



The Obscure Object of Social Justice

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The phrase ‘Social Justice’ is an alluring one, and perhaps what is most tempting about it is the way it can be filled with many kinds of desire. It operates as a kind of ‘empty signifier’ – much like ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ – into which are poured many different kinds of political agenda which then remould it and pull it in unexpected directions. The multivalent nature of Social Justice means that it can stand for a politically progressive approach to injustice, even congruent with the aims of liberation movements, while pulling in with it a more dubious heritage of conservative values.

You cannot have ‘Social Justice’ in an unjust world. One way of resolving that contradiction is to accept injustice, to be ‘disappointed’, and perhaps then to value ‘disappointment’ as a sign that ‘ordinary unhappiness’ has been something worth arriving at. We know psychoanalysts who have taken that route, and then calls for ‘Social Justice’ really are hollow.

This is the danger. Those who subscribe to those values often trade with a conception of desire that separates the individual from society, separates the interior world of desire from external constraints, and then ‘Social Justice’ is not, as we might expect and hope, on the left, but anchored on the right. Take, for instance, the use of the signifier in conservative Catholic discourse in which we are each of us treated as made in the image of God, worthy of respect and of the right to fulfil our potential. Here the focus is on individuals flourishing one by one and triumphing over adversity. It is this conception that was harnessed by the proto-fascist priest Father Coughlin whose newspaper, which was called ‘*Social Justice*’, peddled antisemitic conspiracy theories in the United States from 1936 to 1942.

Ostensibly radical representations of politics thus carry with them a toxic misleading ideological charge. See, for example, the 1941 film *Meet John Doe* in which Gary Cooper and Barbara Stanwyck tangle with politics and try to speak for the ‘little people’ against big government. As Walter Brennan playing sidekick to Gary Cooper’s innocent fictitious ‘John Doe’ says, in an ostensibly even more radical comment on what will transpire in the film, you start by buying things and paying taxes and you end up losing your freedom.

At the risk of reducing the text to the intentions of its authors or pinning things too firmly on one religion as if it were the only source of the problem, it is worth noting that the film was directed by Frank Capra who was a right-wing Catholic, as was Brennan, as were Cooper and Stanwyck at the end of their days. Perhaps their marginal social position in a WASP-dominated US predisposed them to a politics of resentment based on individual success, one that Father Coughlin was able to give voice to.

Psychoanalysis sometimes indulges in the dominant commonsense opposition between individual and society, and of individual desires set against those of civilisation, and a corresponding opposition between our interior world, treated as if it were site of the unconscious, and an exterior world to which we have to bend our desires. This conception of subjectivity chimes with ideological representations of the self, and then makes it all the more tempting to turn psychoanalysis into a tool of adaptation. When the outside world is seen as a mere 'environment' in this way, how could the task of analysis not be to enable people to fit into it better? The search for 'Social Justice' is indeed then a search for an obscure lost object, as bewitching as is the search for an individual subject who exists independently of the world.

There is another path psychoanalysis can tread though, and it does so when we are unafraid of contravening commonsense, when we treat the relationship between the individual and the social as ecological rather than environmental. Here we are interdependent, intermeshed, intersecting with others, as intimate part of the world as the world is intimate to us. A more radical turn on that conception takes us to a political approach that sometimes goes under the rubric of 'ecosocialism'.

That also takes us, psychoanalytically, towards what the Mexican Marxist David Pavón-Cuéllar describes, to borrow the title of one of his books, from 'the conscious interior to an exterior unconscious'. Now we have a different take on 'Social Justice', something very different from the way that the term has often functioned, critical of the way it has often functioned and seeing the dominant traditional meanings as problematic, ideological.

We have another case example closer to home, here in Britain, with the demonization of the poor and the attempt to cut welfare benefits, replacing those benefits, from 2012, with what has been misleadingly called 'Universal Credit'. Universal Credit is, semiotically, ideologically, a kind of evil twin of 'Social Justice'. Note that just as Universal Credit is designed to blame victims of social injustice, so there is a corresponding mobilisation by the far right against those who speak out against injustice, labelling them 'Social Justice Warriors'. Architects of the government's Universal Credit programme, advisors and apparatchiks who have been brought in from the world of investment banking, like to refer to people on benefits as those who have made 'lifestyle choices'.

The danger is two-fold. First, in the domain of psychoanalytic theory, we need to work hard to ward off, to analyse indeed the appeal of commonsensical notions of individuality and interiority, to avoid privileging the conscious interior as set against the external world, to beware of celebrating ordinary unhappiness as the most mature and realistic response to living in a world that does not give us what we want.

Second, in the domain of our own institutions, we need to notice how they too often operate as adjuncts to the state, and to notice how the state presents itself as meritocratic, busily weaning people off bad 'lifestyle choices'. Some psychoanalysts do that too, but this actually sediments injustice, ensuring that those who have striven to reach the top by enforcing the rules are then all the more attached to the forms of private property the capitalist state is designed to uphold.

Psychoanalysis can do better, as recent conferences at the Freud Museum on the hidden tradition of free clinics and social intervention have signalled with significant contributions from Latin America. There the preferential option for the poor has taken psychoanalysis in a very different direction from the dominant tradition of 'Social Justice', clashing along the way with conservative Church institutions.

It is in that vein that David Pavón-Cuéllar and I have co-written a manifesto which aims to link psychoanalysis with liberation movements, ecologically we might say rather than merely environmentally. Instead of treating subjectivity as separate from the world, only then to be adapted to it, we treat subjectivity as an intimate part of the world, the world of others, always calling for a response to injustice. This is a manifesto currently in the process of being translated into over twenty languages, articulating with different theories and different political contexts.

This is a political project that treats the unconscious as exterior, traces repetition of false paths as functions of a drive to change society that so often conserves its institutions. We map the way transference operates in the clinic, and how it functions and questions repetitive unconscious drive phenomena. This is a critical approach to our everyday psychology that turns psychoanalysis into a resource for change. This not only clashes with commonsense, as psychoanalysis must do, but also opens up some unavoidable contradictions, antagonisms inside psychoanalysis itself. This auto-critique should not only be applied to the dominant forms of psychoanalysis in the English-speaking world, but also reflexively to ostensibly more radical forms of psychoanalysis that have been influenced by Catholic motifs.

This manifesto *Psychoanalysis and Revolution: Critical Psychology for Liberation Movements* is one opening to an understanding of subjectivity and the social world that takes private property and the state and the family seriously; these are questions that can only be solved in practice. It still will be no more than an obscure object, unintelligible for some, but for others we intend it to be a call to action, in and against psychoanalysis and in and against the institutions that house it, enabling those who have little to do with psychoanalysis to understand and work better with its attractions and dangers.

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