

BARBARA BUCKINX | **Exploitation and
global poverty**

Richard W. Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

What responsibilities do we, as citizens of developed countries, have with regard to the global poor? Richard W. Miller's highly original and convincing answer to this question represents a significant contribution to the already extensive literature on global distributive justice. Admirably, it also brings this large body of work into a much-needed discussion with the literatures on global political-institutional justice, humanitarian intervention, and climate or greenhouse justice.

Miller's central insight is that the question of our responsibility for global poverty cannot be adequately addressed unless we take into account the myriad of ways in which developed countries stand in relationships of power with other countries. In Chapter 1, he sets the stage for his relational account by criticizing the impartial cosmopolitanism of Peter Singer's beneficence approach. He accuses Singer of misunderstanding ordinary morality, since, as Miller sees it, 'equal respect does not entail equal concern' (p. 18), and it is entirely consistent with the principle of equal respect for persons to also display more concern for the wellbeing of one's own child or compatriot than for that of a stranger.

The argument that we incur special political obligations towards compatriots as a result of the specific relationships that we have with them is explored in more detail in Chapter 2. Miller views the compatriot relationship in terms of political rather than cultural or ethno-national ties, and emphasizes the importance of civic friendship, or the expression of appreciation for the loyalty of compatriots and their 'willing support for the shared political institutions' (p. 43). Civic friendship is an important source of civic duty, since one obvious way of expressing this gratitude to compatriots is to show special concern for their wellbeing. This focus on ethics and civic friendship distinguishes Miller's account from the justice-based accounts of cosmopolitans such as Charles Beitz, Thomas Pogge, and Darrel Moellendorf.

However, like Beitz, Pogge, and Moellendorf, Miller also argues that our interactions with non-compatriots often create demanding responsibilities. His disagreement with the existing cosmopolitan approaches centers on their

argument that these responsibilities follow from relationships of interdependence in the area of international commerce. As Miller argues, a situation of economic interdependence – such as that which characterized Bronze Age Europe – does not in itself generate extensive obligations to foreigners. He thus attempts to describe the ‘facts’ of interaction (p. 33) that do create more demanding duties. Dissatisfied with the broad character of mere interdependence and the narrow, exclusive focus on the economic sphere, Miller instead identifies as the source of our responsibilities those kinds of transnational interactions that are characterized by exploitation, inequity, and negligent harm – irrespective of the realm in which they occur. In the remaining chapters, he argues that, taken together, these interactions amount to a staggering abuse of power and that they entail a massive, unmet responsibility on our part to help the global poor.

Four distinct forms of interactions with poor non-compatriots create duties to help, the first two of which echo familiar analyses in other accounts of global distributive justice. Miller argues, first, that we are implicated in transnational economic exploitation, and second, that we are responsible for the existing inequity in the institutional framework for international trade (Chapter 3).

With regard to the first category, which is exemplified by the exploitation of citizens in poor countries by transnational corporations, Miller distinguishes ‘mere exploitation’ from ‘immoral exploitation’ (p. 66). The former entails taking advantage of a poor person’s inferior bargaining position, while the latter involves something more nefarious, namely, taking advantage of a person in such a way that this person enters ‘arrangements involving drudgery or penury that are not fully worthy of human dignity’ (p.65). Not surprisingly, many of the instances of exploitation of citizens in developing countries are of this latter kind.

As for the second form of interactions, Miller focuses on the unfair process of deliberation that led to the current, inequitable trade regime. A deliberation procedure would meet the requisite standard of fairness if it ensured that the representatives acted in good faith (that is, on the basis of reciprocity in reasoning and with a willingness to reach a compromise), that they fulfilled their responsibilities to their constituents, and that the citizens of each country did not in turn shirk their civic duties towards compatriots by trying to shift that burden abroad. With regard to this last point, Miller quite astutely points out that arguments against aid for the global poor that rely on appeals to obligations of domestic justice are often on shaky ground. The rich in developed countries have obligations both to their poorer compatriots and to poor non-compatriots, and it is unfair to withhold aid from the latter, since this has the effect of making them bear the costs of programs of domestic redistribution, when these should instead be funded by compatriots.

Unlike the first two kinds, the third and fourth forms of interactions do not commonly feature in accounts of responsibility for global poverty, and Miller makes a very good case for why their usual omission is a grave mistake. According to Miller, the other forms of interactions that engender obligations to help with global poverty are, third, our contributions to harmful climate change, and fourth, and most interesting, our engagement in what he terms ‘imperial irresponsibility’ (p. 5).

In Chapter 4, Miller focuses on the problem of climate change. He posits that we must show concern for ‘unintended harmful side-effects of conduct which may, itself, be morally flawless’ (p. 84), and he offers climate change as a case that involves such ‘negligent harm’. He expresses doubts about a few prominent proposals for tackling climate change, including a ‘mandate of cheap rescue’ and the ‘polluter pays’ principle, according to which the developed countries would pay – either because they can do so without incurring too many costs, or because they are responsible for most of the pollution. Instead, he prefers the model of ‘fair teamwork’, which calls for trustworthy cooperation and due care in an attempt to achieve an allocation of sacrifices that is acceptable to all. However, interesting as this is, it is not clear why he presents his model as an alternative to, and on a par with, the existing ones. Indeed, ‘fair teamwork’ seems to describe not a model for distributing climate change harms but the procedure by which we might arrive at a model that is in turn based on, say, the ‘polluter pays’ principle, the ‘mandate of cheap rescue’, or a combination of both. Viewed in this light, ‘fair teamwork’ and ‘polluter pays’ might be complementary.

The final form of interactions that attract Miller’s attention are those that occur in the context of American imperial power. The argument in this part of the book (Chapters 5-7), namely, that imperial power creates duties to help the global poor, is particularly interesting and may well reshape the way political theorists think about global distributive justice.

In Chapter 5, Miller describes the forms of power that are inherent in what he calls the American empire. While he focuses on the US, his arguments also apply to a lesser extent to citizens of allied states. According to Miller, the US empire’s ‘domineering influence’ consists of ‘the influence of prerogatives, the influence of threat power, and the exercise of destructive power’ (p. 120). US prerogatives mean that ‘the bearer of a prerogative has importance that forces others to give way’ (p. 121) and they exist because of features of the world system, such as the global role of the dollar or the English language. Threat power describes the threats and intimidation by which the US gets its way. Finally, destructive power is exercised in war and other violent conflict.

In the remainder of the chapter, Miller seeks to show that ‘[l]ives everywhere are significantly affected by domineering influence based in the United States’ (p. 133) and that the US indeed functions as an empire. To substantiate the latter claim, he enumerates four mechanisms by which the American empire exercises its power. First, the US exercises indirect financial rule through its domination of international institutions. Second, it maintains its power by engaging in military sponsorship of client regimes. Third, it uses aid dependence as a vehicle of influence by apportioning aid in accordance with its own interests. Fourth, it does the same with regard to trade dependence.

While I find Miller’s endeavor to connect the exercise of global political power with responsibility for global poverty very appealing, I am not sure whether he exhausts all the various ways in which imperial power manifests itself. In particular, his tripartite distinction – of prerogatives, threat power, and destructive power – seems to leave out what I would call virtual global power. To his credit, Miller recognizes that the US does not need to carry out its threats in order to exercise power over citizens in other countries. Indeed, the mere presence of a threat could be sufficient. However, perhaps Miller should have added a category of power that does not depend on overt or implicit threats at all. Indeed, the absence of threats or intimidation could simply mean that the interests of the foreign individuals or country in question happen at that time to coincide with those of the US, thus relieving the US from having to make its wishes on the subject known. The absence of such threatening behavior or posturing might then not indicate an absence of US power. Assuming that the US is capable of making credible and successful threats should it so desire, the absence of actual threats could mean instead that the US virtually controls the options that are available to citizens in other countries. This possible oversight on Miller’s part is, however, perhaps only a minor concern.

In Chapter 6, Miller goes on to argue that the existence of imperial power creates vast, unmet responsibilities on the part of US citizens to help poor non-compatriots. US citizens ought to do their part by ensuring that structural adjustment policies are not used to further political interests, and that support for violent client regimes is withdrawn. (Mubarak’s Egypt is one of the many examples of client regimes in this chapter. Having read Miller, it seems clear that one of the reasons why US citizens ought to welcome this regime’s collapse is because it is accompanied by a reduction in the exercise of US imperial power.) The responsibility of American citizens for global poverty is limited by only a few factors: the existence of outside agency in addition to US imperial power, and the extent to which insiders passively accommodate it.

Chapter 7 examines the mechanisms of imperial political governance and

the ways in which they prevent close scrutiny and accountability. Because of limitations inherent in the domestic political system – including, most glaringly, the lack of incentives to pay attention to the concerns of non-compatriots – Miller argues that citizens ought to try to reduce the moral excesses of imperial power ‘through initiatives originating outside of institutional governance, if this political endeavor is not especially costly...and has some prospect of success’ (pp. 181-182). American citizens, and to a lesser extent also citizens of allied countries, must do their best to promote justice on the part of their country in whichever way possible.

Surprisingly, however, Miller does not conclude that citizens must aim to abolish the American empire altogether. Instead, and partly for reasons of feasibility, they ought merely to try to restrain its reach. In order to make his case in support of the continued existence of the American empire, Miller compares the struggle against imperial excess with the position of nonanarchists about government, who believe that government is ‘beneficial in some ways, dangerous in others, a process whose unconstrained exertion and whose absence would be catastrophic’ (p. 207). He contrasts this with the position of campaigners who seek to abolish racism, and he argues that, unlike the end of racism, the end of the US empire would be fraught with uncertainty and danger.

This is a puzzling position for Miller to take, and it is unclear what his motivation is, since he dedicates only a few pages to the rival analogies of anti-racism and nonanarchism. Intuitively, it seems that US imperial power more strongly resembles the former than the latter: like racism, imperial power seems to impose severe disadvantages on the lives of members of the oppressed group and weighty obligations on the oppressors, and so we should surely strive to eliminate it entirely. Indeed, it seems that, like a reduction in the prevalence of racism, a reduction in US imperial power would only be a welcome step in the right direction. With the exception of a few brief remarks about potential uncertainty and the rise of China as a rival imperial power, Miller does not explain why the absence of the imperial power of the US would in any way be ‘catastrophic’. Let us assume for a moment that China would be a worse imperial power than the US, and that a power vacuum would be disastrous. (No evidence is given, however, in support of these claims.) It is nevertheless unclear why our reaction to these facts should be to maintain US imperial power in some form – rather than, say, to work to create a well-functioning and just global political-institutional structure which restricts the capacity of any country to rise as an empire. Presumably, we would not caution against the elimination of racist policies solely because of a fear that their removal might lead to the establishment of other nefarious – say, sexist – ones.

Miller describes his account as only quasi-cosmopolitan (Chapter 8), since its relational character likely leads to a slightly different set of obligations than that which would be entailed by a fully impartial, cosmopolitan account. After all, our obligations to help non-compatriots are stronger when we have more extensive and exploitative interactions with them. Nevertheless, Miller argues that we ought to be cosmopolitan in at least one respect: our positive project ought to be a world in which interactions among all individuals are based on mutual trust. Indeed, he describes the goal of global justice as the same as that of domestic justice; in either sphere, civic friendship is justice's ultimate goal. Given this ultimate goal, his decision to preserve a role for the American empire is even more perplexing.

It may be a real limitation of the book, then, that it does not include a discussion of global institutional design. After all, it might be possible for us to envision a global regime that falls short of world government and that nevertheless severely constrains the ability of any particular country to dominate any other. This seems entirely consistent with, and almost required by, his larger concern with mutual trust, respect, and civic friendship.

Fortunately, Miller does engage with global reform in some way, albeit reform of a non-institutional kind. In the final chapter, he examines how exactly developed countries and their citizens might be induced to fulfill their responsibilities to the global poor. With domestic political and economic incentives skewed towards continued exploitation, his hope rests on the various social movements of the present that focus on topics such as climate change, debt reduction for the poorest countries, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Describing these movements as part of an incipient 'global version of social democracy' (p. 238), he believes that they – and the citizens who are involved in them – are the mechanism by which the change that is so urgently needed might be brought about.

On the whole, then, while it would have been helpful if Miller had offered a proposal for far-reaching global institutional reform, his book is nevertheless an important and successful contribution to the literature on global distributive justice.

Barbara Buckinx
'Justitia Amplificata', Centre for Advanced Studies
Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main.
buckinx@em.uni-frankfurt.de

