

BOOK REVIEW

Fuyuki Kurasawa. 2007. *The Work of Global Justice: Human Rights as Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-67391-4 Paperback: 29.99 CAD. Pages: 256.

Reviewed by Elaine Coburn

CADIS-Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales

Kurasawa's work first came to my attention in a chapter that wonderfully balanced political economy and a postmodern sensitivity to culture: a well-written, creative analysis of cultural life within the dependent Canadian economy (Kurasawa 2003). I then lost sight of Kurasawa's work until stumbling across this title. Happy with my (re)discovery, I ordered the book. Backcover praise by Craig Calhoun and Nancy Fraser, whose writing I admire, seemed to justify my anticipation. Against such high expectations, how does the book fare?

Kurasawa explores global justice from a 'critical substantivist' perspective. He refuses normative philosophizing 'from above' that derives abstract principles to guide human behaviour without adequate attention to actually-observed human relationships. Such normative philosophizing tends to formalistic studies of institutionalized human rights and is often unduly optimistic about how human rights may be made secure through formal institutional changes. He likewise rejects mindless empiricism 'from below' insofar as such approaches pretend to observe and describe from a 'neutral' normative standpoint. By documenting seemingly endless numbers of human rights abuses (4-11) such empiricism may induce a morally irresponsible form of 'stoic fatalism' (xii). Against overly formalistic studies of jurified human 'rights', Kurasawa's substantive critical theory of justice defines a new object for engaged research, that of 'socio-political and ethical action' (195), while retaining a normative edge, asking, 'what these struggles should accomplish and how the existing world order can be organized in an emancipatory fashion' (8)?

Kurasawa argues that global justice does not just 'happen'; it is the consequence of ongoing *labour*. Together, five central practices constitute the work of global justice: bearing witness, forgiveness, foresight, aid and solidarity (17). Each is fraught with tensions and contradictions, implying certain 'tasks' but also associated 'perils'. For example, bearing witness is

complicated by the difficulty of 'expressing the inexpressible' of atrocities like the Holocaust and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. How can the fundamentally uncommunicable nature of such tragedy be overcome, allowing 'bonds of similarity' between those offering testimony and broader civil society (37-40)? Ideally, a balance is achieved in which atrocity victims are seen neither as totally alien 'others' nor simply like any other human being. Similarly, supplying aid in situations of humanitarian disasters requires work if a (Christian) Westernizing paternalism is to be avoided. Aid providers must exercise their 'moral imagination', based on an empathetic imagining of how providers would themselves like to receive aid (putting oneself in the aid receivers' shoes) while recognizing the limits of such empathy given the historical, social and cultural distance between aid providers and recipients (138-9). Each of the five practices constituting global justice is explored in this way. Ultimately, Kurasawa insists upon the 'dialogical, public and transnational' (209) character of ethically and practically successful attempts to bear witness, achieve forgiveness, etc., while recognizing how difficult this dialogue is.

Kurasawa's willingness to tackle the large, important topic of global justice, with both a practical and critical sensibility is admirable. Yet, the text has major weaknesses. In his earlier work, I appreciated Kurasawa's sensitivity to culture *and* his grasp of political economy. Here, the political economy dimension is unsatisfying. The reader is reminded generically of 'asymmetries of power within national and global arenas, which enframe the socio-political production and reception' (31) of global justice practices. Near the conclusions, Kurasawa suggests that some of these power asymmetries are associated with specific, concrete historical relationships, including 'neoliberal capitalism' and 'neo-imperialist unilateralism' – but these are never defined and certainly not explored in any detail. Likewise, there are passing, underdeveloped references to 'structural violence'. At one point, Kurasawa suggests that 'democratic control of production' (207) is necessary against such 'global threats' as neoliberal capitalism. But, these structures are gestured to, rather than explored and explained as specific, material arrangements that contribute to global injustice.

At worst, 'democratic control of (the mode of) production' appears as just one element in a long list, on par with personal efforts to practice a non-paternalistic, non-patronizing form of aid. Thus, for example, Kurasawa leaves unquestioned the ways in which 'aid' is *systematically*

perverted, not so much because of personal prejudice and paternalism, as because of enormous inequalities across the world capitalist system. Bill Gates may adjust his attitude continually but this will not address the underlying problem of a single billionaire deciding the health priorities for Africans. Nor will a properly empathetic attitude do much to alter a situation in which aid priorities are decided by Western donors rather than as an expression of the democratic will of those aid-givers seek to help. Ultimately, 'aid' will only cease to be paternalistic when it is no longer 'aid' but rather democratic redistribution grounded in the right of all human beings to access resources and services needed in order to live healthy, fulfilled lives. Within capitalism, attitude adjustments matter less than structural efforts to encourage truly democratic change e.g., by funding developing countries overall budgets, rather than providing 'targeted' aid directly but undemocratically to communities. Vague, underspecified references to 'structural violence' cannot substitute for considered analysis of the possible within but also beyond capitalist political economies.

Kurasawa's book is careful, thoughtful and sincere and he tackles a question of major, enduring importance: how to labour for worldwide social justice. His emphasis on human justice as labour is a welcome corrective to legally-inspired approaches reducing human justice to top-down declarations of equality and rights. But, if the question is crucial, the answers he proposes are unsatisfactory. They focus too much on individual attitude changes and not sufficiently on hard analysis of the possibilities for progressive social change within and beyond the historically specific moment of neoliberal capitalism. But, perhaps I came to the book with unfairly high expectations?

Reference

- Kurasawa, Fuyuki. 2003. "Finding Godot? Bringing Popular Culture into Canadian Political Economy." In *Changing Canada: Political Economy as Transformation*, ed. Wallace Clement and Leah Vosko. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.