

*Politics as Usual: What Lies Behind the
Pro-Poor Rhetoric*
by Thomas Pogge

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010
(ISBN: 978-0-7456-3893-5). 224pp.

Ruth Jack (University of Glasgow)

Politics as Usual is a bold, critical and often cynical discussion on issues of global significance and their relationship to poverty. It is a condemnation of world leadership in tackling those issues and, most poignantly, it is a criticism of the reader as a citizen of the world for their apathy in the face of overwhelming suffering and inequality.

The author, Thomas Pogge, is a philosopher of German birth who now holds senior professorial positions in eminent universities around the world. Pogge begins the book with an explanation of his personal world view, which he says was deeply affected at an early age by the discovery that every adult he knew played a part in the horrendous events of the Second World War, and that as a nation they were responsible for mass murder on an unimaginable scale. His sense of shock, personal culpability, and moral outrage at this discovery were obviously deeply felt and are themes which continue to shape his life, his thinking, and the tone and content of this book.

Politics as Usual is therefore a deeply personal book, an intimate exploration between author and reader of issues of enormous significance that Pogge brings abruptly to our attention, offering facts and figures of staggering magnitude that can be uncomfortable to read. Pogge begins this exploration with a discussion on Global Justice, with particular reference to global poverty, asserting that:

Many more people - 360 million - have died from hunger and remedial diseases in peacetime in the 20 years since the end of the Cold War than perished from wars, civil wars and government repression over the entire twentieth century (p.11)

Pogge continues by discussing this poverty within the context of 'unprecedented global affluence' (p.12), and makes the observation that, whilst the gap between rich and poor is continuing to widen, a small and almost imperceptible adjustment to the income of the richest in society would result in the eradication of extreme poverty worldwide.

Pogge then goes on to discuss the very meaning of the term 'global justice', which leads into a section entitled 'The Human Rights of the Global Poor'. Pogge takes his time to explore the philosophical basis on which the term 'global' has come to be used in place of 'international', and discusses the role of global institutions within a new world order that have replaced bounded countries in importance. The writing is at times slow going, and Pogge himself admits that 'the discussion has been tedious and unpleasant' (p.107). However, his argument that the international rights of the poorest individuals are lost or ignored within this new global order is well made and very relevant to the journey ahead.

Pogge's unwrapping of the issue of extreme poverty continues with a discussion on the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), indices of poverty and gender equity, and growth and inequality. Throughout, the reader is addressed directly and challenged to take collective responsibility for the wrongs that persist and are growing. With reference to the MDGs and what Pogge sees as shifting targets for their achievement, he warns:

How are Kofi Annan and the rest of us going to explain to those 496 million people that we changed our minds and that consequently they shall not have a minimum, nutritionally adequate diet plus essential non-food requirements? (p.60)

However, Pogge reserves his most critical attack for those world leaders, both political and business, whom he believes allow and maintain these global atrocities and injustices, noting that ‘the poor have no friends among the global elite’ (p.62). And yet, whilst his statistical analysis of the depth of world poverty is accurate and needs to be stated, his discussion on the role of world leadership within this context is not always convincing. His argument seems to be that not only do world leaders allow the status quo to persist but actively and knowingly collude to maintain it for their own ends. Pogge apports them an organised and malevolent intent on the basis of evidence that appears tenuous, and could amount to no more than grammatical nuances and interpretation.

At this juncture, Pogge turns his attention to other issues of moral significance, which he skillfully relates to his central theme of extreme poverty. This starts with a discussion on abortion, with particular reference to the importance and polarisation of opinion the issue continues to generate in the US. He continues by looking at terrorism and the morality of the international war on terror that is perpetrated in the name of the western world. The Rwandan genocide is his next topic of choice, with particular attention paid to the way the United Nations used its own constitution as a basis upon which to reject intervention. Finally, Pogge completes his journey with a section entitled ‘Reflection on the European Union’s “Democratic Deficit”’, highlighting the undemocratic

nature of this powerful international institution, and the particular influence that certain large member states have within the EU.

Politics as Usual is not light reading, either in content or style, and should be read with caution. It is likely to challenge, disturb and shock any reader willing to enter the world described by Pogge. Nevertheless, it is essential reading for anyone interested in international relations, politics, economics or world development, and will doubtless be read with eager interest by philosophers and fans of Pogge's work. Most importantly though, it is accessible to 'everyday' people as an alternative perspective on the world that many of us think we know and understand. Despite the sometimes heavy-going nature of the philosophical discussion Pogge brings a very personal and heartfelt morality to issues that are usually dealt with in high economic terms, and he passionately argues the case for a fairer and more equal world in which we can all take part. Quite clearly, his early childhood experiences have left an indelible mark of responsibility for the plight of the downtrodden and voiceless, and in this, we are the grateful, if reluctant, beneficiaries of insight from a very capable advocate.

The Kelvingrove Review
www.gla.ac.uk/tkr