



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

SOCIAL JUSTICE

WORK MATTERS

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COLUMN

What is Social Justice?

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We are social animals, which means we do better and achieve more together. We're just not built to be alone. However we're not very good at being together either. Human history is full of conquest and empires, tyrants and warlords, exploitation, discrimination and genocide. As Bob Marley (1976) said, "Man to man is so unjust."

And this is the inherent difficulty in the fight for a just society. So often what is being fought is not the criminal or the abnormal. It is social behaviour that is considered normal, natural and right. It is natural to subjugate and exploit women, normal to exclude and persecute entire races of people, to create a concept like race to deny humanity and facilitate exploitation, and acceptable to use power to overpower and dispose others. But the history of human society also sees an endless battle to make society better for the people who live in it. Democracy, emancipation, women's suffrage, anti-colonialism and civil rights are all historical movements which have attempted to make the successes of society more available to people who were systemically excluded.

Social Justice has become the modern continuation of movements to make society more fair and more just. It has also become, by necessity, an international agenda. Global capitalist society has successfully integrated the entire world but is far from perfect. There is no local. What happens in one part of the world instantly affects another. Patterns of power and injustice in US, Europe or China affects us all. Local patterns of exclusion and exploitation are reinforced and enabled by international currents. But inevitably, these patterns are given the appearance of normality, they are sanctified with the status of culture. And we often miss the fact that, at the root, it is always about wealth and resources.

In many ways exploitation and exclusion are allowed to persist, becoming more sophisticated and more entrenched. Industrialization has produced the greatest capacity for wealth generation in human history, but it has also facilitated the concentration of that wealth in the fewest hands ever. World Inequality Database (2023) estimates that 76% of global wealth is held by 10% of the world's population, while 38% of global wealth is held by only 1%. By contrast, the rest of us, the 90%, survive on 24% of global wealth. As the COVID 19 pandemic recently demonstrated, this situation is a recipe for hardship and vulnerability, particularly for women, the poor and the excluded.

The battle for social justice has had to respond to the global dimension as well. We have seen the growth of supra-national agencies, in response to two world wars with exploitation, exclusion and injustice at their core. They include the United Nations (UN), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the European Union (EU), the World Bank (WB), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). These agencies affect systems of international governance. They enable member countries to engage in collaboration on important issues of security, economic development and the protection of a brand-new concept, human rights.

This system is also far from perfect. There can be little international consensus on, well, anything. Consensus often appears to benefit some more than others. The imposition of what consensus there is can be experienced as a loss of sovereignty. And the application of a 'floor' based model of development implements minimalist amelioration of the most gross levels of inequality and vulnerability. In a world of material excess, this can almost feel inconsequential.

Social justice, therefore, always depends on a vibrant layer of local activism, injecting a ground level realism and sensitivity to the often invisible injustices and exclusions. Social justice institutions of the industrial era have been critical. The labour movement is one of the first modern justice and solidarity movements to position itself against the political and economic excesses of capitalism, in support of the excluded working class. Its sister solidarity and working-class movement, co-operativism, has been pioneering in bending capitalism to the will and inventiveness of excluded peoples. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activist and community organizations have arisen around local patterns of exclusion. And all demonstrate the importance of mobilizing intersectionality. In short, social justice is messy, contested and resistant to simple and singular definition. And perhaps this is a good thing.

Social justice in modern industrial societies has been the culmination of social activism in the area of work, particularly in the field of Industrial Relations and the creation of access to income/wealth generation. It has developed along with multiplicity of social science and other academic disciplines such as economics, politics, sociology and psychology. Critical analysis is indispensable to mak-

ing possible a more inclusive society, capable of limiting inequity and vulnerability. Activism and empowerment are vital in inculcating a commitment the values of social justice. And work is the necessary context for the implementation of the pillars of Social Justice; Access to Resources, Participation, Equity, Diversity and Human Rights.

A prosperous world should benefit all. The pursuit of Social Justice, at both the global and local levels, through the management of work and opportunity for income, is critical.

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