Rawls’s Society of Self-Respect
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2071 will be the 100th anniversary of the publication of Rawls’s A Theory of Justice. What parts of justice as fairness might spread beyond the academy into American public culture by 2071?

This question of American public culture is vital, because Justice as Fairness has the distinctive feature that it cannot succeed in its own terms unless it is understood and endorsed by ordinary Americans. Yet the most famous device in Rawls’s theory, the original position, will very likely never become part of American public culture.

There are ideas in Rawls’s work that might spread widely and grow deeply in America’s public culture, which attention to the original position has left undeveloped, and which the next era of Rawls scholarship could cultivate.

The paper first develops Rawls’s critique of the ideal type of America’s current distributive system, which is meritocracy. Rawls thought that meritocracy can lead to a ‘politics of resentment,’ and to what he called ‘hostile outbreaks of envy,’ which we see in American politics now. Rawls also thought that these politics of resentment can lead to a destructive racial nationalism that might endanger constitutional government itself. Rawls’s analysis of these instabilities urges a move beyond meritocracy, for the sake both of justice and prudence.

In a Rawlsian well-ordered society, each citizen can have self-respect. The paper shows how this model of society runs throughout Rawls’s work, and argues that this ideal of self-respect for all could spread into the American public culture of the future.

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