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Review of Richard Dien Winfield, The Just Economy (1988)

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THE JUST ECONOMY

Richard Dien Winfield

New York/London: Routledge, 1988,252 pp. Hardcover $35.00.

In this interesting and original book, Winfield argues for five main theses:

a) The very idea that the economic realm has its own justice (and, hence, is a normative sphere with its own rights and obligations) presupposes that economic relationships are freely entered. This implies that within a just economy human agents can be autonomous: they must be able to determine their needs and occupations and have ample opportunity to satisfy their needs through freely chosen interactions with others.

b) Only a market economy can instantiate this idea of economic autonomy for all.

c) A market economy left to itself will eventually lead to unemployment, poverty, and other economic situations that are antithetical to universal economic autonomy. *The* just economy is, therefore, a market economy so regulated that the conditions of economic autonomy are safeguarded for all. Thus, within the just economy, the right to economic self-determination will go hand in hand with the (legally enforced) duty to so restrict one's economic activities that everyone can enjoy this right.

d) Although the just economy has its own specific norms, it is part of a broader ethical order: the just state as a democratic order. Universal economic autonomy should, therefore, be so limited within the just economy that it becomes compatible with universal political self-determination.

e) Among the numerous social and political theorists from Plato to Rawls, only Hegel provides "a viable starting point for addressing the just economy," although "his efforts are fragmentary and often misguided" (p. 87). (In roughly the first third of his book, Winfield briefly criticizes Plato, Aristotle, the classical social contractarians, Adam Smith, and Fichte, and deals more extensively with Marx and Rawls. In the remainder of the book, Winfield explicates and defends his view of the just economy through a reconstruction of Hegel's political economy, focussing on the section on Civil Society in the *Philosophy of Right.)*

Although thesis (b) is pivotal to Winfield's overall argument, he spends little time considering the possibility that a market economy might not be the most successful economic arrangement in terms of realizing economic autonomy for all. His brief critical discussion of democratic economic planning (see pp. 165-68) suffers from posing a false dilemma between a market economy as such and a totally planned economy (including the collective assignments of jobs). Also, Winfield fails to consider the proposal that economic autonomy might be best served by making available to all an increasing number of goods and services outside the market of commodoties. Another problem with Winfield's defense of thesis (b) is that he does not offer a critical analysis of the kinds of choices that a market economy tends to make available. Is it, for example, really the case that our economic autonomy increases when we are able to choose between more and more brands of the same product? More importantly, Winfield does not address the question to what extent we are able to determine our own needs in a market economy. Hegel is more critical in this regard: "What the English call 'comfort' is something inexhaustible and illimitable. [T]he need for greater comfort does not exactly arise within you directly; it is suggested to you by those who hope to make a profit from its creation" *(Philosophy of Right,* Addition to Par. 191).

It should be noted, however, that Winfield, unlike Hegel, does not seek to defend just some approximation of the capitalist market economy. Rather, on Winfields's account, it is a matter of economic choice whether family-owned businesses, corporations, or labor-managed cooperatives will predominate within a just economy. What is only crucial within this economy is that the role of state enterprises moves within two limits: state enterprises should not become so prevalent that they seriously limit economic of political self-determination, and they should at least provide for those goods and services which are in the public interest and other enterprises are unwilling to deliver or cannot deliver without monopolizing the market (see pp. 222-227). A clear merit of this open-ended approach is that Winfield, in his explication of theses (c) and (d), raises important problems that pertain to both market capitalism and market socialism, thus challenging defenders of either economic system. Moreover, this approach has the merit that Winfield's proposals for overcoming these problems, and in particular his justification for these proposals, should be of considerable interest to proponents of either market capitalism or market socialism. (Some of these proposals are that the state must guarantee health care and day care for all, provide for job training, and make funds available for political activity and starting new economic enterprises.) But the price paid is that the impact of different forms of productive property ownership is underestimated. Winfield rightly argues, for example, that markest mechanisms generate inequalities in wealth that undermine economic and political autonomy for many people, but he pays little attention to the fact that this problem seems less severe (and, certainly, takes on a different form) in a market economy with predominantly labor-managed cooperatives than in a market system in which the means of production are primarily individually owned (see pp. 162-63 and 229-31).

Finally, with regard to thesis (e), it should be noted that Winfield criticized not only various aspects of Hegel's political economy, such as its class analysis and its understanding of capital, but also gives his own conception of the just economy a definite un-Hegelian "activist" dimension. Winfield's sensible concluding statement illustrates this latter point: "The just economy is...a product of continual political as well as civil vigilance" (p. 232).

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