Who Carries the Difference?

On Claims, Burdens, and What a Shared World Cannot Fulfil at Once

A town has fewer childcare places than children who need them.

The shortage can be described as a number. There are this many places and this many applications. On paper, the difference is simple.

It does not remain simple for long. One family needs a place because both parents work. Another is headed by one parent who cannot reduce their hours without losing income the household depends on. A third child requires additional support. Another family has fewer financial resources but grandparents living nearby. Someone has been waiting longer. Someone has recently moved to the town. Someone already has one child in the same nursery.

None of these circumstances creates another place. They create reasons, and a rule has to translate those reasons into a decision.

The town can give priority to employment, income, disability, single parents, siblings, length of waiting or some combination of them. It can use a lottery where no difference seems sufficient to establish priority. It can raise fees, expand capacity, recruit staff or ask families to wait while something new is built. Some responses may be better than others. None changes what happens before enough additional places exist.

Some children enter. Others do not.

The families who do not receive a place may understand the rule. They may even consider it fair. They still have to do something on Monday morning. Someone reduces working hours. A grandparent becomes more involved. Savings are used. A return to work is delayed. Another place is found farther away. Time that had been available for one purpose becomes unavailable for another.

The shortage has moved.

It began as a difference between applications and places. It ends as time, income, care, distance, uncertainty or a possibility one person can no longer pursue.

This movement interests me because public arguments often begin somewhere else. They begin with the legitimacy of a claim. Should families have access to childcare? Should employees expect security? Should someone unable to support themselves receive assistance? Should a business be able to earn a profit? Should housing remain affordable? Should a person be free to organise a life differently from the majority around them? Should future generations inherit ecological conditions within which they can still make meaningful choices?

These questions matter. A society can exclude someone long before resources are distributed simply by deciding that their circumstances do not count.

Many claims visible in contemporary societies are not evidence that people have suddenly become more demanding. Some are newly created, but others have become audible because people who once had little authority to define their own situation now possess more of it. Women entering professions previously closed to them, people with disabilities demanding usable access rather than formal permission, workers seeking protection, minorities insisting that equal citizenship include them as they are: none of this can adequately be described as the growth of selfishness.

A society in which fewer people were permitted to object may have appeared easier to organise without having resolved more of the lives within it. Recognition is therefore an achievement.

Yet recognition creates another problem that recognition itself cannot solve.

Several claims can deserve consideration without all of them being fully realisable at the same time. A healthcare system may have good reasons to expand treatment, pay its workers better, keep contributions affordable and preserve sufficient capacity for future crises. Employees may reasonably want higher income, more autonomy and predictable time, while the organisations employing them need to remain productive enough to continue existing. A government may want to reduce emissions, protect low-income households, maintain industrial capacity and avoid commitments that future citizens will be unable to sustain.

None of these purposes has to be illegitimate for them to conflict.

The language of rights and recognition can obscure this second movement. To say that a claim matters does not yet tell us what satisfying it requires, what it displaces or what happens if it can be fulfilled only partially.

Rights themselves require institutions capable of making them usable. Courts, administration, enforcement and public resources are part of what turns a declared right into something a person can actually rely on.[1] The same applies beyond formal rights. Care requires somebody's time. Education requires trained people and places in which they can work. Reliable infrastructure requires materials, energy, attention and maintenance. Security may require restrictions whose legitimacy must then be examined in turn.

None of this means that possibilities are fixed.

A lack of childcare places can be addressed by training more staff, changing working conditions, expanding buildings or organising care differently. Technology can reduce the resources needed for one activity and create capacities for another. Productivity can make possible levels of healthcare, education or material security that an earlier society could not provide. Cooperation and trade can create gains unavailable to isolated actors.

Production is not only allocation. Creation matters.

But creation does not abolish limits. Financing can be expanded through taxation, borrowing or monetary arrangements, while real capacities remain constrained under particular conditions. The same trained person cannot perform two incompatible tasks at the same moment. The same piece of land cannot simultaneously remain untouched and contain a building. Time, materials, energy, skills and institutional attention are not infinitely available because money can be mobilised.

Public borrowing makes the distinction especially clear. Debt is not automatically a burden irresponsibly transferred into the future. A bridge, school, energy network or research programme financed today may leave future citizens with capacities whose value exceeds the financing that helped create them. Other borrowing may preserve present consumption while leaving little capacity behind. The important question is not simply whether something has been moved forward in time, but what travels with it.

Limits are real, but they are partly shaped by what societies create. The political difficulty begins where reasonable claims still exceed what can be accommodated together under the conditions that exist.

Something then remains unresolved.

Who carries what remains?

This is not the same question as asking which claim is legitimate.

Suppose treatment is available but not immediately. Someone waits. Suppose a service continues but contributions rise. Someone pays more. Suppose an environmental restriction is introduced. Someone loses a previously available use. Suppose wages rise. The additional cost may reduce profit, raise prices, delay another investment or appear somewhere else.

The unresolved difference does not remain an abstract disagreement. It becomes time, money, work, risk, restricted use or a possibility that cannot be realised.

Three questions are easily confused. Does a claim deserve recognition? How far can it be fulfilled together with other legitimate claims? And if it cannot be fully accommodated, who carries the difference?

A claim can be legitimate without being unlimited. A limitation can be unavoidable without every distribution of that limitation being just. An arrangement can function economically while the place where its burden finally settles remains ethically difficult to defend.

Several principles can plausibly tell us where such a burden should go. Perhaps those who caused a problem should carry more of its cost, though causes may be dispersed across many actors or generations. Perhaps those who benefited should contribute more, though benefits are rarely isolated. Perhaps those most able to carry a burden should carry more of it, though ability alone does not explain why responsibility should repeatedly settle in the same place. Need and reciprocity introduce further claims that may point in different directions.

The disagreement between these principles is not a defect that can simply be repaired by discovering the correct formula. Causation, benefit, capacity, need and reciprocity do not always identify the same person.

Politics cannot avoid choosing between them merely by calling its choices technical.

The rule deciding who receives the childcare place already contains a judgment about which differences matter. A tax rule does the same. So does an eligibility criterion, an environmental standard or a legal definition of liability. Ethics therefore does not arrive after a system has neutrally distributed its burdens. It is already present in the rule by which they are distributed.

Markets and public institutions organise this problem differently. Markets can coordinate immense amounts of activity without a central authority deciding every exchange, but willingness and ability to pay do not necessarily follow need. Public institutions can correct some of these differences through taxation, regulation and collective provision, while creating their own failures, rigidities and opportunities for influence.

Neither market nor state eliminates allocation. They give it different forms.

The problem becomes especially visible where private decision and collective dependence meet.

Economic ownership normally joins a possibility of gain to a possibility of loss. Someone invests capital because success may bring a return, while failure can destroy some or all of what was invested. The arrangement becomes more difficult when the failure of one organisation threatens people far beyond its owners.

A bank is an obvious example, but the same problem can arise around an energy network or another organisation on whose continued operation many other activities depend. Allowing such an actor to fail may keep loss close to the decisions that produced it, but it can also impose costs on people who never made those decisions. Protecting the system around it can reduce those wider costs while insulating part of the original risk from its consequences.

No corruption is required for this dilemma to exist, although political influence can deepen it. Dependence itself changes the available choices. A systemically important actor can acquire a peculiar form of leverage because the consequences of its weakness extend beyond itself.

Its weakness can become part of its strength.

The more damage its disappearance would cause elsewhere, the harder it becomes to insist that every consequence remain where it began.

The movement of burdens is not unique to companies. Social protection deliberately moves burdens too, and that is partly its purpose. A person becomes seriously ill and the full financial consequence is not left with that person. Someone loses a job. A family has a child with needs it could not reasonably insure against by itself. A society shares parts of these risks because leaving every consequence where chance first placed it would create another kind of injustice and make many forms of freedom possible only for those wealthy enough to survive failure.

The question cannot therefore be whether burdens should ever move. They already do. The harder question is when moving them is justified and what obligations remain after they have moved.

A society that collectivised almost no risk would leave many people unable to take risks at all. A society that detached every decision from its consequences would create a different problem. There is no natural line between the two waiting to be discovered. There is only a line that has to be drawn, defended and, when circumstances change, drawn again.

This brings power into the question in a more precise form.

Power is often imagined as the ability to obtain something: money, influence, access, a favourable rule, a majority or a decision. But power can also be the ability to prevent an unwanted consequence from settling on oneself.

A company may be able to move an investment. Capital can cross jurisdictions. A well-organised profession may resist a loss more effectively than dispersed users of a service. A large voting bloc can make a proposed change electorally expensive. Governments can move part of a cost into the future. Wealthy societies can consume goods whose environmental or labour consequences are experienced elsewhere. A shortage in formal care can disappear from a public budget while reappearing as unpaid work in a household.

These movements are not morally equivalent. What links them is narrower: they concern the **mobility of burdens**.

Some actors can move a cost more easily than others. Some have more places to which it can be moved. Others absorb it where it arrives.

Exit and resistance are not inherently unjust. The ability to leave an abusive employer is a freedom. A company need not undertake an investment under conditions that make it unviable. Citizens should be able to organise against taxes or rules they consider wrong. A country may reasonably reject obligations it believes others are unfairly shifting towards it.

The difficulty begins where this mobility becomes strongly asymmetrical and the same people repeatedly become the point at which further movement stops.

A cost does not become fair merely because it has finally found someone unable to move it further.

Politics therefore distributes more than burdens themselves. It also distributes their visibility.

A benefit is often easy to announce. A new service opens. A tax is reduced. A subsidy is introduced. A legal protection expands. The corresponding cost may be dispersed. Political economists have long examined situations in which benefits are concentrated among visible constituencies while costs are spread more widely.[2] Political actors also have reasons to distance themselves from unpopular losses or move responsibility for them elsewhere.[3]

The underlying difficulty does not require cynical politicians. Even a government acting in good faith will prefer a reform in which no one is visibly worse off.

Sometimes economic growth or technological change provides enough additional room to make this possible. A growing economy can fund new services without reducing every existing one. Better organisation can remove waste rather than redistribute deprivation. New technologies can create genuine gains.

Some conflicts, however, concern limits rather than additional surplus. An environmental rule may require an activity to stop. Demographic change may increase the number of people requiring care faster than the workforce able to provide it. An accumulated fiscal imbalance may eventually require higher revenue, lower expenditure or a different distribution between them. A city may need housing while residents also value the open land on which some of it could be built.

In these situations, the promise that every legitimate interest can eventually be made whole becomes harder to sustain.

Consider two people arguing about a social programme. One says: I have contributed for years. My income is transparent. Every new obligation seems to find me because I am easy to charge.

The other replies: The conditions that allowed you to earn that income were not created by you alone. People with fewer resources do not become less entitled to security because their contribution is less visible.

Both statements can contain truth.

Their disagreement becomes sharper when each experiences the other not simply as wanting something different, but as moving a burden. One believes another person's recognised need has become their recurring obligation. The other believes someone's private success rests upon conditions whose costs have already been carried by people with less security.

Neither begins the argument from zero. Each possesses a story about what has already been given.

This is one reason struggles over recognition and struggles over material distribution cannot simply substitute for one another.[4] A group can gain formal recognition while still encountering material conditions that restrict what that recognition allows it to do. Another group can accept the legitimacy of that recognition and still believe that the costs of accommodating that change have been distributed unfairly.

The conflict then becomes more than a disagreement about the next policy.

It becomes a disagreement over memory.

Who has already carried what? Who adapted? Whose work disappeared into the background? Whose losses were called necessary? Whose losses were compensated? Whose advantages became so familiar that their conditions disappeared from view?

And eventually the argument takes a form that can be heard across very different political positions:

Why is it always us?

This cannot explain political polarisation by itself. Political identities, economic conditions, migration, cultural conflicts, parties, media and many other forces matter. Nor does a belief that one has been treated unfairly prove that the belief is accurate.

But competing accounts of burden may help explain why some disagreements become difficult to resolve. If I believe that your freedom is continually financed by my restraint, your next claim does not arrive as an isolated request. It arrives carrying the history I assign to everything before it. If you believe that my security was built on opportunities unavailable to you, my complaint that I am being asked to contribute more may sound like an attempt to preserve a favourable arrangement while calling it fairness.

Political disagreement then concerns not only what should happen next but who is already in debt to whom.

A democracy cannot remove this problem by discovering an objective social optimum hidden beneath it. Even where factual questions can be answered, people can reasonably assign different weight to security, freedom, equality, prosperity, continuity or environmental protection. A collective decision should therefore not always be imagined as the discovery of what society truly wanted all along.

It may be a legitimate way of ending a disagreement for now.

This distinction matters because democratic politics can look particularly disappointing when judged as though its purpose were to make disagreement disappear. Compromise appears weak because nobody receives exactly what they wanted. Negotiation can appear dishonest because positions change. Courts may look obstructive when they restrict an elected government. Federal structures can appear inefficient when several levels have to agree. Consultation can look like delay.

Sometimes these criticisms are justified. Procedures can become excessive. Vetoes can protect privileges rather than pluralism. Consultation can become ritual rather than participation. Governments can avoid necessary decisions because every actor hopes someone else will bear the political cost.

Democratic friction is not automatically democratic virtue.

But removing the friction does not necessarily remove the conflict beneath it.

Suppose decision-making becomes more concentrated. An executive gains greater freedom. Parliament has fewer opportunities to delay. Courts exercise less review. Experts remove more questions from ordinary political dispute. A stable majority is allowed to implement its programme with fewer requirements to accommodate those outside it.

Such arrangements may sometimes act faster. They may sometimes make better decisions. An authoritarian government can build a useful railway. A democratic government can waste enormous amounts of money. Expertise does not become wrong because it is insulated from an election, and a majority does not become wise because it is a majority.

Fewer constraints, however, do not create a second piece of land. They do not give the same hour to two incompatible uses. They do not create a childcare place because dissent has been shortened, or make the costs of an industrial transition disappear.

The difference remains. What changes is who allocates it and how easily that allocation can be challenged.

A more concentrated system can therefore appear to have resolved a conflict that it has partly made less contestable. The person who loses still carries something. What may disappear is the institutional route through which that person can continue asking whether the burden should remain there.

This is where democracy acquires a significance that cannot be reduced to the quality of each individual decision.

Democracy produces losers. That is unavoidable. An election in which everyone wins is not an election, and no legislative decision can satisfy every constituency. Research on what political scientists have called *losers' consent* has examined the problem of maintaining democratic legitimacy among people whose preferred electoral outcome did not prevail.[5]

The deeper issue extends beyond elections. A person may lose a policy dispute, pay a tax they opposed or live with a development they tried to prevent. They may still retain the right to know how the decision was reached, challenge its legality, organise against it and attempt to change it later.

Their burden remains. Their political standing need not disappear with it.

That difference separates burden from exclusion.

A democracy cannot guarantee that nobody loses. It can try to preserve a condition in which losing one decision does not establish that one's reasons no longer count.

This becomes more difficult because the community making a decision is not identical to the community experiencing all of its consequences.

A national electorate can distribute costs among present citizens while moving others beyond its borders or beyond its own time. Future generations do not vote in today's election. A product consumed here may depend on work, extraction or environmental damage elsewhere. Climate effects cross political boundaries. A shortage of care can be solved statistically by shifting more work into households. Public borrowing can finance productive capacity for those who come later, but it can also leave future budgets with obligations created mainly for present benefit.

A democratic decision can therefore be acceptable among those represented in the room while part of its burden settles on someone outside it.

The boundary of political membership is not automatically the boundary of moral consequence.

Iris Marion Young's account of structural responsibility is useful here because it does not require every injustice to be traced to one guilty decision-maker. Structural processes can connect many actors whose individually ordinary actions contribute to consequences distributed

through institutions and across borders.[6] This does not make everyone equally responsible. Power, contribution, benefit and capacity still differ. It does mean that distance alone is a poor reason for treating a consequence as though it had disappeared.

There is another danger at this point. The argument can begin to sound as though the world were a fixed quantity: one person gains only because another loses.

That is not the world we inhabit either.

Knowledge expands capacities. Technology changes what can be produced from the same resources. Better institutions can remove waste. Trade can create mutual gains. A disease that once consumed years of life may become treatable. New technologies can make possibilities available to people who previously could not afford them.

A society can create more possibility.

But every new possibility enters a world already organised by earlier ones. A technology can reduce one cost while concentrating control somewhere else. Higher productivity can create wealth while changing bargaining power. New infrastructure can connect one place while altering another. Growth can make redistribution easier while creating environmental or social consequences that were previously small enough to ignore.

Creation changes the difference. It does not permanently abolish it.

This is why a society cannot solve the political problem once and then move beyond allocation. Today's improvement becomes tomorrow's expectation. People organise their lives around what becomes reliably available. A childcare place allows someone to maintain a profession. A train connection makes a job reachable. Healthcare changes the risks around which a family plans. A right once established becomes part of the ground from which later decisions begin.

Removing such a condition later is not simply returning people to the world before it existed. Their lives have already been built around it.

This gives continuity moral weight without making every existing arrangement permanent. A society needs forms stable enough for people to plan. It also needs the ability to ask whether the conditions supporting those forms can still be justified.

Perhaps this is where the question of burden becomes useful. It does not tell us that every existing entitlement must remain, that everyone should contribute equally or that individual freedom has become excessive. It asks for something more modest.

When a claim cannot be fulfilled without placing something elsewhere, follow what moves. What becomes time, money, unpaid work or lost possibility — and where does that movement stop?

This does not replace the question of justice. It makes part of that question harder to hide.

The town may eventually build another nursery. Perhaps more staff are trained. Perhaps an unused building is converted. Perhaps fees change. Capacity may eventually expand enough that the waiting list disappears.

The numerical difference can be closed.

But the additional nursery does not travel backwards through the lives that carried the shortage while it existed. The parent who reduced work may have lost income, experience or professional

confidence. A grandparent may have reorganised years of their own life. Savings may have been used. A child may have entered care later than planned.

Capacity can solve a shortage without retroactively removing its burden.

What it can do is change who carries the difference next time.

Perhaps a shared order should therefore be judged not only by what it recognises, what it produces or how efficiently it reaches decisions. It should also be judged by what happens to what it cannot provide: who can move the resulting burden and who cannot; who has to explain why it landed where it did; who was present when that was decided; who remained outside the room; and whether the person who carries it today still has a credible way of asking for another arrangement tomorrow.

The difference between what people can reasonably ask of a shared world and what that world can fulfil at once will never disappear completely. It will become something: money, time, work, risk, waiting, restriction, debt, damage or a possibility that remains unrealised.

The political question is where it goes.

The ethical question is why it may go there.

And perhaps the democratic question is whether those who have to carry it remain among the people whose reasons still count.

Notes

[1] Stephen Holmes and Cass R. Sunstein, *The Cost of Rights: Why Liberty Depends on Taxes* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999). Holmes and Sunstein argue that legally enforceable rights, including conventional liberties, depend upon publicly financed institutions for their definition, protection and enforcement.

[2] Barry R. Weingast, Kenneth A. Shepsle and Christopher Johnsen, “The Political Economy of Benefits and Costs: A Neoclassical Approach to Distributive Politics,” *Journal of Political Economy* 89, no. 4 (1981): 642–664. Their analysis examines the political significance of the different geographic incidence of benefits and costs in representative institutions.

[3] R. Kent Weaver, “The Politics of Blame Avoidance,” *Journal of Public Policy* 6, no. 4 (1986): 371–398. Weaver examines strategies through which political actors seek to avoid blame for unpopular consequences, including limiting agendas, shifting responsibility and scapegoating.

[4] Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-Socialist’ Age,” *New Left Review* I/212 (July–August 1995), and “Rethinking Recognition,” *New Left Review* II/3 (May–June 2000). Fraser argues against treating recognition and socioeconomic redistribution as substitutes, while showing how the two dimensions of injustice remain connected.

[5] Christopher J. Anderson, André Blais, Shaun Bowler, Todd Donovan and Ola Listhaug, *Losers' Consent: Elections and Democratic Legitimacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). The book examines how losing electoral outcomes affects political support and how institutions shape citizens' willingness to continue accepting democratic arrangements after defeat.

[6] Iris Marion Young, “Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 23, no. 1 (2006): 102–130. Young develops a forward-looking account of

responsibility for unjust structural processes in which many individual and institutional actors participate, including processes that extend across national borders.