

## Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency by Lea Ypi

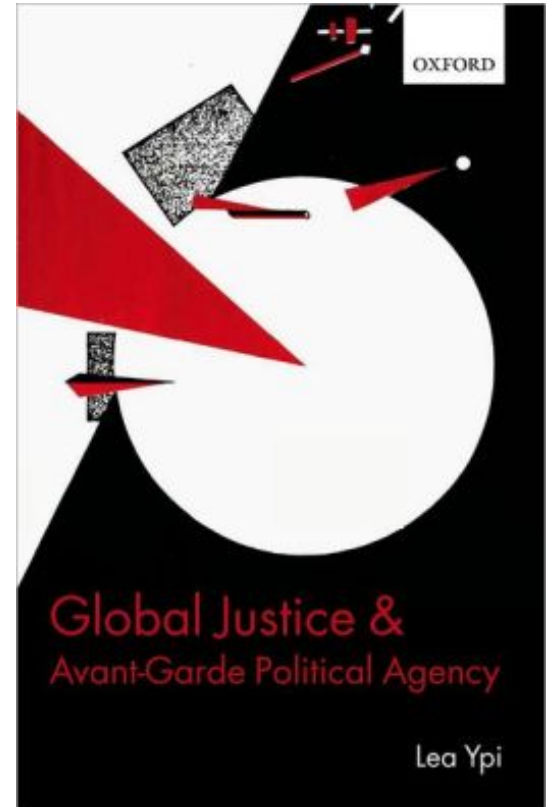
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***Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency***, Lea Ypi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 226 pp., \$99 cloth.

In *Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency*, Lea Ypi proposes a novel approach to political theory in relation to the issue of global equality. She fiercely criticizes the tendency to abstract from the realities of political agency in “ideal” theorizing, since, she insists, such abstraction renders the conclusions drawn practically irrelevant and indeterminate. But she also refuses to treat current political practices and norms as given constraints in the manner of “nonideal” theorizing, on the grounds that the selection of relevant practices and norms is always morally loaded and their analysis inevitably conservative. Instead, Ypi proposes that theory begin with a specific political conflict, diagnose the failure of existing practices and norms to resolve it, and, in this light, develop better practices and norms. She calls this approach “dialectical” insofar as it considers political practices and norms to develop progressively in resolving emerging political problems, and “activist” or “avant-garde” in its responding and contributing to political change through appropriate political agents.

After setting out this approach in the second chapter, and presenting Kant’s cosmopolitanism as an example of it in the first, Ypi spends the rest of the book elaborating it. She begins with a sophisticated account of the failings of “ideal” and “nonideal” theorizing about global justice. Here she argues that statist’s treatment of the state as the only or primary political association is an arbitrary idealization, since it abstracts from other associative relations that are relevant to global responsibilities. But she also argues that by pressing moral individualism and egalitarianism against the associative responsibilities of states, cosmopolitans too idealize away relevant political conflicts and forms of collective responsibility and agency—most notably, those of the state. Ypi also insists that both statist and cosmopolitans are often too “nonideal” in restricting their treatments of poverty and inequality to the shocking facts, and not reflecting on their causes. In particular, she argues that this lets statist associationism off too lightly, by neglecting the global associative relations that cause poverty and inequality. She consequently intends her own, activist treatment of global equality to invoke ideal and nonideal considerations more appropriately, guided by the normative and strategic analysis of relevant conflicts.

Ypi’s normative analysis, presented in the fifth chapter, is intended to show that global egalitarianism can be defended merely on the grounds of preventing absolute deprivation, and thus without invoking the strong moral individualism and egalitarianism typical of cosmopolitanism. Her basic claim here is that absolute deprivation—that is, the lack of goods essential to ordinary human physical functioning, such as food—is caused by, among other things, unequal access to other competitive goods, such as work, markets, education, and legal protection. Famines, for instance, are often caused not by absolute food shortages, but by rising relative prices that exclude the poor from food markets. Ypi thus objects to sufficientarianism, and defends egalitarianism on sufficientarianism’s own grounds: to remedy or prevent absolute deprivation, it is often necessary to equalize access to other goods. Crucially, her argument is thus intended to convince even statist, insofar as they are also committed to preventing the absolute deprivation of any human being.



This is an innovative and important argument for global egalitarianism. Its compelling claim about the causes of absolute deprivation shows what statist and cosmopolitans miss with their idealizing abstractions from relevant associative relations and their nonideal wariness of causal claims. It also shows that strong cosmopolitan and egalitarian claims can be established without presupposing a strong moral individualism and egalitarianism. If there is a complaint to make here, it is just that some other cosmopolitans have also insisted on the normative significance of global causal relations (Thomas Pogge, say) or state membership (Richard Miller, for instance). A more thorough engagement with such positions would therefore have been welcome.

In the final two chapters, Ypi provides a strategic analysis of how global equality might best be achieved. In opposition to both the abstract individualism of cosmopolitanism and the moral particularism of statism, she proposes to treat the democratic state as the locus of political transformation, as practices and norms evolve in response to emerging problems. Her novel claim here is that, rather than individual philanthropy or supra-state institutions, the democratic state is the most effective means of realizing global equality. In the light of this “statist cosmopolitanism,” she identifies avant-garde agents as those who engage in states’ public spheres to cultivate sensibility and develop solutions to global inequalities, and so influence the decisionmaking of democratic state institutions. She points to examples ranging from movements for workers’ rights and environmental protection to feminism and anticolonialism to suggest that, understood in this political and collective form, cosmopolitan responsibilities can have significant motivational and political force.

This concern with the political realization of normative principles is, of course, laudable. Still, it is perhaps not as rare among theorists as Ypi suggests, and some cosmopolitans would agree that the state provides the best means of achieving their goals. It also leaves both the “statism” and the “cosmopolitanism” of her statist cosmopolitanism vulnerable to political contestation, insofar as the relative strategic merits of engaging in democratic public spheres, rather than pursuing philanthropy or global institutional reform, could be contested on strategic grounds. And Ypi admits to simply taking for granted the normative commitment on which her argument for global egalitarianism is based—namely, the rejection of absolute deprivation (pp. 108–109, 174–75). Insofar as this commitment is lacking in actual politics, then, her cosmopolitanism will lack normative authority.

Moreover, Ypi’s treatment of political agency and conflict—and thus the general approach to political theory that she proposes—is not as novel as she suggests. Her normative analysis employs the ordinary tools of moral argument, conceptual analysis, and empirical premises, albeit to criticize and revise some presuppositions and claims common in global justice debates. And her strategic analysis treats the relevant agents simply as means of sensitizing normative analysis to conflicts and applying its general conclusions in particular public spheres, albeit contextually. Thus her argument appears no more activist, avant-garde, or dialectical than standard normative ethics. Unfortunately, this belies some of her most intriguing claims about political agency, such as her claim to revise common understandings of theory’s relation to practice, her talk of democratic “learning” and “innovation,” and even the analogy she draws with artistic avant-gardes. Such “dialectical” claims suggest that the normative criteria of “progress” might extend beyond those of standard normative analysis and political effectiveness—to, say, the capacity to resolve conflicts, the acceptability to agents immediately involved, or the immanent improvement of existing norms that she mentions (pp. 40–45, 56–61, 161–66), or even the Hegelian terms that she rejects (pp. 42–43).

Still, if Ypi’s treatments of political agency and theory are not quite as coherent as her argument for global egalitarianism, they nonetheless contribute to making *Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency* an extremely stimulating read. With her argument for global egalitarianism and her critique of ideal and nonideal theorizing, Ypi succeeds in posing significant challenges to common ways of thinking about global justice, and, at least in its more dialectical moments, her notion of avant-garde agency is also potentially fruitful. Scholars will thus find much to engage with in this short book, while undergraduates and postgraduates too will learn much from its accessible accounts and criticisms of the standard positions in the field.

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