

Perspectives on Social Justice

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Introduction

Many advocates of social justice tend not to specify their understanding of this concept. They act as if its meaning was self-evident and, therefore, did not require interpretation. When challenged to specify the meaning of the concept, they tend to hesitate. Leaving the meaning of social justice unspecified may actually be quite useful, for the vagueness of the concept enables people to avoid facing the implications of a clear definition for their accustomed ways of life.

In this essay, I am sketching my understanding of social justice on three related levels: individual human relations; social institutions and values; and global human relations. I also examine whether, and to what extent, the values, institutions, and culture of the United States are compatible with social justice and how to confront culture-based obstacles towards its realization.

My insights into social justice are not “correct” in an absolute sense. They are merely the meanings the concept conveys for me. I do think, however, that all students and advocates of social justice ought to move beyond an emotional attachment to a vague idea toward an intellectual position, and ought to specify the meaning the concept has for them when they use it in discourse with others. Such specifications seem especially necessary for deliberations on strategies toward the realization of social justice from local to global levels.

Individual Human Relations and Social Justice

The important distinction the philosopher Martin Buber made between “I-Thou” and “I-It” relations suggests, perhaps, the most pithy conceptualization of social justice in individual human relations (Buber, 1937). “I-Thou” human relations mean that everyone is to acknowledge and treat everyone else as an autonomous, authentic subject with equal rights and responsibilities, rather than as an object to be used, as is typically done in “I-It” human relations. Gradual expansion of genuine “I-Thou” relations, from local to global levels, could eventually phase out and prevent all kinds of domination and exploitation among people and groups of people.

Buber’s insights into social justice were by no means unique. They were foreshadowed in biblical and gospel sources, as illustrated by sayings such as “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” and “Do not do onto others what you do not want done to thyself.” These illustrations from Judeo-Christian traditions could be matched by similar quotes from the Koran and from sacred scriptures of Buddhists, Hindus, Confucians, and other Asian, African, and (Native-) American traditions.

Social Institutions, Values, and Social Justice

On the level of social institutions and values, social justice means socially-established living conditions and ways of life that are conducive to the fulfillment of everyone's intrinsic needs and to the realization of everyone's innate potential, from local to global levels.

Innate human capacities tend to unfold spontaneously when people have opportunities to fulfill their intrinsic needs in their natural and social-cultural environments. Insights into the dynamics of social justice require, therefore, clarification of intrinsic human needs and of the conditions for their fulfillment (Fromm, 1955; Gil, 1992; Maslow, 1970). Human needs include the following inter-related dimensions:

- Biological/material needs for survival and development;
- Social/psychological needs for meaningful relations of the "I-Thou" type;
- Productive/creative needs for engagement in meaningful work;
- Security needs derived from trust in stable fulfillment of the above needs;
- Self-actualization needs, to become what one is inherently capable of becoming;
- Spiritual needs, to discover meaning in one's existence in an unknowable cosmos.
 - Whether natural and social-cultural environments are conducive to the fulfillment of these needs, and the extent to which these needs can actually be met, depends on the value system and social policies, i.e., the institutional context of societies. That context involves the following inter-related dimensions of social life (Gil, 1992):
 - Management of natural and human-evolved, productive resources;
 - Organization of work and production;
 - Distribution of goods and services, and of civil, social, and political rights and responsibilities;
 - Governance;
 - Biological and cultural reproduction, socialization and social control.

Different societies, at different times and places, and at different stages of social, cultural, and technological development have shaped these essential dimensions of social life in different ways. These variations in policies result in different outcomes for people's circumstances of living, for their relative power, for the quality of their relations, and for the overall quality of life.

Systems of social policies are always results of human choices. However, these choices, in any generation, tend to be influenced and constrained by traditions and beliefs that reflect choices of prior generations. Nevertheless, since people originated all social policies, people, in any generation, can act collectively to change prevailing social policies in order to achieve more desired outcomes. People have often struggled for, and achieved, such changes throughout history, in spite of fierce resistance from social classes interested in preserving established ways of life.

At different times throughout social evolution human groups have actually created policy systems conducive to meeting the needs of all people, facilitating thus everyone's development. Societies that created such institutional systems in the past did practice "social justice" in accordance with the perspective suggested here. In theory, socially just policy systems could again be pursued and attained in the future.

Socially just societies, whenever and wherever they existed throughout history, have been egalitarian, structurally non-violent, and genuinely democratic (Kanter, 1972; Kropotkin, 1956). "Egalitarian," as used here, is not a mathematical, but a social-philosophical notion (Tawney, 1931, 1952). It means that all people have equal rights, equal responsibilities, and equal opportunities in all spheres of life, including control of resources; organization of work and production; distribution of goods, services, and rights; governance; and reproduction. Equality does not mean that everything is divided and distributed in identical shares, but that distributions are geared thoughtfully to individual differences, and everyone's different needs are acknowledged equally.

Socially just societies do not require "structural violence" by the state, as socially unjust societies do (Gil, 1996). The function of structural violence is to establish and maintain, social, economic, and political inequalities among individuals, social groups, and social classes. Inequalities of rights, responsibilities, and opportunities among people of a society are unlikely to be ever established and maintained voluntarily. Rather, their establishment requires coercion in the form of initiating physical violence which is gradually complemented by a "consciousness of submission" resulting from ideological indoctrination or the "colonization of people's minds."

Socially just societies also tend to practice real, rather than merely ritualistic, democracy. In the context of social, economic, and political equality of socially just societies, no individuals, groups, or social classes can monopolize power over other people and the state, by using

accumulated wealth to influence the outcome of elections, as is usually done in socially unjust, non-egalitarian societies.

Like social policies, values, too, are products of human choices, but their human origin tends to be disregarded and denied. Their origin tends to be projected onto extra-human sources and their power over human behavior is thus enhanced.

Values are guiding principles for human behavior and social relations derived from judgments of behavioral outcomes. Outcomes judged desirable and worthy of repetition are valued positively, while outcomes judged undesirable and to be avoided, are valued negatively. An important issue concerning these judgments is who made them, and whose interests are served by beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors shaped by the resulting values.

The history of values reveals that, in fragmented societies, the judgments were usually made by dominant classes, and behaviors guided by the values served the perceived interests of these classes. Values, once established in a society, tend to be internalized into the consciousness of most people and to shape their behavior, even when actions shaped by the values do not fit their real interests. An apt illustration of this tendency is the value that men are more worthy than women. That value was often internalized, not only by men whose perceived interests were served by it, but also by women whose real interests were hurt. Another illustration is the value of the “sanctity of property” which tends to be internalized not only by propertied, but also by expropriated classes, and which protects the interests of owners of property.

The values of societies tend to limit the range of possible changes in their policies. Significant changes in social policies and in institutional systems are, therefore, unlikely without prior significant changes in values.

The following value dimensions differentiate socially just from socially unjust societies:

just societies

equality

liberty

individuality

collectivity-orientation and mutualism

cooperation

unjust societies

inequality

domination and exploitation

selfishness and individualism

disregard for community

competition

Global Human Relations and Social Justice

Social justice on a scale of global human relations implies a vision of over six billion fully developed people living in fully developed societies and communities. This vision involves extending “I-Thou” relations to all of the world’s people and extending the institutional context of social justice from local and national to global levels. And, since living conditions shaped by social justice principles tend to prevent all forms of violence at their source, this vision implies also a peaceful world without structural violence by states and without counter-violence by individuals and groups, including the type of counter-violence labeled “terrorism.”

The institutional requirements of global social justice would have to be met by sharing the aggregate of productive resources, knowledge, work, goods, and services of the global community in ways conducive to meeting everyone’s intrinsic needs, and realizing everyone’s innate capacities. People everywhere would thus have equal social, economic, and political rights, responsibilities, and opportunities and no one would be dominated and exploited by others.

Contrary to intuitive assumptions and fears, redistribution of resources, knowledge, work, goods, and services in accordance with principles of global social justice, would not cause declines in the quality of life of currently privileged people and nations. For global wealth is not a fixed, zero-sum quantity and quality, but could be enhanced both quantitatively and qualitatively, as the productive potential of currently underdeveloped people and countries is liberated. Appropriate redistributions would have to be carried out gradually, thoughtfully, and non-coercively, once more and more people come to discover that global social justice would serve their real needs and interests, and would, therefore, enrich everyone.

The quality of life for all would actually be enriched immensely, when people everywhere will be free to develop their innate capacities and will be entitled to use necessary productive resources and accumulated knowledge and skills in meaningful, productive endeavors. The “real” wealth of humankind is after all not the aggregate of privately controlled concentrations of capital, but the aggregate of realized human potential, the globe’s natural and human-created resources, and the aggregate of knowledge and skills generated since early stages of social evolution.

The Culture of the United States and Social Justice

A society's culture is its unique way of life shaped by its history, beliefs, customs, and traditions, and by its values and social policies. A society's culture determines whether, and to what extent, social justice is attainable for its people, groups and classes. Since cultures are not fixed and can be changed by people, reducing prevailing levels of social injustice, is usually possible, though difficult, by changing the values, institutions, and social policies of the culture.

The foregoing sketch of the three related levels of social justice suggests that societies and their cultures are just:

- when they practice “I-Thou” human relations;
- when their institutions enable people to meet intrinsic needs and to unfold innate capacities;
- when their people have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities concerning the key dimensions of social life, i.e., resources, work, goods and services, governance, and reproduction;
- when their values stress equality, liberty, individuality, community, mutualism, and cooperation;
- when they are free of structural violence and wars from local to global levels;
- when they practice genuine democracy; and
- when their relations and interactions with people and nations all over the globe conform to the principles of social justice.

By applying these criteria, one is forced to conclude that the United States and its culture are not socially just. Its people would have to transform key aspects of their culture in order to reduce the prevailing scope of social injustice and to gradually move toward social justice.

Capitalism, the established economic system of the United States, is based on “I-It” human relations, domestically and globally. Individual and corporate enterprises use people, land, energy, and natural and human-made materials as “factors of production” to be exploited in the pursuit of profits. Employed workers are not treated as autonomous subjects or “masters of production,” but as means to the ends of their employers.

Capitalist economies do not aim to match the actual needs of populations, but only the “effective demand” of people who are able and willing to pay market prizes for goods and services. The people and governments in the United States have usually been reluctant to cover

even basic material needs not met by the market, as the people and governments of some other capitalist countries do. As a consequence of the way social, economic, and political institutions function in the United States, people tend not to meet their intrinsic needs and, therefore, cannot unfold their innate capacities. Also, the rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of people concerning resources, work, goods and services, governance, and reproduction tend to vary significantly in relation to social class status, gender, race, ethnicity, and other characteristics.

The “Declaration of Independence,” the “Constitution” and other important documents of the United States stress values of equality, liberty, individuality, community, mutualism, and cooperation. However, the values that actually shape the consciousness and behavior of most people of the United States, from local to global levels, are inequality, domination and exploitation, individualism, disregard for community, and competition.

The institutional systems and culture of the United States are permeated by overt and subtle “structural violence” that sustains established, multi-dimensional inequalities, and defines diverse manifestations of social injustice such as hunger, poverty, homelessness, and unemployment as “law and order.” The messages of structural violence tend to be internalized not only into the consciousness of beneficiaries of social injustices, but also into the consciousness of their victims. Structural violence, in turn, gives rise to vicious circles of counter-violence by its victims. Acts of counter-violence are usually not directed at the sources, beneficiaries, and agents of injustice, but tend to be displaced onto other targets through domestic violence, rape, crime, addictions, mental illness, suicide, etc.

The public response to counter-violence is usually “repressive structural violence,” by the “criminal justice” system against the perpetrators of counter-violence, i.e., the victims of structural violence. The aim and methods of repressive structural violence are to punish, control, and change the perpetrators of counter-violence, to deter others from engaging in counter-violence, and to reinforce conformity to the status quo. The roots of counter-violence in structural violence are usually disregarded and are, therefore, not addressed by the “criminal justice” system.

Wars have been a regular phenomenon throughout the history of the United States from genocidal wars against native peoples, to wars of conquest across and beyond the North American continent, the “War of Independence,” the “Civil War,” wars in Latin America and Asia, “World Wars,” and wars of global expansion and domination in the 20th and 21st

centuries (Zinn, 1994). Regardless of the official rationales and public perceptions of these many wars, none of them pursued and achieved social justice.

The United States is a constitutional democracy and has consistently practiced ritualistic elections throughout its history.. However, the people do not govern themselves democratically in a real sense. Because of constantly expanding, multi-dimensional inequalities, some groups and classes have usually more economic and social power than others, and exert, therefore, disproportionate influence over electoral processes and outcomes.

The above sketch suggests that the culture of the United States is incompatible with social justice in its domestic policies. When examining the role of the United States on a global scale, one cannot avoid a similar conclusion. The same dynamics of the US culture that limit the extent of social justice at home, shape also its foreign policies and lead to the same results of comprehensive global injustice.

Social-justice oriented aspects of the culture of the United States, like the “Bill of Rights,” are results of cultural change processes brought about by social activism over many centuries, going back to the barons’ struggle against the English crown, that resulted in the “Magna Carta.” More recent illustrations of cultural change efforts in the United States are the unfinished struggles for civil rights of Afro-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, immigrants and other groups; for workers’ rights; and for women’s liberation. Yet in spite of important gains in reducing the scope of social injustice as a result of these struggles, the prevailing culture of the United States continues to be a source of massive social injustice from local to global scales.

Confronting Culture-Based Obstacles to Social Justice

Ways of life of societies, their cultures, and their systems of social policy, have never been fixed, although they tend to feel as permanent to people at any point in time. Change is actually a constant aspect of social existence.

Effective action for social and cultural changes to overcome culture-based obstacles to social justice is, inevitably, a lengthy process, rather than a brief event of seizing power over the state. There are no known shortcuts to establish cultures of social justice. After all, social injustice has a history and traditions of about ten thousand years.

The history of revolutions aimed at establishing social justice reveals the un-likelihood of achieving just societies quickly by coercive means. A possible solution to this dilemma may be

the theory of non-violent social change as advocated and practiced by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and others (Sharp, 1979; King, 1992).

Effective social and cultural changes seem to depend on prior changes in consciousness, values, and perceptions of interest of growing segments of societies. To accomplish such changes of consciousness requires social movements committed to facilitate the spread of critical consciousness through non-violent practice of “dialogical counter-education” as suggested and demonstrated by Paulo Freire and others (Freire, 1970; Gil, 1998; hooks, 1994).

Movements can also promote and facilitate the creation and development of alternative models of social life such as intentional, cooperative communities, worker-owned enterprises, and various cooperative institutions. In this way “islands of socially just experimental societies” would grow in the midst of established unjust societies, just as early “capitalist islands” emerged in opposition to, within medieval feudal societies. Experiments along such lines are actually already happening in many countries across the globe including some in the United States (Blum, 1968; Buber, 1958; Kanter, 1972; Lindenfeld, 1982; Morrison, 1991; Quarter, 1989; Spiro, 1970).

People who wish to involve themselves personally in transformation processes toward social justice can do so by critically examining their ways of life and the quality of their human relations. Based on such self-examinations, they can aim to adjust their relationships with others to the “I-Thou” pattern, as far as possible within existing institutional realities, and they can aim to adjust their life styles and production and consumption patterns to requirements of global human development and environmental conservation. They can also join transformation movements and support groups, to work cooperatively with others to enhance their critical consciousness and their political practice, and to continuously examine their social change strategies (Gil, 1998).

Along with the above-sketches long-range strategies to confront culture-based obstacles to social justice, social change activists should support every opportunity for policy change to reduce the prevailing scope and intensity of social injustice in the short range. There is no contradiction between promoting policy “reforms” toward “incremental reductions” of injustice on the one hand, and pursuing, on the other, comprehensive policy transformations focused on eliminating the causes and dynamics of injustice in the fabric of society. Social change activists ought, however, to avoid interpreting and promoting fragmentary reductions of injustice as if

they were real solutions toward establishing social justice. They ought to pursue a simultaneous two-track change strategy, combining short-range, symptom-focused and long-range, cause-focused activism.

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This paper was first printed in *Reflections*, Volume 10, # 4, Fall, 2004.

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