On the Origins and Character of "Social Justice"

By [Michael Rectenwald](#) (August 2018)
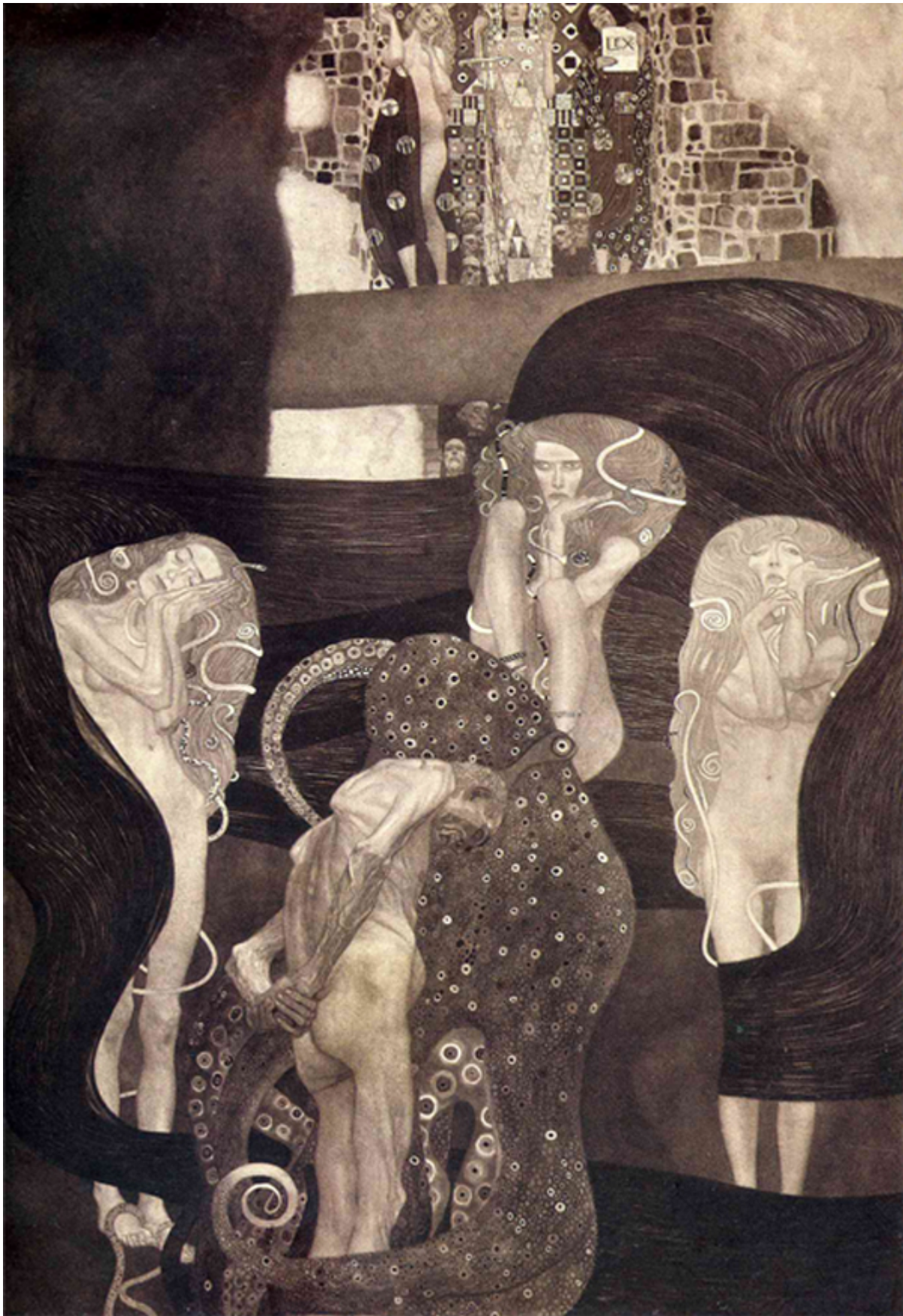
One of the great ironies of Western political history involves

the term "social justice." Although a core idea within liberalism and socialism for at least 175 years, the background and origin of "social justice" was a cultural and political conservatism. The irony of the "cultural appropriation" of social justice by liberalism and socialism has recently redoubled. Suggestive of a seemingly undeniably intangible good—that is, of just, fair, well-ordered, and harmonious social relations—social justice is now implicated in fierce and sometimes violent antagonisms. Social justice crystallizes in two words some of the most contentious issues roiling North American politics today. Contemporary social justice bears little resemblance to the original social justice or even more recent movements that have gone by the same name.

Social justice can be traced to nineteenth-century Catholic social theory. Coined and developed in the early 1840s by Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio, an aristocrat turned Jesuit priest, the concept was intended to serve as s new type of justice, added to those already included in Catholic justice doctrine (commutative, distributive, and legal justice). In a five-volume magnum opus entitled *A Theoretical Treatise of Natural Law Based on Fact* (1841-1843), Taparelli's "social justice" was a renovation and extension of "general justice," an ancient virtue, which St. Thomas Aquinas had adopted from Aristotle.

The context for the introduction of social justice was the glaring lack of an adequate Catholic response to industrialism and urbanization, with their associated social and economic symptoms—the supplanting of guild-based cottage industries by urban factories, the displacement of workers from the countryside to the metropolis, overcrowded and unsanitary conditions of urban life, and a rising population of indigent

laborers. In sum, the immediate consequences of industrial development for laborers amounted to a new and expanded poverty that involved precarious and degraded ways of life. In England, this became known as "[the Condition of England Question](#)," which commentators as diverse in political outlook as Thomas Carlyle, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Dickens, John Stuart Mill, and Friedrich Engels would directly address.[1]

Like Carlyle, Taparelli offered an alternative to the prescriptions of liberalism and socialism, the two emergent political contenders in the era. His Catholic social justice theory aimed to protect individuals from the lottery-like conditions of *laissez faire* economics on the one hand, and the domination by a centralized power of the state on the other. As Taparelli saw it, *laissez faire* would reduce human society to atomism and anarchy, and socialism would be the inevitable response. The latter could only enforce economic equality by violating the core principles of human individuality and liberty on which his concept social justice depended. Taparelli offered social justice as an alternative.

Social justice was proffered as a fact-based theory to mitigate the evils that these twin systems failed to address. Both liberalism and socialism, Taparelli claimed, began from a philosophically materialist premise that "pleasure [is] the supreme law of nature, guiding men to their happiness." From false premises, deficient analyses and prescriptions inevitably must follow; this crude materialist conception ignored the intellectual and social dimensions of human nature. Including them explained our natural propensity to identify with others, the principles of equality and reciprocity, and the charitable impulse that followed from these facts of human nature. Any comprehensive response to social crises required a grasp of these fundamental premises.

Social justice also represented a recognition that human social organization involved social groups of various sizes, beginning with the family and including churches, charitable organizations, schools, economic associations, professional and industry trade groups, workers' unions, and so forth. Social justice depended on a principle called "subsidiarity," the precept that the smallest social unit capable of undertaking a social task should indeed undertake it. These groups played vital roles in social justice, yet they faced possible abolition under centralized statism, and dissolution under *laissez faire*. Larger, centralized social units, such as the state, should be the means of last resort. In its preference for smaller groups, subsidiarity aimed to protect the semi-autonomy and liberty of individuals, which no justice could exist without. Addressing the negative effects of unequal outcomes—including the provision of assistance to the less fortunate—was indeed part of the original social justice schema, but such measures were to be undertaken primarily at the level of individuals and charitable organizations and, only in rare cases, the state. Material, *de facto* equality was not the goal.

As a proposed addendum to Catholic doctrine, social justice necessarily represented human beings as equals by virtue of their shared membership in the human species, a species created by God in his image. Taparelli recognized this ultimate, abstract equality. But such equality was essentially unearthly. It represented humans as a "species being," as Marx put it, individuals who recognized their membership in a species with others. For Taparelli, concrete equality was another matter altogether. Unlike contemporary social justice notions, the original social justice creed did not aim at actual, concrete equality in any dimension—either social, economic, or political. Actual human beings were concrete

individuals, not living, breathing abstractions as the left figures them.

Taparelli pointed to what he saw as an inevitable and historically demonstrable hierarchical tendency in human social organization. Human social hierarchy derived from differences in ability and was marked by the differential access to, and biological and legal inheritance of, material resources and social power. He compared this factual history of human social arrangements with John Locke's liberal social contract theory:

> . . . these are the chief facts of history to which we have applied the universal principle of duty. The results of this application are that man needs always to be governed, and so he is, in point of fact; that he who governs is stronger and at the same time possesses authority, and so he actually is; that subjects are not sovereigns, and in point of fact they are not . . . Compare this theory of the facts of history with the hypotheses of the social contract where man is by nature free but in fact is in chains; by right is sovereign but in fact is created by it; confers authority, but in fact has no part of that authority; has made a pact, but did no negotiating; did it to secure all his rights, and meanwhile gave them away; believes every state to be a republic, yet sees there are monarchies; believes all men are equal, yet sees everywhere a hierarchy of classes; believes it gives consent, yet sees things happen despite it; believes it gives laws, yet sees that it receives them . . . Compare these two doctrines, I say, and judge which of them is true!

The original social justice amounted to the protection and mobilization of small charitable and philanthropic organizations to address (but not eliminate) the recalcitrant social facts of individual, economic, and political inequality, which had been exacerbated under the new industrial economy.

By the time it became official Catholic doctrine with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (or "On the Condition of the Working Classes") in 1891, the term had already changed meanings. Christian socialism, secular philosophy, and secular social theory further developed social justice in the redistributive economic direction taken by Catholic doctrine.

This origin story has historical value, even if only satisfying an antiquarian curiosity. On the charge of antiquarianism, I plead guilty. But I introduced it not only for its purely historical value but also to draw out a few implications that follow from the history.

First, the original version of social justice of the early 1840s differs markedly from its contemporary namesake. Although they share the concern for justice as applied to the social realm, the two are not on the same genealogical tree either philosophically or politically. They share a name but only because later movements adopted the moniker. Taparelli's social justice, which later became official Catholic doctrine, was well-articulated and intentioned, and also essentially conservative. It was egalitarian only in an otherworldly sense. It included no pretense of striving for concrete equality of any kind. It relied on charity and not on state-mandated distributive measures. It had nothing to do with contemporary notions of identity. It was not socialist. In

fact, Taparelli formulated social justice in large part to ward off socialism.

Second, exposure to this history shows what should be obvious even without it: the phrase "social justice" has no *necessary* meaning at all. In fact, "social justice" can and has signified many different notions, especially given that the meanings of "justice" itself have been quite varied historically and philosophically.

The third point is an extension of the first two: Beware of the nominalist fallacy—beware of mistaking particular instances designated by an abstract term with the meaning of the abstract term itself. When an abstract term is used to designate a particular instance of a putatively universal concept, the instance should not be confused with the universal concept that it conjures. Charles Manson and the Family might have called their murderous campaign "social justice." That wouldn't have made it good. The American Nazi Party does invoke the term "social justice" to designate a feature of its platform.[2] The neo-Nazis' use of such a noble-sounding term should not lead to any confusion about their intent.

Another piece of political nomenclature helps to make this clear. The "progressive" movement began in the Progressive era and included ideas we would recognize as characteristic of contemporary progressivism: progressive taxation, redistributive measures, economic safety nets. From this instance a general conception of progressive politics has arisen. Yet the earliest progressive economic and immigration proposals also included eugenics proposals. Thus, the earliest progressive movement included features that were hardly

"progressive" as the term is now employed. If we were to observe a diktat of contemporary social justice, the word "progressive" should be accompanied by a trigger warning (TW). The term should also remind us to be wary of noble ideas conjured by this and other lofty language.

Four, another extension of the above: the contemporary social justice movement should not be accepted or supported simply because it may sound virtuous to most contemporary ears. Instead, the core ideas, epistemological assumptions, political practices, and institutional techniques should be the crux of the matter in evaluating it. In my new book, *[Springtime for Snowflakes: "Social Justice" and Its Postmodern Parentage](#)*, I retrace my graduate education in literary and cultural theory and cultural studies to track the postmodern theoretical and Stalinist/Maoist disciplinary roots of contemporary social justice.

Some will recall twentieth-century social justice movements and thereby lose the scent leading to the actual historical bases and character of contemporary social justice. The twentieth-century variant included struggles for racial justice and equality; women's rights and equality; equal economic opportunity; redistributive economic objectives; and legal and political equality, including the protection of democratic participation. Of course, both abolitionism and the Civil Rights movement were essentially social justice crusades.

But social justice has since come to be associated with new, distinct features. Whereas the campus free speech movement was a hallmark of social justice in the 1960s, violent skirmishes waged *against* free speech and academic freedom are now

associated with the term. Events that have unfolded on college campuses, including at Yale, New York University, UC Berkeley, Middlebury College, Evergreen State College, and many others, bear the social justice insignia.

In addition to speech codes and the demand for speech repression, social justice comes with a whole other package of beliefs and objectives. Many of these would have struck earlier social justice activists as quite alien. A dramatic shift in ideas and a new focus on social identity mark the new social justice. Social justice includes new (trans)gender theories and activism, as well as notions of "privilege," "privilege-checking," "self-criticism," "cultural appropriation," "discursive violence," "rape culture," and so forth. "Intersectionality" is the axiomatic oppression-ranking framework that establishes a new social justice hierarchy based on the multiplicities of oppression as they may intersect and affect subjects in multiple, supposedly subordinated social categories. It then inverts the supposedly existing hierarchy on the basis of this intersectional ranking, moving those on the bottom to the top, and vice versa. This is not a temporary feature of social justice but represents a hierarchical inversion that must be maintained to engender the animus and *ressentiment* necessary to continue fueling the movement. I explain the provenance of this hierarchical inversion in *Springtime for Snowflakes*.

Both its epistemology and ontology—its assumptions about how one acquires knowledge, who can know, and the nature of the objects of knowledge—are enforced with authoritarianism. Claims made on behalf of correct beliefs, correct wording, and proper naming—that is, *language* itself— [TW] trump [/TW] empirical evidence and nullify scientific findings and methods in advance. Thus, social justice represents an entirely new

understanding, quite distinct from previous versions. It also involves entirely different practices and methods for implementing it.

On the Internet throughout the first decade of the 2000s, although in rudimentary and often outlandish forms, many of the theoretical elements of postmodern theory appeared to have found a safe space among new and mostly non-academic believers. Surprisingly, and almost without any prior indication, by 2015-16, I noted that postmodern theory had been succeeded on campus by a crude and brutish caricature in social justice ideology. Moreover, its believers now included university administrators.

I am not alone in describing this sudden and largely unanticipated development. Jonathan Haidt, NYU colleague, psychologist and author of *The Righteous Mind*, concurs with my assessment about the novelty of this near total takeover. The creed's terminology and mechanisms suddenly entered official university policy, mechanisms and techniques in the form of "safe spaces," "trigger warnings," "bias reporting hotlines," and the complicity of administrators in the "no-platforming" of speakers. As I show in *Springtime for Snowflakes*, behind each of these policies, mechanisms, and techniques, the markers of postmodern theory are evident.

The social justice ethos had suddenly become official doctrine within university culture. On campuses across North America, social justice served as a newly-installed superintendent of speech, behavior, policy, and pedagogy.[3] It now goes without saying that freedom of speech, academic freedom, and freedom of inquiry have come under attack and are in full retreat in academia. And, the social justice creed has since metastasized

further into the broader culture, where it has already become firmly entrenched.

By officially adopting and promoting the contemporary social justice creed, preferentially recruiting social justice novitiates and paying them to play active roles as part of an extended and extensive social justice administration,[4] the institutions of North American higher education have taken a sharp, wrong turn. They have ceded moral and political authority to some of the most virulent, self-righteous, and authoritarian activists among the contemporary left. These activists have rallied other true believers, coaxed and cowed administrators, and conduced quailing faculty to applaud or quietly assent as the intellectual, cultural, and social cargo of millennia is jettisoned so that its freight can be driven "safely" through narrowing "tunnels of oppression."[5] Having gone so far as to officially adopt a peculiarly censorious subset of contemporary leftist ideology, colleges and universities have tragically abdicated their roles as politically impartial and intellectually independent institutions for the advancement and transmission of knowledge and wisdom.

---

[1] Thomas Carlyle coined the phrase "the Condition of England" in Chapter One of *Chartism* (1839). Friedrich Engels contributed in 1844 with *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. See Michael Levin, *The Condition of England Question: Carlyle, Mill, Engels* (1998).

[2] American Nazi Party. Accessed July 13, 2018. http://www.anp14.com/platform/index.php.

[3] A hallmark of social justice pedagogy is "progressive stacking," a method for calling on students in class based on the inverted social justice hierarchy. See Miles Cheong, "'Progressive Stacking Is Infiltrating College Classrooms," *The Daily Caller*, November 2, 2017, http://dailycaller.com/2017/11/06/progressive-stacking-is-infiltrating-college-classrooms/.

[4] Rachel Frommer, "Universities Spending Big on Social Justice Initiatives," *Washington Free Beacon*, November 8, 2017, http://freebeacon.com/culture/universities-spending-big-social-justice-initiatives/.

See also: "Social Justice Education: Diversity Education's Social Justice Peer Educator Project," "Washington State University, https://diversityeducation.wsu.edu/social-justice-education/