

Defining Social Justice

Social Justice – although this little phrase glibly slips off the tongue of many an individual, its ambiguity and explosive political nature can often cause profound confusion about the concept's true meaning. Indeed, as one commentator put it, the concept of social justice “is allowed to float in the air as if everyone will recognize an instance of it when it appears.”

While the wide use of the term social justice is fairly new, philosophical exploration of the meaning of justice goes far back into the ancient world. Early philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle wrestled with the concept of justice, the former describing it as “having and doing what is a man's own, and belongs to him,” the latter defining it as “the distribution of the right thing to the right person.”

Additionally, early biblical writings pressed for “do[ing] justice to the afflicted and needy.” Premised on the idea of a just God whose law and standards rightly give what is deserved to each individual, the biblical theme of justice naturally led Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas to expound on how justice should be practiced in the daily lives of human beings as they related to God and one another. ?

The concept of justice further took hold during the Enlightenment as thinkers began to encourage liberty and individualism. To them, justice meant properly rendering what was due to each individual based upon his or her “just deserts.” But more importantly, it entailed a commitment to upholding the basic natural rights of all individuals, rather than an equality which sought to equally distribute property and wealth. As Adam Smith succinctly put it, “the end of justice is to secure from injury.” ?

In the mid-1800s, the phrase “social and justice” first emerged in the work of a Catholic Jesuit, Luigi D'Azeglio,

who, building on long-standing Christian tradition, “prefaced ‘justice’ with ‘social’ to emphasize the social nature of human beings and, flowing from this, the importance of various social spheres outside civic government.”

Strongly influenced by D’Azeglio’s ideas, Pope Leo XIII picked up the phrase. Leo’s 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, formed the cornerstone of modern Catholic social teaching, a body of official documents setting forth principles for a moral social, economic, and political order achieved through both “public and private institutions.” The encyclical, although severely criticizing socialism, encouraged the fair treatment of the working class, and declared that “[a]mong the many and grave duties of rulers who would do their best for the people, the first and chief is to act with strict justice – with that justice which is called distributive – toward each and every class alike.” Later popes, such as Pius XI, followed Leo’s lead by condemning “the huge disparity between the few exceedingly rich and the unnumbered propertyless” and suggesting that social justice demanded remedying this disparity.

Paralleling the evolution of Catholic social teaching, the secular idea of social justice began to veer away from the traditional, historical meaning of justice, and instead began to focus on a philosophy which encouraged equality through the redistribution of wealth. This idea became especially prevalent during the Depression era through the efforts of several leading figures. Running a popular but controversial radio program during the 1920s and 30s, Father Coughlin sought to remedy what he saw as the deleterious effects of capitalism, considering social justice to be, among other things, a living wage and the ability to unionize. Additionally, FDR promoted his New Deal programs as advancing the welfare of the laboring man.

Perhaps the most influential contribution to the modern discourse about social justice was made by John Rawls. Aimed

as an alternative to utilitarianism, Rawls' seminal work, *A Theory of Justice*, argued that "[a]ll social values—liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone's advantage." According to Rawls, "[i]njustice, then, is simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all."

In his view of "justice as fairness" the ideal political system would be based on rules hypothetically chosen in an "original position" in which "no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like." This so-called "veil of ignorance," Rawls argued, would lead to the establishment of two foundational principles of justice:

"(a) Each person has the same inalienable claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all; and

(b) Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle)."

Rawls' theory received major criticisms, most prominently from Robert Nozick. In *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, he points out that

"no end-state principle or distributional patterned principle of justice can be continuously realized without continuous interference with people's lives. Any favored pattern would be transformed into one unfavored by the principle, by people choosing to act in various ways... To

maintain a pattern one must either continually interfere to stop people from transferring resources as they wish to, or continually (or periodically) interfere to take from some persons resources that others for some reason chose to transfer to them.”

Another prominent critic, Friedrich Hayek, attacked the concept of social justice as meaningless ?in his work *The Mirage of Social Justice*?:

“It is not pleasant to have to argue against a superstition which is held most strongly by men and women who are often regarded as the best in our society, and against a belief that has become almost the new religion of our time (and in which many of the ministers of old religion have found their refuge), and which has become the recognized mark of the good man. But the present universality of that belief proves no more the reality of its object than did the universal belief in witches or the philosopher’s stone. Nor does the long history of the conception of distributive justice understood as an attribute of individual conduct (and now often treated as synonymous with ‘social justice’) prove that it has any relevance to the positions arising from the market process.”

Hayek’s strong support for individualism and a free society led him to further argue that Rawls’ conception of social justice – or controlled fairness – actually led to injustice because it picked the “winners and losers” in society. Hayek believed that justice was better achieved by allowing individuals to pursue their own ambitions and talents while letting market forces play out as they would.

Today, social justice is often viewed as a type of compassion and aid exercised toward those who are oppressed and disadvantaged. Since compassion through personal charity and private aid as in times past is commonly deemed insufficient,

governmental policies such as progressive taxation and a host of welfare programs, attempt to help the "little man" by redistributing from the wealthy in order to give to the poor. Of course, the merits and demerits of these measures continuously elicit debate across the political spectrum.