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### A Social Justice Manifesto: An Examination of Social Justice as a Process

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A Social Justice Manifesto  
An examination of social justice as a process

Austin Clements  
Under the direction of Dr. Myra Houser

Introduction to Social Justice  
Dr. Myra Houser  
December 13, 2017

Social justice is a very broad term and one that is not easily defined. Is it certain issues or is it a broad range of issues? Is it one particular methodology or is it a variety of methodologies? It is a term that can provoke both a sense of pride and a roaring ire towards anyone who uses it in a positive context. Why is social justice a term that provokes so many different emotions, opinions, and ideas about its origins? It is because social justice itself is a term that possesses a different meaning, dependent on who is using the term. *That is why social justice itself, in a neutral sense, can be defined as fighting for a selfless societal cause even when you do not have the support of other people.* I have chosen this definition for social justice for several reasons. Firstly, it is a very general definition because, as mentioned before, the term social justice an emotional and personal term to many people. To be more specific in this definition of social justice would do a disservice to many people to whom my personal definition of social justice is. Secondly, this definition of social justice requires one to fight for a “selfless” cause. This eliminates fighting for causes in a general sense because humans, in nature, are selfish and many causes that we will fight for will tend to benefit us and that is why we fight for them. To seek true social justice is fighting for a cause that will not benefit, and may even hurt oneself or their standing in the world in some way. True social justice cannot be accomplished without sacrifice. Lastly, this definition of social justice implies that to fight for social justice, you may be on your own or it may feel like you are on your own frequently. Fighting for social justice can be quite disheartening, as one quickly realizes that no matter how dire or urgent your cause is, many people will just not care. True social justice can only be accomplished if someone, even just one person, keeps forging ahead when no one else will.

## **Social justice as a general idea**

While many people have a very personal definition of social justice, the idea of social justice is very broad and covers many aspects of life. Merriam-Webster defines social justice as “a state or doctrine of egalitarianism.” While I tend to agree with this definition, I believe that social justice is just more than egalitarianism. I believe that social justice is making sure everyone has equal opportunities, freedoms, and privilege in society no matter their status in society. Social justice is not just a doctrine or state, it is a process of accomplishing egalitarianism in society. Social justice is not a state accomplished one day, it is an ongoing process of denial and failure and words falling on deaf ears until enough people listen and care. However, in this day in age, causes for social justice arise suddenly and gain traction very quickly. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement appeared very suddenly following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the crime of the murder of Tamir Rice in 2013. Black Lives Matter gained traction in 2015 following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO. The movement did not start slowly and gain traction, membership and growth of the movement hinged upon inciting incidents, which were mostly the shootings of unarmed black men in the United States. However, this is just one cause of many in the “doctrine of egalitarianism” that is social justice. While to the parents of Tamir Rice, Black Lives Matter may seem like the most urgent cause in social justice, but to someone with no association or connection to the Black Lives Matter Movement, police brutality would not seem like one of the most pressing issues to them. This is why the definition of social justice requires a broad and inclusive definition. Even different readers of this exact essay will have wildly different opinions on what particularly social justice is. I personally believe the most urgent social justice issues today include racial injustice, economic disparity between the poor and the rich, and the equality of all peoples no matter their race, class, or

gender. While that is my definition of pertinent social justice issues, I do not believe that this is the definition of social justice. Social justice is constantly evolving to match the era it is in.

### **Social Justice as a selfless cause**

Social justice, as discussed earlier, is a general term for affecting change in society and is general for a reason. However, it is my belief that this cannot just be any cause. It is my belief that to fight for social justice, the individual cannot be fighting for purely selfless causes. This does not, however, mean that they cannot be personally tied to this cause. For example, W.E.B. Du Bois helped to pioneer sociology and went on to fight for the advancement of black people and was a founder of the NAACP. While this did affect Du Bois personally because he was a black man, not only did it affect many other people, but it involved a lot of personal sacrifice on his behalf. According to Aldon Morris, Du Bois was ridiculed by many of his contemporaries for his belief that African Americans were not an inferior race, but they had just been given poor opportunities since the end of slavery.<sup>1</sup> Du Bois risked his career and his status as a renowned scholar to accomplish a social change in the way we think about race. Too often in our society today, people will join in on a cause because it is *en vogue* at the time. To me, this is not social justice because it is not out of self-sacrifice or selflessness that they are seeking change, but rather because it is something that they can tell their friends they did or because it makes them feel good. This is another problem with modern advocates for social justice, is there genuine sentiment and the feeling for the need to change behind the words of a supporter, or is it someone that will be gone next week because they have found something else to make them feel good? This idea, while not exactly like it, bears large similarities to the white savior complex.

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<sup>1</sup> Aldon Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015.)

The white savior complex is a trope that originally restricted to movies: the well-educated, moderately wealthy white person comes and saves the poor or the minority from their plight. However, in recent years, the phrase has come to mean the “coming to the rescue” of those who need it, with limited to no knowledge of their actual plight and limited actual help coming from the “white savior.” The poet and author Teju Cole says this concerning the view of the white savior complex, “The world exists simply to satisfy the needs – including, importantly, the sentimental needs – of white people and Oprah.”<sup>2</sup> The plight described can also “slacktivism”, which is when someone donates or does a little advocacy while not actually making an actual impact on a problem or giving too much money or effort. A fitting example of the white savior complex in action is the *Kony2012* movement that occurred in the United States in 2012.

*Kony2012* was a video produced by the NGO Invisible Children, who sought to have Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army militia in Uganda, arrested and tried for his crimes against humanity. While this movement sought to raise awareness for heinous crimes transpiring in Uganda, according to Mareike Schomerus, “...for the people who lived in the Central African regions where the LRA was active, the idea of ‘making Kony famous’ made little sense.”<sup>3</sup> This made little sense to the people of Central Africa because the *Kony2012* video advocated for US military intervention, something the Ugandan people did not want at all. In fact, at a screening of the *Kony2012* video in Uganda many Ugandans were disgusted with what they saw. According to Victor Ochen, who hosted the screening, says that “It was very hurtful for them and their families to see posters, bracelets and buttons, all looking like slick campaign

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<sup>2</sup> Teju Cole, Twitter post, March 8, 2012, 11:35 am, [https://twitter.com/tejucole?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theatlantic.com%2Finternational%2Farchive%2F2012%2F03%2Fthe-white-savior-industrial-complex%2F254843%2F](https://twitter.com/tejucole?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theatlantic.com%2Finternational%2Farchive%2F2012%2F03%2Fthe-white-savior-industrial-complex%2F254843%2F)

<sup>3</sup> Mareike Schomerus, ‘*Make Him Famous*’: *The Single Conflict Narrative of Kony and Kony 2012*, included in *Advocacy in Conflict: Critical Perspectives on Transnational Activism* by Alex de Waal (London: Zed Books, 2015.) 143.

ads of the person most responsible for their shattered lives. One young man who lost four brothers and one of his arms said afterwards: ‘How can anybody expect me to wear a T-shirt with Kony’s name on it?’<sup>4</sup> These sentiments are not exclusive to the Kony 2012 movement. This is evident especially in the rise of social media, as it is quite easy to like something on Facebook or follow an activist on Twitter but not actually pursue any real form of activism for social change. This is why social justice requires a selfless goal, a goal that either requires self-sacrifice (that is not evident in white savior-esque aims) or a cause that would not necessarily benefit yourself but is something that is still desired.

### **Social justice without support**

Social justice, while it may not seem like it when it succeeds, can frequently be isolating and one may be on their own or with a limited group of people when fighting for social justice. Believe it or not, many do not want to hear about how people are dying in Africa of a curable disease or how often someone is sold into human trafficking all of the time. Unbelievably, this can be quite a downer for many people. This leads many causes to lose support or traction a few months after their initial success. This, combined with the fact that technology today makes it easy for people to move on from “slacktivism”, leads to many advocates for change left without support and societal issues still not addressed. For example, following the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, Facebook and Twitter both launched support campaigns for rebuilding and rescuing survivors. According to the Huffington Post, the American Red Cross collected \$7 million in a day by

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<sup>4</sup> Rosebell Kagumire and David Smith, “Kony 2012 video screening met with anger in northern Uganda,” *The Guardian*, March 14, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/14/kony-2012-screening-anger-northern-uganda>

allowing people to donate right from their cell phones.<sup>5</sup> However, Haiti is still rebuilding from that earthquake in 2010 but it is not the issue that is in style right now, so it will not see any attention. That \$7 million did not fix the underlying problems that led to 220,000 people dying in Haiti rather than a much lower number. Haiti is still struggling with issues that were there and are still very much present in Haitian society. Almost always preceding mention of the Haitian earthquake, though, was the assertion that Haiti was the ‘poorest country in the Western hemisphere’. This again is the white savior complex rearing its head in the way we talk about social change and affecting real change in society. To accomplish real social justice, social change must be accomplished by fighting through waning support and resistance to your cause.

### **Issues of social justice**

As previously stated, social justice can include a wide range of advocacy and methodologies and issues. I, however, do personally have ideas that I believe to be pressing issues of social justice that need to be addressed in the United States. I believe that racial tensions and disparities are the most pressing social injustice and need to be addressed. The United States has come a long ways from the days of slavery in the realm of mending race relations. Passages of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments to the Constitution as well as the passages of the Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1870, 1871, 1875, 1957, and 1964 were acknowledgements by the United States Congress that racism and race relations were a dire issue in this country. However, it is believed by many that racism and mending race relations is a thing of the past. I strongly believe that this is not true. There is still a profound disparity in incarceration rates and poverty rates in the US between black Americans and white Americans. For example, 27% of black Americans

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<sup>5</sup> Kim Karst, “Social Media as a Catalyst for Social Change,” *The Huffington Post*, May 2, 2013. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kim-garst/social-media-as-a-catalys\\_b\\_3197544.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kim-garst/social-media-as-a-catalys_b_3197544.html)



live below the poverty line compared to the national average of 15.5%.<sup>6</sup> Even more alarming is the fact that 38% of black children live below the poverty line compared to the national average of 22%.<sup>7</sup> This is alarming on its own but when analyzed with other statistics, it is quite clear the need for change in some form. In the realm of criminal justice, African Americans are incarcerated at nearly five times the rate of white Americans<sup>8</sup> and account for 12.5% of illicit drug users but account for 29% of those arrested for drug offenses.<sup>9</sup> I would make the argument that if there was a change in the economic change in the prospects for African American communities that there would be a decline in incarceration rates. According to Ta-Nehisi Coates, “To yell ‘black on black crime’ is to shoot a man and then shame him for bleeding.”<sup>10</sup> While there may not be any legislation on the books anymore that is explicitly racist, there is very little legislation that has been adopted to mend years of racist systems. The dire straits of black communities economically hold down these communities across the nation and this should certainly be addressed as an issue of social justice.

## **Conclusion**

Defining social justice is a challenging task. Not only is it a broad term on its own, but it is a highly personal topic to many people and can incite many emotional reactions. That is why the definition I chose was one that could be applied in many ways. *That is why social justice itself, in a neutral sense, can be defined as fighting for a selfless societal cause even when you do not have the support of other people.* I believe the most important part of this statement is the idea

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<sup>6</sup> US Census Bureau, 2014 American Community Survey 1 Year Estimates

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet,” naacp.org, accessed December 12, 2017. <http://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (Oakland: New York, 2015)

that the cause must be selfless. This eliminates many causes that keep society stagnant and not moving forward. Selfless causes or self-sacrificing causes require real conviction and true pain to motivate them, not just the ability to click 'donate' on the Invisible Children's website. Social justice, while I speak of it in absolute terms, is a phrase that can mean many different things and can change very quickly depending on what is necessary in society. To define specific ideas that are included in the realm of social justice is a mistake because they will change very quickly. That being said I am a hypocrite for including a specific example. However, and this is my bias towards the issue influencing my thinking, I do believe that economic disparity between races is a relevant enough issue that has stayed constant for over a hundred years in the United States that it could safely be included in this essay. Social justice is not a state, as Merriam-Webster describes it, but rather it is a process. Social justice is something society can work towards and attempt to accomplish, and it is something we as a society should advocate for genuinely in our society.

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