

## Review - The Foreign Policy of John Rawls and Amartya Sen

Written by Annette Förster

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# Review - The Foreign Policy of John Rawls and Amartya Sen

<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/08/18/review-the-foreign-policy-of-john-rawls-and-amartya-sen/>

ANNETTE FÖRSTER, AUG 18 2014

*The Foreign Policy of John Rawls and Amartya Sen*

By: Neal Leavitt

Maryland and Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2013

In times where violent conflicts and protests, sometimes amounting to civil war, conflicts on nuclear weapon programmes, and spy scandals causing mistrust between democracies dominate news reports, Neal Leavitt's book *The Foreign Policy of John Rawls and Amartya Sen* generates valuable insights into how the ideas of Rawls and Sen might make the foreign policy of democratic regimes "a little better" – as Leavitt characterises the core of Rawls' political philosophy – and to understand the dynamics of world politics and their effect on the everyday life of people (44).

At a first glance, the title seems misleading. The first six chapters focus on the domestic policies of an ideal democracy, on essential elements of a just and stable domestic structure, and on Rawls' writings. Sen's work mostly serves to add to or to criticize Rawls' ideas. Against this background, Leavitt discusses tensions between the social contract tradition, human rights and political realism.

Sen's work, alongside Rawls', plays a central role in the second part of the book (chapters 7-9), especially when it comes to questions of famine relief and disarmament. The chapters elaborate on how the regimes drawn out in the first part should act and interact on the international level when it comes to questions of reciprocity and assistance, the political economy or national defence.

Despite this concern for human rights, Rawls accepts attacking civilians in 'supreme emergency' cases, which Leavitt identifies as a 'defensive realist' element in Rawls' theory (xi f.). Leavitt's central critique of Rawls points to the necessity of nuclear weapons to deter outlaw regimes and to the acceptance of their use in cases of supreme emergency. Here, Leavitt especially draws on Sen, leading to a very interesting and persuasive discussion of both matters (13f., chapter 9).

### *The Domestic Arena*

In the first chapters, Leavitt takes an area central to an (ideal) democracy (interaction; elections; public health; primary schooling; and employment). In each, he presents and discusses what Rawls has to say on those matters against the background of other thinkers – such as Machiavelli when it comes to elections, or John Locke when it comes to public health – and, in the process, against political realism.

As Leavitt details, central to Rawls' concept of the ideal democracy are the "ideals of freedom, equality and reciprocity" (5). Transferred to the international level, "every democratic society must treat every other democratic society in a free, equal and reciprocal manner" (6). As a lack of health care (chapter 3) as well as of basic education (chapter 4) violate the principle of equality and of fair equality of opportunity, and as both are a basis for making use of one's basic liberties, basic health care and education should be secured for all people. Otherwise, people may

# Review - The Foreign Policy of John Rawls and Amartya Sen

Written by Annette Förster

suffer from grave disadvantages when it comes to taking part in the social life, leading a self-determined life, or finding employment (chapter 5). As unemployment can lead to physical harm (due to the inability to afford basic necessities), as well as mental harm (referring to self-respect and self-determination), the state should take care of adequate employment opportunities. To sum up, societies need “a form of social safety net [...] insuring each citizen has ‘all purpose means’ necessary to freely live” (79) and governments “must protect the civilian population from a wide range of entitlement failures” (80).

Leavitt in the first part of the book makes some interesting observations about social dynamics and the impact of political priorities on the everyday life of those subject to them. The same can be said when it comes to the second part on foreign policy, which builds on the previous elaborations.

## *The Foreign Arena*

What Rawls demands of the (ideal) democracy fits in with the commitments states have made in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (83ff.). Rawls' duty of assistance, which Leavitt locates in the preamble, calls for assistance in reaching common living standards for all people, and is considered as an adjustment to the actual foreign policy of democracies around the world (84-87). States increasing the political power of other regimes by trade or assistance need to keep in mind how this power is going to be exercised. Ideal democracies should thus refrain from trading with outlaw regimes and coordinate their foreign policies to implement effective foreign aid strategies (93ff.). Focusing on the political economy, the different competing objectives – each of which deserve a share and can be rebalanced according to circumstances – need to be considered: health care, education, defence, foreign aid, and employment (100ff.).

Whereas Rawls focuses on ideal democracies, Sen applies a comparative method working with existing and historical examples (104f.). Building on Sen, Leavitt draws out a connection between military spending and the occurrence of famines (106ff.). Instead of selling arms to developing countries, he argues that democracies should encourage them to balance their political economy in favour of the development of their social and political culture and institutions (108ff.). Societies will profit from spending the budget on enhancing health care and education instead of on developing an atomic bomb (130).

To Leavitt, Rawls, when arguing that democracies must avoid relative military weakness in comparison to outlaw regimes (102), remains caught in realist argumentation. By contrast, Sen's work is used to argue *against* democracies maintaining nuclear weapons as this leads other societies to acquire nuclear weapons (113). Leavitt shows in a persuasive manner, building on Sen, that policies deemed to enhance the security of states from a realist perspective might actually diminish the security of every individual in the world by initiating a conflict spiral of armament and the escalation of tensions and hostilities. Inclusion, reasoning, reciprocity and consent can function as de-escalating principles (89ff.).

Leavitt rejects maintaining nuclear weapons even in supreme emergency cases: humans are fallible, especially under pressure. There is no justification for killing “millions of *civilians*” (129). What democracies should do according to Rawls, Sen, and Leavitt, is to join powers and act collectively for “beneficial effects in the lives of all people” (123), abolish nuclear weapons, constrain the arms trade (126), and to affirm a foreign policy of reciprocity and assistance (127).

## *Tying It All Together*

Whereas Leavitt's book contains valuable insights into the writings of Rawls and Sen on domestic and foreign policies, he rarely discusses relevant contemporary writing and, with the exception of empirical cases taken from Sen, misses the opportunity to link the discussion to contemporary debates such as the conflict on the nuclear programme of Iran. Highly interesting is that Leavitt draws on several of Rawls' writings and thus manages to draw out parallels and developments *within* Rawlsian thinking (see for example 29ff.).

Leavitt sketches out how an ideal democracy should act on the domestic as well as on the international level, but he

## Review - The Foreign Policy of John Rawls and Amartya Sen

Written by Annette Förster

scarcely touches the question of tolerating non-democratic, decent regimes, which forms a central idea in Rawls' *The Law of Peoples* (LP). As a consequence, Leavitt mostly refers to a 'federation' or 'alliance' of democracies (6, 11) coordinating their foreign policies, whereas Rawls speaks of the Society of Peoples, covering democratic and decent hierarchical regimes (LP: 3, 29f.). Also, while pointing out human rights as a central concern, Leavitt does not discuss Rawls' human rights minimalism in LP.

Despite those gaps in discussing LP, Leavitt makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of both Rawls and Sen in relation to one another, and generates insights into how both theories can help to understand and inform the foreign policies of democratic regimes.

---

### About the author:

**Annette Förster** is a Lecturer and Research Associate at RWTH Aachen University, Germany where she teaches and researches in the field of international justice and the theory of the state. She received her PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science, UK.