In *A Theory of Justice* (1971), John Rawls proposed a conception of justice he called “justice as fairness.” A synthesis of liberal and egalitarian political values, justice-as-fairness comprises two principles of justice—principles that require our institutions to ensure equal basic liberties, provide genuinely equal opportunities, and limit socioeconomic inequalities to those that maximally benefit the least advantaged (Rawls, 1999). Recognizing the distance of such institutions from current realities, Rawls nevertheless says that justice-as-fairness presents a realistic utopia—a utopia because it meets the demands of our fundamental political values, realistic because it is politically feasible, taking people as they are and institutions as they might be (Rawls, 2001, p. 4).

This concern for realism, for institutional feasibility, was central to Rawls’s idea of the aims of political philosophy. Political philosophy, an exercise of practical reason, aims, inter alia, to play a role in the political world by “provid[ing] guidance where guidance is needed” (Rawls, 1999, p. 18) in particular, by guiding our judgment on large, open questions about the demands of justice. A very large open question is how, if at all, we can balance the demands of liberty and equality in the institutions of a modern political society. Given this aim, a case for institutional feasibility cannot be relegated to a “from-theory-to-practice” appendix, treated as a supplemental application of principles fully justified prior to such argument. Instead, that case is an ingredient of “reflective equilibrium”—of the justification of a conception of justice (Rawls, 1999, pp. xix, 171, 577–578).

Rawls’s own account of just institutions has several features, including democracy, both constitutional and deliberative. But one especially striking part was the idea of a *property-owning democracy*, drawn from ideas of Nobel Prize-winning economist James Meade (1964). A property-owning democracy is defined by its broad dispersion of private productive assets. Already present in *A Theory of Justice*, this idea plays a large role in Rawls’s later *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Rawls, 2001, pp. 135–140). There he expresses skepticism that justice-as-fairness can be realized in a capitalist welfare state, which he assumes to rely principally on a tax-transfer redistribution of market incomes to achieve fair distribution. Capitalist welfare states do not, as Rawls describes them, worry about the dispersion of income-generating assets—human and
nonhuman capital. But asset inequalities threaten a concentration of economic and political power damaging to democracy and equal opportunity. Achieving a reconciliation of liberty and equality in a private ownership economy requires, then, a broad distribution of those assets.

But Rawls did not say much about property-owning democracy: that is the purpose of this volume, the basis of the “Rawls and Beyond” in its subtitle. The essays collected here provide a serious, critical exploration of the appeal and potential of property-owning democracy. Beginning with Martin O’Neill and Thad Williamson’s illuminating and instructive introduction, the volume is historically grounded, philosophically informed, and inspiring alive with good practical and moral sense.

One of the lessons of the book is that property-owning democracy is a complex theme with many variations and a rich history. Rather than briefly sketching (thus simplifying) that complexity, we propose to locate the argument on a wider political-philosophical canvass.

First, the book focuses on a problem of just institutions. This focus – embraced by Rawls in his emphasis on the “basic structure of society” – belongs to the central traditions of political theory: from Plato’s kallipolis, ruled by philosopher-kings, to Locke’s case for the rule of law and separated powers, to Marx’s communism, with common property and free cooperation without subjection to a state. But post-Rawlsian political philosophy has been less concerned with institutions, concentrating instead on alternative principles of justice (as in the vast literature on responsibiltysensitive variants of egalitarianism), or on the complexities of justifying principles of justice under conditions of pluralism, or on the importance of outcomes or “realizations” rather than institutions (Sen, 2009, pp. 5–6). These philosophical challenges raise important questions about the precise role of institutions in an account of justice. But even if a concern with just institutions is less fundamental than political theorists have traditionally supposed, even if they are only a tool for producing independently defined just outcomes, they are an important tool and command close attention. As Amartya Sen, a sharp critic of an exclusively institutional focus, says, “Any theory of justice has to give an important place to the role of institutions . . .” (Sen, 2009, p. 82).

Second, the book focuses on domestic justice and institutions. For the past 15 years, much political philosophy has focused on global justice, especially global distributive justice – important subjects in view of the extraordinary importance of globalization, global politics, global inequality, global poverty. Still, justice in a domestic society is a subject of great importance, and a focus on domestic institutions has much to be said for it. To be sure, it might be said that we simply cannot work out what a just domestic society is except as part of a larger argument about global justice; perhaps, for example, a global difference principle makes concern for the least advantaged in wealthier societies less pressing. But most reasonable ideas about global justice permit us to reflect, as a distinct practical matter, on principles and institutions for domestic justice. The discussion here accepts that invitation. Without minimizing the importance of global justice, the authors are betting that they can make progress understanding just domestic institutions while abstracting from the global setting.

Finally, the book focuses on economic justice and class – a central focus of modern politics and of the Rawlsian concern to respond to radical democratic and socialist
criticisms of liberalism. To be sure, a focus on these issues abstracts from other important concerns – race, gender and family, ethnicity, nationality, culture, and language – that raise large issues of justice and have provided a focus of much work in political philosophy since the mid-1980s. Here again, the editors and contributors do not slight these other issues, but lay a bet – like Rawls’s in *A Theory of Justice* – that they can make headway in analyzing certain institutions of economic justice while abstracting from the more complete picture of a just society that fuller engagement with those issues might permit.

Readers will decide for themselves if this bet – like the bets on a domestic and institutional focus – is likely to pay off. We like the odds and happily join them in their wager.

References