

DRAFT 2.1

National Responsibility & Societal Wealth

It is often thought that nations are responsible for the wealth of their societies. This claim can take either of two main forms. First, it may serve as a description. According to the descriptive claim, nations – here and now – are morally responsible for the wealth of their societies. Second, the national responsibility claim can be an ideal. Here, the idea is that a just world is one which places nations at equivalent starting points and then allows them to autonomously pursue policies for which they will be held responsible. In this paper, I argue that neither version of the national responsibility claim can be successfully defended.

Acknowledgments: Colin Bird, George Klosko and A. John Simmons provided helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. Additionally, the financial support provided by the Love Fellowship has made this work possible.

I. Introduction

According to the United Nations's 2003 figures, per capita GNP (in U.S. dollars) was \$190 in Zimbabwe, \$36,924 in the United States, \$4,523 in Chile, and \$555 in India.¹ It is no exaggeration, then, to say that material wealth is distributed extremely unequally between nations. However, empirical observations about the inequality of nations do not translate simply into normative claims. Wealth – Robert Nozick famously reminds us – is not manna from heaven; instead, he claims that, 'justice in holdings is historical; it depends upon what actually has happened.'² Correspondingly, David Miller argues that in assessing the justice of disparities like those noted above, 'we need to look not just at how resources are distributed at any moment but at what brought the current distribution in to being and, in particular, at how far collective agents are responsible for being better off or worse off.'³

Like Miller, many hold that nations are responsible for the wealth of their societies. This claim can take either of two main forms. First, it may serve as a description. According to the *descriptive* claim, nations – here and now – are morally responsible for the wealth of their societies (Sections II-IV). Second, the national responsibility claim can be an *ideal*. Here, the idea is that a just world is one which places nations at equivalent starting points and then allows them to autonomously pursue policies for which they will be held responsible (Section V).⁴ In this paper, I argue that neither version of the national responsibility claim can be successfully defended.

¹ This information is taken from the United Nations' Statistics Division Homepage (www.unstats.un.org).

² Robert Nozick *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (NY: Basic Books, 1974), 152.

³ David Miller 'Holding Nations Responsible' *Ethics* (January 2004): 240-268 at 268.

⁴ I make no attempt in this paper to assess exactly what position particular proponents are adopting. Because the types of claims have not been clearly distinguished in the literature, I think proponents slide (perhaps unknowingly) between the two types of claims. If I can persuasively show that neither type of claim is defensible, then it will not much matter how particular proponents are classified.

II. Assessing the Descriptive Thesis

Influential political philosophers have argued that national groups are responsible for the wealth of their societies and, as a result, have an important normative claim over that wealth. For instance, John Rawls – in *The Law of Peoples* – argues that because ‘the crucial element in how a country fares is its political culture,’ there is (even setting aside practical problems of implementation), no justification for a principle of global redistribution (Rawls 1999, 117).⁵ Thus, for theorists like Rawls, a major reason to resist demands for international redistribution is that nations are themselves responsible for the level of wealth they achieve. Similarly, Miller argues that it makes sense to see nations as responsible:

for their own present circumstances ... a country that is now relatively poor because of choices made in the past is responsible for its own poverty, implying that there is no injustice (or less injustice, anyway) in its members having fewer resources than people elsewhere. (Miller 2004, 241).

The idea is that just as individuals who make the choice to lead a more economically productive life owe nothing to those surfing bums amongst them who sacrifice productivity for leisure time; so too societies make decisions about the relative importance of various goals and should not be required to compensate nations who pursue less productive policies.

It is important to recognize that there is both an empirical and a normative element to the descriptive national responsibility argument. The basic idea is that because our wealth is largely the result of the success of this national project (the

⁵ Rawls does insist on a cross societal duty of assistance. He suggests, however, that this duty of assistance is distinct from a principle of redistribution because it has both a target and a cutoff point: ‘it seeks both to raise the world’s poor until they are either free and equal citizens of a reasonably liberal society or members of a decent hierarchical society. That is its target. It also has by design a cutoff point, since for each burdened society the principle ceases to apply once the target is reached’ (Rawls 1999, 119).

empirical point), the national group itself has some sort of entitlement claim to its resources (the normative point).

Before considering this argument in detail, I want to make clearer what advocates of national responsibility would need to establish in order to successfully defend their position. Note, first, that the relevant notion of responsibility is *outcome responsibility*. This involves, in Miller's words, attributing consequences 'in such a way that, other things being equal, the resulting benefits and burdens should fall' to the agent in question (Miller 2004, 245).⁶ Miller continues by explaining that:

Outcome responsibility is a narrower notion than bare causal responsibility because it does not extend to outcomes that arise in bizarre and unpredictable ways. (Miller 2004, 245)

The discrepancy between outcome and causal responsibility is the result of the importance of the free selection of the relevant action.

We do not generally attach moral responsibility to things that arise in ways disconnected from the will of the agent.⁷ That is, in order for an agent to be outcome responsible, it must willingly select the action and the results that may be reasonably expected to flow from it. We hold agents morally responsible for results connected to their will rather than to all the various unpredictable contingencies that might arise as a

⁶ It is important to recognize that outcome responsibility may be softened by remedial responsibility. That is, one might not be held entirely accountable for burdens if they are enormous (even if they are the result of actions for which one is outcome responsible). Instead, some non-outcome responsible agent might be the appropriate one to alleviate the burden. For instance, even if, 'there is a legitimate sense in which Bangladeshi farmers can be held collectively responsible for their present impoverished condition. It does not follow that they should also be held remedially responsible for getting rid of that poverty. Other agents may be much better placed to do so, and we may decide that the responsibility should be theirs' (Miller 2004, 247). Thus, an agent may be remedially responsible even without being outcome responsible.

⁷ Outcome responsibility is the natural correlate to commonsense moral responsibility. The classic vindication of the fundamental connection between will and moral responsibility is Harry G. Frankfurt's 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility' *The Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969), 828-839. Frankfurt demonstrates that the essential precondition for moral responsibility is the internal will of the actor rather than the external possibilities that exist.

result of actions. In the passage that follows, Virginia Held effectively explains the basic point:

To hold an individual *morally* responsible for an action requires that he be aware of what I shall call the *moral nature* of the action, which can be understood as either the moral import of the kind of action of which it is an instance or as the moral value of the consequences it may produce.... They require that he be aware of the kind of action he is performing, but not that he know everything about either its empirical or its moral aspects. If, for example, an individual throws an explosive device into an open window, and as a result a child is killed, he may not have been able to foresee this particular consequence, but he could be said to have been aware of the moral nature of his action as an instance of actions that risk causing injury. On the other hand, if an individual flips on a light switch and, by a mechanism of which he could have no knowledge, causes an explosion that kills a child, he could be said to be responsible for flipping on the switch, but not for causing the child's death.⁸

Thus, the free selection of an action and its reasonably predictable consequences is a necessary precondition for the assignment of outcome responsibility to an agent. Hence, proponents of the descriptive national responsibility thesis *must demonstrate that nations willingly select policies that produce their development paths.*

III. Development Paths & Nations

In this section, I begin to show why it is incoherent to hold nations responsible for their current levels of wealth. Nothing I say in this section or the next should be taken as a conceptual argument against the ideal of national responsibility for societal wealth. Instead, in this section and the next, I am concerned only to show that, here and now, nations are not typically responsible for societal wealth.

To begin, it is important that a society's development path precedes the emergence of nations. That is, by the time nations become prominent political actors,

⁸ Virginia Held 'Can a Random Collection of Individuals be Morally Responsible?' *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 67, No. 14 (Jul. 23, 1970), 471-481 at 472-473.

their societies are already largely tied to a particular development path. The argument flows from the two following empirical claims:

1. Nations are a modern phenomenon. E. J. Hobsbawm explains that ‘in its modern and basically political sense the concept’ of the nation, ‘is historically very young.’⁹ Similarly, Ernest Gellner stresses that:
Nationalism is *not* the awakening of an old, latent, dormant force, though that is how it does indeed present itself. It is in reality the consequence of a new form of social organization, based on deeply internalized, education-dependent high cultures, each protected by its own state.¹⁰
The important point is that *nationalism emerged only late in the eighteenth century as a result of the onset of industrial society and the emergence of the state*. As one analyst observes, ‘nationalism did not create the modern state; rather the modern state stimulated the rise of nationalism.’¹¹
2. *The extent to which a society develops economically depends on geographical factors and a societal balance of power that predates the industrial era*. Atul Kohli explains that, ‘any state’s developmental effectiveness is a function not only of how well the state is organized but also of the underlying class basis of power’ (Kohli, 384). However, and this is the key point, a society’s balance of power (along with the state’s organization) – or bureaucratic tradition – depends on its distant (sometimes ancient) past. As Skocpol remarks, ‘the best situation for the state may be a regular flow of elite university graduates ... into official careers that are of such high status as to keep the most ambitious and successful from moving on ... But if this situation has not been historically established by the start of the industrial era, it is difficult to undo less favorable alternative patterns.’¹²

My argument is conditional in the sense that it obtains only *if* the above empirical claims are accurate. That said, I should note that both propositions enjoy (to my knowledge) extremely broad support. Thus, while the conclusions for which I argue could be

⁹ E. J. Hobsbawm *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 18.

¹⁰ Ernest Gellner *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 48. For an explanation of how group identities are maintained by individual interest, see Russell Hardin *One for All* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹¹ Bruce D. Porter *War and the Rise of the State* (NY: The Free Press, 1994), 123.

¹² Theda Skocpol, ‘Bringing the State Back In’ in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 3-37 at 16. The importance of historically distant critical junctures is widely affirmed by political scientists, economists and other scholars. The following works all emphasize the importance of such distant junctures in economic development: Jared Diamond *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997); Peter Evans *Embedded Autonomy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); David Kang *Crony Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Michael Mann *The Sources of Social Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Douglass C. North *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic*

undermined by new historical information, such data seem unlikely to be forthcoming. Two important points follow from the acceptance of these premises.

First, and simply put, the most important and influential events in regards to a society's current economic position occurred *prior* to the existence of national groups. Indeed, nationalist movements did not emerge in the non-Western world until the late nineteenth century and even more recently in most parts of the developing world—where nationalist movements often did not take hold until after WWII and the Atlantic Charter (Hobsbawm, 105). Generally speaking, then, the key determinants of societal wealth historically precede the emergence of national communities. Further, these pre-nationalist economic paths constrain the decisions later available to national communities.

Crucially, if the relevant nations did not emerge until the late nineteenth century and the roots of their economic problems lie in historical distributions of power that formed, in most cases, many centuries prior, then it is incoherent to suggest that nations are responsible for differences between their wealth and that of the developed nations. That is, if nations did not exist at the relevant historical junctures, then they cannot be coherently held responsible for the paths there taken.

A critic might point to the heated debates concerning economic policy in countries around the globe in order to suggest that I have exaggerated the extent to which economic destinies are determined in the distant path. If our economic destinies are as rigid as I suggest, one might wonder why these debates transpire. While it is true that our economic destinies are not purely determined by historically distant choices, it is

Performance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Paul Pierson *Politics in Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Jeffrey Sachs *The End of Poverty* (NY: Penguin, 2005).

important to put these economic policy arguments into proper perspective. When there are arguments, for example, about the level at which interest rates should be set in the United States, nobody is concerned that if the wrong decision is made, annual GNP per capita will fall to the level of Zimbabwe's. After all, Zimbabwe's current GNP per capita is one half of one percent of the U.S. figure. The decisions made here and now are only likely to have an effect on the margins.

Thus, to the extent that we are concerned with such stark inequality, it does seem to be the case that our relative economic destinies are more or less fixed by very distant history. If the critic is persistent, she might further point to the Asian tigers and their quite recent economic surge as evidence for the non-marginal importance that current policies might have. However, once again, in order to explain even this late development, political economists are regularly forced to consider matters tied to a historically determined societal balance of power (Evans 1995, Kang 2002, North 1990).

Ultimately, I am going to argue that even if it is the case that decisions made by nations here and now can have significant impact on their relative wealth, it does not follow that nations are responsible for the wealth of their societies because they are not responsible for those characteristics that led them to make the relevant policy decisions (Section V). I want, however, to set this point aside for the moment. The key point here is just that the current distribution of wealth depends upon trajectories of economic development set in place prior to the widespread emergence of national groups.¹³ Hence,

¹³ One might think that whether or not nations can be held so responsible depends on contingencies that will necessarily vary between nations and, as a result, it just does not make sense to expect that an argument about national responsibility can have the sort of general applicability at which I have been gesturing. While it is quite right to suggest that – ultimately – assessments of national responsibility ought to take place on a specific level and the general arguments about timeframes that I have pressed will have exceptions, there are nevertheless two important reasons for engaging the argument via the general approach adopted here. First, it is worth understanding these general timeframes because (a) they can

it is only by accepting the now debunked idea of nations as primordial that one can coherently claim that nations are responsible for development.¹⁴ If I am correct in insisting that nations only emerged after the relevant development paths were largely set, then we must reject the idea that nations meaningfully chose the policies out of which their development paths emerged. Instead, from the standpoint of the nation, its wealth – relative to that of other nations – amounts to a *fait accompli*.

IV. Nations as Placeholders?

In the preceding section, my main argument was that because the emergence of development paths precedes the emergence of the nation, the nation cannot meaningfully select a development path. One way of disputing this claim is via the suggestion that my arguments have relied on a too technical definition of nations. My approach, one might suggest, is disingenuous because it is not nations in this technical sense that ought to be held responsible for economic development, but instead the group of people more loosely understood as living in the relevant economic area. That is, advocates of national

provide a general framework through which to consider national responsibility claims in arguments about societal wealth and (b) they help undermine blanket affirmations of such national responsibility. Second, more specific investigations of national responsibility will quite often find not only that it is incoherent to hold national communities responsible for lack of development in LDCs (because of the issues raised here), but will further find that an important part of their failure to develop is the legacy of the imposition of colonialism. That is, in many LDCs, colonizers were responsible both for the shape of the national community and for the difficulties related to economic development. While historically distant power relations generally prevail to determine the shape and effectiveness of state structures, colonialism was 'especially significant because most developing country states are the product of colonialism, and their respective forms were molded decisively by this encounter' (Kohli, 17). Insofar as colonizing societies developed the institutions which have persisted and thwarted growth in LDCs, it can make little sense to hold the indigenous national communities of those states responsible for their failed development.

¹⁴ Lisa Wedeen, for example, argues that this 'understanding of culture as a specific group's primordial values or traits is untenable empirically. It ignores the historical conditions and relevant power relationships that give rise to political phenomena such as 'democratization,' ethnic conflicts, and contemporary radical Islamicist movements. The groups traits version of culture, moreover, rides roughshod over the diversity of views and the experiences of contention within the group or groups under study.... Treating culture as a set of traits that purportedly distinguish one group from another also neglects the terrains of solidarity and fluidity that exist among groups.... Treating culture as a set of traits that purportedly distinguish one group from another also neglects the terrains of solidarity and fluidity that exist

responsibility may suggest that the nation is but a *placeholder* for the relevantly responsible group.¹⁵ On this account, when we talk about national responsibility we are not concerned with nations *per se*, but with those groups of people out of whose interactions our economies grew. If this wider understanding of the nation is defensible, then the worries raised in the previous section are effectively superseded.

This section, in response, explains why it is a mistake to suggest that nations are but placeholders for the relevantly responsible group. The problem with the placeholder position is that plausible accounts of national responsibility depend on the group in question exhibiting certain features (of fairness and historical unity) that do not obtain prior to the development of modern nationalism and, most often (though I will not pursue this point), not even then. That is, in order for advocates to reasonably construe nations as collectively responsible and autonomous units, they must seize on characteristics that these groups will feature only once modern nationalism takes hold. In order to help illustrate this point, I examine the discussions of Rawls and Miller.¹⁶

a. *Rawls*

Rawls allows that nations can only plausibly be held responsible if they meet the criteria he sets out for political autonomy.¹⁷ However, because this autonomous nature

among groups' [Lisa Wedeen 'Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science' *American Political Science Review* Vol. 96, No. 4 (December 2002), 713-728 at 715].

¹⁵ I am grateful to George Klosko for pressing this point in conversation.

¹⁶ I focus on Rawls and Miller because their accounts have been so influential but instances of the position can be found throughout the literature. Other examples include Stephen Macedo 'What Self-Governing Peoples Owe to One Another: Universalism, Diversity, and The Law of Peoples' *Fordham Law Review* (April, 2004), 1721-1738; and Stephane Chauvier 'Justice and Nakedness' in *Global Justice* ed. Thomas Pogge (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 91-105.

¹⁷ Rawls largely avoids use of the term 'nation', preferring instead 'peoples'. For our purposes, it is fair to treat this as a semantic shift on which nothing important hinges. As we will see once we flesh the concepts out, Rawls's 'peoples' are substantively extremely similar to 'nations' in common usage (and in Miller's work). Thus, I will just argue that Rawls uses his term in a specifically technical sense and that abandoning that technical usage to instead use the term as a mere placeholder will undermine his argument for holding

depends on features that groups only attain once modern nationalism takes hold, it cannot be applied to pre-industrial political groups. The upshot, again, is that because the key determinants of economic growth were decided prior to the emergence of – to use Rawls’s term – politically autonomous (and, thus, collectively responsible) peoples, it is a mistake to hold them responsible for their material wealth.

He begins his discussion of national responsibility by asking us to consider ‘two liberal or decent countries’ at ‘the same level of wealth’ (Rawls 1999, 117):

The first decides to industrialize and to increase its rate of (real) saving, while the second does not. Being content with things as they are, and preferring a more pastoral and leisurely society, the second reaffirms its social values. Some decades later the first country is twice as wealthy as the second. (Rawls 1999, 117)

Rawls uses this example in order to argue that nations are responsible for the outcomes of their policies. He argues that:

Given that both societies are liberal or decent, and their peoples free and responsible, and able to make their own decisions, the duty of assistance does not require taxes from the first, now wealthier society, while the global egalitarian principle without target would. Again, this latter position seems unacceptable. (Rawls 1999, 118, emphasis added)

This example suggests that just as individuals who make the choice to lead a more economically productive life owe nothing to those surfing bums amongst them who sacrifice productivity for leisure time, so too societies make decisions about relative wealth and owe one another nothing as a result.¹⁸

peoples responsible for development. I assume that succeeding on this charge will count as successfully undermining Rawls’s argument for ‘national’ responsibility.

¹⁸ One ought not dismiss the national responsibility view as a peculiar feature of *The Law of Peoples*. Instead, the idea of a people as a collectively responsible unit in Rawls’s work is importantly related to his idea of society as a union of social unions intended to reinforce the social bases of self-respect. For instance, Rawls insists that ‘a democratic society well-ordered by the two principles of justice can be for each citizen a far more comprehensive good than the determinate good of individuals when left to their own devices or limited to smaller associations. Participation in this more comprehensive good can greatly enlarge and sustain each person’s determinate good’ [John Rawls *Political Liberalism* (NY: Columbia

I italicized the first clause in the passage in order to emphasize the conditional nature of Rawls's claim. As I remarked above, for Rawls, it is only once nations are politically autonomous that they become responsible for the outcomes of their policies.¹⁹ As a result, it is only peoples – and not societies generally – that can properly be held outcome responsible for their policies. The three preconditions for attaining the status of 'peoples' and, thus, for attaining the political autonomy necessary for outcome responsibility are:

1. Peoples must possess a *reasonably just constitutional democratic government* that serves the citizenry's fundamental interests 'as specified in a written or unwritten constitution' and 'is not an autonomous agency pursuing its own bureaucratic ambitions' (Rawls 1999, 24)
2. Peoples must be *united by 'common sympathies'* (irrespective of the source of those common sympathies)
3. Peoples must have a *moral nature*; that is, 'a firm attachment to a political (moral) conception of right and justice' and so be willing to 'offer fair terms of cooperation to other peoples' (Rawls 1999, 24-25, emphases added).

Of course, 'reasonably just constitutional democratic government' is a modern phenomenon taking root in societies long *after* and *as a result of* the developmental path on which the society was already traveling. Thus, Rawls's politically autonomous peoples are necessarily modern. So, even on Rawls's view, *peoples only gain the necessary preconditions for collective outcome responsibility long after the roots of successful or unsuccessful development are planted*. As a result, they cannot be coherently held responsible for their current wealth.

University Press, 1993), 320]. In this passage, one can see Rawls's idea that the individual is part of a larger historical project manifested in the nation.

¹⁹ In his interesting essay, Farid Abdel-Nour adopts a similar position, arguing that 'the more a people enjoys political liberty, the greater is its liability for the actions of its leaders and injustices of the state.' Farid Abdel-Nour 'National Responsibility' *Political Theory* Vol. 31 No. 5 (Oct 2003), 696.

Notice that the reasonably just clause insisted upon by Rawls is not fulfilled by something like ancient Athenian democracy. This is because, for Rawls, reasonable justice entails basic citizenship rights for *all* and a means by which to submit requests and receive reasoned responses (Rawls 1999, §8). Thus, in at least some sense, the modern ideal of universal citizenship is a prerequisite for Rawlsian political autonomy and, thus, national responsibility.

Further, though it is not entirely clear what Rawls means when he insists that political autonomy requires that societies be united by common sympathies, I believe that they are, in the sense he intends, also a phenomenon that largely takes hold during the emergence of nationalism. For instance, Benedict Anderson explains that the fall of a united Christendom and divinely enshrined monarchs:

under the impact of economic change, ‘discoveries’ (social and scientific), and the development of increasingly rapid communications, drove a harsh wedge between cosmology and history. No surprise then that the search was on, so to speak, for a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together. Nothing perhaps more precipitated this search, nor made it more fruitful, than print-capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.²⁰

While nothing in my argument hinges crucially on it (because the modernity of reasonably just constitutional government is enough to establish my point), I take it that what Anderson is saying here is that the sort of common sympathies that Rawls is interested in (e.g. sympathies directed at one another as political equals²¹) only emerged with the fall of alternative grand narratives and the development of technology like print

²⁰ Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities* (NY: Verso, 1983), 36.

²¹ For an explanation of how the status of individuals changed with the emergence of the modern state, see Gianfranco Poggi *The Development of the Modern State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978). He explains, for example, that ‘the relationship voluntarily entered into by the two near peers [vassal and lord] had significant effects on vast numbers of humbler people ... *Such people were deeply affected by the feudal relationship without being parties to it; the parties themselves looked on them essentially as the*

capitalism and public education that made comprehensible the shared sympathies of conationals.²²

Thus, at least vis-à-vis Rawls, it is not the case that my earlier argument hinges on an overly technical conception of the nation. Instead, Rawls himself is committed to a similar understanding of the term. He cannot argue that modern peoples are but placeholders for the relevantly responsible societal units because he denies that societies not characterized by the modern characteristics of peoplehood possess the political autonomy necessary for them to qualify as outcome responsible units.

Remember that proponents of national responsibility must defend the idea that nations freely select their development path. At least on Rawls's account, we have seen that nations only qualify as free and responsible choosers once they fulfill the characteristically modern requirements of political autonomy. It cannot then make sense to suggest that nations are only a placeholder for some other older social unit because it is only with the development of the modern nation that the community became politically autonomous and thus potential possessors of outcome responsibility.

b. Miller

Like Rawls's view, David Miller's defense of national responsibility relies on a characterization of the nation that is technical in the sense that it requires that nations meet certain standards in order to qualify as collectively responsible. He begins by roughly characterizing nations as communities 'of people who share an identity and a public culture, who recognize special obligations to one another and value their continued

objects of rule, and occasionally and incidentally as the beneficiaries of rule, but never as the subjects of a political relationship' (Poggi, 23, emphasis added).

²² For a discussion of the importance of public education for the development of nationalism, see Gellner 1983, especially chapter 3.

association, and who aspire to be politically self-determining’ (Miller 2004, 243). Importantly, he argues that we are ‘justified in holding nations responsible *insofar as they display like-minded group and/or cooperative practice features*’ (Miller 2004, 249, emphasis added). Thus, like Rawls, Miller maintains that collective responsibility depends on nations meeting certain contingent standards.

It is important to recognize that, though worded differently, the conditions insisted upon by Rawls and Miller are quite similar. Both insist that, in order to be collectively responsible, nations must exhibit features of unity and cooperation:

	David Miller	John Rawls
Unity	Like-Mindedness	Moral Nature and Common Sympathies
Fairness	Cooperative Practice	Democratic Government

While it is impossible to conclusively show that all accounts of national responsibility will seize on the characteristics of unity and fairness in order to make plausible collective responsibility, it is difficult to see how an explanation that did not do so could be plausible.²³ Without such features, groups will look random and, thus, appear as poor candidates for collective responsibility.

In the previous section, I argued that because the relevant placeholder groups did not meet Rawls’s standards of political autonomy during the time period in which the crucial decisions concerning economic development were made, it is a mistake to hold

²³ While Held has shown that there are cases in which collections of individuals not satisfying these requirements can be held responsible, it is important that this can only be the case when ‘the action called for in a given situation is obvious to the reasonable person and when the expected outcome of the action is clearly favorable’ (Held, 476). So, a group of people can be held responsible for looking on while an innocent person is attacked if the attack is easily preventable, but the argument is not applicable to

them responsible for economic development. Likewise, here I will argue that even if we follow Miller in accepting that nations can be held collectively responsible when they can be characterized as a ‘like-minded group’ and/or qualify as ‘cooperative’ practices, it is a mistake to suggest that nations freely select the development path taken and, thus, can legitimately be held responsible for societal wealth.

Miller’s ‘like-minded’ group justification ‘applies to groups who share aims and outlooks in common, and who *recognize* their like-mindedness, so that when individual members act they do so in the light of the support they are receiving from other members of the group’ (Miller 2004, 251). In order to illustrate this case, Miller uses the example of ‘a mob rampaging through the neighborhood, terrifying the residents, destroying property, and looting shops’ (Miller 2004, 249). He explains that the:

specific intentions of each participant at the beginning of the riot may have been different: some may have started out meaning to inflict physical damage, others may have wanted to make a political point, and so forth. What matters is that each person took part with the same general attitude. (Miller 2004, 249)

The argument depends on the climate of opinion sustained by groups; Miller explains that ‘people in crowds behave *differently* precisely because of the contagion of those around them’ (Miller 2004, 251). Thus, he suggests that there is an important sense in which it is actually the *group* that is responsible for the behavior in question. That is, each member of the rampaging mob acts differently (emboldened) because of the presence of the mob.

He elaborates this point with a discussion of the postbellum American South, arguing that the climate of opinion – sustained by the group – contributed to the action of each:

economic development because development does not hinge on a particular action whose execution is obviously required by the group.

The argument in the case of the postbellum American South is that where a community of people shares a set of cultural values, one of whose effects is to encourage behavior that results in outcome O, then everyone who belongs to the community shares in the responsibility for O, even if they disapprove of it. By participating in the community they help to sustain the climate of opinion in which the actions in question take place, even if they voice their opposition to the actions. (Miller 2004, 252)

The key difficulty with applying this argument to economic development is – as Miller acknowledges – that it does not show that responsibility transcends generations. That is, the fact that A’s grandfather contributed to the environment that encouraged outcome O does not show that A is responsible for outcome O.²⁴

Miller’s second model of national responsibility (cooperative practice) is based on fairness and receipt of benefits rather than like-minded attitude. Here he asks us to ‘consider an employee-controlled firm whose manufacturing process has unwanted environmental effects—it involves depositing chemical substances in a river’ (Miller 2004, 253). He explains that ‘members are divided about whether this practice should continue or whether a different, more expensive technology should be used, but when the matter is discussed, the majority favors staying with the existing process’ (Miller 2004, 253). Importantly, he argues that collective responsibility extends to the dissenting minority because they:

are the beneficiaries of a common practice in which participants are treated fairly—they get the income and other benefits that go with the job, and they have

²⁴ Further, there are different degrees to which people contribute or sustain the cultures in which they live, but Miller’s framework ignores these differences. For instance, how can it be that antiwar activists ‘sustain the climate of opinion’ in which wars take place? Instead, quite obviously, dissenting members of a culture challenge the prevailing climate of opinion. Holding them responsible for ensuing injustice belittles their efforts to alter the culture in question. Even if antiwar protests led to a reactionary pro-war patriotism that itself furthered the climate of opinion in the culture it would still – in most cases – be a mistake to assign responsibility for this backlash to the protestors. Doing so wrongly makes them responsible for how others respond to their protests. But the way in which members of the public decide to respond to a protest is freely chosen and is, thus, their responsibility. It is thus important to see that the climate of opinion is the result of an amalgam of individual efforts. While it might (as Miller suggests) be empirically impossible to accurately divide responsibility, this practical difficulty does not amount to a normative *justification* of collective responsibility.

a fair chance to influence the firm's decisions—and so they must also be prepared to carry their share of the costs, in this case the costs that stem from the external impact of the practice.... It would not in general be right to blame (or punish) members of the minority for what their firm has done to the river—they could quite properly defend themselves by saying that they spoke out against the manufacturing process that caused the pollution. But it is right to hold them, along with others, liable for the damage they have caused. (Miller 2004, 253)

Miller's argument is that because the minority had the chance to influence policy, but failed to successfully do so and, as a result, benefited from the unfairness of the chosen policy (apparently the firm profits by ignoring environmental damage) it makes sense to hold them liable. After all, doing so only amounts to taking back what they have illicitly gained. While this line of argument makes a certain amount of sense for one kind of national responsibility question (e.g. those related to internal injustices like slavery), it makes little sense when applied to the question of economic development.

The major reason for this is that the dissenting minority in cases pertaining to a failure to development economically *have not illicitly gained*. That is, the dissenting minority in a slave culture might take advantage of the economic benefits produced by that culture and, as a result, it might make sense to suggest that their claim to these benefits is marred by the unjust climate in which they were secured. The case of economic development, however, is importantly different. If country X decides to pursue a rigid path of state ownership and isolation from the international community and, as a result, suffers from poor economic performance, then there *are no benefits* for the dissenting minority to illicitly gain. That is to say, they have not illicitly gained because they have not gained at all. Instead, the falling tide takes everyone down, dissenters included.²⁵

²⁵ Many poor countries feature a small group of wealthy magnates. Even if there is (and there almost certainly will be) a case for forcing these people to surrender some of their assets, it is hard to imagine that

In the slavery case, the economic benefits of the decision had *positive* externalities that extended to the dissenting minority.²⁶ As such, Miller may be correct to suggest that there is reason to hold even the dissenters liable.²⁷ Alternatively, in the case of economic development the decision in question has *negative* externalities. That is, the dissenting minority are *harmed* by their inclusion in the decision. As such, it is hard to see why they ought to be further held responsible for it; after all, they have suffered harm for which they were not responsible.²⁸

In this section, I examined the arguments put forth by John Rawls and David Miller in order to see if – via the placeholder strategy – they could defend the national responsibility claim. We saw that in order to make sense of the idea that nations could be

(if such a person dissented from the policies that led to their wealth), the case could somehow be made in terms of national responsibility.

²⁶ I feel extremely uncomfortable suggesting that there are positive externalities to be gained by living in a slave society. It is important to stress that I mean this in only the strictest economic sense. That is, dissenters might – as a result of slavery – have more economic resources than they would otherwise have. This is not at all meant to be a suggestion that their lives are – given a wider perspective – actually enhanced by the decision. And, indeed, this consideration raises a question even about the legitimacy of Miller’s reasoning in the slavery case; for it is the wider perspective with which we should ultimately be interested. Indeed, against claims that they have illicitly benefited from slavery, members of the dissenting class might easily point to effects that are not strictly economic and suggest, in response, that – in sum – they have actually been unfairly harmed by the decision in question. If this is the case, it is quite possible that the majority may owe compensation both to the slave class and, to a lesser extent, to the dissenting minority.

²⁷ If the only way that benefits can be avoided is by leaving the society altogether and if it is impossible to ascertain which benefits are the result of unjust policy, then the dissenters liability becomes less clear. This is a somewhat complicated issue and I will leave it to the side here. I am, nevertheless, indebted to A. John Simmons for demonstrating the difficulties with such judgments.

²⁸ Incidentally, this explanation can help us make sense of a salient puzzle confronting liberals (in the leftist sense) on the issue of national responsibility. Liberals are sometimes criticized for their apparently incoherent position on national responsibility. On the one hand, they are typically reluctant to support national responsibility for development and, as a result, advocate comparatively generous foreign aid spending. Alternatively and simultaneously, liberals often vigorously *support* national responsibility in cases of historic injustices. For example, it is analysts on the far left of the political spectrum who have more typically advocated reparations for slavery in the United States. Thus, like Frost’s (in)famous liberal, they appear to both support and oppose national responsibility. Indeed, a cynic might suggest that the principle underlying these liberal positions is support – everywhere and anywhere – for government handouts. However, the above analysis can make sense of this apparent incoherence. In particular, liberals are willing to hold nations, including dissenters, responsible so long as they illicitly reaped benefits. While this condition may obtain in some cases of relatively recent historic injustice, it quite clearly does not in the case of development. Thus, the apparently contradictory liberal position on such questions is not incoherent.

collectively responsible both theorists were forced to seize on features peculiar to modern national communities. For Rawls, communities can only be treated as collectively responsible agents insofar as they are ‘politically autonomous’ and, for Miller, responsibility required nations to be like-minded groups and/or cooperative practices. Advocates of the placeholder strategy must somehow show that nations were free choosing and collectively responsible units even before they acquired the unifying, inclusive and democratic characteristics that emerged – if at all – with the onset of modern nationalism. Such an explanation does not seem likely to be forthcoming.

V. National Responsibility as an Ideal

So far, I have only argued that nations are not responsible for their current wealth. We have seen that there is vast inequality between nations and that it is not typically coherent to hold nations responsible for such divergence. While this is a key point to bear in mind in debates regarding global distributive justice, it only addresses part of the claim made by advocates of the national responsibility thesis. As I have remarked, the national responsibility thesis also constitutes an *ideal*.²⁹ That is, advocates suggest that – in a just world – nations will have the opportunity to make autonomous policy decisions the results of which will bind their members.

The idea is that nations ought to have the opportunity to make independent policy decisions and that their members should enjoy the fruits – or bear the burdens – of such decisions. For instance, Miller argues that:

Nations should have the opportunity to make real choices in areas such as economic policy, population policy, and environmental policy, and the effect of this will inevitably be that some become relatively richer and others relatively poorer when wealth and poverty are measured in conventional money terms....

²⁹ I have significantly benefited from discussion with Colin Bird on this point.

We should aim, in other words, for a world order in which national responsibility becomes feasible and genuine for everyone. (Miller 2004, 268)

Thus, Miller suggests that all nations ought to enjoy conditions of political autonomy such that they can be legitimately held collectively accountable for the outcomes of their respective policies. Similarly, Stephen Macedo has suggested that:

A decent and well-ordered people – one capable of providing a decent life for all members and of living up to its own ideals of justice – may decide that it has accumulated enough, or it may give a low priority to saving and investing for the sake of growing its capital stock and national wealth in favor of other priorities such as subsidizing culture or learning. (Macedo, 1725)

Macedo's point is that a nation may choose to pursue a less economically productive development path and that such a choice should (a) be respected by outsiders and (b) not be the basis of entitlement claims regarding redistribution. Here the national responsibility claim acts as an ideal. On this view, we should aim for a world of politically autonomous and responsible nations.

This ideal depends, as we have seen, on the idea that nations might be brought to an appropriate baseline of autonomy from which they could be held responsible for their policies. The difficulty with such an ideal is that it ignores the extent to which nations will always be immersed in the situations created by their particular historical experiences.

The disparities in the current wealth of nations are the byproduct of long, twisted, and particular historical circumstances. The events of the feudal era continue to bear heavily on the wealth and possibilities of current nations. It is important to recognize that these past events both (a) constrain the possibilities available to nations and (b) play a large role in constituting the nation. That is, pre-national history both gives nations their particular shapes and constrains their action. However, so long as economic destinies

remain largely constrained by distant events that cannot themselves be attributed to the choices made by nations and so long as nations are not responsible for the characteristics that cause them to choose in certain way, it is difficult to understand what sense there will be in holding nations outcome responsible for their wealth.

This point can be effectively brought out by looking at a crucial passage in *A Theory of Justice*. There, in regards to individuals, Rawls argues that:

The distributive shares that result do not correlate with moral worth, since the initial endowment of natural assets and the contingencies of their growth and nurture in early life are arbitrary from a moral point of view. The precept which seems intuitively to come closest to rewarding moral desert is that of distribution according to effort, or perhaps better, conscientious effort. Once again, however, it seems clear that the effort a person is willing to make is influenced by his natural abilities and skills and the alternatives open to him. The better endowed are more likely, other things equal, to strive conscientiously, and there seems to be no way to discount for their greater good fortune. The idea of rewarding desert is impracticable. (Rawls 1971, 274)³⁰

Rawls argues that natural assets, the ways in which those assets are affected by experiences, and the effort one may exert are all inextricably linked to factors that are arbitrary from a moral point of view.³¹

³⁰ I believe that this argument enjoys widespread support in the literature. For example, both Eric Rakowski and Samuel Scheffler call the position ‘uncontroversial.’ See Rakowski *Equal Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 112 and Scheffler ‘Responsibility, Reactive Attitudes, and Liberalism in Philosophy and Politics’ *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 21 (1992), 299-323 at 307. Other versions of the argument have also prominently appeared. For instance, Galen Strawson has influentially called into question the idea of moral responsibility. His argument is as follows: ‘(1) Nothing can be *causa sui*—nothing can be the cause of itself. (2) In order to be truly morally responsible for one’s actions one would have to be *causa sui*, at least in certain crucial mental respects. (3) Therefore nothing can be truly morally responsible’ (‘The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility’ *What Do We Deserve?* Ed. Louis P. Pojman and Owen McLeod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 115). Notice that this argument is slightly more radical than Rawls in that it claims not only that separating deserved and undeserved inequality is ‘impracticable’, but that no such distinction exists. Finally, even prominent critics of this skeptical thesis concerning moral responsibility admit that they cannot refute it. For an interesting example, see David Schmidtz ‘How To Deserve’ *Political Theory*, Vol. 30 No. 6, (Dec. 2000), 774-799 especially at 777-778.

³¹ George Sher attempts to save the notion of desert from Rawls’s attack on the grounds that there is a distinction between the *possession* of the ability to exert effort and the *exercise* of that ability [George Sher *Desert* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), Chapter 2]. On Sher’s account, then, so long as the ability to exert effort is roughly equal between individuals, they can still deserve – in Rawls’s strong sense – the fruits of their conscientious efforts. This strategy of circumventing the Rawlsian position is unsuccessful in that, rather than showing Rawls’s claim to be mistaken, it simply moves one further step up

If all of these factors – those things that differentiate individuals – are arbitrary from a moral point of view, then it follows that they ought to be treated as equals. That is, given that their differentiation is not something for which they can meaningfully take credit, it follows that one should opt for a principle of equality except when inequalities work to the advantage of all. Indeed, this is one way of understanding Rawls’s initial formulation of the two principles of justice.³² If we – with Rawls – are not prepared to grant individuals entitlement to resources that are the result of endowments and dispositions that are arbitrary from the point of view of the individual, then there seems to be strong reason to resist granting entitlements to nations that are constituted and constrained by historical circumstances beyond their control.

The ideal of national responsibility depends on the idea that nations can be separated from their historical context and placed on an equal setting: a sort of starting line disconnected from historical circumstances. Remember Rawls’s example from *The*

the ladder of abstraction. The obvious Rawlsian reply to Sher is to insist that people who better exercise their ability to exert effort do not deserve whatever it is about them that cause them do so. Thus, the distinction between possession and exercise of ability to exert effort fails to demonstrate that people deserve the results of their conscientious effort.

³² For Rawls’s initial formulation of his two principles of justice, see John Rawls ‘Justice as Fairness’ in *Collected Papers* ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 47-72 at 48. In view of Rawls’s strong resistance, in *The Law of Peoples*, to applying the two principles of justice to nations, it is interesting to note that in ‘Justice as Fairness’ he explicitly argues that the principles *do* apply to nations. There, he says that the term ‘person’ is ‘to be construed variously depending on the circumstances. On some occasions it will mean human individuals, but in others it may refer to nations, provinces, business firms, churches, teams, and so on. The principles of justice apply in all these instances, although there is a certain logical priority to the case of human individuals’ (49). Throughout Rawls’s career, the substantive content of the principles he defended was remarkably consistent (even as the justification for those principles went through various iterations), but here he must have either changed his mind or failed to realize the consequences of this initial formulation. Rawls’s was influenced by the egalitarianism of Herbert Spiegelberg who offered a very similar case for a far-reaching egalitarianism. Spiegelberg argued that: ‘among our inequalities some are *initial* inequalities or inequalities of birth. Others arise only during the course of our lives. It is next to impossible to determine how many of the second inequalities are morally deserved. Most of them are certainly on a level very different from the of the inequalities of birth. But even they are based on the conditions, equal or unequal, implied by our birth’ (‘An Argument for Equality from Compensatory Desert’ (Pojman and McLeod, 151)).

Law of Peoples. There, he asks us to consider ‘two liberal or decent countries’ at ‘*the same level of wealth*’ (Rawls 1999, emphasis added, 117):

The first decides to industrialize and to increase its rate of (real) saving, while the second does not. Being content with things as they are, and preferring a more pastoral and leisurely society, the second reaffirms its social values. Some decades later the first country is twice as wealthy as the second. Given that both societies are liberal or decent, and their peoples free and responsible, and able to make their own decisions, the duty of assistance does not require taxes from the first, now wealthier society (Rawls 1999, 117-118)

Importantly, the argument depends on (a) disconnecting nations from their historical experiences and, so, ignoring the ways in which their futures are differently constrained and (b) failing to ask why the nations make different choices and, so, failing to see that nations are not responsible for the features that lead them to make one choice rather than the other. So long as these historical experiences continue to arbitrarily constrain and constitute the possibilities of national groups, such a disconnection is illicit.

Like individuals, nations are not the causes of themselves. They cannot coherently be held responsible for policy decisions because doing so entails holding them responsible both for elements of their own shape and elements of their historical circumstances which they did not will to come about in the relevant way. Rather than being responsible for these circumstances, the circumstances themselves are largely responsible for the shape of nations. Given this, it is not clear what justification can be given for restricting the life chances of individuals within poor nations via the national responsibility ideal. Neither the individuals themselves nor the nations are responsible for their relative wealth.

Importantly, wealthy nations do not *deserve* the advantages of their distant histories.³³ Rawls's thought experiment revealingly and problematically hinges on a timeframe expressed in decades. The problem is that the choices made by nations now about the degree of wealth to pursue are hugely constrained, and indeed shaped, by events, like the that occurred long before the nation ever took root.

Indeed, on some accounts the relative wealth of nations is heavily impacted by facts about the natural world. For instance, Michael Mann argues that:

Civilization, stratification, and the state emerged as the result of the impetus given by alluvial agriculture to diverse, overlapping networks of social interaction present in the region surrounding it. This encouraged further caging interaction between alluvium and hinterlands, leading to intensification of civilization, stratification and the state – now, however, intensified as overlapping *power* networks, embodying permanent, coercive power. (Mann 1986, 77)

There are certainly many questions to ask about Mann's particular account, but this is not the place (and I am not the person) to press those questions. The important point is just the general one that nations are shaped and constrained in all kinds of ways that are ultimately beyond their control. However, *so long as nations cannot be held responsible for the conditions that led them to make particular policy decisions or the conditions that constrained those choices, then they cannot be held responsible for the outcome of the choices themselves.*

³³ I am aware that there is a sizable debate (see especially Nozick 1974) stressing the significance of entitlement rather than desert. The difficulty with the entitlement position – both in Nozick's work and in connection with our discussion – is that it depends on the existence of a legitimate starting point for ownership. However, the standard Lockean labor account of property ownership has been subject to withering critiques (in addition to Nozick see Jeremy Waldron *The Right to Private Property* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)). Even if there was a successful account of appropriation, it would only be an ideal with little connection to the world's real story of appropriation. In the absence of a successful account of legitimate appropriation along with a way of reconciling it with the violent history of appropriation, one must ultimately fall back to a desert-based position. This point is powerfully made by Waldron in 'Superseding Historical Injustice' *Ethics* 103 (1992), 4-28.

Similarly, though somewhat less radically, Brian Downing argues that modern differences in government structures can be traced back to the late medieval period. He explains that Western Europe:

Was characterized by parliaments controlling taxation and matters of war and peace; local centers of power limiting the strength of the crown; the development of independent judiciaries and the rule of law; and certain basic freedoms and rights enjoyed by large numbers of the population. Medieval constitutionalism, where it survived, laid the foundations for liberal democracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries..³⁴

Downing's argument is that modern differences in governmental structures are largely traceable to differences in medieval governance differences and in different responses to the military revolution.³⁵ Presumably if he attempted to explain the *cause* of differences in these medieval governance structures, Downing would be forced to fall back, like Mann, to an explanation based on geographical differences.

Again, whether or not the particular explanations of Downing or Mann are acceptable, the general point that both the shape of nations and the constraints in which they make policy decisions are largely beyond their control seems beyond question. As Downing memorably remarks, 'history gives no clean slates' (Downing, 252). The crucial point in regards to the coherence of national responsibility as an ideal is that so long as these historical peculiarities continue to importantly bear on the possibilities enjoyed by nations, rewarding desert will be impracticable. Rawls's thought experiment, which attempts to place nations in equivalent starting positions, illicitly abstracts from

³⁴ Brian M. Downing *The Military Revolution and Political Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 10.

³⁵ Hechter and Brustein explain that 'by the 12th century, western European regions varied with respect to a host of social factors, including types of agricultural organization, patterns of settlement, inheritance customs, modal family types, class composition, systems of governance, legal systems and types of property right, and, in some cases, religious practices.' They further claim that 'the evidence for earlier periods is fragmentary ... the origins of regional differences are older than the historical record permits us

historical particularities that continue to play an extremely important role in the ‘life chances’ of nations.

VI. Conclusion

This paper disputed two kinds of national responsibility claims. First, I argued that nations are not generally responsible for the current wealth of their societies. Indeed, we have seen that the historical literature demonstrates that the determinants of economic growth take root long before the emergence of nations. Meanwhile, it is only the features of modern nations that render it plausible to see them as collectively responsible units. Hence, it is a mistake to hold nations responsible for the material wealth of their societies because they are not constituted so as to make responsible selections at the relevant historical juncture.

Second, I argued that national responsibility is incoherent as an ideal. Instead, (a) the opportunities available to nations and (b) the shape of nations themselves are unavoidably and lastingly embedded in a long train of historical experiences that are, like the talent of individuals, arbitrary from a moral point of view. Thus, it is a mistake to look forward to a day in which nations will be able to be left to their own devices and legitimately held responsible for the autonomous policy decisions which they undertake.

to see’ (Michael Hechter and William Brustein ‘Regional Modes of Production and Patterns of State Formation in Western Europe’ *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1980), 1061-93, at 1064-1065).