Social justice: meanings and politics

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Where now for social justice?  
Ruth Lister

Now that the main British political parties are committed to the ideal of social justice the political debate will focus on its meaning(s) and how and through which institutions it is best achieved. This article discusses key dimensions of social justice – conceptualised as distributional and recognition claims – with particular reference to poverty, inequality, disability and the perceived tension between diversity and solidarity in the welfare state. The second part provides an overview of a number of social justice issues below and above the (nation) state, moving from the domestic, through the neighbourhood, the devolved administrations and Europe, to the global.

Introduction

The recent conversion of the Conservative Party to the cause of social justice represents a major break with its embrace of Hayekian neo-liberalism, which disputed the validity of the very idea of social justice. Thus, in the UK the political debate is no longer about the desirability of social justice. Instead, it now concerns its meaning(s) and how it is best achieved. Pivotal to the political debate will be the role of the state. In his Scarman Lecture, David Cameron, Conservative Party Leader, identified, as a ‘crucial difference’ between the Conservatives and the Government, the latter’s over-reliance ‘on the large, clunking mechanisms of the state’ to fight poverty. Where ‘state welfare – blunt, mechanical, impersonal – has failed’, ‘social responsibility’, involving the rolling forward of ‘the frontiers of society’ will succeed (Cameron, 2006). New Labour, keen to distance itself from accusations of old-fashioned statism, has embraced the notion of the ‘enabling state’ and, like the Conservatives, has emphasised the role of the third (aka voluntary) sector. Nevertheless, Cameron is right to identify the nature of the state’s contribution to achieving social justice as a dividing line between the two parties.

As this debate illustrates, social justice represents a political ideal. It is also a contested theoretical concept discussed at length in political and social theory. As such it can be analysed across a number of dimensions and at a number of levels. The first part of this article discusses the key dimensions of social justice; the second adopts a multi-scalar frame to identify how issues of social justice are played out below and beyond the nation state. Together they provide an overview of some key elements in contemporary debates around the meanings and implications of social justice.

Dimensions of social justice

One commonly cited straightforward definition of what social justice is about is that provided by the political theorist, David Miller: ‘how the good and bad things in life should be distributed among the members of a human society’ (1999, p 1). This sums up the distributional paradigm of social justice. However, not all social justice claims are expressed in (re)distributional terms and an alternative – in some accounts complementary – recognition paradigm has also been expounded. I will discuss each in turn and then provide some examples of how redistribution and recognition claims are frequently intertwined. A third dimension – representation or voice – is here discussed under the rubric of recognition but in her more recent writings, Nancy Fraser,
the theorist most identified with the two-dimensional recognition-redistribution paradigm, has characterised it as a third dimension (Fraser, 2005).

**Distributional claims**

The distribution of income and wealth is the ‘good’ most commonly referred to in discussions of social justice. At the recent Social Justice and Public Policy conference, Richard Best commented that when ‘googling’ social justice he found very different issues came up according to country of origin. Only in Britain was social justice identified so heavily with poverty and social exclusion (in contrast with, for instance, ‘race’ in Canada and the US or aboriginal rights in Australia). One key element of a socially just distribution of income and wealth in any particular society is that all its members have sufficient material resources to live with dignity and to flourish. Despite the very welcome reductions in child and pensioner (though not working age adult) poverty achieved by New Labour, levels of poverty in Britain remain high compared with those in most of the wider European Union.

There is now a broad political consensus in support of the goal of the eradication of child poverty. Moreover, the Conservatives now accept that poverty has to be understood and measured in relative terms – not so much the ‘end of the line for poverty’ as the cabinet minister John Moore (1989) notoriously put it, but the ‘end of the line’ for a narrow absolute conceptualisation of poverty. Nevertheless, in the same lecture in which he endorsed the notion of relative poverty, Cameron (2006) identified its causes not as structural but as pertaining largely to the individual and their family: family breakdown, drugs and alcohol abuse and debt. This reflected the diagnosis developed in Ian Duncan-Smith’s Social Justice Policy Group’s (2006) interim report. Thus, despite acceptance of the relative nature of the problem of poverty, the Conservatives are not willing to embrace as key to the solution the kind of redistributive mechanisms identified as necessary in a range of recent reports (Fabian Commission, 2006; Harker, 2006; Hirsch, 2006).

Both Conservatives and New Labour tend to frame poverty as a discrete problem or set of problems rather than as part of the grossly unequal overall distribution of income and wealth that marks the UK, with implications for the resources enjoyed by the rich as well as those lacked by ‘the poor’. Not only is the income and wealth gap very wide by historical and comparative standards, it is also accentuated by conspicuous consumption among the rich. Anthony Sampson (2004) has made the comparison with the Edwardians, ‘with their luxury, complacency – and indifference to inequality’.

David Donnison has put a powerful strategic argument for focusing on inequality: ‘whereas poverty focuses attention on others – a minority – who have, and perhaps are the problem [witness the return of the spectre of ‘problem families’], inequality’, he argues, brings ‘us all into the policy agenda. We have to ask questions about the health of our whole society, about the rich as well as the poor’ (2006). Moreover, he warns, ‘grossly unequal societies may successfully manage their social problems, but they do not solve them’ (2006-07, p 28).
When the distributional debate moves beyond the issue of poverty, the question arises as to whether the goal is a meritocratic or egalitarian conceptualisation of social justice. It is the meritocratic ideal, expressed in terms of opportunity and social mobility, which currently drives policy. New Labour has more or less abandoned the goal of greater equality in favour of a discourse of opportunity (Lister, 2007a). However, as some New Labour supporters acknowledge, greater equality is the prerequisite for equality of opportunity. Indeed, inter-generational mobility is generally higher in more egalitarian societies. Privilege, as well as poverty, undermines genuine equality of opportunity. Moreover, not everyone can climb up the ladder of meritocracy. The more politicians promote the ideal of a meritocratic society — and when Michael Young coined the term it was to describe a dystopia not a utopia — the more are those who do not succeed likely to be branded as failures and inequality legitimated. Many of those unable to climb the ladder are nevertheless making important contributions to society, for example, as carers. So social justice is not just about opportunity but also about equity and about a fair distribution of rewards (Lister, 2007a; see also Fabian Commission, 2006). Thus, for instance, while it is important to develop policies to help people move out of low paid jobs, the low rewards associated with these jobs must also be tackled.

In many cases these low rewards reflect gendered assumptions about the value of different jobs and kinds of work. The gender pay gap — which is one of the widest in Europe — is a key issue in achieving social justice for women. The wider gendered distribution of income interacts with the distribution of another important resource — time, which is often overlooked in discussions of social justice. As the recent Compass volume on the Good Society argues, ‘access to meaningful, disposable time can be seen as a primary good in itself and as a means to other — economic, social, political and personal — ends. Its distribution is a matter of social justice….There is an unequal distribution of working, caring and disposable time between and within households’ (Rutherford and Shah, 2006, p 39; see also Bryson, forthcoming).

Miller’s definition of social justice refers to the distribution of ‘bads’ as well as ‘goods’. There is growing recognition of the interconnections between environmental and social justice concerns. For example, David Miliband, Secretary of State for the Environment, told the Guardian’s political editor that ‘climate change is about social justice…If you are not serious about social justice you cannot tackle the climate change problem’ (The Guardian, 11 December 2006). Both within and between societies, environmental bads are suffered disproportionately by those who are materially disadvantaged. Moreover, the Institute for Public Policy Research has argued that ‘social inequalities are amongst the very causes of environmental harm’ (Foley et al., 2005, p. 178). Social justice therefore needs to embrace environmental justice.

**Recognition claims**

The distributional paradigm of social justice thus covers a wide terrain, stretching beyond traditional concerns with the distribution of income and
wealth. Nevertheless, the topography of social justice has been broadened even further to embrace non-material dimensions of social justice. One exponent of this even broader understanding was the late Iris Young who contends that domination and oppression should be ‘the starting point for a conception of social justice’ (1990, p 16). Part of her argument is that this is necessary in order to ground discussions of social justice in an understanding of social and power relations.

Young also argues that it is misleading to conceptualise non-material aspects of social justice in distributional terms. Instead, we can identify an alternative paradigm of social justice rooted in the struggle for recognition, which, according to Fraser, emerged as the ‘paradigmatic form of political conflict in the late twentieth century’ (Fraser, 1997, p. 11). Whereas the redistribution paradigm is concerned with economic injustice, the recognition paradigm addresses cultural or symbolic injustice. Fraser sums this up as ‘nonrecognition (being rendered invisible via the authoritative representational, communicative, and interpretative practices of one’s culture) or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions’ (ibid., p 14).

Recognition claims are about how people are represented (for instance in the media and political debate) and how they are treated. They are also about representation in the political sense of ‘voice’ or having a say: recognition that one’s views count. These can be enormously important for people’s sense of themselves and their place in the world. All too easily dismissed as so-called ‘political correctness’ (particularly when recognition struggles have been expressed in terms of narrow identity politics), recognition is in fact about claims to decency and dignity.

**Recognition and redistribution**

Theorists have debated at great length the relative importance of and relationship between recognition and redistribution (see, for instance, Fraser and Honneth, 2003 and Thompson, 2006, Ch. 5). First though a parallel, more prominent political, debate concerns what Will Kymlicka has termed ‘the “recognition/redistribution” trade-off’ (2005, p. 1). Here the argument is not so much been competing versions of social justice as between different analyses of the implications of multi-cultural recognition policies for redistributive welfare state policies.

The issue has been raised most vocally in the UK by David Goodhart, editor of *Prospect*. He has expressed the fear that ‘the more different we become from one another and the less we share a moral consensus or a sense of mutual obligation and belonging, the less happy we may be to support a generous welfare state’ (Goodhart, 2005: 156). His own position is that ‘when solidarity [redistribution] and diversity [recognition] pull against each other’, public policy should favour solidarity (2004: 35). Others, while acknowledging the potential tension between the two, dispute that it is inevitable (Pearce, 2004). Kymlicka’s own conclusion is that ‘we need to avoid premature judgements about the inevitability of trade-offs and tragic choices between economic redistribution and cultural recognition. The recent
evidence…suggests that in many circumstances, we can pursue both’ (2005, p 22).

From the perspective of social justice struggles, such as those of women, racialised groups or gays and lesbians, it is not a question of categorising them as a politics of either redistribution or recognition. To differing degrees they incorporate claims for both. This is also exemplified by the struggles of two groups who tend to be ignored in the recognition/redistribution literature: disabled people and people living in poverty.

Goodlad and Riddell have explored the ways in which ‘disability is implicated in two types of claims about the source of social injustice: those concerned with socially constructed differences between people; and those arising from material inequalities’ (2005, p 45). Disabled people are all too often rendered invisible or inaudible – the ‘does she take sugar?’ syndrome – and are subjected to prejudice and hostility. They also suffer very real material disadvantage in terms of labour market position, access to public services and the failure of income maintenance provisions adequately to cover the additional costs associated with disability. The disabled people’s movement is thus struggling for both recognition and redistribution. Moreover, as Sally Witcher argues, social justice for disabled people requires ‘recognition of differences and sameness’ and ‘recognition is intrinsically bound up with patterns of distribution’ (2005, p 62).

This last point is also highly relevant to the position of people living in poverty but in this case the demand is for recognition only of sameness – of common humanity and citizenship and of the equal worth that flows from that. Such demands are in response to the misrecognition involved in the construction of ‘the poor’ as different/inferior - a process of Othering through which people living in poverty are thought about, talked about and treated as ‘other’ to the rest of us (Lister, 2004). It is a process of differentiation by which social distance is established and maintained and which all too easily serves to justify poverty and inequality by blaming the ‘other’ for their own and society’s problems. So, for instance, research for the Fabian Commission on Life Chances and Child Poverty revealed a lack of empathy with parents in poverty and a tendency to blame parental behaviour for child poverty insofar as its existence was even acknowledged (Fabian Commission, 2005).

Every time politicians talk about a ‘dependency culture’ or an ‘underclass’ (revived in political debate with the publication of the Social Justice Policy Group’s interim report (2006)) on the one hand and ‘decent, hard-working families’ on the other they are reinforcing deep-rooted historical divisions between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor and between those not in paid work and the wider society.

Rather than a politics of recognition of difference, what is at issue here is the need for respect. As a young unemployed woman told a National Poverty Hearing ‘I just feel very angry sometimes that people are ignorant to the fact that we are humans as well and we do need to be respected’ (Russell, 1996, p 10). This is the flipside of New Labour’s respect agenda, which tends to
ignore the reciprocal nature of respect and the power relations underpinning it. This was well put by Rahila Gupta of Southall Black Sisters who criticised the framing of the Respect agenda in a way that ‘did not recognise that in a democracy respect must flow from the powerful to the powerless before they can expect a return on it, that respect implies a mutuality that is difficult to achieve in an unequal society and therefore any debate on it must be informed by marginal voices in our society’ (Today Programme, 2005).

The need for respect was also one of the main messages of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, half of whose members had direct experience of poverty. For many of those it talked to respect is tied up with being listened to – voice and citizenship – and the ultimate disrespect is seen as ‘being involved in phoney participation, by people who don’t listen, when things don’t change’ (CoPPP, 2000, p 18).

Even struggles for decent wages are often framed not just in materialistic terms but as claims for recognition of low paid workers’ value and dignity. This points to how recognition arguments can be used to make the case for redistribution. If the gap between rich and poor is very wide, then those at the top become too far removed socially, geographically and/or culturally from those at the bottom to recognise the latter as citizens of equal worth (Phillips, 1999). Respect does not easily transcend ‘the boundaries of inequality’ (Sennett, 2003, p 23). Thus, as Andrew Sayer argues, ‘the grounds for an egalitarian politics of distribution lie in an egalitarian politics of recognition: any argument for distributional equality must ultimately appeal to criteria of recognition – that all are of equal worth’ (2005, p. 65). So, while a politics of redistribution, rooted in a politics of recognition, remains essential to tackle poverty itself, social justice for people living in poverty also requires an explicit politics of recognition&respect (Lister, 2004).

Below and beyond the (nation) state
Whether we are talking about recognition or redistribution or a combination of the two, social injustice is experienced in particular spaces and places and struggles for social justice are multi-scalar, situated both below and beyond the (nation) state.

The domestic
Issues of social justice do not stop at the front door. Domestic violence and child abuse mean that, rather than a safe haven, the family can at times be a site of oppression. Frequently money, time and/or labour are distributed unfairly between male and female partners. A number of studies have revealed that wages or benefits paid to fathers are not always shared fairly within families (see, for instance, Goode et al., 1998). One of these underlines the intersection between gender and social class. It suggests that any shifts towards greater equality between men and women within intimate relationships are...likely to have been mainly confined to younger, middle-class, childless, cohabiting couples and cohabiting mothers, and they are also likely to have been associated with increasing class inequalities between households, since in households
in which men are in the working or intermediate classes, female partners are more likely to be in part-time or non-employment (Vogler et al., 2006, p. 477).

With regard to time and labour, women have changed their behaviour in the public sphere of the labour market more than men have changed theirs in the private sphere of the household. Although there is evidence that men are spending more time on child care than in the past, how much more is contested (Bryson, forthcoming).

In Justice, Gender and the Family, Susan Moller Okin describes the family as ‘a school of social justice’ (1989, p 17). If children perceive or experience injustices within the family, she contends, ‘they are likely to be considerably hindered in becoming people who are guided by principles of justice’ (ibid.). This has implications for parents’ state-sanctioned right to hit their children, which many would argue represents an injustice, as well as, in the words of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, ‘a serious violation of the dignity of the child’ (CRC, 2002, para. 35).

The neighbourhood
Families live in neighbourhoods of one kind or another. Suzanne Fitzpatrick has argued that, although concerns about poverty of place tend to be expressed in terms of the impact on social cohesion, it is properly understood as a problem of social justice. This is ‘because a highly prized social good – a sense of safety and security – is being distributed in a highly unequal way as a consequence of spatial concentrations of poverty and wealth’ (2004, p 6). People living in poor neighbourhoods are at the greatest risk of various forms of crime and are more likely to fear crime and suffer from a general sense of insecurity (Dixon et al., 2006). Satisfaction with key public services is also likely to be less in such neighbourhoods.

Fitzpatrick also pointed out that ‘neighbourhoods are often a primary source of stigma for people living in poverty in urban areas’ (2004, p 10). Research by Dean and Hastings underlines the tenacity of area stigma even in the face of large-scale regeneration. ‘Their conclusion that the stigma attached to deprived estates ‘impoverishes all areas of residents’ lives’ (2000, p 1) is supported by numerous studies.

Thus for people living in poverty, the neighbourhood can represent a site of injustice in both distributional and recognition terms, even if it also provides an important source of sustenance through social networks. At the same time, the wealthy are increasingly segregating themselves in exclusive enclaves, with gated communities the most extreme example.

As McLaughlin and Monteith (2006) point out, ‘the scope for subnational social justice action plans is considerable’ through, for instance, area-based and participatory initiatives. There has been renewed emphasis on such initiatives to combat deprivation in recent years. One advantage is that it is easier to build in participation at local than national level so that residents have a say in the development and implementation of policies that affect their
lives. However, as noted earlier, while this is an important element in a poverty politics of recognition&respect, phoney participation is often seen as the ultimate disrespect. However well intentioned the commitment, genuine participation requires more time and resources than is generally allowed for. This is particularly so with regard to reaching the most marginalised and to building capacity among all participants – professionals and officials as well as local residents (Lister, 2007b).

The devolved administrations
Area-based and participatory initiatives have been part of the social justice repertoire of the devolved administrations. Wales and Northern Ireland (where devolution is currently suspended) are discussed by Mark Drakeford and Robin Wilson elsewhere in this issue. In Scotland, many people took heart when the Scottish Executive framed its early policies in a discourse of social justice and social inclusion (rather than social exclusion) and appointed a Minister of Social Justice. However, the social justice strategy has since been re-framed as ‘closing the opportunity gap’, the Minister of Social Justice is no more and, just like south of the border, social justice is understood by New Labour in meritocratic rather than egalitarian terms.

At an ESRC seminar on ‘social justice and devolution’, Scottish participants were pretty critical of the progress made towards meeting what was acknowledged as the Scottish Executive’s real commitment to social justice. This contrasted with Wales, which despite its lesser powers, was seen as having developed a more coherent set of principles and strategy of social justice.

Both these devolved administrations have out-performed Westminster in terms of women’s (though not minority ethnic) political representation. In Scotland this was thanks to the success of the women’s movement in shaping the devolution settlement. An analysis by McKay and Gillespie suggests that more open political institutions and processes – an important aspect of Scotland’s new political settlement – together with ‘an explicit commitment to mainstreaming equality concerns…imply a more favourable framework for advancing’ women’s social justice claims (2005, p 112). However, they conclude that hitherto this has been translated into few concrete policy initiatives capable of transforming women’s lives.

The European
The impetus for mainstreaming the equalities agenda has come in part from the European Commission and this is reflected also in more comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation from Westminster. It is also partly thanks to the requirements attached by Brussels to the development of National Action Plans on Social Inclusion that the UK government has made greater efforts to listen to the voices of people experiencing poverty in the drawing up of the 2006-8 Plan. A national Get Heard initiative resulted in 146 workshops around the country (Cochrane, 2006). Civil servants involved in the process have attested to its value and it represents an important step in the recognition of the expertise borne of experience.
It would be fanciful, though, to portray the European Union as inspired primarily by an ideal of social justice. Matters of social justice tend to be subordinated to the higher end of economic competitiveness. Thus, for instance, Jane Lewis has commented on the paradox that ‘just as gender equality established itself institutionally within EU policy-making…, its meaning shifted such that it became an instrument of the wider agenda on employment and economic growth’ (Lewis, J., 2006, p 433). The European Commission has also been criticised for its instrumental emphasis on children as investments in society’s future at the expense of children’s rights and the quality of their childhood (Ruxton, 2005). This is echoed in the framing of New Labour’s, otherwise very welcome, policies for children as investments in the citizen-workers of the future (Lister, 2003). Such investment is necessary, it is argued, in order to equip citizens to respond to global economic change.

**The global**
The global today represents a highly significant space in the theorisation and politics of social justice (see Mandle, 2006). As Fraser observes, ‘globalization is changing the way we argue about justice…For many it has ceased to be axiomatic that the modern territorial state is the appropriate unit for thinking about issues of justice (2005, pp 69, 71). This is particularly the case with regard to global poverty, the environment and immigration and asylum.

In his treatise on ‘the good society’ J. K. Galbraith drew implicitly on both recognition and redistribution arguments in his statement that ‘the responsibility for economic and social well-being is general, transnational. Human beings are human beings wherever they live. Concern for their suffering does not end because those so afflicted are on the other side of an international frontier’ (1996, p 2).

The case for global social justice rests in part on the kind of principles articulated by Galbraith, together with human rights arguments (Mandle, 2006) and the realities of global interdependence (Mepham, 2005). This global interdependence currently advantages the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor and powerless. Recent UN statistics show that the richest 1% of adults own 40% of the world’s wealth and half the world’s adult population owns barely 1% (*The Guardian*, 6 December, 2006). Global justice campaigns like Make Poverty History are an attempt to redress the balance in terms of material resources.

As at the national level, the distribution of material resources globally is a source of environmental injustice. Environmental justice is ‘an inherently internationalist issue’ to quote David Miliband (*The Guardian*, 11 December, 2006). The philosopher Thomas W. Pogge argues that citizens of more affluent societies are all implicated in a ‘global institutional order’ which impoverishes the worst-off and that ‘the global poor get to share the burdens resulting from the degradation of our natural environment while having to watch helplessly as the affluent distribute the planet’s abundant natural wealth amongst themselves’ (2004, pp 269, 270).
This global environmental injustice is creating environmental refugees, with millions more predicted in the Stern Report (Stern, 2007). Global justice is not only about how we respond to the needs of fellow human beings the other side of the world. It is also about how we respond when the global becomes local on our own doorsteps in the persons of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants (and in the case of migrant domestic workers it brings the global into the domestic).

A recent Scottish Refugee Council report revealed that ‘at least 154 asylum seekers, refugees and their dependants [including 25 children] were destitute in Glasgow between 30 January and 26 February 2006’ (Green, 2006, p add). Nearly half of these had been destitute for longer than six months. ‘They think we are nothing’, the report’s title, is the observation of a female asylum-seeker and it illustrates how social justice for asylum-seekers requires recognition as well as redistribution.

Misrecognition of asylum-seekers is fuelled by the media. Many asylum-seekers interviewed in a study of media reporting recounted ‘direct experience of prejudice, abuse or aggression from neighbours and service providers which they attributed to the way in which the media informs public opinion’ (Buchanan et al., 2003, p 9). This misrecognition has both cultural and socio-economic roots. Culturally asylum-seekers are perceived as the ‘Other’. They also all too often appear ‘as the physical embodiment of the external threat to jobs, living standards and welfare’ in a globalizing world (Castles, 2003: 20). As such, it is easy to blame them for the deficiencies of the welfare state, as suggested by opinion polls and by another Scottish study, which found that asylum seekers have often become scapegoats for existing social problems and anxieties about social change. Its author warns that “asylum-seeker” has become shorthand for any ethnic minority, meaning that hostility can easily spill over from one group to the next...Tackling attitudes towards asylum-seekers, therefore, needs to sit alongside long-term attempts to address racism‘ (Lewis, M., 2006, p add).

Conclusion
This article has deliberately painted a broad canvas so as to provide an overview of the range of issues on the contemporary social justice agenda. In conclusion, it is important to remember that the theorisation and politics of social justice are about the kind of society and the kind of world in which we want to live together. Whether we are talking about redistribution and/or recognition and whatever the scale of our analysis, ultimately we are weighing up the effects of policies and practices on individual lives and on the quality of social relations. The costs of social injustice are born by and large by those who lack voice and power. The struggle for social justice should involve us all.

References


1 This article is based on a public lecture given at Glasgow University in my capacity as Donald Dewar Visiting Professor of Social Justice. The lecture, *The Scales of Social Justice*, is published by the Scottish Centre for Research on Social Justice at www.scrsj.ac.uk. Part of the argument is developed further in Lister (2008).

2 For a range of views on meritocracy see Dench (2006).