The house that Chuck built: twenty-five years of reading Charles Beitz

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Introduction

On the face of it, this might seem a somewhat frivolous, not to say over-familiar, title for an essay on the influence of Charles Beitz's *Political Theory and International Relations* (hereafter, *PTIR*); Beitz, however, will recognise the implicit comparison between his work and John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, and will accordingly, I hope, forgive the familiarity.[1] But, accepting that this is a title that conveys respect, it might still be argued to be inappropriate on the rather different grounds that it substantially overstates the influence of *PTIR*. Can it really be the case that this relatively short (under 200 pages) volume with an over-ambitious title 'changed the subject' in the way that *A Theory of Justice* certainly did a few years earlier?[2] Obviously the subject in question – international political theory – is rather more limited than the whole world of at least Anglo-American political theory that was changed by Rawls's work, but such a claim can, I think, be defended. *PTIR* was genuinely innovatory; it introduced a new way of looking at some old problems in international relations, and applied some older ways of thought to examining some new problems. Charles Beitz can certainly claim some of the credit for the fact that international political theory has been one of the fastest growing areas within both political theory and international relations theory in the last quarter century. Other writers of equal distinction have contributed substantially to this discourse – *inter alia*, Mervyn Frost, Andrew Linklater, Terry Nardin, Onora O'Neill, Thomas Pogge, John Rawls, Henry Shue, Michael Walzer – and some, Walzer for example, made major contributions before *PTIR* was published, but the latter was the first general study of the field, and the questions it addressed remain on the front burner.[3]

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1 Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979, reissued with a new afterword, 1999). John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* 1st and 2nd revised edns. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971/1999). The reference is to A.S. Laden, 'The House that Jack Built: Thirty Years of Reading Rawls', *Ethics*, 113 (2003), pp. 367–90.

2 The phrase comes from the Dedication to Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

3 For example, see Mervyn Frost, *Ethics in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); Terry Nardin, *Law, Morality and the Relations of States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Onora O'Neill, *Faces of Hunger* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986); Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Johns Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Henry Shue, *Basic Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

There is another respect in which the influence of *PTIR* and *A Theory of Justice* might reasonably be compared. Both are highly influential, but deeply problematic books; the truly vast literature on Rawls's masterpiece would not have been produced had there not been so many problems thrown up by the conceptual framework he deployed therein, and much the same might be said of Beitz's work. There is another more minor point of comparison here; one of the most interesting critics of *A Theory of Justice* has been John Rawls himself, and in both *The Law of Peoples* and, especially, *Political Liberalism* Rawls offers radical revisions of his own work, revisions that some critics, have been unwilling to accept, preferring the earlier version.[4] In much the same spirit, Beitz has withdrawn one of the main arguments he deploys in Part Three of *PTIR*, while maintaining the substance of his position, even though some cosmopolitan writers such as Thomas Pogge remain committed to the notion of a 'global difference principle' as set out in *PTIR*.[5]

These considerations establish the framework for this essay. First, the unique contribution of *PTIR* will be described, but then some quite serious problems will be explored. In particular, it will be argued that the way in which Beitz frames the discourse of international political theory privileges a particular perspective, discounting the extent to which it is possible to do international political theory without being committed to a cosmopolitan politics; in summary, the house that Chuck built has too few entrances, too few rooms and too simple a floor plan – a much larger residence is required in order to accommodate the variety of ideas to be found in the discourse.

International Relations theory *sui generis* no more

The structure of *PTIR* is relatively simple. There are three parts; in Part One, Beitz confronts realism, in Part Two he criticises what he calls the 'morality of states' approach that is, more or less, the notion of a norm-governed international society, and in Part Three extends his analysis to the notion of international distributive justice, addressing therein a topic that neither traditional IR theory nor Rawlsian justice theory had taken very seriously. This is an ambitious programme for a short book, and I will argue below that Beitz misunderstands the moral seriousness of realism, underestimates the resources available to theorists of international society, and overestimates the desirability of international redistribution.[6] However, these points of criticism are actually less significant in the broader scale of things than a feature of *PTIR* which comes into play before one gets down to the details of the

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[4] Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*; and *Political Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). For a critique of political liberalism, see Brian Barry, 'John Rawls and the Search for Stability', *Ethics*, 105 (1995), pp. 874–915. Opponents of *The Law of Peoples* from an earlier Rawlsian perspective are legion; see, for example, Charles Beitz, 'Rawls's Law of Peoples' and Allen Buchanan 'Rawls's Law of Peoples: Rules for a Vanishing Westphalian World', both in *Ethics*, 110 (2000), pp. 669–721. For a rare favourable account, see Chris Brown 'The Construction of A Realist Utopia: John Rawls and International Political Theory', *Review of International Studies*, 28 (2002), pp. 5–21.

[5] Charles Beitz, 'Cosmopolitan Ideas and National Sovereignty', *Journal of Philosophy*, 80 (1983), pp. 591–600. Thomas Pogge, *Realising Rawls* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[6] 'Apart from that, how was the play Mrs Lincoln?'

argument, and that is the rejection of the notion that 'international relations theory' is to be seen as something separable from 'political theory'. The whole book is a rejection of the notion that international relations is *sui generis*, a subject that leads to a discourse that cannot be fruitfully related to other, apparently similar, discourses. This, in itself, is an achievement and one that has helped to structure international political theory in a positive way.

This point needs to be elaborated. One of the striking features of the Anglo-American discourse of International Relations (IR) has been its insistence that IR is, in so many ways, different from the other social sciences. Although, as Brian Schmidt insists, there is continuity between the present discipline and nineteenth-century Political Science, nonetheless the discipline of IR can still be seen as an intellectual response to the perceived diplomatic failures that led to the two World Wars of the twentieth century.[7] Until fairly recently, scholars in IR tended to be quite closely linked to the world of diplomacy, with backgrounds in history and law rather than the social sciences, and with one foot in the Universities, another in Government, and an anatomically impossible third in research institutes such as the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the International Institute for Strategic Studies and the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City.[8] Such figures are perfectly represented by Hedley Bull, and to a lesser extent by Martin Wight, whose essay 'Why is there no International Theory?' is quite rightly identified as seminal by Beitz.[9] Wight searches for an 'international theory' to parallel political theory, and cannot find it.[10] He describes actual international theorising as a melange of works of international history, the memoirs of statesmen, the writings of international lawyers, and some minor writings and *obiter dicta* of the real political theorists who have concentrated instead on the state, and in particular the possibilities for improving the latter institution. International relations, by way of contrast, are beyond improvement; they are the realm of repetition and recurrence, locked into unbreakable patterns of conflict combined with occasional cooperation.[11]

Strikingly, and I think mistakenly, Beitz accepts quite a lot of the detail of this argument; he accepts, for example, that the key problematic of traditional IR theory is war and peace, and that the political theory of international relations is severely underdeveloped; moreover, his own analysis engages with the *obiter dicta* of Hobbes and Locke and the work of the international lawyers rather that the much more fully elaborated international theories of Kant and Hegel. But what he does not accept – and this distinguishes *PTIR* from the work of Wight's English School – is that there is something inherently intractable about the subject matter of international relations which means that political theorists had better stand aside and leave the

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[7] Brian Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998).

[8] That this is no longer true, especially in the US, is to be attributed to the rise of rational choice theory based approaches to IR, which perhaps confirms the wisdom of the maxim that one should be careful what one wishes for, in case it comes true. More on this below.

[9] Martin Wight 'Why is there no International Theory?' in Herbert Butterfield and Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), cited in *PTIR*, pp. 3 and 7.

[10] It is actually the 'relations' that are international, not the theory, but the term is too useful to abandon.

[11] Wight, 'Why no International Theory?', p. 26.

field to others, especially philosophers of history in Wight's account. Instead, Beitz heroically throws himself into the fray and demonstrates by example that political theorists both can and should address international issues. Political theory is not simply, as Wight would have it, theorising about the state, but rather addresses issues such as the nature of justice and political obligation which cannot be considered in isolation from the international. A small number of writers prior to Beitz had considered the *history* of international thought in these terms (in particular W.B. Gallie in *Philosophers of Peace and War*, a book with a wider frame of reference than Beitz attributes to it[12]) and Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* of 1977 addresses a specific topic (war and the rights of political communities) from this perspective, but Beitz is the first wide-ranging and general study to approach the international as a fit subject for contemporary normative political theorising. This is the core achievement of *PTIR* which deserves to be acknowledged before any criticisms are made.

The moral seriousness of realism

The first part of *PTIR* is devoted to undermining the realist school of IR theorists. For Beitz this is a necessary preliminary task because he associates realism with one or more of amoralism, moral scepticism and moral relativism, and assumes, I think correctly, that such positions are incompatible with any normative international political theory. He very effectively shows that attempts to moralise the national interest are incoherent (§1) then pins down realism to an essentially Hobbesian account of the conditions necessary for moral obligation (§2). The best defence of realism, he argues, is that states are to one another as individuals would be in a Hobbesian state of nature; this analogy, however, does not hold, for a variety of reasons, most notably because states differ dramatically in terms of power and, because of interdependence, can no longer be seen as analogous to discrete, autonomous individuals (§3). Attempts to derive a morality purely on the basis of self-interest cannot succeed (§4) and a more plausible basis for a 'morality of states' comes out of the critique of Hobbes delivered by the likes of Puffendorf, such a critique being the subject of Part Two of *PTIR* (§5).

In many respects, this is a perceptive and percipient critique of what was to become the dominant trend in US IR theory in the quarter-century after the publication of *PTIR* in 1979, which was also the publication date of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, widely seen as the foundation text of neo- or structural realism.[13] As an American analytical political philosopher, Beitz is highly attuned to the kind of social choice reasoning that characterises neo-realism; the latter studies the behaviour of rational egoists under conditions of anarchy, and this clearly relates back to the Hobbesian framework that Beitz deploys and criticises very effectively – although it should be noted that Waltz and his colleagues are not concerned to make

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12 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. See *PTIR* fn. p. 9.
13 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1979). This book is an elaboration of Part 3 of Waltz's *Man, The State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), which is an important source for Beitz.

moral claims on behalf of their position. In their world, states pursue balance of power politics because of systemic imperatives, and right and wrong does not come into it; it is political philosophers such as David Gauthier who attempt to moralise the Hobbesian problematic, not IR theorists.[14] In any event, Beitz presents a powerful critique of this version of realism – but is this the only, or even the most appropriate, version available?

The extensive bibliography of works cited in *PTIR* tells the story here. Hans Morgenthau is well represented, but not by what many people, including me, regard as his best book, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*; even more striking in a book which explores the moral politics of realist thought, is the absence of Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* or indeed any other of the influential works of this theologian.[15] The point is that such writers represent a different, non-Hobbesian strand of realist thought, sometimes described as 'Augustinian' realism.[16] Key features of this position are a scepticism about the capacity of human beings to remake the world, based on both a strong sense of the existence of evil, and a feeling for the tragic aspects of the human condition. Beitz and the neo-realists both, as modern heirs to the Scottish Enlightenment, have no time for such quasi-theological notions. For them, when people do bad things or behave uncooperatively it is because they are pursuing what they take to be their rational interests in a context which provides no incentive to cooperate or behave well; moreover, there can be no such thing as a tragic dilemma, because, given enough brainpower employed to solve a problem, the right thing to do will always be clear. For writers such as Niebuhr and Morgenthau, whose thoughts on international politics were shaped by the horrors of the interwar period, this kind of liberal optimism seemed facile. The reason grand designs to reshape the world in pursuit of international harmony do not work is not because of faults in the blueprint that could be corrected by going back to the drawing board, but because there is something about human beings (potentially, all human beings[17]) that subverts such projects, and, even as between men and women of good will, there may be differences that are irreconcilable. Not only do such designs not work, they actually unleash forces in the world that are less well meaning; a moral international politics must be based on the realist virtues of prudence and caution, and may sometimes involve behaviour that would not be acceptable from individuals in a law-governed society – although, incidentally, no realist argues that *all* means in the conduct of foreign policy are morally acceptable.

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[14] David Gauthier *The Logic of Leviathan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). See also his later *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). It might also be noted that the view of Hobbes as a proto-rational choice theorist is highly contentious: see for example Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Civil Society*, vol. III of *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[15] Hans J. Morgenthau *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1947); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932).

[16] On which see A.J. Murray, *Reconstructing Realism* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1996), and, particularly relevant here, 'The Moral Politics of Hans Morgenthau', *The Review of Politics*, 58 (1966), pp. 81–107, also Joel Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists* (Baton Rouge, LA: University of Louisiana Press, 1991).

[17] The Christian perception that there is a potential for evil in all of us that requires that we be constrained by a framework of government and law can be endorsed by atheists such as the present writer, even though the notion of evil undergoes transformations when divorced from its theological origins.

Beitz occasionally and very fleetingly alludes to this kind of thinking, but he does not, indeed cannot, take it seriously. If, a hundred pages later in your book, you intend to propose the establishment of a global scheme of extensive economic redistribution, you had better not draw too much attention to, or take too seriously, the kind of critique of wholesale international institutional reform that this brand of realism offers. Better by far to concentrate on those Hobbesian realists for whom international cooperation is subverted by the anarchy problematic, because it is not too difficult to show that their way of thinking can be pointed in another direction. Indeed, that is exactly what neoliberal institutionalists do in IR theory; they show how rational egoists can cooperate under anarchy.[18] Because such cooperation is always sub-optimal and limited, this only partly opens the door to the kind of remodelling of the world that Beitz desires, but it is at least a step in the right direction, whereas Augustinian scepticism would hardly allow the journey to begin. And, it should be noted, this scepticism is not, *pace* Beitz's Part One, §1, a scepticism about morals as such – the sobriquet 'righteous realists' is wholly appropriate in this context, figures such as Niebuhr, Morgenthau and Kennan were strikingly unsceptical about notions of right and wrong – but about the possibilities of international amelioration in the absence of international government, and the implausibility of programmes which rely on wishing the latter into existence.

I have discussed Beitz's treatment of realism at some length, because the decisions he makes in Part One of *PTIR* shape much of what is to follow. His concentration on a Hobbesian conception of realism leads naturally into the Lockean conception of international society that is laid out in Part Two, and the radical schemes of reform discussed in Part Three again draw on the same Anglo-Saxon liberal heritage. In effect, Beitz makes international political theory a conversation between different readings of the international implications of liberal, individualist political theory. The argument of Parts Two and Three of *PTIR*, which will now be addressed, are shaped by this basic move.

The morality of states and international society

In Part Two of *PTIR*, Beitz explores 'the morality of states' by which he means the morality that is instantiated in a norm-governed international society and described by international lawyers such as Wolff and Vattel. In effect, he argues, this amounts to a moral defence of the autonomy of states (§1) which provides the basis for moral doctrines endorsing non-intervention (§2) and self-determination (§3). But this defence is flawed; the various practices that allegedly violate the autonomy of states are wrong because unjust in themselves, not because they violate a norm of autonomy; 'Intervention, colonialism, imperialism and dependence are not morally objectionable because they offend a right of autonomy, but rather because they are unjust' (*PTIR*, p. 69). The indefensible notion that autonomy is desirable in its own terms produces injustices concerning nationality and boundaries, and reinforces the dependence of weak and poor states on the rich and strong, standing in the way of schemes of international social justice (§§ 4–6).

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[18] See the papers collected in David Baldwin (ed.), *Neorealism and Neoliberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

One again, an argument that is strong in its own terms is offered, but the terms themselves are quite highly restrictive, this time in two directions. First, Beitz excludes from consideration what later became termed 'solidarist' notions of international society, concentrating instead on 'pluralist' defences of the autonomy of states.[19] He explicitly excludes Grotius and Grotian thinking because the Grotians are, he believes, prepared to justify breaches of the norm of state autonomy in the way that Wolff and Vattel are not, and thereby limits the scope of his discussion quite severely.[20] Whereas solidarist thinkers are prepared to assert human rights against the sovereign state in some circumstances, Beitz wants to concentrate his fire on those who defend a sterner doctrine of state autonomy, which means that those theorists of international society who regard states as 'local agents of the common good' disappear from the picture altogether.[21] However, Beitz is even more restrictive than this would imply, because, second, his account of 'pluralism' excludes a number of potentially important arguments. He can make nothing of the idea that the state could be seen as a moral agent analogous to a person, which he associates with Hegelian thought (p. 76), and the idea that a normatively-grounded international society might have the desirable effect of allowing different conceptions of the good to coexist seems equally, although less explicitly, unappealing.[22]

Instead, just as Hobbesians are the main opponents engaged in Part One of *PTIR*, so the liberal nationalists Michael Walzer and John Stuart Mill, who defend state autonomy in terms of an extension of the rights of individuals, become the main target of Part Two. In both cases, Beitz is taking on writers who, although they differ from him in many substantial ways, are still part of the broad movement out of which his own approach emerges. Just as Augustinian realism is written out of the picture, so those versions of international society theory that are difficult to read in this way also disappear. Hedley Bull's The *Anarchical Society*, with its rejection of the 'domestic analogy' and its emphasis on the value of order, could have been a point of reference for pluralist IR theory, but is not taken as such. Later works which do not admit of a progressivist reading, such as Robert Jackson's conservative take on international society, *The Global Covenant*, have no place in the conversation Beitz has orchestrated.[23]

Global distributive justice

Part Three of *PTIR* establishes the case for the global social justice, the possibility of which is denied by theorists who stress state autonomy. John Rawls in *A Theory*

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[19] For the terminology, see Nicholas Wheeler, 'Pluralist and Solidarist Conceptions of International Society: Bull and Vincent on Humanitarian Intervention', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 21 (1992), pp. 463–87.

[20] Readers of Richard Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) will appreciate that 'Grotius' here is a term of art for the English School, bearing very little relationship to the actual writer, whose views were much closer to those of Hobbes than either Beitz or Hedley Bull realised.

[21] The phrase is Hedley Bull's, from *Justice in International Society: The Hagey Lectures* (Waterloo, Ontario: University of Waterloo, 1984), p. 14, but the idea is much older.

[22] Admittedly the most compelling modern defence of this position (Nardin's *Law, Morality and the Relations of States*, see fn. 3) was to come after the publication of *PTIR*; still, works such as Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society* (London: Macmillan, 1977) and the earlier Butterfield and Wight collection (fn. 9 above) had already presented the argument quite fully by 1979.

[23] Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

of Justice rejected the notion of international distributive justice but was wrong to do so. Rawls is wrong to think that the representatives of individual societies would choose, behind the 'veil of ignorance', to reject the common ownership of the world's natural resources (§2) and, in any event, Rawls was wrong to ignore interdependence and define a society, for the purposes of theory, as a self-contained cooperative scheme (§3). Real differences exist as between domestic and international society, but not such as to preclude international social justice, and arguments drawn from the rights of states are, predictably, invalid (§§4 and 5); there are serious practical differences to overcome before a scheme of global redistribution could come into effect, but it is the role of ideal theory to set benchmarks towards which we ought to strive (§6).

The detail of this argument has been discussed extensively over the last twenty-five years, and, as noted above, Beitz himself has stepped back from the notion of a global difference principle, responding to the criticism that the 'interdependence' of rich and poor in the modern world can hardly be described as constituting a cooperative scheme for mutual advantage.[24] He now rests the case for global redistribution on more general notions of human equality and the right to equal treatment. In any event, the radicalism of Part Three of *PTIR* need come as no surprise. In the course of Parts One and Two, Beitz has either demolished, to his own satisfaction at least, or written out of the canon most of the potential critics of a project of global social justice. In Part Three John Rawls plays the role played by Hobbesians and liberal nationalists in Parts One and Two; he is the acceptable conversation partner; in order to demonstrate the necessity of a global difference principle, Beitz need only confront the originator of that principle – admittedly a formidable task, but rather less onerous than having as well to confront those who reject Rawls's principles altogether. Rawls holds that there is no global 'product' to be redistributed, and support for this position could be drawn from many of the pluralist writers who Beitz has previously discounted – instead it is only the logic of Rawls's argument that counts, and this, again, removes from consideration the position of those who are doubtful as to the value of ideal theory. Beitz addresses this issue as a conversation amongst cosmopolitan liberals and, inevitably, produces a cosmopolitan, liberal solution.

Conclusion

The final paragraph of *PTIR* exemplifies perfectly what is right and what is wrong with Beitz's approach, and a sentence by sentence exegesis is justified here.[25] There are three sentences; first, 'Thus far, such systematic moral debate about international relations as has taken place has been between adherents of international skepticism

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[24] See fn. 5 above. Chris Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), ch. 9, discusses the fate of Beitz's argument in more detail.

[25] *PTIR*, p. 183. I do not address the 'Afterword' to the 1999 edition of *PTIR* because this essay is concerned with the intellectual significance of the original volume; in any event there is nothing in the Afterword that would require substantial revision to this essay.

and the morality of states'. This is a perfectly accurate observation, so long as 'international skepticism' is understood as the realist tradition, and it is accepted that this tradition is wider and richer than Beitz would have us believe. Second: 'However, as I hope to have made clear, the more pressing issues are those that divide the morality of states from a cosmopolitan morality'. It is, indeed, Beitz's achievement to have made this clear, and thereby to have widened the scope of systematic moral debate about international relations, even though, in the process, he underestimates the resources available to the morality of states (*sc*. international society) approach. Third: 'A normative political theory of international relations that takes into account my criticisms of prevailing views would be cosmopolitan, and would situate controversy about morality in world affairs on more fruitful terrain'. And here we see Beitz undermining his own achievement! Rather than widening the scope of systematic moral debate about international relations by introducing a cosmopolitan dimension, his intent is to replace the existing discourse with what is inevitably a far more limited discussion of the implications of cosmopolitanism. Non-cosmopolitans will be allowed to make the occasional observation about practicality, but the wider perspectives they might bring to the discussion have been discounted in advance. In the house that Chuck built all the best rooms are reserved for cosmopolitan liberals, and the 'No Vacancies' sign will be lit for everyone else.