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SJUS 1003 Intro to Social Justice

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November 30, 2020

The question of how to define social justice is a complicated matter for me to do personally. The phrase itself carries a lot of weight behind it. The word social implies that this is to be a community matter, while justice speaks to things being fair for all people. However personal encounters with those who speak for social justice often ask me to side on issues that I don't entirely agree with. However, after considering the term this semester I have refined my own view of what social justice should be and how I myself want to live it out. Social Justice is the process of improving the community through understanding others and seeking the truth about social issues.

To better understand my own definition, I should speak to my history with the term. I first heard this phrase used after the movie *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* came out to theaters. The movie was criticized in part for its political agenda. The movie was seen as too progressive. a popular term used to describe people who supported some of this were referred to as social justice warriors. A small portion of the audience spoke up against its choice to include a more diverse cast to the point where one member of the cast left social media because of their harassment (Chuba, 2018; Van Der Werff, 2017).

This experience was odd for me as I personally liked the movie, but some of the political issues they were saying the movie was trying to talk about were not things I thought were simple issues that I could simply affirm without thinking. The movie was faulted for pushing racial diversity, which I thought was a good thing, but it also was being linked to some more progressive issues which I was less comfortable blindly endorsing. Over the next several months I learned more about what some of what people who considered themselves fighting for social justice. And the more I learned about it the wearier I became.

According to Yeshiva University's Website, social justice is currently focused on a wide range of issues including the income gap, racial injustice, and gun violence, among many others. (9 Biggest, 2020) All of these issues are complex, and solutions to them are not simple. I have seen people cry for justice in one area not noticing the complexities of such an issue and others call out those people for not looking into the complexities. The entire conversation surrounding it in regards to this term seemed unfruitful. I care deeply about these issues, but as a term social justice seemed laden with baggage that marked anyone looking into these issues as one with their own biases.

As I was gearing up for this semester I told a few people in my hometown what classes I was taking, every one of them questioned intro to social justice, saying that they were sorry that I had to take it or that I should be careful that I was not indoctrinated into progressive beliefs. This again concerned me as I was not required to take the class, I chose to take it. I wanted to understand the movement better and how it could be used in my own life. While I was not sure if I agreed with the direction these issues were framed in the larger social justice movement, the issues it was dealing with were important to me all the same.

As I wrestled with these questions, I entered into my intro to social justice class in college, interested to see what I could learn. The class began on an interesting note, the first thing we were required to read for the class already gave an interesting perspective that challenged some of my own ways of thinking. The article was called *I'm a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture Is Toxic* and confronted the issue of internet call out culture. The idea behind call out culture is to publicly call out someone on social media for using rhetoric that goes against that which is considered to be most appropriate by the culture. The idea is that those on social media

with an audience have a responsibility to not hurt people, so those who use what is considered harmful language should be reprimanded for doing so (Ross, 2019).

This article confronts the harmful nature of this idea because it causes people to fear discussing complicated issues. Having people constantly live in fear of public shame if they do not abide by a set of unwritten and constantly changing rules loosely defined by society is a sure way to limit who gets to speak in a given context. The author instead advocates for the readers to invite people to speak honestly about an issue and the complexities that come with it. She recognizes that the country is divided and as such the public's ability to communicate with each other is in desperate need for improvement. (Ross, 2019)

The idea of call out culture is at face value one that seemed troublesome, but the author called out the heart of the issue, which was that in the midst of trying to help people, call out culture often silenced fruitful discussion. My issues with social justice so far was that social justice seemed to attach itself to certain sides of issues, but her argument spoke against this notion. I could tell from reading the article that I probably did not agree with the author on many different issues, however the idea that issues of importance should not divide communication between each other helped me see that there was still things I could learn from her. Mainly, that understanding is key to dealing with such issues.

As the semester continued my idea of social justice continued to develop, *Evicted* by Mathew Desmond delved into the harsh world of landlords and tenants. Two stories stuck out to me in particular regarding the issue of social justice. The first was the story of when the landlord Sherrena and her tenant Marlene go to the court to deal with Marlene's eviction. the scene painted in the book was one of a court where cases were not tried as much as processed. The amount of evictions the court had caused them to not deal with the cases on much more than a

piece of paperwork that had to be processed. Hence decisions that would have huge impacts on an individual's life were processed quickly without much thought. Most people did not have a good enough understanding of the court to ever come to their court date, figuring it was too late to do much about their eviction. This left it so tenants could sue them beyond what was necessarily fair and they could do little about it. (Desmond, 2016).

Another story tells of another tenant named Lamar agreeing to do some work for Sherrena to cover his rent. He accomplishes the task but not up to Sherrena's expectations, so she does not end up paying him the money she had agreed to pay, noting that the work was not done as well as it should have been done and that she could have had the job done for much cheaper than the cost of his rent. So, she goes back on what she agreed to pay and there were no consequences because it was not a formal agreement, it was done on good will alone (Desmond, 2016).

The position that these stories speak to is unfair treatment of people because of the position that they are in, the people are being taken advantage of because they are in a financial crisis, but just because they are in financial crisis does not mean that this is fair. The right to fair trial and fair wages should be held up no matter the situation that one finds themselves in. Desmond even points this out as a direct issue as he talks about solutions, noting that due process is not being followed and effort needs to be taken to make sure that each citizen is given a fair trial, even noting that such a measure could actually end up saving the country money for the state in other housing costs associated with aiding those who would have lost their housing through evictions (Desmond, 2016).

While that solution has its own complexities that go beyond the scope of the current discussion, the idea behind it is useful for my continued development for what social justice

should be. The idea of fairness despite social and financial status makes a lot of sense. The idea of people having certain rights makes sense and holds true to what most Americans believe. The constitution is built upon this idea. So, to see that certain people are being denied fairness and are being overlooked because they are deemed immature and unworthy of being able to have a fair trial because of their position in poverty is inexcusable.

Throughout these stories and the rest of the book Sherrena acts with the mindset that everyone is trying to take advantage of her and makes it clear that she does want what is best for the tenants. The complexities of the people in these situations is difficult to understand, but if there is anything that they should be able to count on it should be the fairness of the system. They should not be seen as merely a source of money but as people who should be treated fairly.

This notion of considering people beyond their practical meaning in one's life was somewhat of a theme in the class. In Paul Kalanithi's book, *When Breath Becomes Air* he speaks about his experience first practicing surgery, he talked about how there was a pile of paperwork that was comprised of the patients the surgical office went through, he realized as he began to work with patients each one had their own story that impacted him more than just another file to get through. After he lost his first patient, he writes that he resolved to always see the paperwork as individual people and not as merely tasks on his desk to accomplish (Kalanithi,2016).

This illustrates a key point, the key usefulness in the social justice movement, it is from this perspective, that other people are not just a means to our end, whether they are our patient, tenant, or anything else, seeing the humanity and worth of the individual beyond their individual part in our lives is key. Many movements exist and come forth from social justice, but the moment that any of them start to dehumanize an individual as not worthy of further consideration, an issue begins to arise.

Such an issue can be seen in a scene from Bryan Stevenson's *Just mercy*. In the book Stevenson recounts his tales as a judge who serves as a defense for people who are on death row. During one case he meets with a district attorney to discuss a case involving a man named Walter. Walter was accused of murder of a girl due to some sketchy witnesses. At the time of this meeting there were several witnesses that placed Walter at a different location at the time of the crime. But the state prosecution had witnesses of their own that told a different story. Stevenson had already seen that the story these people were telling did not make sense, but one witness that went against their testimony was prosecuted for perjury. Stevenson went to a district attorney working under the prosecution's office to discuss the matter. (Stevenson, 2015)

Stevenson begins the conversation by trying to listen to what he had to say, he knew that a charge of perjury had to be legitimate before it could be prosecuted, but Stevenson wanted to let him speak before he made an accusation. The attorney did not extend the same grace, quickly framing the whole thing as a done deal, without any need for further investigation. He told Stevenson that everybody already believed that the matter was a done deal. Stevenson replied telling him that there were plenty of people who were not convinced that he was guilty, some of which claimed they were with him during the crime. The district attorney responded by dismissing them all as unreliable witnesses. Stevenson manages to get him to drop the perjury charge, but only because it is no longer helpful for the case because Stevenson's appeal to include him as a witness fell through. Stevenson walks away writing that the attorney did not care what the law said. (Stevenson, 2015)

The story here is tragic as it tells the story of someone who is caught up unjust system that is trying to give a fair trial, but trying to satisfy the voices of those who are most detrimental to their career. The people wanted to prosecute someone for an outrageous crime but were more

willing to prosecute an innocent man to do so. By doing such he discounts other people entirely because it does not fit within the narrative that he and his peers had constructed. While to the public it looks like he is fighting for justice, his attitude exposes that appearances and maintaining his own pride is more important to him than actually fighting for the truth.

This brings me back to my initial concern with social justice and why one needs to be so careful when one speaks about it. It is very easy for one to jump onto a cause and use it to dismiss people around you and doing so can have serious consequences. By throwing out the testimony of the few on the grounds that they were defending a horrible man, the attorney was not doing anyone any good. Justice is good, but justice requires truth to be truly just, and if one forsakes seeking truth in the name of justice, then justice is already lost.

This point is seen in a small comment made in Andrew Solomon's book *Far from the Tree*. In the book Solomon is discussing the idea of identity, He notes that long standing illnesses are being seen less and less as a thing that is inherently wrong with a person and more as part of their identity. People are taking pride in their deafness and dwarfism and even autism. But He notes that this perspective is not completely defensible as a moral standard. He tells us about pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia movements that challenge this way of thinking. The movements sought to affirm and celebrate their ways of life. These conditions are dangerous to the one who suffers from them. Anorexia is the mental illness with the highest death rate. Following in the steps of these movements can lead to death of the individuals suffering from these mental illnesses. Solomon notes that to say they are merely exploring identity by doing these practices is like saying joining a gang that leads to violence is doing the same. (Solomon 2012).

The idea that one can get so wrapped up in affirming people that one accidentally ends up hurting people must be fought against if social justice is to do the good it seems to want to

accomplish. By seeking to celebrate illnesses such as deafness and dwarfism for the unique perspective and lives can be honorable as far as trying to affirm the worth of the person's life despite the conditions they have to live within. Doing the same for a mental disorder that is dangerous to the individual is irresponsible.

When considering this under the lens of social justice it tells us that there are times where people can be listened to but not affirmed. One can seek to understand someone without affirming what they believe. To endorse the anorexic to fulfill their desire to abstain from food as much as they can is to harm them, but that does not mean that dehumanizing them is the answer either. As argued above every individual no matter the position should be seen as an individual with their worth beyond their role in another's life. To not try to understand them brings us back to the issues of call out culture. Even if one disagrees with what someone is saying and has certainty that their personal beliefs are true, that does not allow one to escape the task of understanding.

So that leaves me with a complicated view of social justice, on the one hand I think that social justice is beneficial because it calls one to listen to the voice of those who are often overlooked, but on the other hand it can easily be used to silence those who disagree with one's view on an issue, all of the reading in this class had perspectives on complicated issues. Some of the perspectives I agreed with and some of them I did not. But at the heart of it all I saw in everything I read for this class this semester a desire to help the world by understanding it better and by listening to and affirming individuals lives and stories.

I want to be careful to see what blind spots remain in my own pursuit of justice, and I want to be careful not to let my own pride dismiss another's story, even when I think I am doing the right thing. At the end of the day I am unsure if social justice is a beneficial term because it

so often leads to pride because every person defines it differently. Language which fails to communicate can lead to confusion instead of understanding. While I believe it is still a complicated and loaded term there is a desire behind it to learn, understand and value people, and that is a virtue that I want to pursue.

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