

### Book review: Iñigo González-Ricoy and Axel Gosseries (eds.): Institutions for Future Generations

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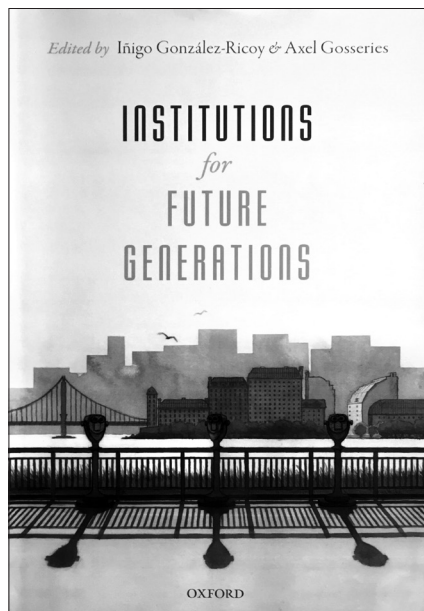
# Iñigo González-Ricoy and Axel Gosseries (eds.): Institutions for Future Generations

Reviewed by Markus Rutsche

Doing justice to a collection of 24 articles within the confines of a short book review is a nigh-on impossible task, but I hope that by presenting a brief survey of its content I can at least draw some attention to it. Iñigo González-Ricoy and Axel Gosseries, the editors, deserve much praise from the outset for their laudable service of putting together what is (to my knowledge) the latest and to date perhaps most comprehensive volume on institutional responses to the widespread problem of “short-termism”. They describe their project as an attempt to “advance and assess a variety of innovative institutional proposals to render policymaking [...] more sensitive to the interests of future generations” (3); and it is in this broad spirit of applied political philosophy that the book combines empirically informed evaluations of existing approaches with largely normative considerations of yet-to-be-realised possibilities for institutionalising intergenerational justice.

Apart from its two separate introductions, which make for a very helpful and succinct overview of the issues at hand, the volume is organised around three different blocks: the first addresses theoretical and conceptual issues of intergenerational justice; the second discusses institutional proposals which aim specifically at promoting long-term policies; and the third explores ways of increasing the long-termism of already existing institutions whose primary ends and purposes lie elsewhere.

Before raising a few concerns that do remain after a close reading of this book, a brief summary of its content might be in order. Following an excellent introduction by the editors and another one by Michael K. MacKenzie on the various sources and manifestations of short-termism, Part II hits off with a “primer” on intergenerational justice by Nicholas Vrousalis, who offers some “tentative responses” (49) to the question of how, according to the standard theories, the benefits and burdens of progress ought to be measured (by preference satisfaction, resources, or capabilities?) and intergenerationally distributed (according to the demands of equality, sufficiency, or maximum utility?). Next, Stéphane Zuber provides a more detailed look at how to measure intergenerational justice both at the design stage and at the operational stage of any given institution, and he does so by addressing the comparison of costs and benefits across generations as well as the more specific issue of just savings, figuring most prominently in Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* (§44). Whether it is at all possible for us, in any meaningful sense of the term, to actually “represent”



future generations is a question asked, and eventually answered in the affirmative, in the following chapter by Anja Karnein. She argues that a modification of what she calls “surrogate representation” (90) is the most convincing way of approximating such an ideal without running into the several difficulties that may arise from other approaches to representing future generations. With the goal of further conceptual clarification in mind, Axel Gosseries then embarks on an attempt to “clarify the link between generational sovereignty and specific institutional proposals” (98). He maintains that the numerous proposals contained in the collection at hand “only [...] to a limited extent [restrict] the jurisdictional sovereignty of the generations that they affect” (109), not least because only few of them, as we shall see in passing, require any constitutional entrenchment at all.

Part III opens with a proposal which, as Ludvig Beckman and Fredrik Ugglå freely admit, is “not exactly new” (117): the idea of an ombudsperson for future generations. To the regular readers of this journal, this idea will be indeed rather familiar; however, the way in which the authors argue for its feasibility, democratic legitimacy, and possible effectiveness is still original and generally convincing, despite the obvious need for this proposal to be part of a bigger “package”. A more comprehensive view along those lines is offered in the subsequent chapter by Simon Caney, who discusses a package of five distinct reforms or policies that are designed to “enhance the accountability of the decision-making process in ways that take into account the interests of persons in the future” (135). Based in part on a system currently in place in Finland, he advocates, in turn, for a mandatory Governmental Manifesto on how to protect the interests of future generations, a Parliamentary Committee to report on and scrutinise that manifesto, an annual “Visions for the Future” Day, an independent Council for the Future, and the employment of performance indicators to evaluate the attainment of long-term goals. A more economic perspective is then added by John Broom and Duncan K. Foley, who propose a World Climate Bank tasked with the issuance of “World Climate Bonds” in order to finance the long-overdue shift towards renewable energy. They suggest that eliminating the inefficiency caused by greenhouse-gas emissions requires nothing less than a transformation of the global economy; and their argument that an international financial institution is needed to underwrite and to finance this transformation will surely resonate with many. Moving on, Iñigo González-Ricoy provides an overview of consti-

tutional provisions for securing the interests of future generations. (The article is not identical with a piece by the same author that appeared in issue 2/2016 of this journal.) He argues that constitutional entrenchment can curb short-termism in three different ways: first, constitutionalising intergenerational provisions can raise the costs of deviating from such policies; second, it can reduce uncertainty with regard to the outcome of said policies; and third, it can go a long way in signalling the importance of these matters to each and every citizen by “coordinating [them] around new focal points as well as shaping their values and beliefs” (171). A somewhat different approach is taken by Dennis F. Thompson, who suggests that we should “establish an independent body whose members [...] act as trustees charged with the responsibility of the political system.” (184) Echoing a metaphor from Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, he holds that democratic trusteeship prescribes “the institutional equivalent of bifocals” by allowing that citizens and their representatives “see clearly not only their own democratic interests but also those of future citizens.” (195)

Marcel Szabó proposes the idea of a “Common Heritage Fund”, financed by a 1% tax on all international trade and tasked with the goal of “conserving the natural resources of the world for the next generations.” (197) While there are several antecedents to such an idea, most notably in the form of the UNESCO World Heritage Fund established in 1972, the author argues that adopting his proposal would move the international community “towards a more balanced world order where the participating states pay due consideration to the differences existing between them [...], without losing sight of the enforcement of the interests of future generations.” (212) Another model for the representation of future generations is proposed and discussed by Kristian Skagen Ege, who contrasts his own “sub-majority rule model” with Dobson’s “restricted franchise model”. While both aim at promoting future-oriented deliberations in representative democracies by raising public awareness about issues that will have a lasting impact on the living conditions of future generations, Ege’s model is distinct in demanding that “at least one-third of the legislators [...] be granted two procedural rights in order to protect future interests” (214), namely, the power to delay legislation and the right to require referendums. In the concluding chapter of Part III, Chiara Cordelli and Rob Reich consider ways in which philanthropic institutions may play a role in serving intergenerational justice. They argue that, given their unusual accountability structures and their largely private nature, such institutions are uniquely well-equipped for counteracting the phenomenon of democratic “presentism” as well as for supplementing and complementing political institutions seeking to do the same.

As mentioned above, Part IV of the volume consists of a number of papers discussing how institutions that “we” already have and that exist for their own distinct purpose (rather than those designed precisely with the aim of furthering long-termist policies) can be made more sensitive and responsive to the demands of intergenerational justice. It opens with an enquiry by Simon Niemeyer and Julia Jennstål into the question of how the institutionalisation of so-called “mini-publics”, consisting of “randomly selected citizens engaging in deliberation on decisions affecting intergenerational equity”, may further the effective inclusion of future generations and thereby overcome a perceived “value-action gap” by means of a “discursive representation of their interests” (247). In order for such an idea to be successful, the authors argue that a disposition

to “being open to all relevant arguments” (247) is required on behalf of its participants. They contend that achieving such a stance is, practically speaking, far from unrealistic, despite the obvious problems and challenges involved in this. Juliana Bidanure scrutinises another proposal that has been under intense consideration on the pages of earlier issues of the IGJR, and which can be said to have gained substantive momentum as of late: the introduction of “youth quotas” in parliaments as a means of “proxy representation” of future generations. (The article is not identical, neither in form nor in substance, with a piece published by the same author in issue 2/2015 of this journal.) She argues that, from a perspective of intergenerational justice in particular, the inclusion of more young people in parliaments is desirable on the grounds that they have a “higher stake” in the future and that they are “more concerned” by it than older people (the distinction between these two arguments remains a bit unclear). Such inclusion is also desirable because greater generational diversity is “likely to increase the competence of parliaments in solving complex problems” (268).

In his second contribution to the volume, Michael K. MacKenzie entertains the idea of an additional, randomly selected legislative chamber with a high degree of rotation among its membership (recruited from the entire citizenry) and mostly a general type of “soft power” at its disposal. He argues, rather persuasively, that a general-purpose institution of this kind would be “well-positioned to help counterbalance some of the short-term tendencies associated with elected chambers” (283). Claudio López-Guerra’s proposal in the following chapter is based on the intuition that “politicians ought to have a larger stake in the consequences of their own decisions.” (299) He suggests that a condition be imposed on the occupancy of public office according to which “politicians would agree to exclusively use certain public services, during and after their term in office.” (29) The rationale for this proposal is based on an analogy with airline pilots, who the author rightfully claims are “strongly motivated to fly [...] safely because their own lives are on the line.” (299) While the analogy might only go so far and looks likely to encounter severe issues of feasibility both in legal and political terms, the idea of “piloting” responsibility in such a way is surely an intriguing one and deserves further consideration. As many have pointed out before, the fact that an idea might seem far-fetched at first and even unlikely to ever garner sufficient support for its realisation does not necessarily make it any less interesting or worthy of discussion, and rightly so.

Karl Widerquist introduces the idea of a “people’s endowment” in order to establish “the precedent that the people as a whole own the environment and the resources within it.” (327) He suggests that half the revenue derived from such an endowment ought to be used for government spending and half for an unconditional basic income, and he maintains that doing so will “help create an institutional structure that more fairly shares the benefits of our economy with [...] all people, living today and in the future.” (327) Under the label of “democratic firms”, Virginie Péroton reignites the idea of “firms owned and managed by their employees” (331), more commonly known as co-operatives, and argues that these would help mitigate many of the short-term biases typically associated with for-profit corporations. She holds that not only would there be direct benefits for future generations in that, *inter alia*, the accumulated capital of such firms could not be eaten up,

as it were, by its very own stakeholders (thereby effectively rendering those firms into “collective goods”), but that there would also be benefits of a rather indirect kind by establishing a longer time horizon for job stability as well as by ensuring a closer monitoring of management.

Next, Jonathan White turns to the issue of political parties and to the question of how to facilitate their taking on more long-termist views. His proposal amounts to outlining a new conception of the party constitution, which he argues (in terms that will ring familiar to the readers of this journal) ought to be conceived as “living” (353) – that is, as ever expanding and re-directing itself over time as new issues come and go. He adds to this the requirement that parties participate in efforts to archive and to publicise whatever prior policy commitments they might have engaged in historically, thereby enhancing their overall accountability. One cannot help but think, however, that this proposal must have grown out of the unusual configuration of recent British politics, for the practice of outsourcing and institutionalising the task of archiving a party’s history is indeed quite a common one in many countries including – but not limited to – Germany.

Turning to another arena, how may institutions of higher education do their share in encouraging long-termist decision-making? Danielle Zwarthoed suggests that the representation of both students and, especially, alumni be expanded significantly on universities’ governing bodies – a move she argues would go a long way in enhancing the long-termist orientation and accountability of not just higher education, but of other types of educational institutions as well. Joakim Sandberg offers a proposal according to which pension funds, thanks to their huge influence on commerce and society as a whole, ought to “take a stronger responsibility for the effects of corporate activities on future generations” (385). To this end, he suggests that instead of focusing on “fiduciary duty”, pension funds be given “independent social and environmental obligations” such that they be (legally) required to take into account their own impact on future generations and fragile stakeholders, and to do so “irrespective of whether this is in the beneficiaries’ interest” (394). Whether the interests of future generations must always outweigh those of present beneficiaries, or whether it might in fact be possible to consistently serve them both at once, is a question that is unfortunately not taken up by the author. In the final contribution to this volume, Thomas Baudin and Paula Gobbi discuss the strongly contested issue of family planning. They argue that since the individually desired degree of fertility is strongly driven by what they call “deep” determinants (such as a mother’s education, child mortality rates, and other factors), institutional efforts to reduce fertility in developing countries should focus more on shaping the economic and educational conditions to foster this outcome, rather than merely providing the means (i.e., birth control) for doing so.

As this all-too-brief summary shows, there is quite a lot happening in this book, and readers will doubtless find themselves deeply enriched and inspired by the multitude of approaches and ideas on how to institutionalise justice for future generations that are presented on its pages. What clearly emerges from the contributions to this volume is that there are indeed, as the saying goes, many rooms in the house of intergenerational justice, and that the responses to the problem are just as manifold and complex as the problem itself. The editors are to be commended for their efforts in bringing all of these together, and the collection will surely

serve as a starting point of debates on institutions for intergenerational justice for many years to come.

A minor quarrel, rather than a substantive point of contention, is that the volume provides few, if any insights on how to move from the level of creative imagination to actual implementation. Issues of feasibility and stability are very rarely discussed throughout the book, and while the institutional designs presented in it are certainly valuable in and of themselves, the general absence of such considerations does leave something to be desired (for the record, this is not true of all chapters). We also learn very little about institutions in the sense of “regimes”, that is, as sets of rather fixed and socially shared rules and norms that do not possess any agency in and of themselves (think of marriage, or friendship), and how these might figure in attempts to overcome the short-termism that has taken hold of so much of our society and our politics. And even though the authors implicitly seem to share a mostly commonsensical view of what institutions actually are, conceptually speaking, and how they may work to shape and to enforce attitudes, preferences, and eventually policies, there is little in the way of theoretical elaboration that would make any of this agreement explicit – let alone show what it is that holds the various proposals together, beyond their mere juxtaposition. But perhaps this is too much to ask. Those small misgivings aside, however, this volume does an excellent service to students and scholars of intergenerational justice alike, and one can only hope that it will find many vigilant and engaged readers.

*González-Ricoy, Iñigo / Gosseries, Axel (eds.) (2016): Institutions for Future Generations. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 448 pages. ISBN: 978-0-19-874695-9. Price: £65.*