## What Does the Left Mean by Social Justice?

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The term *social justice* is ubiquitous these days. It appears in the mission statements of nonprofit organizations, graduate programs, and professional societies; in commencement addresses and high-school lesson plans; and on college syllabi. Particularly prominent in the rhetoric of left-of-center political movements and organizations, social justice is the lodestar of modern progressive politics.

While activists frequently appeal to the idea of social justice in support of particular policy goals, however, they rarely define what it means. A survey of academic works on the subject reveals two broad conceptions: social justice as fair distribution of social goods and social justice as the fight against oppression—defined in the broadest possible way—within society.[1]

### Social Justice as Fair Distribution

Many social justice advocates are concerned with achieving a "fair and compassionate" distribution of goods and burdens within society.[2] Equality of rights, and thus conditions of nondiscrimination, are of course necessary for a socially just order.[3] But social justice is also concerned with the distribution of other kinds of goods deemed especially important to life such as income; employment opportuni-

ties; wealth; property ownership; housing; education (including access to relevant technology); access to health care, transportation, and child care services; and personal safety.[4] Some would also include in this list more intangible goods like access to political power, political participation, social recognition, recreation or leisure opportunities, and the right to "a healthy and pleasant environment."[5] Also of concern to social justice advocates is the uneven distribution of burdens like "military service, hard, dangerous, or degrading work" and the necessity of caring for elderly relatives.[6]

Among social justice thinkers, *need* is typically understood not merely as what is "indispensably necessary" for bare survival, but also as including those things that are required to meet the minimum standard of a "decent" life within a given society (thus allowing for variation across diverse cultures).[7] Social justice does not necessarily demand absolute material equality, but rather seeks to reduce inequality to a "contextually determined 'acceptable' range of inequalities" or to establish a baseline standard of living below which no one in the society should fall.[8]

Some thinkers go farther, insisting that achieving a just society requires more than guaranteeing some minimum amount of material resources for all. Proponents of the "capabilities approach" argue that a society can be called just only to the extent that every person in it is truly able to cultivate his or her innate human capacities while also enjoying real opportunities for exercising them and freedom of choice in how to do so.[9] On this view, governments must strive to remove any "obstacles" that hinder "the full and effective empowerment of all citizens."[10]

According to political theorist David Miller, these kinds of goods and burdens are concerns of social justice because their "allocation depends on the workings of the major social institutions."[11] As the United Nations' report on *Social Justice in an Open World* argues, "Social justice is not possible without strong and coherent redistributive policies conceived and implemented by public agencies."[12] Miller emphasizes, however, that social justice is not simply a matter of governments distributing resources according to some sort of quota; rather, it is concerned with how "a range of social institutions and practices together influence the shares of resources available to different people."[13] Thus, social justice must concern itself with the interaction between government policies and other social institutions and arrangements like the housing and health care industries, the educational system, and markets more generally.

## Social Justice as Fight Against Oppression

In recent years, a more radical approach to social justice has become prominent, especially on university campuses. Inspired by critiques developed by the New Left in the 1960s, proponents of this approach tend to view society as fractionalized into various social identity groups (defined by class, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, etc.) that occupy "unequal social locations."[14] One group—the dominant one—is always privileged relative to the others and consistently benefits directly or indirectly from the others' disadvantages.[15] On this view, simply focusing on distributive outcomes both "ignores" and "obscures" the unjust social processes and relations that have produced and work to perpetuate society's unfair distribution.[16]

1. Social justice emerged as a concept in the mid-19th century as writers responded to the social disruption and hardship brought about by industrialization. Although some of the earliest usages occurred in the writings of Roman Catholic writers in Italy, a different strand of social justice thinking emerged shortly thereafter among liberals in Great Britain and America. At a time when the perceived excesses of laissez-faire capitalism were leading some to consider radical socialist alternatives, reform-minded liberals called for state intervention to curb the system's harshest aspects and help bring about a more "just distribution of social resources." David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 3. For more on the Catholic alternative, see Michael Novak, "Social Justice: Not What You Think It Is," Heritage Foundation *Lecture* No. 1138, December 29, 2009 (delivered June 10, 2009), pp. 5 et seq., http://www.heritage.org/poverty-and-inequality/report/social-justice-not-what-you-think-it.

2. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development, *Social Justice in an Open World: The Role of the United Nations*, United Nations Publication No. ST/ESA/305, 2006, p. 7, http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/ifsd/SocialJustice.pdf (accessed March 12, 2017).

3. Ibid., p. 15.

4. Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, pp. 7 and 11; United Nations, *Social Justice in an Open World*, p. 17.

5. Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, pp. 7, 9, and 10; United Nations, *Social Justice in an Open World*, pp. 18–19.

6. Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, p. 7.

7. Ibid., p. 210; United Nations, *Social Justice in an Open World*, p. 16. Some thinkers, however, would define "needs" in more universal terms, as whatever is required for one to live a life consistent with human dignity; see, for example, Martha Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice," *Feminist Economics*, Vol. 9, No. 2–3 (2003), p. 40; cf. also United Nations, *Social Justice in an Open World*, pp. 12 and 15.

8. United Nations, *Social Justice in an Open World*, p. 16. Some writers also call for upper limits on earnings; see, for example, Diane Reay, "What Would a Socially Just Education System Look Like?" Centre for Labour and Social Studies *Think Piece*, July 2012, p. 8, http://classonline.org.uk/docs/2012_Diane_Reay_-_a_socially_just_education_system.pdf (accessed March 13, 2017).

9. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 18–22; Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements," pp. 35, 37–38, and 40–42.

10. Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements," p. 39.

11. Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, pp. 7 and 11.

12. United Nations, *Social Justice in an Open World*, p. 6.

13. Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, p. 11.

14. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 41; Maurianne Adams, "Conceptual Frameworks: Introduction," in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, 3rd ed., ed. Maurianne Adams, Warren J. Blumenfeld, Carmelita (Rosie) Casteñeda, Heather W. Hackman, Madeline L. Peters, and Ximena Zúñiga (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

15. Adams, "Conceptual Frameworks: Introduction," p. 2; Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, pp. 41–42.

16. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, pp. 8–9 and 15.

Theorists of this stripe subsume all of the social arrangements and circumstances they deem unjust under the heading of *oppression*. When social justice advocates use the word, they are not necessarily referring just to the abusive power of tyrannical rulers that most people would recognize as oppression.[17] Rather, they are referring to an all-encompassing "structure of forces and barriers" that traps people in unfair circumstances, thereby perpetuating inequality and hindering their ability to fully "develop...their capacities and express their needs."[18] These forces are "woven throughout social institutions" (bureaucratic structures and policies, markets, etc.) and "embedded within individual consciousness" in the form of "unquestioned norms," stereotypes, and "unconscious assumptions," as well as outright bias or bigotry.[19] Since negative stereotypes can even be internalized in the minds of oppressed individuals, various "identity politics" movements have sought since the 1960s to change how their particular groups are represented in the culture, substituting positive ideas and images for negative ones.[20]

Because they are rooted in social structures, the forces that perpetuate social injustice can persist despite the good intentions of "well-meaning people."[21] In fact, there need not even be a group deliberately seeking to oppress others (though the "privileged" benefit from the oppression nonetheless).[22] Oppressive conditions can develop simply as an "unintended consequence" of numerous individuals pursuing their particular concerns amid the totality of existing policies and practices.[23]

Thus, even an ostensibly "well-intentioned liberal society" like the United States, the theorists claim, contains "deep institutional injustices."[24] Moreover, because this structural injustice is "systemically reproduced" by society's "major economic, political, and cultural institutions," it cannot be removed through minor legislative or electoral change; only broad-scale systemic change has the potential to eradicate it.[25] According to one theorist, oppression—or social injustice—can be manifest in at least five forms:

- Exploitation;

- Marginalization;

- Powerlessness;

- Cultural imperialism (including negative stereotypes of non-dominant identity groups); and

- Violence, particularly against vulnerable populations.[26]

Advocates widely agree that a socially just society would be characterized by a more even distribution of goods, achieved at least in part by redistributive economic policies,[27] but these more radical theorists want to go further. They seek to change the mechanisms of political participation, workplace decision-making processes, the division of labor, and the overall organization of society, as well as the culture that pervades it.[28]

17. Ibid., p. 40.

18. Ibid., pp. 41–42 and 40; Lee Anne Bell, "Theoretical Foundations for Social Justice," in Adams, et al., *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, p. 22.

19. Bell, "Theoretical Foundations," p. 22; Iris Marion Young, "Structure as the Subject of Justice," in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, p. 55; Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 41.

20. Bell, "Theoretical Foundations," pp. 22–23; Adams, "Conceptual Frameworks: Introduction," p. 3; Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 61.

21. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 41.

22. Ibid., pp. 41 and 42.

23. Young, "Structure as the Subject of Justice," pp. 54 and 55.

24. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, pp. 41 and 7.

25. Ibid., p. 41.

26. Ibid., pp. 49–62.

27. United Nations, *Social Justice in an Open World*, pp. 6–7; Reay, "What Would a Socially Just Education System Look Like?" p. 8.

28. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, pp. 9 and 252–253.

Such thinkers desire that individuals be given greater control of the conditions of their daily lives (more opportunities and options, more income and housing security, etc.). Believing that self-esteem is an essential precondition for empowerment, they also want all people to enjoy opportunities for respect and recognition, both from fellow citizens and from society as a whole. Finally, these social justice advocates, especially proponents of identity politics, emphasize the need to build coalitions among the various "marginalized" identity groups in order to maximize political influence.

## Conclusion

Social justice means different things to different people. More mainstream progressives and liberals tend to focus on a more equal distribution of goods and opportunities, while those of a more leftward bent focus on "oppression" among social groups. Whereas the former emphasize what is common among members of the human family, the latter stress divisions and differences between demographic groups while often also pragmatically emphasizing coalition-building among different "oppressed" groups.

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