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### What is Social Justice?

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Kat Allen

Dr. Houser

Introduction to Social Justice

12 December 2017

### What is Social Justice?

Defining social justice involves incorporating methodologies and ideals, which is why there is not one concrete definition. Therefore, I believe that before defining social justice, it is important to define and better understand what justice is on a more broad level. The definition of justice has changed throughout the course of history as civil ideals and morals have changed. In Greek and Hellenic societies, justice meant harmony, where harmony was achieved when all citizens would satisfy their role in society. From a socialist economic perspective, justice is an equal distribution of wealth among the nation, with the notion that it would obliterate poverty. From a political aspect, justice can be described as allowing a citizen to be maximally free. Due to the way that American politics and society is structured (i.e. organized democracy, constitutional rights and freedoms, and with a bicameral structure of legislature with a system of checks and balances in place) justice is essentially defined based on your personal interests, with the common ground between people being the ultimate goal of fairness.

Social justice seekers are often passionate about a particular cause because they see a need for change in a specific area of society, whether that be decreasing homelessness and poverty in a local area, providing food for the poor, persecuting criminals, working against gentrification, reducing racial tensions and racist efforts, or (from an Evangelical perspective)

focusing on what God wants for society to look like and working towards that. Social justice seekers are also determined to find a solution for the primary issue of their focus and interests, in order to eradicate the problem, or in an attempt to make it better.

Throughout the course of the semester, I have learned that social justice will not have a single definition, mostly because it involves humans. Humans have different cultures, interests, passions, religious beliefs, dislikes, biases, and come from different backgrounds. For the most part, people are either uninformed or unaware of the differences between themselves and others aside from physical attributes, which is problematic because it is easier to be blind to issues in society if they do not directly affect one's interests. It also makes it more difficult to define social justice, as it would have to encompass and apply to all societies, which raises questions—is social justice about equality? Is it about fairness? Is it about getting what we deserve? Or is it about getting what we need? If it is the latter, how would one define need; food, water, shelter and clothing? Or the former in addition to education, freedom and happiness?

Social justice is broad on both a transnational front and on a local front. Transnationally, social justice could be as broad as working towards world peace, or as focused as working towards eradicating AIDS. Locally, it could be as broad as ending racism and prejudicial acts in America, or as focused as volunteering to help families in the community have a substantial supply of food.

Since social justice is predominantly based on an individual, case-by-case basis varying by groups of people's interests, it is easier to describe social justice than it is to define it, as it is largely a fluid term. Therefore, I believe that social justice is a subcategory under justice and can be described as a utilitarian process by which a fair society is one that works towards increasing

the general well-being of all citizens, regardless of race, sex, ethnicity, age, sexual preference, or socioeconomic status. Social justice is a principle which fuses together the three basic fundamental parts of a functional society: societal, ethical, and moral ideals, all of which without, social justice would cease to be a topic of discussion.

**Societal ideals:** The first fundamental part of social justice I would like to focus on is that of societal ideals. A societal ideal is essentially an outcome or goal society strives together to accomplish, even if it does not achieve the goal. For example, a societal ideal could be making sure that all children receive the same standard of education, and ensuring equality of race and gender within a community.

The first step towards building a common ideal is simply acknowledging that there is a problem and addressing it. Unfortunately, this step is difficult to get people to agree on because depravity of man in modern American society. In a nutshell, depravity of man means that all good is derived from God alone, and in no way through humanity. Humans are the reason why we have as many unjust issues in society as we do. But no one wants to take the blame for creating a problem.

For example, let's examine racial tensions in the United States. The United States has a very extensive, brutal history with slavery, which nobody can deny. However, the issue of censorship has led to an increase in racial tensions. Talking about race or slavery is often viewed as a taboo subject. It makes people feel awkward talking about the brutality of enslaved people. It is important that as justice seekers, we invite and encourage people to have these difficult situations. The main problem is that society does not know where to begin. Social justice is not censorship. It is not going to school and learning about Black History Month

without being taught the full truth. African American History throughout primary education, for the most part, is censored. It is taught as peaceful demonstrations and protests that happened a very long time ago, when in fact it was brutal and happened a mere fifty years ago. Children are taught only the sugar-coated facts; that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream, often excluding the fact that he was a reverend, jailed multiple times for his beliefs, received death threats daily, lead a revolutionary march from Selma to Montgomery, and coordinated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); they are being taught that Rosa Parks was just an ordinary citizen on her way home from work when she did not want to give up her seat; when in fact, she was the secretary for the NAACP chapter, and the demonstration took months of strategic planning and coordinating, and that she, too, was educated. Censorship contributes to the expansion of ignorance and misunderstand in society. If people are never taught true history, how will they people about to recognize when it is repeating itself every single day?

Addressing an issue is problematic simply because it does include asking people to have an open mind. Often, when others are asked to have an open mind, they automatically feel like you are going to attack their beliefs or give them a lecture. Citizens do not want to be lectured. Justice seekers must advocate and present information in such a manner that does not come off as offensive or overbearing.

**Ethical and moral ideals:** Additionally, ethical ideals are at the root of Social Justice as well. A primary reason why we discuss social justice is because there is a lot of disagreement about what it means to distribute justly, and virtually everything we debate about politically is related to the exact issue. There are two basic perspectives on human rights— a position that

views rights as negative, and a position which argues that rights are positive. A negative right is the right to not be interfered with or not to be stopped from pursuing the things one needs. So, a proponent of this view would not be able to prevent one from trying to fulfill their needs, but would not feel required to help that person fulfill their needs either. By contrast, a positive rights proponent would state that one is entitled to assistance getting attaining their essential human rights, such as having enough to eat and being able to go to the doctor if they are sick, if they are unable to do so themselves (Crash Course).

What exactly are human rights, though? The general consensus is the same as human needs. According to Abraham Maslow, an American Psychologist, a hierarchy of human needs answers this question. In his paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” Maslow examines the basic needs to be fulfilled in life. The primary and largest tier in the hierarchy (Figure 1) is physiological needs. These needs include food, water, warmth, and rest (Maslow, et. al).



*(Figure 1 depicts Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs)*

**Activities:** As a class, we read the book *Advocacy in Conflict*. I wanted to read an additional chapter over advocacy to get a better view to form my definition of social justice. Alex De Waal wrote a chapter over transnational advocacy, which he defines as, “...personal

salvation or fulfillment, preserving social order, and collective action for transforming society in pursuit of a more just order,” (De Waal, par 10). Throughout the chapter, De Waal explained that his research found that humans essentially will only help people if it benefits them in one way or another. While analyzing the use of resources and skills to alleviate suffering, it was found that when interest groups are asking for materialistic things or monetary donation, they offer a payoff for the donors. In a sense, this can be counterproductive. Although you will have some very interested and committed people supporting your cause and advocating for it, there will also be desperate people latching on to the “campaign” only to help themselves. Transnational advocacy is pertinent to our course of study because without advocacy and awareness of what is going on both within and outside of America’s borders, one cannot expect social justice to ever be achieved.

Additionally, we read about the white savior industrial complex. Cole says, “if we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement.” (Cole, par.1). As I wrote in my journal, Cole describes that what Africa needs more pressingly than Kony’s indictment is more equitable civil society, more robust democracy, and a fairer system of justice. While Kony should be stopped and what he is doing is awful, there are more pressing matters for the entirety of Africa, rather than one person in one region. Cole made an excellent point when he mentioned that there is more to helping than just donating money. He used the example of the Earthquake in Haiti to describe how we donate money, but usually it is only to make ourselves feel better. Society needs to be educated on how our efforts make affect those directly impacted by the unjust act, because as a privileged society, it is easy to overlook facts. I believe the White Industrial Savior Complex is indirectly stemming from censorship in

propaganda, as people are misinformed or not educated on all aspects of a particular situation.

Which leads into the fact that helping hurts. If a “western” idea of social justice is applied to another country or region, what would the consequences of those actions be? Too often, society looks for a quick fix as a solution to a problem without taking the time to thoroughly think it through.

However, there is a side of social justice which is still focused on helping people for the sake of helping people. The 5K in Arkadelphia that the class hung up posters for and some participated in was to raise awareness about a terrible situation that has an impact on the local community. On a local level, it is easier to grasp the long term effects of an action, but once a problem becomes a transnational issue, there is no guarantee of that happening.

. Prior to this class, I would focus my energy and resources towards advocating for minority groups, sexual assault and domestic violence victims, and the Deaf community. Volunteering in the community helped me broaden my horizons on the magnitude of the issue that social justice is. As a social justice seeker, it is easy to (in a sense) get tunnel vision and tune out the other problems in the world. It is important to not become so focused on one organization or campaign that you begin to ignore others. Otherwise, we become victims of the endless cycle of social injustice in which we were born into.

I believe that, as a Social Justice major, it is also important when discussing, describing, and defining social justice to rebut the opposing side, by describing what social justice is not. When I communicate that I am a social justice major, the general response is between “what’s that?” and “awe, social justice warrior and that stuff, right?” No. Wrong. Well, not completely. While there is definitely some political motivation behind the concept of social justice, the term



social justice warrior has a negative stigma attached to it. A Social Justice Warrior is someone who promotes socially progressive views (Dictionary.com), but the majority of the people who use the term use it pejoratively to degrade people who incorrectly and misinterpret information and repeat facts based on hearsay. Social Justice is not simply carrying around a first aid kit and helping people who fall down and get hurt, rather it is the process of helping people get back up on their feet after they fall, and providing them with the resources that they need to go through the healing process. Social justice is not feminism. While feminists can be and often are social justice advocates, they are not interchangeable terms. Social justice is not censorship. Social justice is not a strictly economic policy about the distribution of wealth. To reiterate my earlier statement: it is how we address the issue of poverty and how we can work to change that. Social justice is not a waste of time.

Going into Introduction to Social Justice, I believed that social justice was simply justice and equality for everyone. Throughout the course, my definition of social justice began to evolve. As mentioned before, attaining social justice is a process. Rather than focusing on breaking the cycle, I believe that the best way to work towards social justice is to recognize that it will not happen in one lifetime. I have come to realize that the field of social justice work is oxymoronically both hopeless and hopeful. Social justice work is hopeless in the sense that it is trying to undo all of the wrong that humankind has done throughout history, which is impossible. Why would we bother fighting for something which is inevitably going to repeat itself? Why bother working towards something if we cannot change human nature or human behavior? Social justice seekers work towards a common goal. It is important to try to fix issues, so that people become aware that those issues exist. Although we cannot expect a euphoric utopian society at

the end of the day, we find comfort in the fact that we are still educating people through our actions and advocacy. We find hope in the fact that we can make modern society a better place for everyone, even if it is an excruciatingly slow and painful process.

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