Understanding Social Justice:
Why it matters

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Abstract

Social justice as a concept is both widely used and widely misunderstood. It is also, increasingly, a term of derision. In this Think Piece I explain why it is important to have a clear sense of what we mean by social justice, but to do so without tying it to a precise definition. Rather we need to work with broad understandings of social justice that we share with our fellow scholars and our readers. We also need to make efforts to understand other conceptualisations of social justice, even those with which we disagree. A commitment to social justice can be both a firm belief in key principles, and an openness to hear and understand other perspectives. I contrast the procedural social contract approach to social justice, most famously associated with the work of John Rawls, and more outcomes-focussed approaches such as the capabilities approach and critical theory. My own work is based in a critical theory understanding of social justice which looks at hidden and unseen forms of oppression in an historical context. And yet, I also acknowledge the terrible neglect of issues of race and colonialism in early critical theory. This neglect has become more apparent as we respond to the welcome need to decolonialise education and philosophy. This Think Piece finishes with a reflection on how to engage with indigenous understandings of social justice without appropriation. I advocate an open and forgiving approach to social justice that sits firmly with a deep and thoughtful commitment.

Introduction

Social justice is a concept that is both widely used and widely misunderstood. It is also, in this day of alternative truths and anti, so-called, 'woke' culture, a concept of derision. None of this, however, takes away the reality of profound injustices across the globe, in both international and local contexts. We face a climate emergency, ongoing gender violence, and profound disparities of wealth and opportunities. Issues of social justice have not gone away. This is why we need to understand social justice as a concept.

Education has long had a strong association with social justice. It is seen as a means by which people can be educated about social justice and provided with education to enable them to move beyond injustice. But at the heart of education is always the need to reflect and analyse what we are doing: good intentions are not enough. Time and effort spent on

understanding what we mean, conceptually and philosophically, by the idea of social justice is profoundly important. It is not an indulgent exercise of academic navel-gazing. It is an essentially practical act to inform, guide, challenge and evaluate educational practices. Critical theorist, Theodor Adorno, reminds us that 'thinking is a doing, theory a form of praxis' (Adorno, 2005, p. 261). While our desire to move towards greater social justice often inspires a sense of *act and act now*, stopping to reflect on what we mean by social justice and its implications for the things we do is an equally practical form of action.

Adorno is also helpful to remind us, however, that seeking to pin down an exact definition of social justice is not only folly, but dangerous. Adorno uses the example of freedom to explain why a definition does not of itself capture the meaning of an idea:

> … being free means that, if someone rings the bell at 6.30am, I have no reason to think that the Gestapo or the GPU or the agents of comparable institutions are at the door and can take me off without my being able to invoke the right of *habeas corpus* (Adorno, 2006, p. 140).

This illustrates an important point, at least for critical theorists such as myself, that meaning is neither relative nor absolute. It is pointless to say that we can define precisely one clear definition of freedom or social justice: the experience of both can take so many different shapes. But nor does this mean an idea can mean just anything. In both cases of absolutism or relativism, a concept such as social justice is emptied of meaning. Much the same idea is explored in John Law's (2004) wonderful book about mess in social science research. The pursuit of an exact definition for a human concept is ultimately self-defeating. As the philosopher Raymond Guess (2001) has also articulated, referring to Nietzsche's writings, a triangle is a triangle in any context (though the significance of being a triangle may differ). But a concept like democracy has no one static meaning, and has indeed gone from being a term of abuse 400 years ago to one of our most cherished ideals today.

This is the challenge for those of us committed to social justice and education. How do we demonstrate

that this commitment is meaningful in a world in which snappy definitions and simple slogans are prized, and the fact that social justice is a difficult, complex and contested concept means that some are inclined to say that just shows we shouldn't bother about it: if you cannot define it and measure it, it doesn't matter. And yet, of course, we know the opposite is true, and so much of the value of education is out of the reach of simple measurement.

How can we establish what we mean by social justice?

My approach to the question of *what is social justice*? is twofold. First, I do believe there are some broad principles that are common across different theories, interpretations and approaches to social justice. These include: valuing and respecting the lives of others; a commitment to lives where we have choice; relieving suffering, and a fair distribution of life chances and rewards. This is not an exhaustive list, but it is a demonstration of how we might say that we do, in a sense, have a shared understanding of social justice, even if we do not tie it down to a definition. In Wittgentein's (2001) words, these could be some of the family resemblance features of understandings of social justice. This may seem a fairly bland exercise because its aim is to stay in that middle or common ground, but I think having that personal or shared discussion about what might be the common ground is, in itself, a helpful part of furthering our understanding of social justice. And it is, of course, never an exercise that one completes, or comes up with a definitive list: it is ongoing and always in development.

On the other hand, all of the points above are subject to interpretation and can differ by context (be it temporal, spatial, cultural or something else). They can also differ by emphasis. For example, in the debate between Honneth and Fraser (2003) about how to conceptualise social justice, their arguments rest on a difference of emphasis: whether, as Fraser argues, recognition and redistribution are equally of prime importance, or as Honneth argues, that recognition is the primary, encompassing focus of social justice. Both are critical theorists and have much in common, but in this interesting debate they focus on key differences. Crucially, these are not

simply differences in how we conceptualise social justice, but both Fraser and Honneth directly link their arguments to what would best enable actions leading to greater social justice.

The critical theory of Fraser and Honneth sits in contrast with Rawls' (1971) highly influential rethinking of social justice in the late 20th century, where he focused on ideal-types and perfect conditions generated through thought experiments such as the *veil of ignorance* when decisions about justice are made. By theorising justice in perfect conditions, Rawls believed we could move forward our understanding of how to realise it in real social conditions.

Rawls' approach to social justice sits firmly in the liberal social contract tradition, although his aim was to revisit and update some of the key tenets of this tradition. The social contract idea of justice has been profoundly influential in western societies, and is often assumed to be a natural way of understanding justice. In this sense, we could, however, call it hegemonic. Indeed, the focus on redistribution and procedure is deeply embedded in many everyday understandings of social justice. Here, fairness often becomes a proxy term for justice, and fairness is interpreted as applying the same procedure consistently to everyone.

I highlight this in my work on assessment for social justice (McArthur, 2016, 2018). In an assessment context, fairness is understandably highly valued, as is consistency. This means that we have, for example, set due dates for assessed work to ensure everyone has the same opportunity: we apply a procedure consistently and that makes it fair. But two issues arise here. Firstly, we are only ensuring 'sameness' regarding one aspect of the assessed work. Is the same number of weeks to do an assignment really 'equal' if we compare the situation of an 18-year-old undergraduate with no family responsibilities, and a working mother of three children trying to study alongside these other responsibilities? I am not intending to raise a debate about due dates here! But I do want to highlight how easy it is to claim we are being consistent and fair, but only take into account one aspect of students' lives and circumstances. Second, of course, we do make exceptions for those

who qualify according to what we decree are exceptional circumstances. The problem with this, is that recognition of difference becomes a process of charitable exceptions, and this in itself could be a form of injustice if we view justice through a lens such as recognition, rather than procedure (McArthur, 2016).

The above example demonstrates the difference between traditional (and widely accepted) procedural approaches to social justice, and those which focus on outcomes rather than procedure alone. Martha Nussbaum (2006) highlights the difference well when she compares justice to a bowl of pasta. A procedural approach says that if we use the finest ingredients, best equipment and follow instructions then we can assume a delicious bowl of pasta has been created. An outcomes-based approach says – we want to eat the pasta to know what it is like! In other words, the focus is on the actual life lived, and not on thought experiments about what it might be.

Nussbaum's work is part of an understanding of social justice known as the capabilities approach, a concept first developed by Sen (1999). Sen was keen to eschew idealised versions of social justice and instead focus on the real, messy, lived conditions of people. He argued we shouldn't wait for perfect solutions when sometimes it was clear that something just needed to be done, as in the case of the abolition of slavery. Sen proposed that we focus on the capabilities that people needed in order to have the opportunities to lead flourishing lives. These may differ between people, and not everyone will want to realise the same things in the same way. But what is important is the lives that people actually lead. Sen's work reflects his own Indian background and his engagement with western liberal thought. Thus, for some it provides a helpful approach to social justice that is not restricted to the global North. Nussbaum (2011) developed Sen's work by proposing a list of capabilities that could be reinterpreted in different contexts and, indeed, her work has been very influential in the global South and particularly South Africa (Cin et al., 2020; Mkwananzi, 2018; Walker, 2003, 2010; Walker & McLean, 2015).

Outcomes-based approaches to social justice do not say that procedure doesn't matter (Sen, 2010),

but they do broaden our focus to also consider the essential element of how people actually get to live as a result of any procedure. Critical theory has a similar approach to social justice, with this focus on real lives and the messy realities of suffering and injustice. Here I refer specifically to critical theory from its origins in the Frankfurt School of the late 1920s. Indeed, the term 'critical theory' first appears in a 1937 essay by its Director, Max Horkheimer (Horkheimer, 1995). He contrasts traditional theory that accepts the world as it appears, with critical theory which looks below the surface and highlights unseen forms of oppression and distortions. Where critical theory and the capabilities approach diverge, in my view, is in their relationship to the western Enlightenment, and the rise of western liberalism. Sen and Nussbaum are liberal thinkers, albeit in a transformative way. Critical theorists regard liberalism as harbouring many of those unseen and unacknowledged forms of oppression that they are reacting against: their view of transformation is arguably more radical.

Even within the Frankfurt School tradition, however, there can be significant differences in the approaches to social justice. Habermas, who is known as a second-generation critical theorist, differs in rather substantial ways. Indeed, in his search for ideal speech situations, Habermas's work has some of the features of Rawls' thought experiments working with idealised versions of social justice. Third (current) generation theorists such as Honneth and Fraser have, in my view, far more in common with the first-generation work of Horkhemier and Adorno. Here I refer to the greater messiness of their approaches based in real life experiences, rather than ideal types.

There is, however, one clear resonance with work such as Rawls' social justice thought experiments: both Rawls and these critical theorists are struggling to find a way to work towards social justice from within a society that is manifestly unjust. Rawls does this by a deliberate cognitive act of stepping into a place of thought experiments: of made-up worlds and hypothetical possibilities. In being critical of this approach, or at least recognising its limitations, I think we should also acknowledge the thoughtful motivation for taking this route. Critical theory shares this desire to escape what simply already exists, and

in the next section I will explore more why its approach is necessarily distinctive from that of Rawls and the more established western, liberal tradition.

Critical theory and social justice: contributions and limitations

One reason critical theory eschews the thought experiment approach to understanding social justice, is that such experiments, in their hypothetical spaces, necessarily become ahistorical. In contrast, the key to the work that critical theorists have built on, and Marx is significant here, is the understanding of injustice as historically situated. Other key features of the work of early critical theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno include: social and economic contexts are inter-related; injustice is often hidden, sometimes in plain sight; and individual and social wellbeing are intrinsically connected. These are the features which I believe remain clear in the work of third generation Honneth. Where Habermas is known for being part of a linguistic turn in social theory, Honneth distinguishes himself from earlier critical theorists by being part of what some call a current recognition turn. This emphasis on recognition as social justice is contentious, as evident by Honneth's debate with fellow critical theorist Nancy Fraser (see Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Recognition-based approaches are often confused with so-called identity politics, and accused of focusing on particular identity aspects at the expense of the broader socio-economic context.

Such accusations do not properly reflect Honneth's (2007, 2013, 2014) plural approach to social justice, which I'll now briefly outline. Honneth focuses on mutual recognition as the foundation of social justice in a very Hegelian way, emphasising that we become human through others' recognition of our being. Honneth brings this into an understanding imbued with the features of early critical theory outlined earlier. He teases apart three different realms of recognition, but these are in practice clearly inter-related. The first is love recognition: the primary recognition of a parent for a child, for example. This form of recognition is particular, relating to a particular parent and a particular child. The second form of recognition, however, is universal, and this is rights recognition: understanding one has universal rights, and using those rights, and being recognised by

others in this civic context. Finally, esteem recognition relates to the recognition of our traits, dispositions and abilities that make a positive contribution to wider society. There is an individual element here, but it also highlights the inter-relationship between individual and social wellbeing.

Misrecognition – injustice – occurs when we deny a person's inherent humanity (e.g. through acts of violence such as murder and rape); deny their civic place as a holder of the same rights as others (e.g .to participate in democratic life, to be protected by law), and deny opportunities to be recognised for their individual (something unique to them) contribution to the wellbeing of others. In an assessment context, I've taken this concept of esteem recognition to argue that at some place in a degree programme students must have the opportunity for a sense of achievement beyond a mark or grade, but grounded in their social contribution (McArthur, 2018; McArthur et al., 2021).

While I remain an advocate of the contribution early and more recent critical theory can make to our understandings of social justice and education, it is impossible not to reflect on the problematic nature of such theory in our new decolonial age. Early critical theorists deliberately avoided issues of race, other than the antisemitism so critical to understanding the horrors of the holocaust. As I have argued (McArthur, 2021), this is an inexcusable omission when their core focus was the critique of late capitalism. It is simply impossible to separate the rise of capitalism from colonialism, or colonialism from issues of race.

In confronting this injustice within critical theory's very conceptualisation of social justice, I was faced with a dilemma many scholars in the global North, committed to social justice, now find. How do we engage with indigenous philosophies and conceptualisations of justice without appropriation? Indigenous scholars are rightly critical of the ways some in the global North appropriate, stereotype or distort their knowledges and philosophies (e.g. Martin et al., 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012). And yet, to remain fixed only on concepts of social justice that are deeply embedded in the western Enlightenment, is no longer appropriate either.

Understanding social justice in our decolonial age

We must start the task of thinking of social justice in decolonial terms by acknowledging that social justice itself is a western term, and other societies may phrase and understand these issues differently. The debates I have outlined so far sometimes extend to the global South, but in the main they are rooted in a western context. And so am I. So what can I do? How to engage without appropriation? My own approach (which is both my intellectual and my personal ethical solution) is to borrow from writers who help convey a sense of a place where ideas from the global North and global South can come together without appropriation or distortion (see McArthur, 2021 for a fuller explanation of this approach). Here I refer to Bhabha's (2009) third space, in which different cultures do not just come together but do so in the context of explicit recognition of historical injustices and power imbalances. Similarly, Hopkins (2018) advocates a decolonial conversation in which indigenous educators and students are not just invited into a conversation, but where any exchange explicitly addresses the historical violence and injustice of colonialism: such a conversation is between equals, but past injustices are acknowledged and remain at the fore. And finally, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) offer the idea of indigenous and western scholars being fellow travellers on this journey to greater social justice.

I think the idea of fellow travellers is lovely and helpful, because it enables us to engage without appropriation. Take, for example, the southern African concept of *ubuntu – I am because we are*. Of the many indigenous ways of thinking about humanity or a just society, *ubuntu* seems to have caught the attention of western scholars the most. I am no different, and have argued that the philosophy of *ubuntu* is a fellow traveller to the critical theory commitment to the innate interconnection between the individual and society (McArthur, 2021). But this does not mean I use the term *ubuntu* to explain my own thinking or to analyse how to work towards a more just higher education system in the UK. I engage with *ubuntu* so that I understand my fellow travellers in southern Africa who share a commitment to social justice, but who are walking through very different

terrain to my own, and whose histories are markedly different (albeit with that connection of colonial violence).

This is why I use a concept of social justice from critical theory, despite its deep historical flaws in failing to engage with colonialism. As a scholar in the global North, I must engage with indigenous thought, but not appropriate. I see my task as using engagement with indigenous thought to ensure critical theory remains a dynamic way of understanding social justice, and as such, one that can change and improve (and improve here clearly means to engage with colonialism, race and violence).

How can we work with different theories of social justice?

Thinking about how we engage with decolonialism, and the belated recognition of indigenous thought and philosophies, puts into stark focus the broader issue of engaging with people who think differently to ourselves. As I said at the beginning, if we all can mean different things by social justice, then do we just give up on it being a meaningful idea? Certainly not. Academic work is all about engaging with the minds of others, and rarely do those minds perfectly align with our own. This is how I approach social justice. As long as a reader can clearly understand how I am using this concept, then it is not so important that they exactly share that understanding; rather, it is that that they are able to have a conversation with my ideas. Indeed, this is true in nearly all academic work. We may not be a phenomenographic researcher, but we can engage with this form of research when it is clearly explained to us. We may not share the passion for certain forms of teaching or assessment that others do, but we still engage with them. And even on the philosophical or theoretical level, we surely do not want – ever – to only read from the pond of thought we already agree with. Thus, my own critical theory understanding of social justice is itself evolving in conversation with other ideas.

As scholars, activists, and writers committed to social justice we have a responsibility to clearly communicate our understanding of social justice, though not as a simple definition, but as a broad and nuanced idea that we explain, illustrate or demonstrate – but not define. We also have a responsibility to understand other conceptualisations of social justice. This is what I try to do when I explore Rawls' work and its impact on western thought. But a Rawlsian scholar would no doubt challenge some of my understandings of Rawls' work. That is fine: that is good. As social justice scholars we also have a responsibility to be challenged and corrected. Although sometimes, we can stand our ground about our social justice beliefs – and that is good too.

As educators, our role is to nurture this transformation, sense of self, others, and social justice in ways that genuinely share our passion and commitments, but do not obligate consensus. Equally, our role as educators is to be open to be educated ourselves: to continue to learn, be challenged as well as challenge, be inspired as well as inspire and be open to correction rather than always be the adjudicator of what is acceptable. Social justice has no one definition, but it is an embodied idea and nothing reflects this more than the role, duty and joy of being an educator. Social justice is also a difficult and uncomfortable idea – and that too must be at the heart of education. Otherwise, we are always at risk of what Adorno termed 'the passive acceptance of what is merely the case' (Adorno, 2001, p. 121).

Disclosure statement

I have no conflicts to declare.

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