



## BOOK REVIEW

*Wealth and Power: Philosophical Perspectives*, Michael Bennett, Huub Brouwer, and Rutger Claassen, eds. Routledge, 2023, x + 356 pages.  
doi:[10.1017/S0266267123000184](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266267123000184)

Are political equality and economic inequality compatible? How do inequalities of wealth generate asymmetries of political power? What should be done about such power asymmetries? These are the central questions that Bennett, Brouwer and Claassen's edited collection aims to address. Most of the contributions look at what the editors call 'wealth in the state': the hijacking of government power by the privately wealthy. Some of these discuss the mechanisms through which such a hijack happens (lobbying, for example); others discuss possible solutions (publicly funding parties, for instance). A smaller number of contributions look at 'power in the economy': the focus here is on how wealthy private organizations, and especially corporations, have power over other less wealthy organizations and individuals. The result is a rich discussion of the nexus between wealth and political power. This collection is well worth reading for those interested in such issues.

There are 16 papers in this collection: too many to give a comprehensive overview of in this brief review. But summarizing a handful will help bring out some of their general themes. Let's start with Richard Arneson's contribution. Arneson explores how welfarist egalitarianism and relational egalitarianism assess inequalities of wealth. He thinks welfarist egalitarians should condemn such inequalities on straightforward instrumental grounds: inequalities of wealth lead to inequalities of well-being, and the welfarist egalitarian condemns such inequalities of well-being. Relational egalitarians, or so he claims, have much less reason to condemn wealth inequalities. He thinks they should care about wealth inequalities only when such inequalities lead to inequalities of political power. Wealth inequalities often do lead to such inequalities of political power, but it's at least possible for them to counterbalance other inequalities of political power: consider the case in which privately wealthy individuals help offset the power of a dictator. Arneson's conclusion is that welfarist egalitarianism provides a more robust condemnation of wealth inequalities.

Jessica Flanigan, in contrast, investigates what anarchists should think about how to address wealth inequalities in our actual societies. The version of anarchism she considers says that there are weighty objections to coercion, and that that means the state, as the coercive entity *uber alles*, is morally unsupportable. Usually, when we think about this view, we think it suggests that the state should do as little as possible: it shouldn't, for example, redistribute private property. But Flanigan

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\*The original version of this book review was published with the incorrect author name in the book title. This has been corrected in the online PDF and HTML versions.

demurs; she points out that the existing distribution of private property is produced and maintained by state coercion. And she thinks that, if one is engaged in wrongful coercion, one should minimize the burdensomeness of one's wrongdoing. Yet our current, state-supported, distributions of property are very burdensome to those who don't have very much property. So, she claims, the state should redistribute property. This argument relies on the claim that a more redistributive state won't be one that engages in more instances of wrongful coercion. States are engaged in pervasive coercion in supporting property rights; adding redistribution adds no more coercion to this. That is disputable, of course, but Flanigan's argument is a refreshing and fascinating exploration of anarchism in non-ideal theory. This is a taste of the contributions linking private wealth to state power.

At this point, we're in a position to raise a critical remark. Most of the contributions to this volume assume, I think, that there's a fairly clear and well-understood causal connection between economic inequalities and unequal influence over government. Larry Bartels' *Unequal Democracy* (2008) is cited six times in the volume and Martin Gilens' *Affluence and Influence* (2012) is cited four times. In a somewhat dubious attribution, *Lobbying and Policy Change* by Frank Baumgartner and his coauthors (2009) is cited after the claim that 'lobby groups which represent elite interests . . . are overwhelmingly successful in securing policy change' (230). I think a somewhat more critical stance to this work would be opportune. It's not that I doubt that economic inequalities translate into political inequalities, at least in countries such as the USA. But the extent to which that translation happens, especially outside the USA, seems to me still a very open question.

Let me explain. Bartels and Gilens separately find that, in the USA, the wealthy have more political power than everyone else. They observe that policy or representative voting behavior is more in line with the preferences of the rich than everyone else, and they attribute that to the political power of the rich. The puzzling thing about these studies is that you can use their methods to find roughly the same degree of translation between economic inequalities and political inequalities in Denmark as in the USA. On the face of it, that's just implausible; it might seem obvious that wealth begets power in the USA, but it seems extremely doubtful that, in Denmark, wealth is just as closely associated to power.<sup>1</sup> That suggests something must be wrong with the original studies. And, after all, such purely observational studies are notoriously unreliable. There are always many possible explanations of such observations: for example, policymakers and rich people might share policy preferences because of a shared social background, rather than because of the influence of the rich. Equally, I just mentioned that the citation to Baumgartner *et al.* (2009) is dubious: these authors actually find that lobbyists (again, in the USA) typically only achieve policy change when aligned with a lot of different interest groups, and overwhelmingly fail to achieve any change at all. The status quo almost always prevails. So the connection between unequal wealth and unequal political influence, even in the US case, is not as clear and well-understood as the contributors to this volume tend to intimate. The empirical evidence is disparate and conflicting.

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<sup>1</sup>For this point, see Elkjær and Klitgaard (2021: 4–5).

Why does that matter? In part, it matters because it affects how worried we should be about wealth-induced political inequality in the US case. One picture of US policymaking is one in which politicians are controlled by wealthy individuals and organizations. Another is one in which politicians are largely autonomous, independent of both voters and economic elites. Both are inegalitarian pictures, but only on the former are wealth inequalities at the root of America's ills. I myself suspect that the latter is closer to the truth than the former, and so the ills of American politics are not at root ills of economic inequality. In part, too, it matters because the world extends far beyond the USA. Many other countries have policies aimed at, in the editors' apt term, 'insulating' the political system from economic inequalities. These policies restrict the private donation of money to political actors, they publicly fund parties or candidates, and they constrain lobbyist access to politicians. Perhaps they work; perhaps in Denmark wealth doesn't straightforwardly transfer into political power. But then if there is a problem with wealth inequalities in these cases, it is not the one the editors of this volume emphasize. The nexus between political power and wealth might, in some non-US cases, simply not be that tight, and so we will go wrong when we frame our concern about wealth inequalities in terms of political power.

Accordingly, let's turn to the contributions that address how wealthy private organizations, and especially corporations, can directly exert power over other entities. Thomas Christiano, in his contribution, explores the argument for more worker participation in corporate governance, which means strong unions or codetermination or worker cooperatives. He raises three considerations. First, he summarizes the empirical evidence that firms with more worker participation have more equal wages without losing out on productivity. Second, he points out that worker participation helps equalize power between managers and those they manage: for those of us who think power inequalities are bad in themselves, this seems like a good. And, third, he explores how more unionization often leads to more egalitarian public politics: unions inform and mobilize their typically working-class members, increasing their political participation. This provides a strong, empirically grounded, argument for more worker participation in corporate government, an argument that complements those made by many other writers elsewhere. Intellectually (if not practically), perhaps this is an idea whose time has come.

Michael Bennett and Rutger Claassen have another interesting paper on corporations. This paper is about the purposes of corporations. They observe that from the 17th to the mid-19th century, governments generally chartered corporations to perform some specific public purpose: building infrastructure, providing banking, or trading in some area. This gave way to a regime in which one could set up a corporation for any lawful purpose one wishes. They propose, in some respects, a move back to the prior regime: we should require that corporations be set up with socially useful purposes. The idea is that this would reduce some of the harmful activities of contemporary corporations, evinced for example in their influence over democratic politics. This is an intriguing idea, although of course there are worries about it. One worry is about determining what counts as a 'social purpose'. The authors, in passing, say this needn't require state approval (148): it needn't, presumably, require a bureaucracy evaluating different proposed purposes

and deciding which are good enough. But how to enact this regime without such bureaucratic institutionalization is opaque to this reader. And there are deep, obvious drawbacks to having to run every incorporation by some bureaucrats. Nonetheless, such a sweeping proposal for reorganizing corporate governance is admirable in its ambition.

Let's move on to a more general point. One striking feature of these papers is that they go beyond the editors' explicit framing of their volume. The editors say that they're primarily concerned about the connection between wealth and political power (2). But when corporations have power over their employees or their customers, it's doubtful we should think of this as a kind of political power. After all, it is not power mediated through politics or the government. When a corporation fires one of its workers, it usually needn't run the decision through the legislature. Yet the power asymmetry between corporations and the rest of us still seems problematic. Many of the other contributions in this volume also go beyond discussing merely political power. Emma Saunders-Hasting explores how corporate managers, through philanthropic giving, can exert excess influence on social outcomes. Anahí Wiedenbrüg and Patricio López Turconi argue that wealthy creditors have power over poor countries. And Yara Al Salman defends the view that individual accumulations of private property can give those individual's power over people, precisely when they own things others need in order to have basic capabilities. All point to power relationships that are not, or need not, be mediated through the state. They point to private relationships of power.

It seems to me clear that the fact that inequalities of wealth create private power asymmetries is an extremely important part of why we find them objectionable. Indeed, this seems to me a deeper objection to wealth inequalities than that they conduce to political inequalities. After all, one can insulate the political system from economic inequality. Yet, contrary to this collection's focus on organizations, we cannot understand the problem with private power asymmetries solely as an objection to corporate power. It might be objectionable for corporations such as Amazon or Tesla or Facebook to have a lot of power over their employees and customers. But it is also very deeply objectionable for wealthy individuals to have power over people. It's objectionable for Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg to have power over everyone else, even detached from their influence over the corporations they control. There is an objectionable nexus between power and individually held wealth, just as much as there is between power and corporate wealth.

To understand this nexus, let's return to Richard Arneson's contribution. Arneson claims that relational egalitarians should only really care about inequalities of political power. On this view, other kinds of power asymmetries are often anodyne. I think this is dead wrong. The best relational egalitarian position, in my view, is that almost every kind of power asymmetry constitutes an objectionably inequalitarian relationship, a relationship of subordination and domination, of hierarchy. It's not merely objectionable when you have asymmetric power over someone because you have control over the coercive apparatus of the state. When you have power over someone for purely economic reasons, it is also typically objectionable. This austere and uncompromising view generates a very simple explanation of what's objectionable about the connection between wealth and power. Relative wealth gives one asymmetric power over the less wealthy. Why?

Because when you have a lot of money, you can pay people to do things. Jeff Bezos can pay you to be his personal assistant for the year, or to work at one of his companies. This gives the wealthy the ability to influence other people's behaviour, and that gives them power over other people. To have power over someone is, at least in part, to be able to affect their behaviour. And so wealth inequalities constitute objectionable power asymmetries in a way entirely independent of their connection to inequalities of political power.

Yara Al Salman's contribution comes closest to this kind of view. But she thinks it's only when wealth inequalities mean some cannot satisfy their basic human needs that they lead to objectionable power asymmetries. The view just outlined is much more wide-ranging. If it's correct, it's not just wealth inequalities between those in poverty and everyone else that are objectionable: all wealth inequalities generate objectionable power asymmetries. Many contributors to this volume, however, give reasons to reject the claim that power asymmetries quite generally generate objectionably inegalitarian relationships. Arneson, for example, observes that inequalities of power are ubiquitous in modern societies (56). If power asymmetries are always problematic, many seemingly anodyne relationships are problematic. Philip Parvin, in passing, mentions that 'a great many organizations and bodies within and beyond the state are unelected yet exercise great power' (236). The intimation is that since power asymmetries are so common, they cannot be objectionable. Thomas Christiano asserts that at least asymmetries of 'collaborative power' which is 'power one has because one is able to satisfy a desire or need of another' (134) are not objectionable. On such grounds all these contributors would reject the picture sketched in the previous paragraph.

I think that would be too quick by half. To address Christiano's view, it seems clear that collaborative power as he glosses it is sometimes subordinating. Suppose you have some lethal disease and I, a talented doctor, have synthesized a life-saving cure. It'll require regular administration to preserve your life, and I say I'll administer it to you only if you become my servant. Here, if you accept my offer, I clearly have subordinating power over you. Yet that is only because I satisfy one of your needs. Now perhaps this is unfair to Christiano; he admits he doesn't have a complete definition of collaborative power (135). And one might think this is monopolistic power, which he means to exclude from his gloss of unobjectionable power. But the point is simply that it is hard to carve off unobjectionable from objectionable power asymmetries in a clear and plausible way. Many power asymmetries that might seem unobjectionable are, on closer inspection, objectionable. So it is difficult to explain why the kind of power the wealthy wield over the rest of us, simply by being able to pay us to do things, would be unobjectionable. The most plausible view seems to me the simplest: any power asymmetry, including that between rich and poor, is objectionable.

What kinds of cases Arneson and Parvin have in mind is less clear. Evidently, the mere fact that power asymmetries are ubiquitous does little to show that they're anodyne. Many ubiquitous features of our societies are deeply objectionable. Yet, more charitably, perhaps they have in mind concrete relationships of asymmetric power which do seem anodyne. Consider teacher-student relationships or doctor-patient relationships. These are relationships of asymmetric power but one might be inclined to assert (especially if one is a teacher) that they are not objectionable. Yet

these relationships differ very importantly from those of economic inequality. Specifically, these relationships are entered into voluntarily. When you join a classroom or enlist a doctor, you voluntarily allow them to assume power over you. You consent to them having power over you; you waive your objection to being under their asymmetric power. And that, I suspect, means the relationship is anodyne. At the least, teachers and doctors needn't violate the rights over their students or patients, because those rights have been waived. This is no different in kind from waiving one's right to bodily integrity by stepping into a boxing ring, yet it's very different from the situation you stand in with regard to Jeff Bezos: nobody ever asked you to consent to being under Bezos' asymmetric power.

Parent-child relationships are another anodyne-seeming relationship of asymmetric power. But the correct treatment of this case is obvious: children lack many of the rights adults have. There are other more problematic cases for the view I've outlined, but I don't have the space to address them here. Suffice it to say, if what I've said is true, the contributors to this volume miss out on the simplest, and I suspect the most important, aspect of the wealth-power nexus: relative wealth gives one power over people, simply because you can pay them to do things.

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