Res Publica (2021) 27:515–520
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-020-09493-x

Review of Daniel Bell and Wang Pei, *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. x + 270., Hardcover $29.95. ISBN: 9780691200897

Elena Ziliotti[1]

Accepted: 26 November 2020 / Published online: 8 January 2021
© The Author(s) 2021

Like debates on authoritarianism or torture, when it comes to social hierarchies philosophers (especially in the liberal tradition) disagree on *why*, not *whether*, we should disavow them. Against this backdrop, *Just Hierarchy* is an original and bold project: the book aims to rehabilitate the concept of hierarchy by showing that some social hierarchies are not only tolerable but also just. Besides debunking the conventional view in political theory on hierarchical social relations, Bell and Wang also aim to offer a normative standard for a just socio-political order for contemporary China.

In contrast with the view that 'all social relations should be equal', the book argues that five kinds of hierarchical relations are better equipped to structure people's lives in China. Such hierarchies involve relations between intimates, citizens, states, but also between humans and animals, and humans and machines. The book comprises five chapters, each accounting for one of these social hierarchical relations.

The first chapter focuses on hierarchical relations between intimates. Against friendship—the paradigmatic case of egalitarian relationships—the authors argue that hierarchical relations among lovers, family members and between employers and housekeepers are justified if they involve shifting roles (e.g. the relation between lovers) or if they give rise to a relationship of care that benefits the moral growth of all involved parties (e.g. the employer–housekeeper relation). To this end, family age-based hierarchies are justified if the parents exercise their authority for the well-being of the members of the family. Such a hierarchy does not give Chinese parents absolute power over their family, but it requires young and adult children to consult their parents when they make decisions.

✉ Elena Ziliotti
e.ziliotti@tudelft.nl

[1] Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management, Department of Values, Technology and Innovation, Ethics and Philosophy of Technology Section, Delft University of Technology (TU Delft), Jaffalaan 5 2628 BX, Delft (building 31), 2600, GA, Delft, The Netherlands

Hierarchical political relations in large-scale political communities that lack democratic institutions at the higher political level are the focus of the second chapter of the book. Assuming the Chinese context, Bell and Wang maintain that a hierarchy between rulers and ruled is acceptable if it leads to an efficient political system in which political outcomes promote the well-being of most of the citizens. The best way to establish such order, the authors argue, is a meritocratic system that gives political authority at the high political levels to public officials with superior virtue and abilities (an ideal elaborated by Bell in *China Model* (2015)). For the authors, besides efficiency and resonance with Chinese political culture, China's rising global influence is another reason for welcoming a political meritocratic system in China. After all, the effects of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s political decisions go beyond China, bearing on other countries' economy and politics, and future generations. Thus, in the authors' view, a capable and morally spirited political leadership is in the interest of China and the rest of the world.

The third chapter defends the claim for just hierarchical relations at the international level. Engaging with both Chinese and Indian ancient theories of interstate relations, and Zhao Tingyang's interpretation of *tianxia*, Bell and Wang maintain that a bipolar world in which China and the United States are at the head of two regional hierarchies of states is the best solution to ensure global peace and reciprocal relationships among states (although the authors are also open also to the possibility of an Asian hierarchical system jointly led by China and India). For the authors, the countries which deserve to be at the top of the hierarchical order are those which hold superior political and economic power since they are the ones with higher chances to positively influence the global order to solve global issues, such as climate change. Such international order would give China a higher moral status than its neighbouring states, but it would also give China extra responsibility. China will have an obligation to protect these states without interfering in their domestic politics, while the neighbouring states will defer to China's decisions on issues of global significance.

But how could such an hierarchical international order be implemented in today's East Asia? The prospects look fairly dim. Nowadays, very few East Asian countries would accept a secondary status of moral inferiority compared to China. To avert this problem, Bell and Wang maintain that the strongest state must pay lip service to the idea of equal sovereignty while knowing that this idea is not realistic. By revisiting the ancient Confucian ideal of exemplary leadership, the authors also argue that China can build good relationships and trust with its neighbours by setting an example to other countries. China should therefore improve its domestic policies, while ritual practices can help to create a sense of reciprocity and community, securing social peace between China and its neighbouring countries.

The relation between human beings and animals is the subject of the fourth chapter of the book. For Bell and Wang, animals must be subordinated to human beings without cruelty. Taking issue with Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka's account of animal rights, Bell and Wang claim that the fact that most of us do not feel the same sense of outrage when animals and humans are enslaved proves that many believe in the higher status of human beings. Donaldson and Kymlicka may also share such a belief, given that they do not advocate equal punishments

for those who violate animal rights. Thus, 'at some basic level even animal rights activists agree that there is a hierarchy of moral concern between humans and animals, with humans at the top of the hierarchy' (p. 151). Yet human domination of animals does not justify indifference to their sufferance or lack of compassion towards them. The more animals present human-like traits, the more care humans should develop towards them. In particular, humans must care for their domestic animals not only because their well-being depends on us (p. 159), but also because our relationship with them can help us develop positive virtues also towards humans, such as compassion and concern for the most vulnerable members of society (p. 161).

The final chapter of the book focuses on the relation between humans and machines. Having established the need for a master-slave relation between humans and machines on the basis of the lack of consciousness and feelings in machines, the authors move to discuss the best socio-political order to ensure the subordination of machines to humans in future. From a Confucian perspective, developments in AI must be encouraged to help 'us to realize our constitutive commitments', freeing us from some of our socially necessary work and allowing us to develop fruitful communal ties (p. 192). But who will 'regulate the development of AI so that it doesn't evolve into something that threatens our well-being' (p. 199)? AI does not currently pose a threat to humanity, but the situation may change with the advent of artificial superintelligence.

For the authors, the just hierarchy between humans and machines can be sustained only through a global-technological hierarchical order, where China is the main future global leader in AI. Silicon Valley companies are another candidate in the ongoing race for technological supremacy, but we should hope that the CCP wins the race. Profit is the aim of Silicon Valley-based multinational companies, so they will likely fight against any government's attempt at regulation. On the other hand, the CCP is a non-profit agency which 'is supposed to serve the people' (p. 204). Hence, the CCP may be the best bet for saving humankind. However, to rise to the leadership role in international attempts to regulate AI, China must (again) practise exemplary leadership. It should start regulating research in AI within its domestic borders to set an example that can inspire the rest of the world.

One of the strengths of *Just Hierarchy* is the use of ideas and references from a great variety of cross-cultural sources. The analysis of historical and contemporary issues in China through the book is engaging, and so is the attempt to use resources from ancient Confucian philosophy to generate new paradigms for the present. Both the use of Xunzi's theory of ritual and the discussion of the tributary system in Imperial China in relation to international political theory is stimulating. Furthermore, the chapter on political meritocracy includes the authors' replies to some of the main objections to the *China Model,* such as the problem of corruption in a possible Chinese political meritocratic system, the need to compensate meritocratic selections with the citizens' substantive equal opportunity to develop the required qualities to be selected and the negative societal impact of meritocratic competitions.

Nevertheless, it is unclear whether the authors succeed in achieving their main aim, namely showing that some social hierarchies are indeed justified. The problem is that some of the authors' arguments for just social hierarchies pivot on the need

for an unequal distribution of decisional power and functional differentiation, not a difference in social recognition.

Social hierarchies entail a distinction of rank or social status in which some persons are morally superior to others. As the authors state, ‘a hierarchy is a relation that is characterized by (a) difference and (b) ranking according to some attribute. Social hierarchies tend to have a normative dimension: They are social systems in which there is an implicit or explicit rank of individual or groups with respect to a valued social dimension’ (p. 8). A difference in social recognition or social status is, therefore, a necessary condition for any form of social hierarchy. Such a difference in status often implies subordination through an unequal distribution of power or authority that mirrors the allocation of different social status among the involved parties.

However, accepting an unequal distribution of responsibility and decisional power does not necessarily imply the acceptance of hierarchical relations. Hierarchical relations often entail unequal authority and functional differentiation, but not the other way around. One example is democratic political orders. Democratic political systems stand against any hierarchical relationship between citizens and political leaders. Yet even a democratic order is compatible with inequality of power and authority. Through elections, members of large democratic societies provisionally delegate part of their political power to a restricted group of political leaders, who are called to exercise superior political authority on behalf of their constituency.

If the need for unequal distribution of authority and deference does not imply the presence of social hierarchy, it is unclear how Bell and Wang’s arguments can suffice to justify hierarchical social structures among humans. The discussion of social relations between intimates is an example. The presence in the family of a ‘decider’ with ‘the authority to make the final call in cases of conflict’ (p. 52) can certainly facilitate the prevention of conflicts between the family members, but the need for a decider does not imply that she should also have higher social status. As I said before, non-hierarchical social relations exclude unequal social status among the parties but they are compatible with an unequal distribution of decisional power, especially if such distribution is provisional and can enhance the well-being of both parties. Thus, without an explanation of why deciders should be morally superior, some may agree with Bell and Wang that that parents must have higher decisional power than their children to protect the well-being of the latter while remaining convinced of the wrong of social stratifications.

Perhaps Bell and Wang fear that without linking deference of authority to differences in social status, adult and young children would respect their parents less. But there are reasons to believe that this follows from the hierarchical structure proposed by Bell and Wang, not an egalitarian system of social relations. In their view, ‘hierarchy between adult children and elderly parents often ends up with a complete role reversal’ (p. 54). Note that reversing a hierarchical relation does not only mean a shift in decisional power: it also implies a reversal of the relation of social superiority and social inferiority. Hence, reversing the hierarchical relation between parents and children means that children become morally superior to their parents as the children take up more responsibility and authority in the family. But the idea that the elderly parents are morally inferior to their children is a disturbing conclusion. This

is not what Bell and Wang are after. In the book, the authors clarify that their interest in hierarchies is motivated by the desire to develop a theory of social harmonious relations that could facilitate persons' moral cultivation. Yet this disturbing conclusion follows from their account of hierarchical family relations.

A similar ambiguity on hierarchy appears also in the argument for just intra-state hierarchies. The authors maintain that they aim to advocate a hierarchical structure between states, but they claim that a hierarchical international order in East Asia, in practice, 'might mean setting up East Asian regional institutions with China as the major power, similar, perhaps, to Germany's role in the European Union' (p. 136). This is puzzling because the superior decisional power that Germany informally holds in EU strategic decisions is partly possible in virtue of the unanimous recognition of the equal moral status of all EU countries. This public recognition is not just 'paying lip services to the idea of equality'—as suggested by the authors in chapter three. Rather, it is an ideal defended and promoted through common European laws. So, even in the case of intra-state relations, an argument to explain why unequal influence and authority should correspond to the unequal moral status of the states is missing. As the EU case suggests, there may be good reasons to believe that egalitarian social relations may be better mechanisms to keep in check *de facto* inequalities of power and authority.

This brings me to my final point. Given that just hierarchies are advocated from a Confucian standpoint, a direct engagement with Confucian non-hierarchical views of social relations could have pre-empted criticisms from Confucians and non-Confucian scholars alike. After all, international scepticism towards Confucianism partly derives from the fact that historically Confucianism had been used to justify repressive hierarchical social orders within both family and society. To this end, it is unclear why Confucians' respect for functional divisions and the need for deference cannot be realised in a non-hierarchical social setting. Cannot this be a more fruitful way to make repressive hierarchies Confucian, without rendering Confucianism more hierarchical?

Funding Funding was provided by the research programme 'Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technologies', the Gravitation programme of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science and the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (Grant No. 024.004.031).

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.