

**THOMAS POGGE,  
*POLITICS AS USUAL: WHAT LIES BEHIND PRO-POOR RHETORIC***

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*By Gwilym David Blunt*

An initial glance at Thomas Pogge's most recent work gives the impression that it is business as usual for the cosmopolitan philosopher. He continues his ardent criticism of the current international system's causal relationship with global poverty and the abject failure to better the conditions of the world's poorest persons. Yet, *Politics as Usual* is more than a restatement. Indeed, it has alarming implications for those holding cosmopolitan principles of socioeconomic justice.

There are two claims that demand attention. The first is the direct comparison between those who passively support the international system and Germans who passively supported the Nazi regime. This is not a new analogy for Pogge to be sure (Pogge 2008, 141-2, 152). What is new is the prominence that he gives it in this book. It features at the start of the general introduction and casts a shadow over the rest of the work (Pogge 2010, 1-2). Now comparisons with Nazism can be viewed as the province of literary hobbledoys, but let us assume that this is not mere rhetoric. What this implies is that the average citizen of the developed world is complicit with more than the violation of human rights. The central members of the Nazi regime were condemned for committing crimes against humanity, an intuitively more egregious form of moral failing than human rights violations. However, if this comparison is to be considered as more than rhetoric it needs to be supported by a well-defined conception of what makes a crime against humanity a distinct category of moral wrong. There is also the question about whether transnational institutions are capable of committing crimes against humanity, since it has been suggested that the state is the only agent capable of doing so due to its capacity for direct coercion (Vernon 2002). Finally, there is the issue of responsibility or guilt; are the citizens of the developed world really comparable to the average citizen in Nazi Germany? It may seem that this would be a flawed analogy since some people would not consider global poverty comparable to the Holocaust. Alternatively, one could argue that the citizens of the developed world bear more responsibility for the actions of their states considering that they are more likely than not democratic regimes in which the average citizen exercises more control than the subject of a totalitarian regime.

These questions regarding the severity of the wrongness of global poverty and responsibility gain traction when Pogge addresses the legitimacy of Islamist terror attacks in New York, London, and Madrid as well as the American-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. He argues that violence against innocent persons is *prima facie* wrong, but can be justified if certain individually necessary and collectively sufficient conditions are met: the ends of violence must be uncontroversially good, violence will contribute to meeting this good, the value of the good outweighs the harm, and when it is necessary to achieve the good (Pogge 2010, 143). He argues that Islamist terror attacks fail to satisfy these conditions, as do the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As such, Pogge has set forth an argument that validates the notion that violence can be justifiable in political conflicts, but places an extremely demanding burden of proof on that justification. However, the question left unasked is whether the wrongs committed by the transnational system are sufficient to justify acts of violent resistance, even if they harm the innocent.

If global poverty is comparable to a crime against humanity there is reason to believe this is the case, as it is intuitively plausible that acts of resistance that are permissible are dependent upon the severity of the injustice they are directed against. No one, for example, would condemn Jewish partisans in Nazi occupied Europe for taking up arms and waging a guerrilla war against those who were perpetrating the Holocaust. Even if one finds the Holocaust comparison to be strained, there are alternatives. The sometimes-violent resistance against the apartheid regime by

black South Africans would be one such alternative, since the “crime of apartheid” features in international criminal law as a crime against humanity. Therefore, it seems that there is a tentative case for violent resistance by the global poor against those perpetrating the “crime of poverty” against them.

This does not pretend to be a complete argument that Pogge would endorse violent resistance by the global poor against transnational institutions and the persons who support them. However, what it does is identify a problem raised by Pogge that is not addressed in this book. This points to a general oversight in cosmopolitan literature to address the consequences of their principles in a world characterised by widespread non-compliance with duties of justice. Cosmopolitans, like Pogge, have spent a great deal of energy arguing that the citizens of the developed world have obligations of justice to the global poor and that they are not being satisfied. What has not attracted a comparable amount of energy is what actions are permissible to the victims of unjust social institutions. Those afflicted by severe poverty are victims, but this should not define the limits of their agency. Pogge’s *Politics as Usual* does not stray far from the debate on global justice. However, the implications of his arguments regarding the severity of global poverty as a moral wrong comparable to a crime against humanity and his argument that under certain circumstances resistance may be permissible under certain circumstances open up a new line of enquiry in the debate on transnational justice - one that must investigate how cosmopolitan claims about global poverty justify acts of resistance by the global poor against their oppressors.

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