

Critical Social Work: Theories and practices for a socially just world

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Defining Social Justice in a Socially Unjust World

by Michael Reisch

The Evolution of the Concept of Social Justice

ONE OF THE IRONIES OF THE EARLY twenty-first century is that ideological struggles between and within nations have intensified a decade after the end of the Cold War. Today, proponents of diametrically opposed visions of society, secular and religious, march under the banner of social justice. As desirable social and political goals are depicted in starkly different forms, labels like "good" and "evil" become interchangeable and the meaning of social justice becomes obscured. As it has been for millennia, the concept of social justice is now used as a rationale for maintaining the status quo, promoting far-reaching social reforms, and justifying revolutionary action. If liberals and conservatives, religious fundamentalists, and radical secularists all regard their causes as socially just, how can we develop a common meaning of the term?

Although fascinating and vitally important, a full exploration of this question is better suited for another essay. This article will focus instead, somewhat more narrowly, on how the concept of social justice in Western societies has influenced contemporary social welfare. The evolution of this concept reflects, in part, the shift towards a secular and materialist culture, and the changes this transformation produced in people's fundamental assumptions about human nature, society, and the state. As the meaning of social justice changed, it became increasingly complex and conflict-ridden, both as an idea and in its applications. Today, for example, our understanding of social justice is inextricably connected to our definition of terms like equality and freedom, and to sweeping policy questions about the relative responsibilities and obligations of individuals and society.

Originally, the idea of social justice was group-specific—that is, it was applied solely to a particular people

or nation with the intention of redressing the effects of hierarchical inequalities, particularly inherited inequalities. The Bible, for example, introduces the idea of a "jubilee year," when slaves would be freed, debts and obligations liquidated, and land returned to its original owners. In this usage, however, social justice was not regarded as universal in its application. Also, it focused primarily on issues of economic redistribution largely among individuals.

In *The Republic*, Plato (1974, trans.) expanded the meaning of justice by equating it with human well-being. He linked the concept of individual and social justice by asserting that justice was derived from the harmony between reason, spirit, and appetite present in all persons. Within this formulation, if a society lacked such harmony, justice could not be achieved. Yet, Plato's view of justice did not include a belief in equality. In fact, since he regarded class distinctions as essential for the effective functioning of society, he argued that justice would be achieved when each person received those goods they deserved based on their prescribed position in the social order. In other words, that unequals would be treated unequally. Social justice, therefore, would not involve efforts to transform or transcend existing societal structures, but rather would guarantee that existing institutions would continue to function as intended.

Aristotle further developed this concept of justice in *The Nicomachean Ethics* (1980, trans.), where he introduced a view of justice that anticipates modern debates about issues of resource allocation. Aristotle regarded justice, as fulfilled through law, as the principle that ensures social order through the regulation of the allocation and distribution of benefits. In *Book V*, Aristotle states, "equality for the people involved will be the same as for the things involved, since [in a just society] the relation between the people will be the same as the relation between the things involved. For if the people involved are not

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