

Is Social Justice Just?

**Robert M. Whaples, Michael C. Munger,
and Christopher J. Coyne, eds.**

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As I started reading this book, I figured this would be the easiest review I have ever written. Indeed, the title lends itself to a pithy and dismissive reply. Is social justice just? “No. Of course not.” End of discussion, end of review. But, in the intellectually generous hands of these editors, the question is far from rhetorical, and the answers far from facile. Instead, the book’s nineteen chapters grapple honestly with the problem, denouncing sloppy philosophy just as they offer constructive alternatives.

I doubt (m)any advocates of social justice will read this valuable book. Indeed, they tend to be dogmatic; they harbor no qualms about crying havoc, and letting slip the mobs of war against heretics.

To the likely readers of this book—those who harbor a simultaneous terror at the aggressive bosh of social justice and a genuine concern for the least fortunate—part I will be the most obvious. But it is always enriching to return to first principles. Part I offers a powerful case against social justice, even if it is often unclear what the problem really is. Indeed, as practiced by offended student activists, rent-seeking DEI bureaucracies, or woke corporate boards, social justice typically lacks any metric or rationale. *Any* inequality is perceived as unjust and the result of systemic oppression. Social justice, rather than targeting specific problems, strives for full social reform, the erasure of all sources of inequality, and the correction of inequality through vigorous state action. But if *everything* is injustice, then the whole project is unreachable.

Alas, social justice does not end there. It calls for full war against dhimmitude and infidel alike; there is no gray area for social justice warriors, as everybody is either an ally or an enemy, anti-racist or racist, compassionate or deplorable. There is no room for dialogue, as social justice warriors grab us by the intellectual collar and cancel us for not advancing *their* goals—other injustices be damned! There exists injustice today against immigrants, victims of human trafficking, victims of rent-seeking, Palestinians under Israeli occupation, Israeli victims of terrorism, Uyghurs, Hong Kong dissidents, and a plethora of others. But no advocate of these victims would call for cancellation of those who do not support that particular cause.

Social justice replaces harmony with resentment as a basis for public policy (contra Frédéric Bastiat’s plea in his *Economic Harmonies*). In a synthesis of the arguments presented in the book, social justice suffers from three other foundational problems.

First, in its rejection of equality (of opportunity) for equity (of outcome), it rejects equality before the law, a fundamental tenet of the liberal project.

Second, social justice ignorantly slags capitalism. This is especially befuddling, because it rejects the “Great Fact” of capitalist growth: after almost 200,000 years

of subsistence, increasingly large swaths of humanity were lifted out of poverty and injustice, ca. 1800, by the conversion to capitalism under rule of law. Those swaths were, and remain, scandalously limited—but we are moving in the right direction. In its rejection of free markets, social justice would lead to massive misery. Alas, it remains “the cocaine of the democratic-socialist” (27).

Third, social justice is woefully naïve about the nature of the state. *Of course*, the world is rife with injustice and poverty—but both are commonly *caused* by the state. The social justice warrior, in her infallible wisdom, would have the state redistribute resources to remedy ubiquitous injustice. Alas, she has not studied Public Choice theory, which warns us of the dangers of rent-seeking. Nor has she studied Austrian economics, which warns us that only the market can capture and transfer economic knowledge, in a way bureaucrats cannot.

Part 1 provides useful ammunition for those who are terrified by mob rule and the tyranny of sloppy thinking. But it could have gone further. Indeed, social justice is arguably a resurrection of Marxism, which gave us upward of ninety million deaths (15 National Socialist Holocausts) in the twentieth century. Marxism rests on class identity and warfare, rather than the methodological individualism of classical liberalism. The bourgeoisie and the workers, locked in an inexorable struggle, have now been replaced by the identity groups of social justice. This is nothing less than a rejection of the Enlightenment project itself, with its emphasis on *individual* dignity. One can only shudder at the *reductio ad absurdum* of social justice. When we are all poor, in a post-capitalist society, we will all be equal—and we will all be equally oppressed by an omnipotent state.

Part 1 would have made a strong stand-alone book against social justice. But indicting the dangers of neo-Marxism is only half the problem: the poor are still with us, and injustice is everywhere. Space considerations prohibit me from digging into the foundations of our responsibility for the least fortunate, but I point to Christian charity (Matt. 26:11), Jewish *Tzedakah* (Deut. 15:11), Moslem *Zakat*, or an Objectivist investment in a better society.

How, then, do we improve the lot of the least fortunate? How do we work for justice? These questions are answered philosophically in part 2. I note, especially chapter 9, in Jim Otteson’s always-deft hand; he reminds us that we ought to remove formal inequality before addressing wealth inequality—and that such a “formidable task” will, *ipso facto*, handle most material inequality (140). But this section will appeal mostly to those with a more philosophical or theological bent (four of the five essays appeal to Catholic Social Theory).

How, then, do we build a just society, without committing injustice to rectify injustice, and without making everybody worse off? The essays in part 3 grapple with these questions. We are reminded (212) that inequality, *per se*, is not a problem. Indeed, “a society in which no one lacks anything relevant for a satisfactory quality

of life can be very unequal” (231). Rather, there are two problems *associated* with inequality: poverty, and exploitation (through rent-seeking). Poverty is best addressed through free markets (216; see also the empirical evidence on the relationship between economic freedom and income in the annual *Economic Freedom of the World* report). Exploitation is best addressed through a smaller state, more liberty, and less cronyism; but we can differentiate between two kinds of exploitation. Formal, *direct* unequal treatment of some (such as *de jure* segregation or arbitrary restrictions on the franchise) is easy to identify. However, *indirect* government action with inequality-increasing effects (such as regressive regulation or rent-seeking), is harder to identify (236).

Robert Whaples closes with five more concrete examples: (1) replacing the current unjust educational monopoly with a competitive system that serves the consumer; (2) reforming the health industry; (3) ending the war on drugs and qualified immunity; (4) reforming regressive zoning, job licensing, labor, and welfare laws; (5) recognizing that most environmental policies hurt the poorest; and (5) chiseling away at cronyism.

In sum, social justice is, at best, meaningless—because a society can simultaneously feature inequality and a satisfactory quality of life for all (231). At worst, it is counterproductive—because it ends up creating more inequality and more poverty. The “goals of social justice are better served by a classical liberal structure than state intervention” (230); F. A. Hayek’s general and abstract rules for cooperation are welfare-enhancing, while rent-seeking is a negative-sum game (233–34).

This book’s only shortcoming is that it is a bit too long. There is some repetition, and it would have benefited marginally from an excision of a quarter to a third of the entries. But this is a useful and timely book. Injustice cannot fix injustice—but a classical liberal structure of rights, markets, and opportunities can help the poor who are always with us, and help build a more just world.

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