Review Essay

Democracy and Justice


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Mackie’s volume is a path-breaking, thorough, and innovative overview of the subject of social choice and its implications for understanding democracy. It is made up of various lines of analysis including historical interpretation, a review of massive numbers of statistical studies and a careful analysis of numerous aspects of the logical proof of Kenneth Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem. It will be ‘must reading’ for all who wish to understand democracy given the work in the social choice field over the last 50 years. On the other hand, it has its shortcomings. By focusing on a particular school of attackers of democracy (led by William Riker), the book becomes less balanced and less useful than it might be. Most unfortunately, Mackie does not take the plunge to see what positive elements flow from such related fields as theories of justice. Finally, by avoiding these other fields, the centrality of politics in the pursuit of justice is one of the implications of the analysis that is missed.

KEY WORDS: voting cycles; democratic theory; justice; Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem.

Advocates for social justice press governments for social policies for the poor, for the extension of human rights to those less capable of equal representation, as well as for amelioration of market failures and other economic injustices. Interestingly, we are almost always supporters of democratic governance. How surprised, for example, we were when Shadia Drury,\textsuperscript{3} in her keynote address at

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\textsuperscript{3}Prof. Drury holds the Canada Research Chair in Social Justice at the University of Regina. She gave a keynote address at the Social Justice Research Bi-Annual Meetings in Regina, Canada June 30 to July 3, 2004. Of course, her comments were nuanced, and hedged by the arguments she developed. But her statement, which was quite direct and sudden, electrified the audience of social justice researchers.
Oppenheimer's latest meeting, asserted that she was an ‘anti-democrat.’ Our support of democracy could come from indoctrination, or from reason. But a famous finding regarding the limitation of democracy has tended to serve as a block to the immediate reasoned support of democracy. The work of Kenneth Arrow (1972 Nobel Laureate in Economics) has put a barrier between democracy and any easy assumption of responsiveness of its output to the needs of its citizens. This finding is usually called Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem, after its discoverer. It has led to an enormous body of scholarship referred to as the “social choice” literature. One branch of analysis stemming from this finding has been written by Riker (1982) and some of his students, and other like-minded scholars. These politically conservative scholars have despaired that democracy has no sensible means for aggregating voters’ judgements or choices into sensible outcomes. They argue there can be no ‘sense of the legislature,’ no ‘group rationale behind group choice.’ I believe most of the scholars who have adopted this interpretation have been political scientists. Economists have been more sanguine.

Although there are plenty of scholars who have looked at Arrow’s arguments and come to other more moderate, more pro-democracy, conclusions (c.f. Mueller, 1996, pp. 169–170), Mackie’s volume is a uniquely frontal and blistering attack on the over-reach of a number of the social choice scholars’ pessimistic interpretations of the Impossibility Theorem. He especially singles out Riker for his lack of reasoned conclusions concerning the possibility of responsive democratic government. We social justice theorists are, of course, consumers of democracy. Our theories, if they are to be realized in public policy, depend upon a relatively optimistic relationship between the needs of the populace and the outcomes of democratic politics. So we are all rooting for one side in the debate: the same side as Mackie. If the debate were not central to the understanding of the expectations we can have of a democracy, we could perhaps ignore it. In this essay, I shall begin with a short explication of the problem that Arrow addresses and then turn to the more general Arrow Impossibility Theorem. I will try to illuminate some of the issues with special concern for our field, and introduce the reader to the arguments on both sides of the debate. My sympathies, it must be said at the outset, are clearly in Mackie’s corner.

CYCLES

Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, also called The Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794), was a great champion of democracy, the enlightenment, humanism, social justice, women’s rights, and was one of the most analytic of the classic democratic theorists. When the French Revolution turned murderous, to protect his family, Condorcet went underground as a fugitive and was picked up by authorities on a tip by someone who recognized him at a bar where he had gone to beg for food. He died almost immediately thereafter in prison.