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The Priority of Injustice: Locating Democracy in Critical Theory

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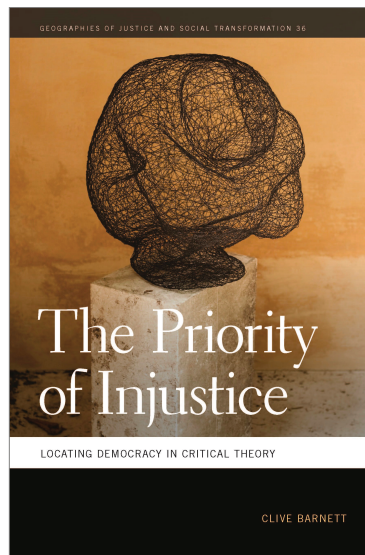
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

The Priority of Injustice: Locating Democracy in Critical Theory

Clive Barnett. Athens, GA:
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2017. xii and 349 pp. \$89.95
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*Introduction by Michael Samers,
Department of Geography,
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I am delighted to open this book review forum for Clive Barnett's *The Priority of Injustice*. On one hand, popular and social scientific claims about the decline of democracy abound, whether in Brazil, the Philippines, Turkey, Venezuela, the United States, or wherever else various forms of authoritarianism seem to reign in the early twenty-first century. On the other, the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, or more recently, massive protests in Hong Kong, point to the liveliness of democratic forms. In this apparent widespread challenge to democracy, or conversely its continual vigor generated by "bodies in public" (to borrow Butler's phrase), Barnett's *The Priority of Injustice* could not be timelier. Yet, if the book is one thing, it is not an empirical or even theoretical assessment of some external democratic reality. In fact, it questions a very fixed definition of democracy. For those then, who are looking for a text that explains or documents their worst fears of democratic collapse, they will be disappointed. Rather, the marvel and significance of Barnett's text lies in its relentless questioning of theories of democracy and justice, and particularly the search for ontologies of both. In *The Priority of Injus-*



tice, Barnett seeks to prudently interrogate such ontological securities (and more besides), by locating understandings of democracy and justice within an impressive range of critical theory, from theories of deliberative democracy to poststructuralist theories of agonism. The book does not, however, follow the usual consolation of using theory to uncover how people have been "got at" (to use his words). Rather, its purpose is to hold in conversation a range of critical theories of democracy and justice, and to reconstruct them in ways that might be surprising for geographers, especially those who seek an ontological basis for democracy, a blueprint for public deliberation, or even some essence of "the political" in the way that often char-

acterizes radical political thought, including postfoundational, poststructuralist, or global and transnational theories of democracy and justice.

In fact, an interrogation of global or transnational theories of justice in *The Priority of Injustice* confirm to the reader that this is an avowedly spatial text, but Barnett has at least three concerns about the way in which geographers have married space with critical theory. First, he laments geographers' dismissal of "ordinary" understandings of space because geographers believe that these fail to question the "normal," the "essential," or the inevitable. Second, he has reservations about geographers' determination to develop "novel spatial ontologies," instead of embracing more vernacular or conventional spatial figures such as nation-states. Third, he considers the association of space with "the constitution of the political" as the wrong theoretical move to make. Rather, Barnett is more concerned with the "spatial grammar" of political thought.

The combination of the critique of theories of democracy, justice, and the rich, subtle, highly original criticisms of spatial arguments showcases Barnett's indubitable strength as a scholar: fostering a careful, judicious, and spatially sensitive critique of critical theory itself, and particularly untouched assumptions of radical certainties. In short, *The Priority of Injustice* is an ambitious, highly accomplished tour de force that demands profound engagement. It is a culmination of many years of work with critical theory and (perhaps less familiar to geographers) liberal philosophy and political theory. My purpose in this introduction is to lay out the basic architecture and principal arguments of the volume, and I let the sympathetic and thoughtful reviews of Joshua Barkan, Kirsi Pauliina Kallio, and Jennifer L. Fluri express their adulation or conversely, their reservations about *The Priority of Injustice*.

The book is laid out in three parts. Part I, "Democracy and Critique," aims not to define democracy, but to examine the nature of the concept of democracy as it is understood across a range of theories, and in particular how they mesh with particular concepts of power. Barnett warns us that such theories are not easily reconciled, and it is perhaps more appropriate to understand democracy through its situated meanings. In short, Barnett asks us to see democracy as an "essentially contested concept," but one that nonetheless is shaped by "ordinary," "emergent practices." In so doing, he attempts to dispel the idea that only a certain form of politics (especially when understood in heroic, street-level form) is "properly political" (p. 47). Barnett then points out that democratic politics is a response to forms of harm owing to horizontal relationships between people as well as the vertical exercise of power. Yet, importantly, democratic politics is not simply a struggle over the vertical exercise of power, but also involves "horizontal" cooperation to create more positive conditions of public life.

Part II, "Rationalities of the Political," engages initially with ontological interpretations of "the political" associated with radical or poststructuralist theories of agonistic pluralism, which are generally opposed to the rationalistic parameters of moralizing liberal pluralism. Barnett claims that we should reject the idea that democratic politics can only involve one or other of these. Concerning the former in particular, he argues that such ontological claims create a very particular definition of democracy, one that rests largely on an antiquarian notion of democracy and the political. At the same time, agonistic theories also tend to run parallel with the concepts of hegemony or subjectification, concepts for which Barnett offers a lengthy critique. In their place, he stresses a more action-centered conception of democratic politics, which allows us to view such politics

as exercised routinely and not simply at dramatic moments. In fact, Barnett insists, radical democratic politics tend to dismiss "ordinary" politics. This is ironic because it implies a spatiotemporal ordering in which fixed boundaries are disrupted by "events" that resist institutionalization.

Barnett's response to these problems involves two theoretical moves. One, following an "action-theoretic" approach and drawing on the work of Axel Honneth among others, is to rely particularly on Mary Dietz's claim that politics is characterized by "strategic forms of action." The second is to draw on Francis Fox Piven's idea of "dissensus politics," which concentrates on electoral politics and policymaking as well as social movement politics. In other words, it provides a thicker sociological understanding of state-society relations and the dynamics of popular mobilization. Poor people's movements result in "disruptive power"—a power that stems from cooperation and interdependence, but this does not "draw a sharp contrast between action that is routine and action that is disruptive" (p. 169).

Part III, "Phenomenologies of Injustice," begins by tracing the principle of "all affected interests" in critical theories of democracy, but Barnett argues that this rests on an unacknowledged "methodological globalism" that underpins theories of cosmopolitanism, justice, and transnational democracy. In his critical reconstruction of the principle, Barnett warns us away from an objective or causal determination of interests to emphasize how communities of the affected are imagined and discursively represented. In fact, the "lifeworlds" of "affectedness" (in which claims are expressed and resisted) can be thought of as a product of deliberative mediation or communicative interaction within situated encounters. Situated encounters occur within "emplaced contexts" such as cities, for example, which are also sites of democratic energy, and these contexts (which involve socialization and social reproduction) should be accounted for in the evolution of the all-affected principle. Thus, what is needed is a conversation between universal norms and situated or "concrete communities of deliberation," including those of nation-states. After all, critical theorists of democracy have often underestimated the resilience of territorial organization and the significance of national, ethnic, and other affinities. Thus, Barnett argues that we need to adjust our imaginations of the geographies of democratization, while concerning ourselves with norms of "nondomination" so that we focus more on understanding the dynamics of domination and experiences of injustice.

Barnett concludes Part III by emphasizing the idea of injustice over justice within democratic theory and politics. Although social movements might express injustice to some

extent, he does not “accord them unquestioned empirical authority or normative validity” (p. 267). Prioritizing injustice can account for the relationship between feelings of harm and their selective manifestation in the public realm. In other words, it is about understanding the “situated emergence of the sense of injustice” (p. 267). Barnett recognizes that the work of Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, and Iris Marion Young, who reject a universalist conception of justice, and who focus on cultural denigration, marginalization, or powerlessness, appeals to critical scholars, but he does question whether all “claims of injustice should be accorded equal value.” The easy response would be to argue that we need universal principles to “determine genuine from spurious claims” (p. 268), but he contends that this is formulated the wrong way around. Rather, we need to attend to claims of injustice to determine what we mean by justice. That is, following Iris Marion Young, we should see claims of justice and injustice as intersubjective accomplishments that shape democratic politics. Thus, injustices are prioritized through a process of deliberation in which such claims are evaluated, not out of skepticism, but out of a real commitment to hearing victims’ sense of harm, injury, and wrong.

Commentary by Joshua Barkan, Department of Geography, University of Georgia, Athens, GA.

For some time now, Clive Barnett has been asking geographers to think carefully about our assumptions in relation to our objects of analysis, including neoliberalism, justice, the public sphere, and democracy. *The Priority of Injustice* extends this approach, asking us not only to rethink some particular area of substantive research, but rather, as the opening lines of the book make clear, what we do when we engage with critical theory in general. I write of lines in the plural because *The Priority of Injustice* contains two different openings. The first, naturally, are those of the introduction, titled “Arguing with Theory,” which pose the blunt question of “what is theory good for?” Barnett answers that “theories are things we argue with” (p. 1), indicating that theories are both the supports we use in making arguments and also the things we argue over and against. Such arguments have high stakes, as he indicates, acknowledging that “arguments over theory are often undertaken as if the choice of an approach is a whole way of life” (p. 1).

With the stakes established as nothing less than our existence as scholars (our whole way of life), it is difficult not to transpose the two sides of this “arguing with” into something like a friend–enemy distinction. On one side are those theories that support and sustain us; on the other are

those so maddening, if not completely thoughtless, that we seek to obliterate them. It was this type of distinction, of course, that Schmitt (2007) asserted as the essence of the political, and one could certainly read this book against itself, suggesting that it remains trapped in the very ontological dimensions of the political that it seeks to disavow.

To do so, however, would be deeply unfaithful to the argument and the practice of reading in *The Priority of Injustice*. Although the book does have its key thinkers and ideas, it avoids simple up-and-down assessments on theorists’ proper names for a strategy of reading that highlights the strategic and action-theoretic dimensions in diverse traditions of thought. Thus, the central argument of *The Priority of Injustice* is that critical social science has taken its understandings of democracy from a series of critical and radical traditions that attempt to identify an authentic democratic politics as a temporal or spatial eruption against settled orders. Barnett locates this way of framing democratic politics in a stunningly wide variety of traditions: the multitude in Negri’s Spinozian immanentism; the order of politics against police in Rancière; the distinction between the ontic and the ontological in Heidegger and left-Heideggerian thought; and the vision of subjects as primarily subjected to power in thinkers such as Althusser and Foucault, to name only a few. He counterposes this way of thinking to one that focuses on the strategies individuals use as they engage in politicizing actions—often in relation to injustices—and the normative frameworks of democracy that such strategic practices suggest. Building on the Habermasian tradition, Barnett suggests that when we engage in strategic action to change something about the world (which is something like his definition of political action), we are already mobilizing some intersubjective normative principles. This happens not only when we raise issues about what it means to live a life in common, but also when we make claims against specific forms of domination or injustice.

Given that the traditions Barnett challenges are the ones that structure my own thinking, it would be easy to argue with him—to think of him as, if not an enemy (a threat to my whole way of life!), at least the object of my critique. *The Priority of Injustice* militates against that type of reading for two reasons. First, the book addresses a real problem in the uptake of critical theory in the social sciences: namely, a certain exhaustion of critical energies directed at uncovering the constructedness of things. For quite some time it has seemed as if recognizing that the present is socially constructed and therefore not natural, essential, or self-evident is the primary function of critical social science. Barnett shows how this operation often goes hand in hand

with positing a deeper layer of social reality in which power resides. Power, at this level, is conceptualized as a power over rather than a power to, and it is this power over that then provides the key to extracting truth out of contingent and constructed events. Thus, the basic model of critical social science falls into increasingly predictable patterns where empirical phenomena (whether it is corporate power, climate justice, organic food, social responsibility, globalization, state power, border policy, or urban governance) is socially constructed through a familiar set of discursive and regulatory practices. Behind this contingent construction there is a more essential phenomena or process (capitalism, neoliberalism, imperialism, racism, sovereignty, biopolitics, etc.) that explains the contingent and constructed nature of the perceived and experienced phenomena. The problem with this operation, as Barnett helps us see, is that if the deep structure answers or explains the fundamental nature of all observed events, it is unclear why we should research or care about the empirical phenomena at all. Once we establish that behind, say, recent manifestations of corporate power there is actually just sovereignty or biopolitics or neoliberalism, what else is left to say? Because my own work has been genealogical in a manner not dissimilar to those Barnett challenges, the book helps me think about different ways of approaching empirical phenomena with open-ended questions, as well as indicating new roles for theory in that process.

Second, Barnett reads his nominal opponents immanently. Unlike the debates over poststructuralism in the 1990s, Barnett provides careful readings of theorists from whom he departs, putting them in conversation with other lines of democratic theory that rarely engage one another. Even more fascinating, in many cases he identifies foundations for the type of action-theoretic concepts he is interested in within the work of thinkers who have been taken up otherwise. For instance, in his lucid discussion of Heidegger, Barnett shows how the distinction between the ontic and the ontological has come to frame debates over politics, setting off an ontological category of “the political” (the authentic sphere of true politics) against the merely ontic forms of everyday management as “politics” (the inauthentic realm of daily action). Yet he also suggests there are other ways of reading this split in which the two categories are not separate layers of social life (like form and appearance) but are simply different elements of things. As Barnett puts it, the practical action of “knowing how” that Heidegger associates with the ontological takes precedent over the ontic “knowing that.” Read in this manner, the ontological dimensions of politics would be something like the affective responses that we all have to events (the cry of pain, the shock of horror, the emotions of love and sym-

pathy, the sense of injustice)—responses that are not more foundational levels of politics but completely intertwined with how we strategically navigate the world.

Yet there remains the problem of the second opening of the book. In the acknowledgments, which appear before the introduction, Barnett humbly states his relation to the text: “I think of this as a book written by a jobbing social scientist, informed as it is by my own experience of working on empirically led research projects . . . where the meaning of democracy has often been a background presence” (p. xi). Besides radically underselling the philosophical sophistication of the book, this suggests Barnett’s desire to make space for social science in the study of democracy. In a book that has little time for polemics, Barnett is at his most pugnacious when discussing continental philosophy’s “calculated disdain for empirical social science” (p. 78). Rancière comes in for the worst blows for connecting empirical social science itself (exemplified by Pierre Bourdieu) with the order of what he calls “police”—the stable order of social relations that, for Rancière, is the antithesis of politics. This drives Barnett nuts, an exasperation driven by, in Barnett’s words, “a style of political theory that effectively seeks to make itself irrefutable” (p. 127).

This opening, however, raises its own issues, less focused on theory and more on social science. If thinkers from Heidegger to Foucault can be read as concerned with strategic problems, is the problem with the theorizing of democracy in continental thought or with the way these philosophical debates have been transposed into empirical social science? One can always critique theoretical abstractions, yet what surprised me about Barnett’s account is that the thinkers most connected with what he describes as “the ontological need” (Chapter 3) are also deeply concerned with the strategic action of individuals. For instance, Rancière’s (2011, 2012) historical work seems to embody the very types of attention to the contextualized practices of individuals as they respond to injustice that Barnett sees as a way forward. Although Rancière conceptualizes these moments as punctual and has little interest in the way they might establish normative principles that could be institutionalized, he at least recognizes the ordinary dimensions of political action.

Relatedly, “the critique” in critical theory, going back to Kant, has always been concerned not only with political projects, but also with the forms of knowledge (including the social sciences) that gave them warrant. This critique of knowledge runs through works Barnett considers—in Althusser’s reading of ideology and science, Derrida’s discussion of text, Foucault on examination and discipline,

and so on. It has been most incisively developed by post-colonial theorists, who demonstrated that attempts to know and write the world, say ethnographically or geographically, were deeply involved with the inscription of a people (an *ethnos*) or a world (a *geo*) for colonial appropriation (Said 1994). In this regard, I wonder if the tradition of democratic theory that Barnett is interested in has a different—more modest but maybe more trenchant—aspiration to problematize the practice of social science. Such critique not only shows the way these concepts have developed and their conditions of possibility, but the way they are shaped by their often unstated context and social formations. Accepting such a formulation poses a different question for Barnett: How does the return to social science that he advocates deal with this element of the critique in critical theory, not directed at the world but at ourselves?

Commentary by Kirsi Pauliina Kallio, Space and Political Agency Research Group, University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland.

The first part of the book *The Priority of Injustice* includes a six-page section titled “Affirmations of Ordinary Life.” There Clive Barnett outlines his attempt “to approach democracy as an ordinary concept” (p. 58). He aligns with thinkers such as Raymond Williams and Charles Taylor, and John Dunn (1996), who claims democracy to be “the political acceptance of the ordinary” (511). Barnett is also inspired by how Cavell (2002) and Das (2015) talk about the meaning of concepts in terms of “going on,” in a Wittgensteinian spirit: “Knowing how to ‘go on’ with a concept does not involve knowing what it means so much as appreciating the significance of those ‘dispersed forms of action’ that count for what it means and why it matters to those who are using it” (p. 59). Such is “not a matter of dramatic willfulness. It is a feature of ordinary usage” (p. 61).

This opening section of the book sparked off my interest. Accompanied by the introduction, Part I consists of an excursion to a number of philosophical positionings, ideas, interpretations, claims, and what Barnett sees as their failures, which is followed by his proposition for using critical theory better. The intention is further explicated in the third part of the book, where Barnett suggests a new methodological approach to studying democracy as it unfolds in our societies and communities—taking place in cabinets as well as on the streets, through the activities of individual persons and collectives, enacted by people with and without citizen status, and deliberated and debated by actors leading, planning, managing, and developing democratic life in diverse institutional roles and positions of trust. As

I see it, this is an attempt to grasp the ordinariness of political life.

At the American Association of Geographers (AAG) 2018 meeting in New Orleans, where we discussed the book in an Author Meets Critics session, I learned that the extensive philosophical discussion forming the second part of the book seemed as “the stake” to many of the commentators. To me it appears as a preface, to the last part where Barnett presents his own take on democracy. Part II surely offers an indispensable introduction as new suggestions in democratic theory are not likely to fly without systematic justification, so there is no doubt about its significance. Such openings are not only hard to make, but also hard to come up with. “The political,” “politics,” and “democracy” are such broadly discussed and contested concepts within and across disciplines that squeezing out something new is always a struggle.

In what follows, I take into focus some aspects presented in the final part of the book, specifically in the section “Claims of the Affected.” While reading it, I set out to ask the author, through my own recent and ongoing research in Finland, questions about affectedness in the ordinariness of political life.

Current urban development has led to the formation of city-regions in many parts of the world. Some of these spatial configurations are rather firmly defined territorial areas with governing structures and institutions. Others are functional agglomerations established gradually through the expansion of a big city or the merging of several urbanities. Additionally, more or less porous and indefinite associations of urban and rural areas might profile as city-regions when they share common interests and have hopes about better (economic) opportunities together.

Finnish city-regions fall between the last two types. The Capital Region, formed around Helsinki and involving three other cities, comes closest to a functional city-region. Others are loosely formed clusters, involving a bunch of municipalities located close to each other with one bigger city as the connecting factor. Some city-regional institutions and state-supported large-scale activities exist, however, most importantly related to land-use planning. Planning, as urban and political geographers know so well, is one of the key venues of democratic society. Thus, in a liberal democracy like Finland, citizens ought to have standing in city-regional planning. Yet, at the present, city-regional citizenship does not exist as a status, and there are no democratic structures for civic participation in the city-regional planning processes.

The situation in Finland is not unique. The whole idea of city-regional citizenship seems contradictory in contexts where the city-region does not exist as an established area or a governable unit, but where various city-regional processes and projects begin and end, involving different collaborators in each case, including a varying number of municipalities. How could people have status and active membership in such a polity that does not exist as an enduring entity?

Another way to approach the question—that is, Barnett’s way—is to ask who the people being affected by city-regional planning processes and the following development projects are. Following the all-affected principle, they are the ones who should have the chance to actively take part in the democratic life of fluctuating city-regions. This approach reaches beyond the idea that citizenship is merely defined by status, toward the conception of “lived citizenship” as diverse forms of political belonging and practice. Of course, the simple guideline does not alone solve the complexities of city-regional citizen participation. In city-regional processes, it is demanding to identify the people potentially being affected, much less to involve them all in planning and decision making by equal means. As Barnett notes himself, “The number and location of those affected by complex chains of action and consequences expands beyond the scope of easy comprehension” (pp. 188–89). As some further ideas, he suggests distinguishing between “*having an interest* in an issue from *taking and interest* [as] two aspects of being affected,” and further emphasizes the active stances that citizens may take by adding in “a third dimension, the aspect of affecting, of having agency or the capacity to act in concert” (189, italics in original). Drawing from Noortje Marres, Barnett also brings in the dimension of “issue-affectedness” that might be fruitful in narrowing down the people who should be primarily involved (pp. 198–99).

The current human rights climate places children into rather particular societal positions. Entitled to children’s rights in addition to general human rights, the youngest generations acquire more basic rights than any other group of people. As proposed by the United Nations and agreed on by most states, the rights of the child concern all young individuals, partly with their families, in the country where they physically reside. Depending on how states have adopted the rights in their legislation, from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and mobilize them in policies and institutional practices, the meanings of children’s rights certainly vary from place to place.

In the liberal democratic welfare state of Finland, children’s rights to be heard in matters concerning them are strongly emphasized in legislation and policies. Institutions and pro-

fessionals are required to organize their activities so that children and youth have opportunities to have their say. In the private sphere, too, children should be appreciated as active members of their mundane communities, as family members and in hobbies, for instance. Although the right to be heard is conditioned by other rights of the child—most important the rights to protection and provision that often overlap and overcome the rights to participation, determining in practice how children’s voices can exert influence—there should be no excuse to not hear children in the first place when something concerning them is being planned, decided, determined, or implemented. The question that arises is this: What matters do *not* concern or affect children?

To open up what follows from this question, let me return briefly to the earlier section on city-regional planning. It is obvious that young generations are among those strongly affected by long-term planning processes and the following development projects. They are typically so slow to realize that children grow out of childhood before completion—think about building a regional tram or establishing a new residential area at the border of two municipalities as two common examples. The all-affected principle hence applies to them as well. But how to understand and approach children in such processes, as citizens? Should they be seen as representatives of their age group, kids living in the same area, or pupils going to the same school? From this perspective, children and youth can be involved representatively with regard to different roles and positions persisting from generation to generation. Or should we think that children are particular political subjects with more and less in common with their age-mates, neighbors, and peers at school? This is how we tend to see people as liberal citizens—free to orient politically, regardless of age, gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, or any other attribute. If we respect young generations in the same way, children should be heard as particular persons with their own ideas and attitudes, as people who can choose to associate with like-minded people and enact political agency with them.

Think about yourself as a child: Into which category would you place yourself? Similar to everyone with similar characteristics? Or a particular person sharing values, attitudes, views and opinions with those close to you? Most institutional interpretations of the UNCRC are based on the former. Perhaps the all-affected principle could be helpful in considering the latter perspective, as proposed by Barnett, with emphasis on politics as an (extraordinary) aspect of (ordinary) human agency.

Although I find Barnett’s approach on democracy productive in the two study contexts already discussed, it appears

more complicated regarding the third research field, where I am currently thinking about the possibilities and actualizations of political agency. With their mere existence, refugees contest the idea of liberal citizenship based on the territorial state system, and it is difficult to see how their political agencies could be enforced through the all-affected principle.

Some refugees have citizenship status in the country of origin, but many people who flee either lose that status due to their escape or never had that in any country. If relocated or afforded asylum, refugees might gain citizen status in the host country, even if this happens rarely, or they might achieve partial citizen rights as residents. This said, most refugees are not relocated nor afforded asylum, but stay waiting at refugee camps, asylum centers, and in informal housing in urban areas, where they hope to be recognized and helped as asylum seekers. In these situations, political rights other than human rights do not exist, and even they are often poorly fulfilled. Citizenship as status and formal practice is, hence, out of most refugees' reach.

The political agency that refugees exercise most visibly are different forms of activism. Through demonstrations, sit-ins, and other public events, they enact citizenship as part of the civil society, often supported by local and transnational activists who might bring in more resources through their established societal positions. In such cases we can see how by joining forces over the status divide, citizenship can be used and made use of collectively, targeting matters that concern and affect refugees at large and contextually—thus emphasizing the “aspect of affecting” in Barnett's theorization.

The refugee communities affected by national policies and supranational political strategies, however, are much broader than those at their immediate focus. Think about the current situation in Europe and its bordering regions, for example. Millions of refugees in Turkey, the Middle East, and northern Africa are affected by the tightening immigration policies of European countries and the European Union, not to mention the people who are yet to leave their countries behind to seek asylum in Europe. Most of them are not activists and have no resources or possibilities to become activists. How could they be approached as citizens through the all-affected principle? How could their voices be brought to bear on European refugee and asylum policies?

In the book, Barnett presents that, “Public action depends on the capacity of actors to respond to events that neither directly affect them nor are immediately affected by them” (p. 189). To me it seems that these actors cannot easily be

refugees. I have arrived at the view that the ideas of affectedness do not go well together with political agencies growing from beyond formal politics. Also, I have come to think that theoretical ideas of spatial relationality, that set out to challenge the state system as the sole locus of democracy and citizenship, are perhaps ill-fitting with the all-affected principle. As the political subjectivities, agencies, and activities of refugees largely form and actualize beyond the territorial spaces of states and borders, it seems that they also require different theoretical approaches to democracy.

Commentary by Jennifer L. Fluri, Department of Geography, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO.

Clive Barnett's *The Priority of Injustice* is an ambitious, thoughtful, and insightful book, which I argue should be a must read for students and scholars tackling theoretical and empirical questions concerning global processes that articulate systems and institutions of injustice. This book is organized into three parts, “Democracy and Critique,” “Rationalities of the Political,” and “Phenomenologies of Injustice.” Each section includes robust and varied inquiries regarding ontology, conflict, globalization, affect, and recognition. This book provides thorough analyses that open up space for new questions and further inquiry. Therefore, this is an excellent book to assign in graduate courses, as Barnett's analyses generate intensive, thought-provoking discussions. Barnett draws on a myriad of theorists, including Althusser, Arendt, Benhabib, Butler, Derrida, Douzinas, Fraser, Graeber, Gramsci, Merleau-Ponty, Mouffe, Rancière, Young, and Žižek, to name a few! These and other theorists are then put into conversation with geographers, which I would like to underscore as a particular strength of this book.

Barnett's examination of universality is compelling and it left me questioning the inherent contradictions between the contestability required of democracy (i.e., civil disobedience) and the quest for universalism. Does this quest or the parameters of universalism serve to negate or disrupt the inherent disputes necessary for democratic processes to effectively function? Therefore, I am more compelled by differential forms of democracy and liberal politics over that of universalisms. If, as argued on page 83, politics is a game played by elites, doesn't universality operate at the behest of elites toward reinforcing power structures that ensure their status while eroding precious little space for civil discord and political challenge to existing hierarchies? Universality, while discursively seeking justice, simultane-

ously dispossesses certain individuals of their ability to access justice. In some cases, this works by identifying specific persons as inherently unjust and operating outside of the “universal” (i.e., enemy combatants). In addressing these conundrums, Barnett discusses politics as having “closed down the possibility of properly heroic action” (p. 85). Although the definition of “heroic action” can (and surely will) be debated, the ontological frameworks that shape debates about universalism and political action are expertly discussed and analyzed by Barnett. Additionally, he takes great care when discussing the differences between how the political is interpreted ontologically, and the ways in which various theorists discuss the “dynamics of human action” (p. 109).

The discussion of radical democracy in this book is intriguing and leads the reader (or at least this reader) toward additional questions. Barnett’s examination of radical democracy pushed me to question the role (if any) of radical equality within the confines of democratic structures. Additionally, his discussion of Gramsci left me questioning the intersected relationship between coercion and consent. Barnett grapples with this relationship in Chapter 4, which is appropriately named “The Scandal of Consent.” Here he charts an alternative path, “one in which questions of consent are kept alive by being made central to an understanding of democratic politics as the problematization of relations of delegation, dependence, and support” (p. 113). This chapter reviews the concept of hegemony as integral to various forms of radical political thought. He deals with the muddy and often turbulent theoretical waters of consent and consensus by identifying that consent is regularly given “grudgingly,” simultaneously calling attention to the ways in which certain inequalities and advantages remain hidden. To further delve into these complications, Barnett turns in the following chapter to conceptualizing conflict.

I found the “Significance of Conflict,” Chapter 5, to be most compelling, as it outlines various theoretical engagements with political conflict. The section on ontologies of antagonism was especially engaging. This section draws heavily from the work of Chantal Mouffe focusing on her analyses of antagonism. This discussion (p. 147) of Girard’s examination of sacrifice illustrates both the ways in which concepts of sacrifice are operationalized for political purposes, and the spatial and situational divisions between combatants and civilians. These divisions, Barnett reminds us, remain in jeopardy of creating and maintaining the “friend/enemy antagonism” (p. 151). Although this is a short section, I found it particularly significant for contemporary examinations of political conflict, which regularly occurs in urban-populated spaces.

Barnett further addresses violence with regard to the legitimacy of injustice by examining the concept of recognition. His examination of Iris Marion Young’s arguments about injustice refocuses the reader toward the practices and affective experiences of structural injustices, to challenge the idea that determining injustice “is just a matter of sorting relations between luck and responsibility” (p. 224). Thus, the concept of luck rather than being a scapegoat of injustices is wedded to institutions that create and affirm structural injustice. Later, Barnett engages with Nancy Fraser’s analyses by focusing on affectedness as a method of making claims “against arbitrary subjection” (p. 236). Thus, this chapter is focused on forms, functions, and conceptions of domination. Barnett further elaborates on domination and affective experiences of injustice in Chapter 8, “Sense of Injustice,” which includes a careful reading and overview of critical theory.

By placing injustice at the center of his critical inquiries, Barnett challenges us to reexamine existing ontologies and epistemologies of justice. The concluding chapter of this exceptionally written text underscores the need for critical scholars to “attend more closely to the conceptual prioritization of injustice in critical theories of democracy” (p. 273). This is a text that not only makes you think, but also question and delve deep into existing theoretical foundations, which should clearly be viewed as unstable.

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I want to acknowledge the care and generosity of spirit with which Joshua Barkan, Kirsi Pauliina Kallio, and Jennifer L. Fluri have engaged with *The Priority of Injustice*, and also express my thanks to Michael Samers in organizing this forum. For the sake of convenience, in responding to the issues they raise, I structure my own comments around the two openings to *The Priority of Injustice* that Barkan identifies, one relating to issues about doing theory, and one to do with ideas about critique in human geography.

Responses to and reviews of *The Priority of Injustice* have noticed that it does not contain any empirical cases. It is a book about theory. Writing about theory is not merely a matter of exegesis. I think of *The Priority of Injustice* as a kind of essay, as a preliminary undertaking that imaginatively lays out ideas as a first step in refining specific problems and their analysis (see Tuan 1984, ix–x). In particular, the book works through the difference between action-oriented styles of social theory and subject-centric theories,

and I want here to elaborate on some of the reasons why I think it matters.

The Priority of Injustice has a three-part structure. The first part, “Democracy and Critique,” considers how different concepts of meaning shape debates about the meaning of concepts like democracy, concepts that are both descriptive and normative in their application. As Kallio observes, it might be the second part of the book, “Rationalities of the Political,” that attracts most attention among geographers. It focuses on different interpretations of the distinction between “the political” and “politics,” or some variant of that distinction. I seek to redeem an action-centered imagination of political life that is all too easily elided by the layered ontologies of subjectification and affect that dominate readings of political theory in human geography. Rejecting the tired contrast between consensual and agonistic styles of political theory, I suggest that the real choice when thinking seriously about the value of democracy is between different ways of conceptualizing conflict. In Chapter 5, I recommend Mary Dietz’s proposition that political life involves an irreducible aspect of strategic action, as an alternative to inflated ontological claims about ineradicable antagonism and violence. This perspective shifts attention, as Fluri notes, squarely on to the task of better understanding how consent is sought and secured; or, if you prefer, to the relationship between the politics of power and the politics of support. It invites, in turn, a reconfiguration of key concepts; for example, throwing new light on how the idea of governmentality can inform the analysis of democratization (pp. 132–41). It is this action-oriented imagination that is then further elaborated in the third part of the book, “Phenomenologies of Injustice,” which outlines a program of analysis that avoids the theoreticism associated with the paradigm of spatial politics that privileges the dynamics of closure and exclusion involved in the positioning of subjects in fields of meaning and affective force.

This action-theoretic perspective shifts understandings of persistent problems in democratic theory. For example, much of the work I consider in *The Priority of Injustice* is concerned with reimagining the normative dynamics of the claims to universalism that are an integral and irreducible aspect of democratic politics. Fluri wonders whether modes of theorizing that aim to reconfigure the value of universality don’t necessarily entail some form of illegitimate exclusion. I’m not sure that is the case at all. Thinkers such as Jurgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib, as well as poststructuralist stalwarts like Judith Butler, share in the idea of thinking of universalism as a horizon rather than a ground or foundation. This involves redefining the

normative value of the universal away from claims to impartiality, toward thinking of universalism in terms of the dialogical dynamics of claims of inclusion. Universalism is thereby transformed from a prescriptive criterion of evaluation into the name for a worldly process of problematization. To fully grasp the significance of this transformation, one would certainly have to suspend one’s credulity toward poststructuralist shibboleths about the constitutive movement of exclusion in the formation of identities and meaning (pp. 152–56). One would also have to reimagine how norms are thought to function: less as subject-forming normalizations, and rather more as varied modes of oughtness that orient actions.

In *The Priority of Injustice*, the geographical significance of an action-theoretic perspective is most fully elaborated through the reconstruction of the theme of all-affectedness in democratic theory. I take Kallio’s engagement with this theme as an important affirmation of how a book about theory can, indeed, inform empirical analysis not so much by providing answers, but by helping reframe and refine problems. She worries, though, that the all-affectedness idea does not really work very well in relation to processes that are not contained territorially within the scope of nation-state. On the contrary, it is precisely those sorts of cases that help to clarify what sort of concept all-affectedness is. It is not meant to be an external norm of evaluation; affectedness is the genre through which the very meaning of democracy is invoked, used, and stretched in worldly situations.

The principle that anyone affected by a decision should have some say in its formulation is a fairly intuitive aspect of the idea of democracy. The all-affected principle is traditionally discussed as an evaluative or prescriptive norm of one sort or another. In its revival in recent democratic theory, it is used to develop accounts of democratic inclusion that privilege relations of power over those of membership (consistent with the methodological globalism of a great deal of contemporary democratic theory). The problem with that shift of emphasis is that it lends itself to a view of affectedness as something that can be objectively determined by some form of causal analysis. This is why, for example, Nancy Fraser ends up rejecting the notion of affectedness as a democratic norm, on the grounds that it is an idea that supports monological forms of reasoning. It is an argument that geographers should take very seriously, given how far the idea of tracking relationships of causal interdependence now define the form and content of geographical pedagogy and research.

At first sight, the all-affected interest idea seems to contain two dimensions—one of being affected, and one of being

able to affect outcomes in some way. In Chapter 6 of *The Priority of Injustice*, I argue that one can actually divide the first of these two aspects—the sense of being affected—into two, differentiating between a sense of having an interest in an issue in a kind of objective way, and a sense of taking an interest in an issue, in a sort of subjective way. This refinement means that the idea of affectedness cannot be straightforwardly used as a principle to evaluate states of affairs. Echoing Robert Dahl, though, it is a good place to start. Not least, it is a good place to start investigating how claims of injustice are assembled; how they emerge and are expressed, processed, and warranted.

Thinking of all-affectedness in this way, as a worldly register through which democracy is posited, problematized, and contested, as well as a place to start analysis also underscores a sharp difference between two ways of thinking about why a geographical imagination matters to political analysis. Thinking of the geographically strung-out, heterogeneous, “relational” constitution of social life is most often used to tell moral stories about the constitution of identities by revealing the fact of being bound into other people’s actions without knowing it. As already suggested, though, that’s a way of thinking that entrains a series of monological forms of reasoning. A relational geographical imagination is interesting for a much more serious reason, but also perhaps a less all-encompassing reason—as writers such as James Bohman and Iris Marion Young demonstrate, it is a way of thinking that is only important in so far as it opens up questions about the relations between agency, consent, and domination (see also Robbins 2017).

The second opening to *The Priority of Injustice* identified by Barkan refers to the status of critique in geography and related fields. Recent “critiques of critique” focus on the limits of procedures concerned with the relentless exposure of the constructedness of phenomena. They tend to avoid any serious treatment of the tradition of Critical Theory, with a big C, however, in which critique involves a negotiation between facts and norms. They thereby continue to dodge the “justificatory dilemma” that is central to debates about the futures of critical theory, revolving around the double imperative to both demonstrate the plausibility and justify the validity of posited alternative visions of social life (pp. 39–43). The fundamental difference between an action-theoretic and a subject-centric perspective with respect to this dilemma turns on how the possibility of change is understood.

There is an internal relationship between concepts of subjectivity-as-subjectification, often articulated in strongly ontological registers, and the idea that power works through naturalization, essentialization, and universaliza-

tion. From this set of associations arises a notion of critique as an exercise in defamiliarization that demonstrates the possibility of the changeability of identities and practices that are, apparently, lived and experienced as eternal and inevitable. The assumption that this is how life is lived and experienced is a projection of the methodological and conceptual protocols derived from ontologized theories of subjectification and affect. In the associated paradigm of spatial politics, it is assumed that subjects are formed by being “enframed,” by being set in place—before a painting, a chain of signifiers, a field of perception, a structure of address, or just immersed in an atmosphere. It is also assumed that any individual or collective identity is constitutively posited against an abjected “other,” so that subject formation appears as a form of exclusionary territorialization. This is a paradigm in which it is assumed that people’s subjective dispositions are functional effects of mediated systems of malevolent power. You thereby arrive at a framework for analyzing any and all practices as scenes for the reproduction of various exclusions and always potential sites for the creative reconfiguration of the emotional attachments and imaginary identifications before which people remain necessarily enthralled. The shared presupposition is that politics—both of the sort one doesn’t approve of and of the sort one hopes to support—works through changing the subject.

The consolidation of this paradigm of analysis, with its specific sense of the marginal spatialities and eventful temporalities of political life, reflects an important shift in the way in which change itself is conceptualized in social theory. In all sorts of social science, it is taken for granted that change is an intrinsic feature of social life. The task of explaining how this feature manifests itself usually involves some procedure in which action is placed within a broader frame of context, or conditions, or constraint. With the ascendancy of subject-centered theories, under the sway of poststructural theories and the turn to ontology, one can see the emergence of a very different image of change. Whether it is theories of hegemony, or of the distribution of the sensible, or of ontological politics, or of assemblage, it is presumed that the task of theory is to account for the stabilization, ordering, or fixing of the essential flux of life into patterns of serial reproducibility. Change, in these accounts, is extraordinary—the overriding interpretative concern is to simply establish the very possibility of change itself. So it is that subject-centric theories and ontologies of the political elide the problem of the validity of alternative futures into demonstrations of the plausibility of change. At best, they simply elevate openness to change and contestation as the highest normative aspiration available to us and as the very essence of democracy.

Thinking of change as an ordinary feature of life that is manifested in various ways, rather than thinking of change as a rare event that interrupts stable routines, is at the core of what I call in *The Priority of Injustice*, after Cavell's sense of this word, an *ordinary* understanding of the uncertain dynamics of democratic politics. It is an understanding that informs my argument that democracy is not just a contested concept, but that this contestability derives in large part from its status as an inherently evaluative concept whose meaning is shaped by the ways in which it is applied in new contexts. This is not an argument about how democracy can be made to mean just what one wants it to mean (the complex words that help to express political life are not "empty signifiers"). It is an argument in favor of attending to the observable range of applications of democratic practices to better understand what it is that democracy is good for, and what its limits might be.

Experiences of harm, injury, and wrong—feelings of injustice—do not always get articulated through a vocabulary of democracy. The historical significance of political life being framed in and through democratic norms—of inclusion, accountability, representation, participation—should be a focus of further inquiry in geography. The action-theoretic imagination that I deploy in *The Priority of Injustice* is offered as a means of directing our curiosity toward that sort of inquiry. An argument about the priority of injustice can easily be misinterpreted as a call to favor practice over theory, but the sort of priority for which I argue in the book is a conceptual one—it is an argument about the need to think about injustice in its own terms, not against a background of ideal theories from which injustice shows up as a departure. This is a difficult task, and there is only a minor tradition of existing scholarship from which to draw in pursuing it. It is a task that challenges various shibboleths of

critical analysis in geography: It requires an ability, for example, to take the concept of experience seriously in ways that might well be impossible for favored styles of cultural theory in particular; it interrupts many of the conventions associated with self-consciously activist strands of scholarship; it requires an acknowledgment that institutionalized responses to injustice are necessarily impure (cf. Barkan and Pulido 2017). Difficult tasks of thinking, however, should be the ones we approach with enthusiasm rather than from which we shy away.

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