

3-1987

Distributive Justice: A Social-Psychological Perspective by
Morton Deutsch

Barry N. Markovsky
University of South Carolina - Columbia, barry@sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/socy_facpub



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 92, Issue 5, 1987, pages 1262-1264.

<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/ajs/current>

© 1987 by University of Chicago Press

This Book Review is brought to you by the Sociology, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

immediately wants to know more. First, under what conditions is the law most likely to be autonomous? Second, what are the different ways in which the law is, in fact, autonomous? Much contemporary legal theory is relevant to these questions. The names of Unger, Selznick, Nonet, and others come to mind. Watson's thesis is too simple to make even a partial answer to these questions.

There are important general theoretical problems in our attempts to understand autonomous institutional development, not just in law but in organizations, in the state (see, e.g., the "autonomy of the state" literature), or in science (as in the attempt to distinguish the internal and the external history of science). Watson's examples are quite germane to these efforts, and one can learn a great deal from them. But Watson's general hypothesis is simply not differentiated enough to enter usefully into theoretical debate.

Distributive Justice: A Social-Psychological Perspective. By Morton Deutsch. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985. Pp. vii + 313. \$27.50.

Barry Markovsky
University of Iowa

Asserting that justice concerns pervade social life, Morton Deutsch has compiled the results of a decade of thinking and research in areas related to distributive justice. Part I contains six chapters on theory, part II has six on research, and part III has four application chapters. Approximately 40% of *Distributive Justice* has been adapted from prior publications. The text is easy to read and not at all technical or overburdened with terminology. Its utility as an introduction to the field, however, is limited since it provides no comprehensive literature review and details only one of the many programs of research in the area.

Nine key features of "systems of distributive justice" appear in the introduction, serving as the platform from which any such system is viewed. They include (1) characteristics of the good or harm being distributed, (2) social roles, (3) styling and timing of the distribution, (4) distributional values (e.g., need, equality, merit), (5) criteria for implementing values (e.g., work quality as a merit criterion), (6) measurement of criteria, (7) procedures for deciding on the above features, (8) boundaries of the distribution system, and (9) social consequences of the system. The introduction also identifies specific issues such as how "self-esteem, attitudes toward work and relations with fellow group members, as well as individual and group productivity, [are] affected by the way a group's earnings are distributed within the group . . . which social and psychological factors determine preferences for one or another distributive value . . . [and] the conditions that lead people to prefer egalitarian rather than meritocratic values" (p. 4).

There are two review chapters. Chapter 2, "A Critique of Equity Theory," addresses major statements through 1978, briefly noting some of the issues that these theories did not address. There are no actual critiques based on logical or empirical analyses. Chapter 7, "Theoretical Overview of the Area," includes summaries of statements by the "leading theorists." That review brings us up to the early 1980s, though only through a sampling of seven out of the numerous theorists and researchers contributing to this field. Several major works are not discussed.

Part I is best considered *metatheoretical*. As such, rather than being provided with a theory of distributive justice, we are shown the concepts that the author believes are worth developing, the issues and factors that he considers important, what previous work bears on these issues, and how to go about developing and testing theories. This approach entails certain strengths and weaknesses. Deutsch has clearly indicated the potential for theories of broad scope in which justice processes are both the consequences and determinants of other important social phenomena. Connections between individual and collective levels are suggested, and links are forged with political science, economics, and numerous subdisciplines of psychology and sociology. The reader cannot but be impressed with the richness and potential of the field of distributive justice.

The weaknesses stem from attempts to generalize from the metatheorizing in part I and the mostly exploratory research of part II. First, no explicit theory is developed from the metatheory. "Justice" is never defined. At various points, it is treated as a psychological state, a social condition, a reward evaluation, and an evaluation of the reward-delivering mechanisms. Other key terms are also used inconsistently. Second, arguments are never systematized. Many statements take the form "*x may affect y.*" Too much emphasis is placed on the fuzzy but oft-repeated "Deutsch's crude law of social relations," which states that "the characteristic processes and effects elicited by a given type of social relationship also tend to elicit that type of social relationship." Third, the intended domain or scope of these statements is never given. Exploratory research is reported—some from natural settings, most from the laboratory—and the results generalized indiscriminately, with insufficient attention paid to the conditions underlying observed phenomena. Generalizing directly from experiments to natural settings (part III) without the guidance of a scope-defined theory fosters confusion over the proper theory-testing role of experimental research.

Morton Deutsch believes (correctly, I think) that he has an important message for us. Numerous times throughout the book he expresses his conviction of and gives evidence for the general superiority of cooperative over competitive social systems. Much of the book is an attempt to prove this conviction by demonstrating a positive correlation between cooperative relationships and the perception of their outcomes as just. Applications to educational systems, egalitarian economic systems, and international relations illustrate the potential benefits of cooperation. But a stronger bridge to existing theory and research on justice judgments

would have been helpful. The research and discussions provide food for thought but do not satisfy.

In sum, *Distributive Justice* does not meet its goals. Its lack of rigor renders the theory less applicable than claimed to the important social issues that are discussed. However, Morton Deutsch has made some metatheoretical contributions of considerable value in having us consider justice determinants and consequences from some new angles. The book identifies problems and directions for solutions, and that is needed in an area that is rich in ideas but not quite so well off theoretically.

Law and Order. By Ralf Dahrendorf. London: Steven; Boulder, Col.: Westview, 1986. Pp. 179. \$20.00.

Irving Louis Horowitz
Rutgers University

When an outstanding talent and a beacon for social science writes a new book or, as is here the case, delivers a series of lectures (the Hamlyn Lectures, to “further among the Common People of Great Britain and Northern Ireland the knowledge of Comparative Jurisprudence and Ethnology”) and that series is magically transformed into a book, it behooves the scholarly community to sit up and take notice. This is doubly so because the volume entitled *Law and Order* is written by a self-declared “unreconstructed eighteenth-century liberal.” But such self-definition is only partially accurate. For, in fact, Ralf Dahrendorf—sociologist, educator, and politician—is very much a child of his age, which spans much of 20th-century Europe.

It is fascinating that, for this 18th-century liberal, the figures who loom largest in his discussion of law and order are not Diderot or even Montesquieu but Rousseau and Hobbes, the counter-Enlightenment figure of the 18th century and the quintessential figure of the 17th-century secularization of politics, respectively. Dahrendorf’s reading of Rousseau as a democrat may surprise those who sometimes juxtapose Rousseau and the Enlightenment. But in emphasizing the ideas of “natural” goodness and “social” deformation, Rousseau’s belief in increasing life chances, liberty, and the freedom to choose, as well as in determining what is chosen, Dahrendorf makes a strong case for a figure who not only combined law with order but appreciated the human capacity to move sideways no less adeptly than forward.

If Rousseau provides the motif of liberty, Hobbes offers the leitmotiv of order. He does so by indirection, in Dahrendorf’s consideration of the Hobbesian Behemoth as a condition of lawlessness, chaos, and rebellion. Ultimately, the Anarch brings about the need for Leviathan. Dahrendorf’s concern is not with the history of ideas alone but with “a new wave of totalitarianism” that could “sweep the world,” a world in which the delicate balance of law and order tips dramatically and fatefully toward