

**The Future of Social Justice in a Diverse and Conflict-Ridden Society**  
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Thank you for your gracious introduction and for inviting me to be your speaker. I am able to be here tonight because I was fortunate to come of age in an era when social justice remained a distinct possibility for most Americans. Although I grew up in public housing in New York City, the building in which I lived was well maintained. A health clinic in the projects provided free checkups and vaccinations. The schools I attended had quality teachers and sufficient books and supplies. When I joined a gang during adolescence, social workers at a local Y recruited me to its youth program. With their assistance and that of my teachers, I was able to receive scholarships that enabled me to attend college and graduate school. Without these examples of our society's commitment to social justice, I surely would be in a very different place today.

Yet, when I was growing up, this commitment to social justice did not apply equally to everyone. While I came from a working class family, I was lucky, what we would now call privileged. As recent developments in our nation vividly demonstrate, many young people, particularly young people of color, do not have such good fortune. I believe this is because our collective sense of social justice has significantly declined in recent years. Unless we recognize the importance of reasserting this value, we will face dire consequences in the future.

Recent global events reveal the tragic human consequences of abandoning the concept of social justice or narrowing its meaning to exclude all but the members of a particular race, class, ethnic group, or religion. In the U.S., recent data on poverty and inequality, and current budget and policy proposals that reflect at best indifference to these conditions and, at worst, a disdain for the people they affect exemplify this trend in dramatic fashion.

How did we get to this point? To answer that question, I would like to trace the evolution of the idea of social justice, discuss recent conflicts that have emerged about its meaning, and conclude by suggesting some steps we might take to reverse contemporary trends.

For thousands of years people have sought social justice for similar reasons. They became dissatisfied with the gap between their society's rhetoric and reality. Unanticipated environmental changes undermined the effectiveness of essential institutions. Revolutionary ideas emerged that reinterpreted the purpose of society, social relations, and even human existence in radical new ways. Sometimes, conditions became too oppressive to bear.

Over several millennia, views of social justice reflected efforts to challenge, transform, or rationalize the prevailing distribution of resources, power, status, and opportunities. Context, economics, and culture have always shaped conceptions of social justice. Today is no different.

Our modern ideas about social responsibility emerged from both religious and secular sources. Virtually all religions prioritize social justice in some form; it embodies the strongest moral challenge to human selfishness. Both religious and secular ideas of social justice contain certain common components, although societies express them in different ways. They all emphasize such values as fairness, mutuality, loyalty to the community, and the idea of a covenant or social contract that laws, rules, and customs enforce.

Biblical prophets and evangelists called for social justice in societies that had become increasingly stratified and indifferent to the plight of the needy. Their common theme, fairness, provides the foundation for our views of charity and social welfare. In the words of the medieval philosopher Maimonides, giving charity simply meant meeting the requirement to "do justice."

Perhaps the most revolutionary idea in both the Old and New Testaments was the belief in human equality. As originally expressed, however, this value applied solely to people within

the same community, not to outsiders. Many ancient and some modern religions stress the special ties that exist among a community of believers and prescribe exclusive loyalty to their members. Over the course of several millennia, however, most religions have evolved to highlight the interdependence of all humankind and, in some form, respect for all peoples.

Other ancient religious and secular sources contain similar statements about social justice. The *Qur'an* declares “wealth should not be allowed to circulate among the rich alone;” it prescribes hospitality for strangers of all races and religions. Greek philosophers like Plato equated social justice with human well-being and individual and societal harmony. Buddha argued that all people could achieve Nirvana, regardless of wealth, rank, or privilege, and that a good ruler ensures an equitable distribution of wealth in his kingdom. Similarly, Hindu concepts of justice—whether expressed as individual righteousness or duty to others—revolve around *dharma* or the preservation of cosmic and social order. Confucianism similarly stressed the importance of caring for other individuals and placed a strong emphasis on human interdependence: Over time, the duty of social responsibility to kin, clan, or tribe expanded to include the *entire* community, including strangers. These diverse religious ideas evolved into the late 18<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary notion of fraternity and the 20<sup>th</sup>-century belief in universal human rights.

The social upheavals produced by industrialization and the political revolutions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries expanded modern Western concepts of social justice and inspired social movements down to the present. Foundational documents, such as the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, reflected these concepts, however imperfectly applied. The French Revolution, in particular, promoted the idea of common humanity, inspiring greater religious toleration, the emancipation of women, the abolition of slavery, and universal secular education. The final movement of

Beethoven's glorious Ninth Symphony in which he put Schiller's *Ode to Joy* to music reflects the revolutionary aspiration of justice for all humankind.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, a split developed in the West between the Anglo-American emphasis on individual freedom and the continental emphasis on social solidarity. The more rapid and extensive European expansion of social welfare during the past century illustrates this difference clearly. Nevertheless, in the U.S., a broad consensus emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that government had a responsibility to promote social justice principles, at least to a limited extent. This consensus lasted roughly until the mid-1970s.

During the past four decades, this consensus has broken down, and it has never been more shattered than today. The values underlying a 1980 statement by then-candidate Ronald Reagan - "Ask yourself, are **YOU (not WE)** better off now than you were four years ago?" - have dominated U.S. politics, policy-making, and popular culture ever since. Current examples of this shift include our obsession with fiscal costs instead of social costs, derogatory remarks about the so-called "47%" who receive government assistance, and the dubious distinction drawn between "producers" and "users." As a result, there is a widespread failure to recognize how mutuality and interdependence are critical to maintaining a healthy, diverse society.

Today, definitions of social justice range from those that focus primarily on individual well-being to those that emphasize universal human rights, from anthropocentric perspectives to the application of social justice to all creatures. Different societies and different cultures within societies, such as the United States, define social justice in different ways and express these differences explicitly through their laws and symbolically through their cultural artifacts.

The philosopher Michael Sandel argues that three largely incompatible views of social justice currently exist: (1) the utilitarian perspective – which seeks to maximize welfare to the

greatest number of persons; (2) the libertarian perspective - which prioritizes individual freedom; and (3) the communitarian perspective – which focuses on virtue and the creation of the good life. In the practical realm, these philosophical approaches produce diverse views on the role of societal institutions in pursuing social justice. Libertarians, for example, emphasize the preservation of individual liberty, property rights, and the social status quo; they define social justice in terms of “fair play” or equality of opportunity. Social democrats prioritize greater social and political equality and promote distributive justice or “fair shares.” Communitarians and post-modernists stress increased mutuality and the inclusion of marginalized people in socially just decision-making processes in order to enhance their capabilities.

Since the late 1940s, the proclamation of universal human rights by the United Nations further complicates this picture. These rights evolved from an initial focus on so-called negative rights (civil and political liberties) to the inclusion of “positive – that is, social and economic – rights,” and, most recently, collective cultural rights. The underlying principle of universality recognizes the inherent dignity, worth, and equality of every person, much like ancient religions.

Yet, the concept of universal human rights is not without its challenges particularly among some critics who regard it as incompatible with social justice. According to Iris Marion Young, structural and cultural injustices, while linked, are fundamentally different. The pursuit of social justice, therefore, does not require us to treat everyone identically. In addition to policy change, it requires basic changes in civil society and in dominant cultural norms and values.

The political environment in the U.S. today reflects the tensions generated by the application of these different perspectives. It produces a number of unresolved questions:

1. First, what do we mean by social justice? Is it merely the absence of injustice?
2. To whom should social justice apply? How do we determine who is deserving of justice?

3. Should our efforts to achieve social justice focus on individuals or groups?
4. What “goods” should be distributed or redistributed in these efforts?
5. What obligations do people owe society in order to receive justice? Do all individuals have the same “desert” or the same duties?
6. How can we resolve the many conflicts of justice that exist in our increasingly diverse society? Is there such a thing as the common good?
7. Are rights and benefits finite – i.e., does social justice involve determining the outcome of a zero sum game? Do some rights take priority over others? These questions are important because, as Hegel wrote, “genuine tragedies in the world are not conflicts between right and wrong. They are conflicts between two rights.”
8. Finally, how can we balance respect for cultural differences with the creation of universal rights and greater equality?

Dramatic economic, demographic, environmental, political, and technological changes make the resolution of these questions more complicated than ever. Unfortunately, our recent response to these changes reflects a revival of long-standing rationalizations for inequality and injustice. We have seen a resurgence of Social Darwinist beliefs asserting that inequality serves a social purpose by rewarding only the deserving or that those who are unequal are either unworthy or unlucky. The conditions the unfortunate experience, therefore, are individual, not societal problems. They are beyond the government’s purpose or control. In fact, according to this perspective, government intervention only makes these problems worse by encouraging “dependency.” This perspective reinforces our long-standing myth of equality of opportunity – the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” solution that justifies our failure to address human

needs. The increasing physical isolation of American communities exacerbates this situation by hiding in plain sight the conditions that affect the most vulnerable members of our nation.

We have also seen a revival of ethnic nationalism as a justification for our collective refusal to address the current pattern of resource and power distribution. Instead of defining citizenship as allegiance to shared institutions, proponents of ethnic nationalism argue that common ethnic and linguistic heritage defines who is an American and is deserving of the rights that accompany citizenship. This narrow concept of citizenship threatens to destabilize further our already fractured sense of community.

Let me give you a few examples of the social consequences this produces: For the past four decades, African Americans and Latinos are 2½-3 times more likely to be poor than white Americans. They are twice as likely to live in households without consistent access to food. Nearly 1/8 of African Americans and over 10% of Latinos experience “deep poverty,” defined as below income 50% of the Federal poverty line. African Americans, Latinos, and female-headed households are also over five times more likely than whites to be chronically poor.

The widespread experience of poverty among all Americans compounds the duration of poverty spells. More than half of the U.S. population experiences an episode of poverty during their lifetime of one year or more, and over 3/4 of the population experiences at least a year of near poverty. Even more striking is that 91% of African Americans experience an extended episode of poverty at some point in their lives. Research demonstrates that chronic poverty is associated with a number of health and mental health issues, poor school performance, and an overall decline in life chances. For example, the life expectancy of residents in a neighborhood called Upton/Druid Heights, just a 10 minute walk from where I work, is 25-30 years less than that of residents of a more affluent neighborhood that is only 2 ½ miles away.

Children constitute the demographic cohort most likely to be poor, a phenomenon unprecedented in industrialized nations. Children who experience extended periods of poverty are less likely to finish high school and go to college; they are more likely to develop chronic illnesses and become involved with the criminal justice system. Astoundingly, in the richest nation in the world, 4 million Americans, including ~3 million children, live in extreme poverty (\$2/day) – a condition usually associated with the most impoverished countries in the world.

Women, particularly elderly women and single parents, are also more likely to be poor at every educational level. In fact, the U.S. has the highest rate of poverty for female-headed households among 22 industrialized nations, about three times higher than average. Even if the gender wage gap continues to close at the current rate, this year's high school graduates will be 61 years old by the time the U.S. achieves gender equality in this respect.

Poverty rates alone do not reflect the erosion of our nation's commitment to social justice. The consequences of persistent and growing inequalities influence all aspects of our economic, social, and political life. These effects are no longer confined to depressed inner city neighborhoods or isolated rural areas. According to recent studies, if we raised the poverty line by just 10%, we would consider about one-third of the U.S. population poor.

Perhaps a more ominous indicator on injustice in the U.S. is the widening gap in income, wealth, education, skills, and health status between classes and races. The top 1% of all households earned 22 times as much as the bottom 20% in 1979. Today, they earn 70 times as much. The top 1% of all U.S. households now has as much total disposable income as the bottom 40%. The share of national assets owned by the richest 1% of households has grown from one-fifth to over one-third of all private wealth, the most unequal distribution of the nation's wealth since 1928 – the eve of the Great Depression. With apologies to Charles



Dickens and Benjamin Disraeli, we are literally living in “A Tale of Two Nations” today. If recent trends continue, it is highly possible that these conditions will get worse in the near future due to deliberate policy decisions. The current proposal to replace the Affordable Care Act will ultimately deprive millions of Americans of health insurance and increase the cost of health care for millions more. Proposed changes in tax policy will enrich the top 1% even further.

A particularly striking example of prevailing injustice is the racial disproportionality in our criminal justice system. African Americans currently constitute approximately 1/8 of the population but nearly 3/8 of the U.S. prison population. One in every ten Black men in their thirties is in prison or jail on any given day. According to the *New York Times*, 1.5 million Black men, ages 25-54, 1 out of 6 in that age cohort, “are missing from everyday life” due to premature death or incarceration. This phenomenon has a profound effect on their families and communities, and our nation as a whole. It transforms the nature of our politics. Felon disenfranchisement affects 1 in 13 Black voters, as compared to 1 in 56 non-Black voters. This widespread injustice is not just a humanitarian issue; it has political consequences. According to a 2014 study, “government policy appears to be fairly responsive to the well-off and virtually unrelated to the desires of low and middle income citizens.”

Let me pull all these statistics together to provide you with a potentially frightening picture of the not-so-distant future. By 2050, fewer workers, over half of whom will be persons of color, will be supporting the needs of a growing elderly population, nearly two-thirds of them still white. Just to maintain Social Security and Medicare benefits at current levels, we will have to enhance educational and social policies for today’s children, particularly children of color, low-income children, and those from immigrant families, to enable them to earn an average wage that is 1.5 times more than at present. Without dramatic improvements in such policies, by the

mid-century they will be economically worse off and unable to sustain current health and income programs for the elderly. This is a formula for inter-generational conflict on a scale previously unknown in our nation. In other words, unless we reverse current policy trends, we are on a self-destructive course that could transform the American dream into a nightmare.

The long-standing and seemingly intractable nature of the inequities I just described explain why throughout U.S. history socially excluded groups have defined social justice in significantly different, if often unrecognized ways. Part of each group's struggle has been to modify universal definitions of social justice, based on hegemonic values, to fit their particular circumstances and aspirations. This struggle has frequently caused conflict between these groups and their mainstream allies, between different "minority groups," and even within their own ranks. These tensions have often made the formation of broad-based coalitions difficult.

What principles could we adopt now to avoid this disastrous future scenario? First, I believe we need to hold vulnerable populations harmless in the distribution of finite societal resources, tangible and intangible. Redistribution of these resources, in the words of Richard Titmuss, is a means to create a proper ordering of the network of relationships in a society. Yet, policies can reduce or eliminate social exclusion and inequality only if they also challenge the structural foundations of injustice, because social injustice is the inevitable consequence of systems based on inequality and competition, rather than equality and reciprocity.

This brings me to a second principle – the importance of mutuality. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his essay *Strength to Love*: "In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All people are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." Iris Marion Young expanded on King's notion. She argued that redistribution alone is insufficient to

achieve social justice because social justice involves more than the reallocation of material goods. These goods are relationship based and involve doing more than having.

A third principle recognizes that common human needs are not identical human needs. Health care and education are good examples of this principle. Finally, we need to include socially just means into policy development through genuine democratic decision-making processes. This is particularly important as our society becomes increasingly diverse.

How can we reverse current trends that have exacerbated long-standing injustices? Over a century ago, one of my professional ancestors, Jane Addams, posed the issue this way: “In what attitude stand you to the present industrial system?” Today, the question is “How can we revive our nation’s tenuous commitment to social justice in the present fractious environment in which selfishness and demonization of ‘others’ are common?”

So, what can each of us do? Let me elaborate on some suggestions proposed by Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative. First, it is important to recognize in our heads and hearts that self-interest and collective interest are not in conflict; they are compatible, in fact, they are inextricably connected. Walt Whitman wrote: “Whoever degrades another degrades me.” A century later Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Despite the media-driven noise that drowns out most reasoned discourse, most Americans subscribe to these beliefs. According to the Pew Research Center, ~90% of Americans believe Social Security and Medicare are good for the country and by a 2:1 margin, they think maintaining these programs are more important than cutting the federal deficit. Although negative attitudes about racial minorities and low-income persons persist, Pew found that ~60% of Americans think low-income persons should not lose their Medicaid benefits.

This means we have to stop “dehumanizing” the “other” – whether this demonization occurs through blatantly racist, sexist, or homophobic statements based on outright lies or distortions, or on more subtle forms of denigration that attribute people’s problems to their personal failings, rather than those of society. We have to stop ignoring, excusing, or unintentionally abetting the behavior of those who do so, whether in the media, political debates, or among our family, friends, and colleagues.

Third, even in an increasingly present-oriented, a-historical climate, we have to remind ourselves of what our nation accomplished collectively when we embraced the concept of social justice. We have to combat efforts by unprincipled political leaders and media personalities to distort our past and to discredit efforts in previous eras that reflected this concept. Understanding the contemporary significance of this history is important because, as James Baldwin wrote, “History does not refer merely, or even principally to the past...We carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways. It is literally present in all that we do.”

We have to listen carefully to and struggle with the interpretation of our history and of contemporary realities as expressed by the “Black Lives Matter” movement, LGBTQ activists, and those who advocate for immigrants’ rights. Yet, and this is somewhat difficult to assert in the current climate, we also have to apply a critical perspective to the potentially separatist tendencies of these well-intentioned efforts. I believe we cannot successfully challenge the institutions that create and sustain injustice in all of its forms unless we embrace social solidarity and recognize, as the poet Audre Lorde wrote, “There is no hierarchy of oppression.”

Fourth, in the face of repeated obfuscation and attempts to divert our attention through the pablum that often passes for news, we need to get closer to the issues, to be critical of the media and the fatuous statements made by candidates for political office and those we have

already elected. Keeping our minds clear and our senses sharp should become part of our daily routine. Like exercise and healthy eating, we can cultivate this habit. This involves analyzing the roots of injustice instead of focusing primarily on its superficial or symbolic manifestations. It also requires us to understand the connection between individual and structural issues.

We have to change the narrative in order to deconstruct what passes for “truth” in this era of “alternative facts.” We have to point out the contradictions in oft-repeated political and media narratives in order to challenge and destabilize the status quo, subvert prevailing rationales for injustice, and give voice to the voiceless. Not only could a counter-narrative disrupt accepted “truths,” it could support those who are excluded and help forge a new social discourse that would emphasize structural explanations for poverty and inequality, the social determinants of health, an expanded definition of human rights, and a dynamic definition of citizenship.

Fifth, we need to recognize that as much as our individual efforts do matter – whether by volunteering, charitable contributions, or recycling – they are not sufficient. We also need to engage in concrete expressions of collective responsibility. Individuals cannot work for social justice solely by acting alone, especially in the face of widespread institutional irresponsibility. We cannot reverse the current tragic and dangerous tide of irresponsibility unless we recognize our common interests, in whatever glorious diversity we express them, and embrace our common humanity, in whatever amazing forms it takes. What this requires is a rebirth of our sense of collective responsibility for each other. I believe this is both necessary and possible.

Sixth, we have to make a concerted effort to fight back against the imposition of feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness. This includes avoiding the natural temptation to “hunker down” and adopt a solely defensive posture in today’s difficult climate. It involves imagining

what a just society looks like rather than focusing merely on modifications of unjust systems. It would propose innovative solutions to today's problems instead of rehashing old ideas.

Finally, we need to get uncomfortable, to take risks, and to encourage others to do the same. We need to pose new questions, refuse to accept the "givens" imposed by others, stop preaching solely to the choir, and meet people face-to-face rather than through virtual internet posts. There are numerous ways to do this: popular education; cultural activities; policy advocacy; expanded civic literacy and civic engagement programs; and using social media more effectively. Despite prevailing cynicism, participation matters if it is not mere token or symbolic participation. As Plato said over 2,000 years ago: "One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors."

Allow me to expand briefly on two strategies that may resonate with this audience. First, we can all become involved, even on a small scale, to advocate for progressive alternatives to the policy initiatives currently under consideration that would exacerbate existing social injustices. In doing so, however, it is important to remember the two basic rules of policy advocacy: (1) Nothing happens overnight; and (2) You can't change Rule #1.

As faculty members, we can do a better job of disseminating our scholarship to the public, the media, key decision makers, and the communities most affected by the issues we study. We can help our students learn to analyze power dynamics and adopt a more critical perspective on contemporary events. We can encourage them to acquire lessons from history and define broad, value-laden concepts, such as social justice, more clearly. We can prepare them for the difficult and conflict-ridden context of today and the years ahead.

At issue in the U.S. today is how do we apply universal ideas about social justice in a multicultural society? In our nation, in which we link the idea of social justice to the notion of

individual rights and freedom, how do we revise our concept of social justice to address group needs, particularly when social justice means different things to different groups?

To do this, we have to become comfortable with several difficult truths. We have to recognize that social justice is a complex, dynamic, conflict-laden, and subjective concept. Social justice and social injustice have different appearances in different contexts. Every system we need to create and maintain a just society has the potential to produce and reproduce injustice. The forces that create social injustice operate in different domains and exist at all levels of society. No society, therefore, achieves justice for all time.

We also have to acknowledge that our current cultural and political divisions are not a new phenomenon. There have been similar conflicts over the meaning of social justice throughout U.S. history. Distortions of its meaning have rationalized a range of inhumane injustices whose consequences reverberate down to the present: the genocide of indigenous peoples, slavery, nativism, racism, and other forms of invidious discrimination against marginalized and socially excluded populations. In an essay published in 1963 in *Ebony* magazine, entitled “The White Man’s Guilt,” James Baldwin wrote prophetically about today’s social climate: “I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”

We must accept the fact that we have not eliminated these injustices, despite the modest successes of 20<sup>th</sup> century social movements. Institutional and cultural barriers still systematically deny individuals and entire communities full access to various rights, opportunities, and resources that are normally available to members of the dominant social group, and which are fundamental to social integration and human well-being.

Part of the problem is that we continue to rely upon certain misguided assumptions. One is that we can achieve the goal of social justice within our existing societal structure and institutions. It is possible that the current construction of our government is inadequate to promote a more just society. 21<sup>st</sup> century social justice may not be compatible with the premises of the 20<sup>th</sup> century welfare state. It has become increasingly clear that the expansion of social provision *by itself* cannot create a more just society. This implies that we must reshape the structure of government institutions and the relationships between the state and the market, and the state and the nonprofit sector, in order to resolve the difficult problems that lie ahead.

We also need to reexamine the assumption that the goal of social justice is always compatible with the preservation of individual rights and unlimited individual freedom. We should reassess whether a universal definition of social justice exists that can be applied to all groups in the same way at all times. Our nation's social and cultural divisions are more complex than ever before. Viewing them solely through a "majority/minority" lens is no longer adequate.

The challenges that I have attempted to summarize today have neither clear nor perfect solutions. The recent recession, mass immigration, and the threat of climate change demonstrate that one nation acting alone can no longer solve such problems. Nor can a single city or state cure homelessness, or educational, health, employment, and housing inequalities by itself.

Finally, we need to remind ourselves that each generation must re-fight even small victories. Whatever social progress we have achieved was not a gift from benevolent elites, but the product of sustained collective struggle. If we can glean one lesson from our tumultuous history and apply it to contemporary politics it is nothing is inevitable – current trends do not foretell the future. We have aspired to become a more socially just society in the past and we can again in the future, but only if we act together. Thank you for your kind attention.