



Mining the past: The case for historical narratives in global justice theorizing

Huw L Williams 
Cardiff University, UK

Abstract

Debates on global justice, it is claimed, can be enriched in important ways by more explicitly historicizing our approach and using historical narratives, stories and debates to expand our conceptual vocabulary and theoretical purview. The claim is illustrated through a specific analysis of Paul Robeson's relationship with the Welsh Miners. It is argued such a historical turn, grounded in a wider interdisciplinary engagement with subjects such as cultural studies may see at least three key benefits accrue in terms of our understanding of the field. Firstly, it can uncover philosophical and theoretical ideas and alternatives so far unconsidered; secondly, it can generate a shift in the empirical frame that accounts for and seeks to identify means for “real world” political change; lastly, it should encourage us to question the in/out dichotomy at the heart of the western debate, which projects global injustice as being “out there.”

Keywords

Cultural Studies, Global Justice, Historical Narratives, History of Political Thought, Paul Robeson

Introduction

Writings on philosophical and ethical issues under the rubric of Global Justice have proliferated in recent years. The starting point of this paper is the mainstream debates that arose in Anglo-American political philosophy, that took questions of redistribution, in particular, to be fundamental.¹ However, the growing breadth of this discussion and the expansion of the debate into other traditions of political philosophy is acknowledged, whereby numerous scholars have been taking disparate and more critical approaches to

Corresponding author:

Huw L Williams, School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University, 1.40 John Percival Building, Colum Drive, Cathays, Cardiff, CF10 3EU, UK.

Email: Williamsh47@Cardiff.ac.uk

the field, and for quite some time. There have been calls to “deparochialize” the study of global justice (Maffettone, 2012), whilst scholars in the West have been keen to bring other philosophical and political traditions of thought to bear on the debate (Jaggar, 2014; Maffettone, 2012; Williams and Death, 2017). Moreover, there are other political philosophers who have broached key issues of global justice from perspectives diverging from that “mainstream” – but whose work remains to greater and lesser degrees peripheral to those debates (e.g. Young, 2006, Fraser, 2008).

This paper is broadly aligned with attempts to explore alternative approaches, and is sympathetic to work such as Iris Marion Young’s, and Michael Goodhart’s volume (2018), specifically in its emphasis on developing theory in the global context that can motivate political change in the real world. However, it remains agnostic with respect to Goodhart’s claim that traditional approaches (what he calls *Ideal Moral Theory*) must be rejected for theory to become more praxis-orientated (Goodhart, 2018). Whilst it engages traditional approaches as the main interlocutor, the argument more straightforwardly claims the deployment of stories and narratives from cultural studies and other cognate disciplines can open up the field, regardless of the philosophical methodology. And whilst there will be theories and thinkers whose methodologies are more closely aligned to the historicized approach advocated in this paper, exploring those connections and the extent of their alignment is the work of another paper.

The predominant philosophical methodology that has evolved through the conventions of Anglophone political theory is a foil against which we can elaborate how particularly constricting methods have obscured potentially important considerations and contributions to the debate. As noted, critiques of the approach abound, but the claims specific to this paper are that the study of global justice can involve: an excessively ahistorical treatment of the subject; an emphasis on abstraction and generalization that tends to obscure the potential and contribution of cultural diversity and identity toward political change, and an excessive focus on the state as the locus of change rather than those who have historically driven reform from below; lastly that there is a dichotomizing assumption that global injustice exists “out there” in the relatively deprived global south, obfuscating the deep connections to our own political culture and its injustices.

We can broaden our purview, and include more theoretically rich morally significant and empirically important information by focusing more consciously and explicitly on the stories and narratives from the past around transnational resistance and solidarity. This entails recognition of the fact that the moniker global justice, whilst a comparatively recent addition to the lexicon of political theory, pertains to political issues and action that have arguably been of concern for centuries. It will also entail an expansion of the interdisciplinarity that is inherent within the field. Heretofore, debates on global redistribution and alleviating inequality have naturally looked, in particular, to economics, development and political science for the empirical content for philosophizing about global moral duties and responsibilities. However, as this paper reveals, in looking at one historical example of fighting global injustice, there is significant potential in looking to other fields in the arts and humanities, such as cultural studies, literary studies, and social history.

To this end the key claim is that historicizing the theorizing of global justice in this way can achieve an enrichment of the debate, with greater practical possibilities. These potential developments relate directly to the main concerns outlined above pertaining to

the more typical global justice methodology. First it may uncover historical accounts and concepts relevant to the study of global injustice that demand reconsideration. Second, it may encourage, in two key ways, a shift in the empirical frame that accounts for and seeks to identify means for political change: first by identifying diverse experiences, values and culture as being potential stimuli for transnational and global reform and secondly focusing more explicitly on oppressed individuals, groups and peoples as the loci for change. Lastly, historicizing the study of global justice can encourage us to question the North/South dichotomy where injustice is perceived by those in the North as “out there” in the South, and to recognize the continuities and connections inherent in global injustice. Taken together, stories from the past provide prospects for “real life” application: past successes can provide inspiration for future action; understanding their motivations and success can move us to a greater focus on how change happens; they can encourage activism and efforts closer to home by revealing the links between the local and the global. Indeed, ultimately local action may be the most effective contribution toward addressing global issues.

In exploring these claims and possibilities, the paper is divided into three main sections. The first outlines four key potentially constricting elements particularly prevalent in the dominant philosophical methodology. The second moves on to present the story of the relationship between Paul Robeson and the Welsh miners: a historical instance of the struggle against global injustice elucidating the questions and ideas that a historicized approach can throw up. The third section draws out the insights provided and questions posed by this history, and argues that other such instances can move the theoretical study of global justice on, with respect to its scope and practical application.

Aspects of a conventional methodology in the study of global justice

This paper begins with the claim that in the theoretical study of global justice there are certain recognizable conventions that occur consistently within philosophical discussion of the subject. It is not claimed that these conventions are fundamentally flawed or incorrect. Rather, they can be seen to prescribe a particular approach to the subject matter that may obscure certain ideas, values and perspectives that we might deem to be useful and normatively significant. These will be more or less prevalent, depending on the thinker in question, and the texts we begin with here can be regarded as representing the dominant “canon” of global justice as traditionally taught and debated. Here those conventions are at their most salient, but it is acknowledged as one moves away from these types of work their salience is reduced, and the historicized approach advocated here will likely be more complementary rather than critical—although it is speculated that the key insights will retain their significance. Mapping them onto the work of a plurality of other thinkers such as Goodhart or Nancy Fraser, who take their own distinctive approach, is potentially a project for the future.

Defining the mainstream study of global justice could in itself be the work of an extensive study, and given obvious restraints I will restrict myself to alluding to four key texts. These are Charles Beitz’s *Political Theory and International Relations* (1999 [1979]), John Rawls’ *The Law of Peoples* (1999), Thomas Pogge’s *World Poverty and Human Rights* (2008) and David Miller’s *National Responsibility and Global Justice*

(2007). My main criteria for choosing these texts is that they can be regarded as seminal texts that have generated significant critical interest amongst scholars, whilst also representing different stages and strands of the global justice debate that have set the parameters of the field to a significant degree.² There are certain approaches and assumptions that are common to the manner in which these authors go about philosophizing on global justice that have inflected the general terms of the debate. That is to say, they share a certain methodology that can be seen to underpin their theoretical reflections on global poverty, which go a long way in defining the terms on which questions of global justice are often discussed. Rawls and Pogge in particular are thinkers whose work continued to cast a long shadow over the terms of the debate (Flikschuh et al., 2013: 43). Here I present a brief taxonomy of this methodology and identify some of the constrictions this places on the mainstream study of the field.

(1) *A historical treatment of injustice.* In referring to the ahistoricity in the study of global justice, no claim is made here that history is ignored. Rawls' *LP*, for example, is punctuated by historical examples that inform his general discussion, whilst Miller (2007: 251), Pogge (2008: 210), and Beitz (1999: 101) all make reference, in particular, to the importance of colonialism in approaching contemporary questions of global justice such as distributing duties and accounting for the current relationships of inequality. Both Miller and Rawls arguably take a more explicitly embedded approach in adopting the idea of *realistic utopianism*, that seeks to take our historically constructed present as the starting point, from where we should “push toward the limits of a practical possibility” (Miller, 2007: 19).

However, historical references provide empirical content and examples that buttress their theorizing, as opposed to the philosophers giving the story priority, reading it on its own terms, and letting it speak to us directly—potentially leading onto or defining the questions and issues thinkers give their attention to. This is partly representative, I would suggest, of the tendency to avoid historical instances being framed as earlier examples of issues of global in/justice, where the relevant texts might be studied (as they are more generally in political theory) as part of the canon, and of continuing relevance. There are at least three important ways in which more historicized thinking could alter this approach: (1) the particularities of stories and historical instances of resisting global injustice can bring to our attention previously obscured or understudied considerations about the subject (as the just war debate is approached by the historical tradition) - by unearthing ideas worth revisiting, (2) a more explicitly historical awareness of injustice perpetrated both *within* our “western” societies and elsewhere can raise questions about how issues of global injustice are debated today, especially with respect to questioning attitudes about where the problems and answers lie (3) by invoking stories that speak to us in terms of building solidarity and successful political action.

(2) *Abstraction and generalization.* Theories of global justice often demand a certain level of normative convergence in terms of their political-moral foundations—meaning that they seek to assert the claims of all humans on the basis of a universal concept such as need or flourishing (Pogge, 2008: Chapter 1) or political rights (Rawls, 1999: 61,

78–80). This universal foundation is then deployed as the means to justify making claims against states, the Bretton Woods institutions and other global actors. In the case of Rawls this is expressed in terms of an international overlapping consensus between states built on shared political principles, whilst in the case of Miller (2007: 179) and Pogge (2008: 51), certain basic individual needs and entitlements are regarded as the initial building block around which principles for global co-operation are to be founded. In positing such moral principles cosmopolitan theories are often criticized for attempting to foist apparently liberal, western principles on the global order.

The key point here, however, is not that seeking normative convergence is necessarily a mistake. It seems inevitable that to provide coherent arguments for global justice, to place activists on solid moral foundations, or defend the idea that injustices in different parts of the globe can be subject to external approbation, the possibility of some moral coherence and a sharing of values across societies is essential. Rather the point here is that the need to reach this juncture and to make strong moral claims in a common currency can lead to a tendency to overlook the possibility of unity in difference, and under-appreciate the way in which groups from disparate parts of the world with very different cultural experiences and realities share some fundamental truths—albeit expressed in different ways. It can be claimed that expressing these truths in formal concepts such as rights or entitlements, which attempt to enable us to express our demands or our experienced injustice, leads us away from considering how empathy, co-operation and collective action occur or how we might *bring about greater global justice*. In particular, if we are interested in how global justice philosophy can drive reform, as well as elucidating it, then the impulse toward identifying our common humanity in more formal, abstract terms—what might be described as a “flattening out” of experiential differences—can blunt crucial tools in the fight against global injustice.³ In this respect stories around common struggle, the building of solidarity across borders, and the affective nature of politics can assume an important role, and can be brought to life across a range of political philosophizing - and potentially inform action.

(3) *State-centrism*. In many ways, even the more communitarian works of Miller and Rawls—that imbue the nation-state with a significant moral value—are working toward diminishing the priority of the state in international affairs and avowing the equal, or superior importance of individual rights, and the significance of certain elements of global governance. Certainly this is the intention of thinkers such as Beitz and Pogge who aim to undermine the perception of international politics as a realm of largely autarkic political communities. Beitz (2000; 1999: 143–161) presented the radical notion of a global society to be administered along the lines of a nation state (at least in distributive terms) whilst Pogge speaks explicitly of a dispersed sovereignty (2008: 184) that puts no more moral value on national government than the local or global—whilst critiquing what he describes as explanatory nationalism, which is the tendency to view states as the primary cause of poverty. Whilst Miller and Rawls are seen to place more or less similar emphasis on the state as the key explanatory unit and agent of change, Pogge moves us away from this focus, in putting significant emphasis on those global institutions which provide the framework for the economic and political transactions that continue to undermine developments toward greater global equality.

However, this perspective still gives methodological priority to the state and its super-venient structures. It shifts the empirical and normative focus to those institutions that are influenced heavily by state governments, as the fulcrum of reform. The Bretton Woods institutions are perceived to be the most significant actors in affecting change in the global economic structure and regulating the global rich, and whilst they have some degree of autonomy, and also authority over states, they are equally defined and constrained in their actions by their members and the global corporations that lobby those states. We, “the people,” as it were, are thus described as mere “willing accomplices” in crimes against humanity (Pogge, 2008: 31). Relatively speaking, Pogge’s approach may not appear to be particularly state-centric, until we contrast its terms of reference with individuals, community groups, social, transnational movements and stateless nations as agents of global justice and the loci of change. Whilst it is important to be able to articulate what principles and policies should be adopted at the state level, it is not unfair to suppose that global justice theorists—as Goodhart argues—should speak to considerations of affecting that change. In this context, it would be a truism to say that many of the most significant political reforms over time have been forced from below, often by mass movements. Whilst we cannot deny the ultimate importance of global institutions that are underpinned by the structure of the society of states, we can also recognize that focusing upon them can lead to overlooking other influential forces and the ways in which agency may be dispersed within and across national boundaries. Again, if global justice philosophers want to foster an account of change, then there also needs to be a focus on the powerful and important reformist and revolutionary networks that operate on a sub-state and/or transnational basis.

(4) *Dichotomizing and dividing.* The study of global justice and the questions that arise from it are, perhaps inevitably, the product of (largely liberal) academics in the affluent West witnessing poverty and injustice in the rest of the world, in proportions that are now largely unfamiliar in their own societies. Indeed, premature death due to poverty, a primary referent in debates on global justice is something that occurs on a scale in the Global South that might be described as incomparable (Pogge, 2008: 2). As such, global injustice is regarded as something that occurs largely or almost exclusively “out there,” which in turn tends to lead to an explicit dichotomy between those nations suffering from global injustice and those nations perpetrating injustice and responsible for the improvement of the situation. Attempts in the work of Rawls and Miller to shift the focus more toward the responsibility of developing nations is perceived as an attempt to divest the west of responsibility rather than an affirmation of agency in the Global South.⁴

It is to state the obvious that the injustices that currently occur in some countries of the Global South are of significantly different and more serious proportions than injustices in the North. However, there are implications to a methodology that does not begin with a more explicit recognition of the pervasive, relative injustices in those societies that are regarded as being primary agents in addressing global injustice. In particular, such a lack of recognition of fundamental injustices occurring within these societies may be an important epistemic consideration with regards to explaining how global injustice “out there” is allowed to persist in such extreme ways. By exploring histories around transnational struggle we may uncover and recall the imbrication of global

injustice in the north and south. They may bring home to us that the struggle for global justice is not about the white man's burden of saving those out in the majority world, like the missionaries of old, but that local action allied to others globally is potentially the most effective pathway for action.

Paul Robeson and the Welsh Miners

One might easily respond to the previous section by claiming that generally speaking global injustice is far more prevalent in more serious ways in areas of the Global South; that it makes sense to focus on state level agents given their privileged position; that providing solid moral, universally applicable foundations for the cause of global justice requires the flattening out of difference and not emphasizing it; that an overtly historical approach to a subject of political philosophy that has a very recent provenance is quite possibly anachronistic. This would be a reasonable enough response. However, my suggestion is that interesting, important considerations can inform the debate with a more explicit turn to history (without necessarily seeking to do away with its conventions in a fundamental way).

In this section of the paper, I begin such an attempt with a particular historical instantiation of what we might term the global justice movement, focusing on the relationship of American Civil Rights campaigner, Paul Robeson, with the Coal Miners of Wales. I present it as a particularly useful history, or story, that speaks to some of the issues alluded to above and demonstrates how the global justice debate might be expanded: a historical example of an intellectual engagement with political and philosophical questions around global justice; a tale of two causes that sought unity in their cultural and experiential differences and similarities, and a narrative that explicitly looks beyond the state; a story that focuses on global injustice from within the western world, not the global south.

It is also worth noting—with reference to the proposed expansion of global justice studies' interdisciplinarity nature—that it is the critical reading of this relationship by English Literature scholar Daniel G. Williams that I take as a key source, specifically his work *Black Skin, Blue Books: African Americans and Wales 1845–1945* (2012). To recall the point, this is important because in turning to such a comparative study I am claiming that it is not just economics, political science and development studies that represent cognate disciplines in the study of global justice. The interdisciplinarity of global justice studies can be fruitfully extended through such resources.

Before focusing on the nature of their relationship and its significance, it is worth making some preliminary remarks about the two protagonists. Robeson is known primarily as a performer who was also a civil rights activist, but he was many other things besides (Bevan Foundation/Paul Robeson Cymru Committee, 2001). After graduating from Rutgers' University he qualified to become a lawyer in Columbia, and was aided in his living costs through playing American Football professionally on weekends. He began a career as a lawyer, but very soon decided to pursue his first love, performing. He is remembered for his singing and his role in a number of plays and films which he featured in between the 1920s and the 40s. He turned his back on the film industry because of the continuing stereotyping constituted by many of the roles he took on, and as his career had

developed so did his political consciousness. The period of ten years he spent in Europe during the 20s and 30s was crucial to these developments (Rice, 2003), in particular the maturing of his ideas about pan-Africanism, Communism and international activism. Such views would cost him and his career dear as he was blacklisted during the McCarthyism of the 50s, but whilst he was cast as a villain in his home country his popularity as a performer and activist only increased elsewhere. He became a symbol of the global struggle for expanding workers and minorities' rights and a hero to many across the world.

The Welsh mining communities, primarily in South Wales, began to form and then expand rapidly during the mid and late nineteenth century, when the industrial revolution was gathering increasing momentum.⁵ "King Coal" constituted not only a massive export industry that saw the development of coastal ports such as the Welsh capital of Cardiff; it was also the force that drove the steel industry that became part of the landscape of the valleys (Evans, 1961). Similar communities across the United Kingdom became fertile territory for popular movements for increasing the franchise and expanding workers' rights and by the beginning of the twentieth Century they were defined by a commitment to the Labor movement and an international struggle against the egregious harms of predatory capitalism.

Despite the similarities and solidarity that the Welsh miners shared with their fellow workers across the UK, there were two unique characteristics that typified their communities. First was the fact that, having been conquered in 1282, thereafter colonized, and annexed as part of the English state in 1536, Wales nevertheless remained a separate country in terms of retaining a national identity, a nominal unitary territory and its own language. Despite, therefore, being constituted on a governmental level as a region of the British nation-state, in other important ways it retained a sense of itself as a separate nation. A second significant difference was the nature of organized religion. Its own distinct religious identity was characterized by the preponderance of Protestant Non-conformism that rejected the authority of the Church of England—the Baptists, Independents, Unitarians and Methodists. It was the last of these sects, the Methodists, who had been particularly influential with regards to the form of religious worship, inspiring two significant revivals that engaged the congregations in no small part through the singing of evocative hymns. A radical, left-wing working class identity that spanned many different forms of socialism lived side by side, and often fused with a historic religious and national tradition that amongst other things, placed particular value on song and poetry.

This identity, despite being increasingly diluted during the twentieth century, provides some clues as to how it was Robeson and the Welsh mining communities would come to forge such a strong and lasting relationship. It was not only the case that their political causes were aligned in certain respects, their connections and the manner in which their developing narratives (in particular that of Robeson) interwove speak to a complexity of factors that present some interesting and telling political considerations. For one, it seems reasonable to suggest that their connection was constituted as much by particularistic cultural considerations and deep emotional ties as it was universal concepts and ideals.

Indeed, it comes as no surprise to learn that Robeson's connection with Wales began in 1929 when he impulsively responded to a group of protesting Welsh miners singing in the West End of London. This story, especially as it is related by his son (Robeson Jr., 2001: 156)⁶ captures the sense in which Robeson and the miners' relationship is first

understood not in terms of a strategic political alliance, but a tie that came about spontaneously, grounded in an emotional response elicited through the medium of song. Indeed, it was singing and music that was to symbolize and provide the foundation for the link that would flourish over time, and which played a not insubstantial role in the development of Robeson's own political consciousness.

The words of Robeson himself best capture the manner in which song became a conduit for a deep emotional tie, and fundamentally political relationship. He claimed that his commitment to politics derived not only from the fate of his own people, but from his connection with the Welsh miners.

I was in the Welsh valley, and the Welsh people sing very much like we do – the Negro people – in many of our songs – beautiful songs. And I was one of the few outsiders who sang at their national festival, which has gone on since the time of the Druids. And I went down into the mines with the workers, and they explained to me, that 'Paul, you may be successful here. . . , but your people suffer like ours. We are poor people, and you belong to us. You don't belong to the bigwigs here in this country.' And so today I feel as much at home in the Welsh valley as I would in my own Negro section in any city in the United States. I just did a broadcast by transatlantic cable to the Welsh valley, a few weeks ago, and here was the first understanding that the struggle of the Negro people, or of any people, cannot be by itself – that is, the human struggle. So I was attracted by and met many members of the Labour Party, and my politics embraced also the common struggle of all oppressed people, including especially the working masses – specifically the laboring people of all the world. That defines my philosophy. It's a joining one. We are a working people, a laboring people – the Negro people (Robeson, 1978: 453).

This quote is discussed in some length in Williams' critical treatment and his analysis is particularly insightful in drawing out how the quote reflects developments in Robeson's own political philosophy. He notes how Robeson began with what is described as a "nationalist" commitment to his people, which developed into an internationalist perspective in part through his encounter with the Welsh, before later developing an understanding of the Afro-American people as a part of the proletariat. What we ultimately find embodied in the relationship between Robeson and the miners is a transcendent emotional and political tie that is grounded in a mutual appreciation of a difference and similarity in culture, which facilitates a transnational human struggle against the global injustices of exploitative, unencumbered capitalism. It is also notable as a struggle that was fighting these global forces from within what we now refer to as the "west" or the "global north"—Robeson and the miners' views attested to the notion that they were victims in the same way as others dotted around the globe.

Robeson's initial commitment to his people exhibits certain elements that speak both to the theme of emotion and a tendency to conform to the dubious intellectual tendencies of the time. As Williams notes, Robeson tended to regard his own work as an actor and singer "in the primitivist terms of the dominant society," (Williams, 2012: 155) affirming the qualities of emotion and feeling that whites used to denounce African Americans. He posited at least two positive aspects to these prejudices, connecting in explicit terms this cultural distinctiveness with the African roots of his people, whilst also arguing that these attributes could help to right the wrongs of the materialist American culture.

These assertions were expressed through a determination to inform African-Americans of their common heritage. This would be a means to address their inferiority complex by demonstrating its richness and value, and in so doing they could lay the grounds for a Pan-African cultural nationalism that could add strength and dynamism to their collective struggle. This aim was not cashed out in terms of an overt rejection of American culture, but rather as a way to demonstrate how the spiritualism of Afro American culture could save White America from its material and mechanized nature. In this early thought Robeson exhibits his internationalist, universalist tendencies with references to the idea that different races have a part to play in creating forms of life where the intellectual and emotional are in harness (Henry Jones (see Matthews, 1998), the Welsh Hegelian philosopher and social reformer, tellingly spoke of Welsh cultural distinctiveness in similar terms with regard to British culture). Williams notes that this echoes the thoughts of Victorian scholars such as Matthew Arnold who viewed “the poetic, feminine temperament and childishness of primitive peoples such as the Celts and African Americans as sources of reinvigoration for their own philistine, materialist societies” (Williams, 2012: 154).

One can understand, therefore, Robeson’s encounter with the Welsh miners as a meeting in which this view of the black struggle and their imminent improvement of American culture takes on global proportions. He does not reject his earlier primitivism as he continues to cleave to a racial conception of identity. Rather this conception “is generalized to encompass other oppressed peoples” (Williams, 2012: 167), so that these culturally defined peoples of the world are conceived as the vanguard for global emancipation. Key to this move is the characterization of such peoples as the workers of the world, as race and class are fused. Class identity becomes synonymous with folk or peoples—so that it is mediated by race rather than economic categories; here we have an intriguing historical example of the struggle against global injustice being conceptualized and theorized in an original and provocative way.

These developments in Robeson’s thought cannot be fully appreciated without recognition of the significant “other” in the relationship between Robeson and the Welsh miners—namely the Soviet Union. It was in the Soviet national minority policy that Robeson saw his vision in action, and here we see the interweaving of individual, cultural group and state ideals that creates an ideology for the oppressed that asks questions of centering on the state in fighting global injustice. In 1955 he recalled how he saw for himself “how the Yakuts and the Uzbeks and all the other formerly oppressed nations were leaping ahead from tribalism to modern industrial economy, from illiteracy to the heights of knowledge” (Robeson, 1978: 407). What attracted Robeson and many other African Americans to Communism was not only the feted rise of the worker or its internationalism per se, rather the fact it “offered an international basis for the recognition of a distinctive African American folk culture” (Williams, 2012: 162). Within this communist ideology Robeson was to interpret his people, in their cultural particularism, as being proletarian.

Williams’ work on Robeson and Wales is particularly significant in its critical approach, and the challenge it constitutes to the mainstream historiography in Wales, which has tended to ignore Robeson’s cultural (inter)nationalism. In one sense this alerts us to the complexities of deploying such histories in global justice studies, where narratives may compete—in the same way, it should be added, as the various theories of

development which are regularly referred to. More importantly, it seems to suggest a tendency in promoting cosmopolitan values that can erase the particularity from which transnational movements may be born (i.e. some Welsh historians promote an account of historical internationalism that rejects the possibility of Welsh linguistic and ethnic particularism playing a significant role). This is a not insignificant tendency to be kept in mind with regard to contemporary debates on global justice, which might be seen to focus on promoting individual rights and state development to the detriment of the cultural values espoused and cherished by certain oppressed groups; the flattening out of difference. The particular tie between Robeson and the Welsh miners was forged as much on account of their “ethnic insistence” (Duberman, 1995: 228) as it was their shared internationalism (which was constituted *through* the relationship)—this shared condition of a marginalized ethnicity appears central to their profound bond.

Ultimately it can be conjectured that this bond was partly forged by an emotional connection motivated through song and personal circumstance, and which sustained their shared human struggle. In his discussion of Robeson and Friedrich Douglass’s transatlantic connections, Alan Rice pronounces that,

These famous African Americans’ deep affection for Britain and especially the British on the Celtic fringes was rewarded by a heroic status which they repaid through romanticized depictions of life in the old country. . .they enabled both Douglass and Robeson to create transatlantic counter-cultures of resistance that helped to radicalize political opinion on both sides of the ocean (Rice, 2003: 187).

Robeson expressed this affection in a performative manner in his concerts, where he sang a mixture of Negro spirituals, Welsh and other peoples’ folk songs: “a creative expression for the fusion of ethnic particularism and socialist universalism that informed his responses to other people and places.” (Williams, 2012: 166–167). There is perhaps no better expression of this bond than in Robeson’s performance of the spiritual “Deep River” in the 1940 film *Proud Valley*. His son speaks of the importance of the film to Robeson and his willingness to see the project through, in the face of some serious doubts after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact:

He had arrived back from Wales exhilarated. . . he and the rest of the cast had lived in miners’ homes with their families, and Paul had descended into a working mine. In a visit to another mine called the Tower Colliery, he sang to the miners and spontaneously suggested that the film be named the *Proud Valley*. The miners roared their assent, and this became the title of the film when it was released (Robeson Jr., 2001: 330).

In the film he plays a role that in many senses personified his political character. An unemployed seaman, he finds himself led to a South Wales mining valley where he is immediately befriended by the local choirmaster on account of his singing. He ultimately becomes part of the choirmaster’s family and takes on the burden of their care after the latter’s untimely death in the mine. The singing of “Deep River” with the choir at his back during the Welsh cultural festival, the *Eisteddfod*, is in memory of his lost friend, and is not only pregnant in meaning within the context of the film, but more so from the perspective of Robeson’s life, politics and relationship with the Welsh miners.

The significance of a historical turn

In this final section, I tease out some claims about the benefits of engaging more thoroughly in historical narratives and stories in the contemporary global justice debate, on the basis of the foregoing history and some of the questions I have indicated it throws up. The initial step in such an engagement involves the expansion of the interdisciplinarity that is inherent within the field, moving from fields such as IPE and political science to embrace historical, cultural and literary studies. In advocating a historical turn I work through anticipated contributions to the wider debate with reference to the aspects of the methodology outlined in section 1.

(i) *Theoretical and conceptual contributions that challenge the preponderant ahistorical treatment of the global justice debate*

Studying past struggles such as this reminds us of the fact that moral issues about global injustice—ones that may appear uniquely relevant to the modern deeply globalized world—were in fact preponderant before Peter Singer (1972) began discussing the moral implications of the East Bengali famine. So, of course, were attempts to address these issues in philosophical and practical ways (we need only think of the resistance to the trans-Atlantic slave trade to recall this). In the case of Robeson and the Welsh miners, here were representatives from two groups of people who were able to recognize similarities in the struggle of the other, as well as numerous other international causes with which they sympathized such as the Spanish Civil War (Duberman, 1995: 28). These stories and their accounts in more literary disciplines also include the emotional, affective elements of politics that are important to our understanding. Specifically, the relationship had an obvious impact on Robeson's political thought, which presents a thought-provoking theory about the relationship between cultural and ethnic particularity and global/transnational resistance. This point about historical precedent is perhaps more starkly evident in a reference that Williams makes to the Universal Races Congress, held in 1911, which signals a much earlier, and particularly thoroughgoing attempt to draw together oppressed people in order to address the mutual problem of injustice, and ultimately “achieve world peace through international cooperation” (Williams, 2012: 2). These earlier attempts to think through issues of global injustice and to find philosophical as well practical answers to these issues can be viewed as potential contributions to the contemporary debate.

Some may appear outdated and anachronistic, but there is good reason to adhere to the spirit of these earlier attempts and draw inspiration from the general contours of their arguments. For example, Robeson's concept of “laboring peoples,” which suggests a fusion between ethnic and proletariat identities, is one which is unfamiliar in the contemporary debate, but could open up interesting discussions about the way in which global injustice often occurs—not simply because of individuals' place within the relations of production, but also because of the particular group to which they belong within a society. Points of connection can be drawn out in this respect with intersectionality, or Fraser's (2008) attempts to expand her recognition theory beyond the confines of state boundaries. In attempting to ensure parity of participation, she considers the equal

recognition of group identities to be as important as fair redistribution and political representation.

Furthermore, although one would want to move away from the type of essentialism explicit in the primitivist views espoused by Robeson, one can nevertheless see benefits to a train of thought that considered non-white, Western cultures as having particular valuable and important contributions to make. Because of the provenance of the global justice debate there is a need and duty in terms of greater efforts to seek involvement, philosophical insight and answers from non-western thought, philosophy and culture (Maffettone, 2012; Williams and Death, 2017). A historical perspectives reveals that this should not be viewed as a radical departure, but a continuation of a flow of ideas that has proceeded over many years, and that others long ago reflected on the benefits of a theoretical and practical meeting of traditions.

One can find an excellent example of drawing on our (distant) past for such theoretical and conceptual inspiration in the work of Alejandra Mancilla (2016). She looks at the “right of necessity,” a medieval principle that granted the chronically deprived the right to take whatever means or occupy whatever land that was required, in order to preserve themselves. She considers how we might look again at this principle in light of the situation of the global poor today, and how it leads to considering what they may do for themselves in attempting to fulfill their right to subsistence.

Taking a more explicit and self-aware historical turn in our study of global justice thus grants us the opportunity not only to look at the debate anew, but also to introduce ideas and concepts that can enrich and improve the debate. This entails a very different use of history than is encountered in the mainstream debate to date, which tends to elucidate historical examples in order to buttress moral arguments and to strengthen the case for certain principles, values and actions. There is nothing wrong with this use of history, of course, but what is being suggested here is a more fundamental engagement with historical examples in order to challenge and expand our theoretical and philosophical vocabulary that we employ in current debates: history to enlighten, not only exemplify.

(ii) *Expanding the empirical frame of the debate*

In claiming that there is potential for expanding the empirical frame, the argument being made here is that certain concepts and practices are privileged in the debate (rights, states, global institutions) and that a historical turn reveals how and why other factors should be given attention—in particular in this instance those factors that can better account for, and encourage and affect change and reform.

(a) *Culture, emotion and historical experience—not only “abstraction & generalization.”* A particularly prevalent theme in the foregoing narrative is the fusion of cultural particularism, emotion and internationalism that animated the relationship between Robeson and the miners. This attitude of seeking unity through difference goes against the grain of the aspiration of generalization that is a key plank for theories of global justice, because rather than emphasizing the possibilities of difference, the tendency is to seek uniformities in values and customs in order to move toward universal accounts of needs (Miller), flourishing (Pogge), rights (Rawls) or capabilities (Nussbaum, 2006)—thus providing

the justificatory moral groundwork and a common starting point for demanding certain reforms and policies.

In one sense there are consistencies with Robeson's outlook, in that he speaks of the potential of unifying forces and peoples aiming toward the same goals. It is doubtful in this respect that Robeson would want to challenge such unifying accounts, and his views and his experience with the Welsh miners are not suggestive of this—rather what can be emphasized is that in seeking elements of common humanity we need not dispense with the particular in looking for the more general and abstract. In particular, in looking for grounds for action, it is likely that actors will find as much motivation from emotional and cultural factors. Demanding reforms and changes can be buttressed by strong moral arguments, but transnational and global solidarity is as likely to accrue through lived experiences and sharing and celebration of one's particularity—which typically lead to the recognition of one's own challenges in the lives of others.

Normative theories emphasizing universal values provide important grounds for making claims against governments and global institutions; however, in keeping with their sincere hopes of elucidating ideas that can elicit change there is a place for embracing the study of historical relationships of transnational solidarity, how this has been fostered, and how we might seek to encourage such developments in the future. Such concerns may seem far removed from the philosophical roots of the mainstream debate, yet authors such as Pogge and Rawls have happily engaged with the study of development and international political economy, so if the mainstream global justice debate is interdisciplinary in one way, what should discourage us from developing this interdisciplinarity in other directions?

An attendant consequence is that in looking at the problems of global injustice from the starting point of historical transnational solidarity, we ground our discussion in practical experience, which is likely to vary immensely between contexts. This draws our attention to the ways in which oppression has functioned in different ways and for different reasons, whilst serving as a constant reminder that progress is nevertheless possible. More recognition of these historical continuities is important in how we theorize and make claims about our present course of action—especially in relation to the manner in which we might seek to influence or intervene in the name of justice. A greater historical awareness can lead to greater empathy and understanding of oppression in other parts of the world, and comprehension and faith in the possibilities for change driven from the bottom up. Indeed, this is an argument developed by the Rawlsian scholar David Reidy (2013: 187), when he defends the tolerance espoused by Rawls toward non-liberal societies—on the grounds that we should not take non-western societies to be incapable of the sort of historical changes that have only occurred very recently in our own political communities, which themselves are never immune from backsliding.

(b) *Emphasizing persons, peoples and groups: Beyond state-centrism.* In looking at such a historical example of a transnational movement that fought against injustices, we find that the focus of attention shifts from the state as the locus of power, or international structures as the primary space for reform. Instead our perspective begins with distinct cultural collectivities and their particular experiences of oppression and how they articulated their struggles. There is no denying the pervasive power of the state, which is

recognized even by theorists who have eschewed the liberal mainstream (Eckersley, 2004: 7) whilst it is a truism that the Bretton Woods institutions wield huge influence on the lives of all of us. Yet in analyzing these entities and the interplay between them, and providing normative arguments and practical recommendations to address them, the mainstream literature pays only lip-service to popular movements (Pogge, 2008: 217, Rawls, 1999: 102) that historically have most often been the engine of change. In debating historical change domestically, no one would doubt that the Chartists, the Suffragettes or the Civil Rights Movements played central roles, yet in theorizing global justice today popular movements are too often given marginal attention.

Historical examples such as these, involving groups from Western countries whose demands were eventually acceded to, show that the problem of global injustice as it is conceived today often overlooks the fact that in many respects we are dealing with injustices rooted in localized problems. Pogge would want to warn against seeing all the causes as being local (explanatory nationalism as he describes it (Pogge, 1998)), but this should not take us away from the fact that addressing injustice will as be as likely to happen through local pressure and activism as relying on the intervention of external institutions and agents. Whilst contemporary theorists are correct to identify the deleterious effects of the global economic order and unjust state institutions, such structural focus might be deemed to overlook the importance of agency amongst groups and collectivities. It should be recognized in this regard that thinkers in other traditions (Culp, 2014; Fraser, 2008) are less wedded to this perspective and are more sensitive to the manner in which sites of injustice, and resistance to them, develop within more localized and transnational contexts—cutting across state boundaries but not always entirely global in reach.

Histories such as that of Robeson and the Miners are therefore a reminder that a tendency toward state centrism should be adapted to include a greater focus on communities and groups within states as agents of change, in particular with a view to understanding and inspiring political action—but also as historical victims of global injustice. More often than not injustices occur against individuals because they are part of particular groups—indigenous Australians, the Dalits in India, and the Roma in Europe are obvious examples. As is implicit in Fraser's recognition theory (2008), to fully understand what is at stake and to recognize the possibilities for reform there needs be a thorough appreciation of the type of prejudices and beliefs that account for them. In relation to Robeson's people, understanding the issues confronting the Afro-American community cannot, of course, be done properly, without an appreciation of the racism engendered by the transatlantic slave trade and the beliefs and prejudices that have built up over time.

(iii) Global injustice begins at home: Against dichotomizing and dividing

There are broader reasons for taking a more explicitly historical approach that emerge in dealing in detail with specific histories: namely as an attempt to ward off the tendency for those in more affluent countries to regard themselves as speaking from a privileged position where global justice exists “out there” in the world. That is to say, at least part of the tendency on behalf of Westerners to regard global injustice as a problem outside their own society and to be administered to elsewhere, might be linked back to the fact

we tend to have a short historical memory. Such stories provide a vivid reminder of the fact that blatant, outright examples of injustice are a very recent phenomenon even in the most progressive of states, and that in many cases a damaging legacy persist.

Whilst global justice theories tend to look at the Global South as the problem to be addressed—and recognize the central role of the Global North in creating such injustice—there arguably remains a disconnect with injustices that occur closer to home. There is an obvious reason for this, of course, which is that the extent of injustices in the Global North are largely less egregious. Yet such histories can remind us of the historical proximity of our own troubled past, the frailty of our contemporary settlement and the linkages between injustices in our own societies and those of the wider world. If nothing else, greater historical awareness and recognition of our own problems now and in the recent past might address what can be perceived as paternalistic and missionary-like attitudes (Rathore, 2012: 173).

Historical continuities in terms of the African-American population are self-evident and hardly need to be rehearsed here, but the same is true with regard the South Wales miners and their communities, where by the end of the 1920s conditions in the coal-field were desperate (Francis and Smith, 1998: 102). The welfare state and nationalization of the industry ushered in post-war could not offer reliable protection for all, as evidenced by the creeping closure of pits, but most despairingly by the (recently commemorated) disaster of Aberfan, which saw 166 villagers die, including scores of children buried alive in their classroom, because the necessary precautions had not been taken to secure the debris from the mines (Francis and Smith, 1980: 460–461). With the closure of the pits in the 1980s and the government's resolve to forego any meaningful regeneration, it is no exaggeration to say that, as in the late 1920s, "depressed mining communities crumbled" (Francis and Smith, 1980: 102). Forty years on the effects are felt not only in terms of comparative deprivation but also in the popular depictions of these communities that are notable for their lack of empathy and understanding. The opposition to the EU expressed in these areas in the 2016 referendum—despite its generous development aid—speak to interesting parallels with issues and problems facing development projects in the global south. Despite the relative nature of the injustices faced, the continuities are there to be borne witness to, exemplified by Oxfam Cymru (Oxfam in Wales) adaption of policies along the lines practiced in their overseas projects.

The potential difficulty of historical blindness in our own case, and the lack of reflexive awareness, goes hand in hand with a potential blindness to injustice beyond our political community. That is to say, an inability to perceive injustice on our own doorstep makes it unlikely that we are able—or willing—to perceive it and do anything about it in the world beyond. Assumptions by a significant proportion of the population that the post-industrial communities of South Wales or the Afro-American community in the USA are to blame for their contemporary difficulties are likely to be mirrored by similar convictions that poor nation-states and their populations are to be held largely responsible for their problems.

This is not to suggest that we can coherently or persuasively place the injustices that occur in more affluent societies on the same footing as injustices in poorer societies, which lead to more widespread suffering and premature death. Yet stories such as that of

Robeson and the Miners need to be recalled more readily, as apt reminders that severe global injustice can and has occurred across the Western world, that important injustices remain, and they are not just “out there.” It seems highly likely that the failure by US and UK societies to recognize them as such—and to institute the transformational change required to address them—can be linked to an unwillingness to see the need for and advocate such far-ranging reforms on a global scale. Moreover, rather than the perennial focus on interventions in the global south, more effective in the long-term would be activism aimed at ensuring domestic government’s relations with other members of the international community are established and carried out on the basis of justice and reciprocity. A historical turn in the study of global justice can help to emphasize the continuities of injustice in our own societies and with the wider world, and provide us with material for attempting to elucidate why it is we have been historically resistant to emancipatory reform both within our own societies and beyond.

Philosophers of global justice hope that constructing powerful arguments and using the power of logic will do much to persuade, but it is equally the case that we need to dedicate time to understanding our behavior and our intransigence in the face of such rational and reasonable arguments. Histories can help us remind us what is possible, and can alert us to the narrowness of our current vision.

Conclusion

The main aim of this paper has been to use an account of the relationship between Paul Robeson and the Welsh miners to demonstrate how such histories can expand and enhance the study of global justice. In putting forward this argument I have identified certain aspects of the predominant debate, which in some senses might be seen to obscure certain values, ideas and concepts that are potentially significant. The specific aspects identified are the ahistorical treatment of global injustice; abstraction and generalization; state-centrism; and dichotomizing and dividing—the idea of global injustice as being “out there.” These aspects were characterized not necessarily as incorrect, but rather the consequence of conventions that have been established over time, but which require augmentation.

The story of Robeson and the miners is immediately intriguing and challenging in terms of the study of global justice for a number of reasons. It represents a historical example of a transnational relationship between two geographically and culturally distant—yet in some sense Western—people who converged around a common struggle. Only a relatively brief amount of reflection is needed to note that it embodies certain considerations that may cast a different light on how we think about and approach issues of global justice. Here we have two groups represented, both situated within western states, who came together in a different era, not only through formal campaigning or affiliations but through art and culture, who ultimately drew strength from each other as much on an emotional basis as on an intellectual plane, in the fight against predatory capitalism. Having related some of the key points of the history, in particular the way in which the relationship was instantiated in Robeson’s thoughts and actions, in the final section I attempted to draw out the way such a history draws attention to relevant considerations that might not be focused upon in the more conventional study of global justice.

In particular, the possibilities of cultural and ethnic particularity as a starting point for transnational solidarity was emphasized, whilst the historical perspective represented a number of possibilities. Earlier intellectual trends and attempts to forge transnational social movements were suggested as a source of inspiration for current debates, whilst a more explicit engagement with such histories can draw our attention to the transient nature of justice and the importance for those in the more affluent countries to guard against hubris. Here a significant link emerged with the sense in which such histories may also disrupt the western tendency to see injustice as something “out there,” drawing attention to the idea that justice begins on the doorstep and that developments in global justice require vigilance against injustice on the home front. Lastly the fact that the protagonists were peoples, or groups, rather than states or global institutions suggests a greater focus on the possibility of agency and reform existing outside the traditional loci of power.

All of these reflections indicate the possibilities of complementing the study of global justice with a greater attempt to engage with, and allow particular stories and histories to guide our approach. In the first place this entails a greater willingness to engage with research and studies in the arts and humanities, and also the study of social movements, which can bring a more rounded and complete interdisciplinarity to the study of global justice. Importantly this can also buttress a more nuanced and complex understanding of the nature of global injustices and the ways in which they might be tackled. Engagement with these historical narratives can lead to more theoretical reflection on how successful campaigns and reform can be secured today.

Historical intellectual trends and relationships can be returned to or buttressed in attempts to forge transnational movements for justice and strengthen links between the Global North and South. Drawing out linkages between injustice in communities and states in the developed world and those in the developing world—both practical and psychological—could bring more attention and understanding about the need to tackle its roots. Such studies can also remind us of the old adage that it is people and not governments that create change, and encourage new attempts to bring peoples together in common cause. Finally culture, and cultural difference, can be given greater attention as the means to bring disparate communities together and forge the type of transnational and global solidarity required to precipitate change with regard to the great injustices of this world. Perhaps if there is one insight to be taken from the particular story discussed here, it is the enduring importance of music and performance, and the emotion it inspires, in uniting peoples of different race and background.

ORCID iD

Huw L Williams  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7577-8816>

Notes

1. See for example contributions to the “third wave” (Wollner, 2013) of global justice theorizing in Valentini (2011), James (2012), and Risse (2012).
2. See Culp (2014) for a discussion of the schematic and terminological development of the debate.

3. One is reminded of Lorde's (1992) feminist writings and her critique of a movement undermined by a failure to seek unity in difference, and in particular the failure of white middle class women to understand the challenges faced by groups of women oppressed in other ways.
4. See Pogge (1998) on "explanatory nationalism."
5. For more historical detail, see Williams (1984), Berger (2001), Francis and Smith (1998), Morgan (1987), Smith (1993), and Williams (1998).
6. "One day during the grim winter of 1929, when unemployment and desperate poverty stalked the British Isles, Paul was on his way to a gala affair when he heard the rich sound of a Welsh miners' choir. . . what Paul instantly seized upon was their spirit and their suffering as human beings. Without hesitation, he joined the group, walking the streets with them and humming along. When they reached one of the large downtown buildings, Paul climbed the front steps and sang "Ol' Man River," ballads, and spirituals to his new friends. . . This was the beginning of a lifetime of ardent friendship between Paul and the people of South Wales."

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Author biography

Huw L Williams is a Reader in Philosophy and University Dean for the Welsh Language at Cardiff University. His main interests are in political philosophy and the history of ideas, and he has published predominantly in English on discussions of global justice, and the intellectual history of Wales in Welsh.