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Only nationalism can justify a welfare state [1]

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The standard consequentialist argument in favour of the welfare state essentially says that the harm caused to rich people by taxation is outweighed by the benefit to poor people from government services. That?s probably wrong, but for the sake of argument let?s say it?s not and concede the idea that governments should redistribute resources. The question that redistributionists have failed to answer satisfyingly is, to whom should the resources be distributed?

The redistributionist argument may seem defensible if we look at one country alone ? taking from the rich in Britain to give to the poor in Britain sounds good to a lot of people. But why *do* we only look at the poor in Britain? Compared to, say, the poor in Peru, they don?t seem to be so badly-off. The redistributionist logic would imply that money should be given to the worst-off, wherever they are. So, why give money to the poor in Britain rather than the very poor in Peru?

A redistributionist might say that a government?s job is to look after its own citizens. That argument, frequently made, has no real ethical basis. Unless the redistributionist believes that the value of, say, a Mancunian?s welfare is of greater importance than a Peruvian?s welfare, there is no outcomes-based argument for favouring the Mancunian over the Peruvian. Taking the redistributionist premise that governments can improve outcomes by taking from the rich and giving to the poor, the only moral argument for spending tax money in Manchester rather than relatively-poorer Peru is based on implicit nationalism. How many redistributionists would admit to that? Yet it is the only logical justification for preferring a big welfare state in Britain to a lot of money being spent around the world.

Some would say that it would be politically impossible to implement this kind of redistributionism. Yes, it would, but that isn?t a convincing argument. Even the argument that overseas spending delivers less bang for the buck than domestic spending is highly dubious, and returns to the question of why redistribution supposedly works inside a country?s borders and not outside them.

This is a fundamental flaw in the redistributionist manifesto. The only intellectual justification for favouring people in Britain over people in Peru for government spending would be that British people are more deserving. This is implied by arguments for a welfare state. The libertarian alternative, on the other hand, doesn?t suffer from this implicit nationalism. The outcomes we argue for treat people as equals: Free markets benefit everybody, wherever they are. I?ll choose that kind of egalitarianism over the narrowly nationalistic redistributionist egalitarianism any day.

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