



Is Social Justice Just an Obscure Object of Desire?

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Given where we have gone in this panel, I want to speak up for social justice as a desire. Not 'just as an obscure object of desire' but as Audre Lorde might have termed it, an erotic. For me, social justice is a desire of life and of destination. I take Ian Parker's many points about the vehicle of social justice – its capaciousness, its ability to encompass the treachery and deviousness of neo-liberal claims. I accept that there are many projections and longings. I recognise the necessary disappointments of desire unmet. I also understand the gap and the limits of accomplishing what we want and the interplay between revolutionary praxis and reformist achievements. And yet. And yet. I don't want to jettison the aspiration that is social justice.

And I am not so sure I like the modifier '*just*' in our title. Why just? Why the diminishing of social justice? I'm also not sure I like the notion of *obscure* in this context. It feels akin to a sneer, as though we, the analysts, know better. The punters, the people, are well, just that. Somewhat less aware of their motivation and the complications of their desire. Hmmm. Who says? It's 2021. No time to be smug. Social justice is being redefined. It's being decolonised. We don't own it. We are not in charge of the definitions. In a curious way, our moment, the moment of leftist psychoanalytic thinkers and activists is taken up and challenged by a new woke politics on the streets by Black Lives Matter, by eco warriors, and intersectionality all over the world.

The idea that social justice is just an obscure object of desire would enrage the people on the streets, the activists and the progressive lawyers, trade unionists, workers, actors, criminologists, city planners, farmers, and so on, whose lived experience in the midst of our vicious political system, endeavour to make social justice not only a desire but a process and an outcome. Is it a naïve desire? Perhaps. We have all known defeat. But we have also lived through gains and changes and hugely personal transformations emerging from social movements which mean our lives look nothing like, or I will speak for myself, the lives of my parents.

Lived experience, a word often heard around The Women's Liberation Movement, in radical science circles and Free Associations, was the struggle to underpin and legitimate political practice through a combination of understanding the forces of power and the evidence of lived experience. That phrase is in use again. I welcome that. It was what underpinned the Women's Therapy Centre which came out of an understanding that the economic and structural ground of patriarchy meant that we

women and men, lived patriarchy inside. We women couldn't not participate in our own subordination without taking on psychoanalysis's insights on subjectivity and human agency.

I want to very briefly discuss a few political moments for social justice in our time - Thank you John Alderdice for your comments on Ireland and the struggle for peace.

The moments and movements that I will very briefly highlight have been entwined or intersected with understandings from psychoanalysis, even though in two cases these were not explicit.

In the aftermath of World War 2, Finland was a defeated and broken country. It had lost 5% of its men. There were enormous social divisions between those who wanted to ally with the Soviet Union and those who wanted to remain an 'independent' democratic country despite paying punishing reparations to the Soviet Union.

Jared Diamond, writes about the necessity Finland faced to recognize defeat and loss. These are two words, two states of mind, we know well from clinical work. This was epic defeat and loss. Diamond tells us that scaled up to the US population it would be like losing 9 million soldiers, more than have been lost in all US wars. So far, so terrible. But he makes an interesting argument that it was the capacity of the Finns and their leadership to face and recognise loss, to engage a population who were in themselves divided and broken and to find ways of connecting with their enemies, that allowed Finland to eventually thrive.

Today, everyone has a good education. Its schoolteachers have high status. Higher than University lecturers. The transition from a rural society to an industrial society and now to a technically innovative culture was managed by engaging with their enemies. It is an interesting case study of how *loss and destruction – if recognized* - can recreate civil society. A civil society with more social justice than we can imagine in which prisoners – to take an example of the dispossessed - live, for the most part in open prisons, can go to university, can drive themselves to town, or the lake, and prepare for a life outside. Parenthetically, I'm thinking of Carine Minne's paper on treating prison inmates yesterday and how extraordinary her work was, and imagining how available that would be in Finland. But, to return to the theme of recognized defeat and loss, this recognition strikes me as an implicit application of understandings that are shared with psychoanalysis.

The second social movement, the struggle by the Sandinistas against the Somoza regime in Nicaragua had a more disturbing outcome and I raise it in this context because I think it is really worth thinking about. Here the involvement of psychoanalysis was explicit. Nancy Hollander, the great historian, psychoanalyst and chronicler of Latin American struggles, the biographer of psychoanalyst of Marie – Mimi - Langer who fled Vienna to go to Spain and then Argentina, details Mimi Langer's establishment of psychoanalysis in Argentina; an innovative psychoanalysis that was taken to the public hospitals, the poor and to women. In 1974, Mimi was forced into exile in Mexico City. From Mexico, she and Ignacio (Nacho) Maldonado led a team of 12 psychoanalysts, psychologists and psychiatrists who on a rotating basis went to Nicaragua to help train and create a new mental health system based on psychoanalytic methods in what was then a newly emerging democracy.

Under Somoza, children had been trained to pluck out the eyes of dissidents. Civil war had wrecked the country. Nicaragua was drenched in loss; what Mimi Langer termed frozen grief. In today's terms we would name this a traumatized society. The International Team worked with on the ground professionals while training barefoot psychoanalysts to enable them to understand how to work with collective traumas and to create the kinds of conversations that can address psychic pain.

Forty years on, Nicaragua is a mess. Yes the new social democratic regime was unsettled by Reagan's Contra war and the Sandinistas lost in 1990. But when Ortega came back, he came back as a 'born again' religious man, anti-democratic and dictatorial. The opposition, as Index on Censorship has detailed, is subject to extreme harassment and arrests. Nicaragua is a tragic and disturbing story about the struggle for social justice and its defeats. For me, it invites questions about what more an applied psychoanalysis could have offered.

In Argentina, though, the work of the same group of progressive analysts was very much in evidence in strengthening the workers during economic collapse of 2001. It wasn't a canonical psychoanalysis, obviously. Analysts were alongside them in the factories as workers took them over and ran them as cooperatives during the IMF-induced recession. The analysts brought their skills, their ability to listen and untangle and acknowledge the very real frights and fears facing the working class.

And that brings me to listening: a key feature of psychoanalysis. A feature it shares with 2nd wave feminism. To my third example - In the reconstruction of Western Germany after WW2, *Die Generation Danach*, that's to say, the generation raised after the defeat of the war, had the job, as they became adults in the 60's, of confronting the recent history of Germany and the recent history of the parents - a history that couldn't be spoken of. Progressive pedagogues, in the late 1960's and 70's did a series of interventions around the cities which made it possible for the adult children to begin to come to terms with their parents' history. They did this by developing curriculum for schools so the next generation would not be raised in ignorance and without history. They did this by creating provocations through posters asking difficult questions. They did this by looking at the intergenerational trauma they were carrying which were the secrets and horrors lived through by their parents.

When some of them trained as therapists, they invited Jewish therapists like me, to help them in the 1980's. Later, in the 1990's the IPA was able to address this. The conversations about the past, the practice of listening and acknowledgment, were critical features in the remaking of German society and German psychoanalysis. These listening group were then used once again by progressives pedagogues during the unification of Germany. Those efforts have been less successful, and we could say that social democracy with all the scandals of German business is hardly nirvana. Nevertheless, I think the attempts to engage people in the struggle for social justice and the wish to be able to manage the different trajectories of East and West Germany, as a desire, is an honourable one.

My last example seems a million miles away in the age of social media. I don't know what we can take from it but it was the most interesting example of participatory engagement I was involved in since the consciousness-raising group of the 1970's. It took the practice of listening to a different and more sophisticated level. At Occupy New York and Occupy London, indeed at all 'Occupys,' participants at

meetings were held in the round. The people in the rows would participate by becoming human microphones and articulating to those behind them what they had heard from the person in front of them. By taking words into their mouths they might not have initially agreed with, and being responsible for sharing those words without bias, without contempt, or without praise, they or rather I should say we, embodied thoughts and ideas about what to do, which we didn't necessarily agree with. We had to allow ourselves to be affected by them; to think difference; to allow complication into our mind.

OCCUPY was a political movement of desire. It was a movement to challenge the 1%. It was a social movement which endeavoured to engage the 99% with its contradictory and often quarrelsome debates. The act of the human microphone in which considering what another was saying, was a considerable break from sectarianism which besets all political movements for social justice. It resonates with psychoanalysis or psychoanalytic ways of working in which, when there is space around words, one can hear what one has said. It reverberates in the hearing and the being held, by another. And the other can hear and in turn be heard. (if only we could do that within psychoanalysis and progressives here too!)

That might seem like a modest starting point in these days of shrieking and echo chambers. Social media may well make such discourse difficult, even utopian. But I'm not ready to give it up. Social justice needs to acknowledge loss and division and defeat. *Its tools are seeing, knowing, feeling, saying, considering and recognising complexity.*

Susie Orbach is a psychotherapist, writer and critic and the author of numerous books