exploring the relationship between justice and poverty, it also presents the reader with various conceptions often associated with poverty: equality, desert, absolute and relative poverty, rural and urban

poverty, discrimination, exploitation, poverty as culture, autonomy, and liberalism, as well as others. She discusses these conceptions to reveal how complex the issue is and to hint at some of the distinctions necessary to understand the subtleties of the later arguments. For example, some theorists think public aid is necessary, but they disagree as to why. Vaughan is excellent at alerting the reader to this disagreement and explaining the intricacies of each position. The introduction is also where Vaughan introduces what one might consider her foil, Samuel Fleischacker. Throughout the book, Vaughan contrasts Fleischacker’s arguments to her own, making her position unmistakable. It should be noted, however, that Vaughan still draws on a wide range of scholarship to make her arguments.

In her second chapter, the author examines Plato’s and Aristotle’s treatments of poverty. Though both saw the destructive power of a rift between the rich and the poor, the theorists differed on their approaches to the problem: Plato

attempted to construct a state that would avoid the problem of poverty, while Aristotle, who assumed poverty would always be a problem, aimed to find ways to limit it. Ultimately, it turns out to be a question of moderation that both theorists thought could be accomplished through proper education, just legislation, and the regulation of private property.

In the third chapter, Vaughan turns to John Locke, who is an interesting case for many reasons. First, he believed that poverty was caused by people making “bad judgments about what is in their best interests” (p. 50). That is, he failed to consider, according to Vaughan, other reasons for poverty: crop failures, economic downturns causing unemployment, death of a wage-earner, etc. He also called for a more centralized government through poor corporations, while advocating limiting the government’s power. At one point, he even argued for mutilation as a punishment for forging a pass to beg. But these are only some of the issues Vaughan addresses as she picks apart Locke’s thought.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith are the subjects of the next chapter, and both offered a far more favorable view of the poor than Locke did. Setting them up against Bernard Mandeville’s influential view that “evil behavior benefits the economy,” Vaughan presents Rousseau and Smith as defenders of the hardworking poor against the extravagant and wasteful wealthy (p. 93). But she is also quick to reveal the several differences between the theorists, much of them stemming from each theorist’s view of society. For Rousseau, society perverted the natural human being by making material goods the most valuable thing to an individual. Smith, in contrast, believed that human beings fulfill their natures in society and that the poor can have a higher standard of living in capitalist economies—an argument that hinged on his view of relative poverty.

Following the more compassionate poverty theorists, Vaughan examines Alexis de Tocqueville

and John Stuart Mill, both of whom were against government aid to the poor and thought the rich and the poor needed to practice self-restraint. Tocqueville, more specifically, thought that the most effective solution was private charity, whereas Mill placed his hope in many solutions (population control, redistribution of property, colonization), but none more than universal education.

G. W. Hegel and Karl Marx are the topics of Vaughan’s sixth chapter. For her, Hegel offered few, if any, specific poor relief measures, though he did mention colonization, or, as Vaughan puts it, “to export [poverty] somewhere else” (p. 156). Hegel’s main contribution concerns his call for public authority to prevent the formation of the rabble. This term points to a particular characteristic of the poor: that they are outside of society. This is important because, for Hegel, human beings are most free in the service of the state as citizens, which meant the rabble were not only outside of the state, but also had a negative affect on it. Marx, however, specifically demanded fairness for the poor and an end to the exploitation of the poor.

Vaughan concludes her book with her most thorough analyses. With a nod toward T. K. Seung’s work, the author provides a detailed account of John Rawls’s theory and its shortcomings, arguing that while “the social contract move that Rawls makes to justify the obligation that we have to those who are less advantaged is weak,” he still “forces us to confront the fact that many of the reasons that individuals find themselves in poverty having nothing to do with desert” (p. 176). Vaughan, however, is not so kind to Robert Nozick, who holds private property as sacrosanct. She says that “he ignores any social or structural factors that may influence individuals’ choices” and that “under his system, one can imagine the gap between wealthy and poor rising to heights that would surely threaten the security of everyone in that society” (p. 182). But both Rawls and Nozick nicely summarize between them one of the many

questions of poverty: how are we to balance freedom and security?

Though not without its problems, this book is quite readable and informative. Previous points are brought up to allow the reader to compare theories addressed earlier and the author's position is clearly defined against the opinions of other scholars. Even the drawbacks are acknowledged by the author. For example, she admits that there needs to be more of a discussion on minorities, specifically women and slaves, and she also recognizes that the notions of justice and poverty are generalized from time to time (on her recognition of problems, see pages 37, 191). The most glaring problem, like the others, is addressed by the author, but in a far less satisfactory way. At the beginning of the third chapter, Vaughan explains that Cicero, Augustine, and Aquinas all had interesting treatments of poverty, but these treatments were "not as extensive nor ... as critical to their political theories and notions of justice as the theorists chosen for this study" (p. 45). This seems inadequate; a single paragraph is not enough to fill a gap of two thousand years. At the very least, Cicero, Augustine, and Aquinas could have been taken together and one could examine why there was an absence of extensive treatments on poverty from such thinkers. Perhaps it had something to do with the ignoble nature of the subject, the rise of the feudal system, or the vow of poverty. The possibilities for speculation alone constitute a need for the chapter. But this certainly is no reason to avoid the book. Vaughan presents political theorists with a badly needed study on a topic seldom addressed in the mainstream. Any serious theorist should pick up this book as soon as he or she gets a chance.

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[1] See page 37 and 191 for Vaughan's recognition of the problems.

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