



► Social Justice

The Historical Evolution of a Shared Ideal

Authors / Suarez Dillon Soares Sergei, Sgroi Silvia





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Abstract

This article traces how the idea of social justice evolved from early human practices of care to a global political ideal. Empathy and mutual aid are ancient, evident both in theory and in practice since the dawn of humanity, and institutions extending care beyond kinship networks are at least as old as writing. Yet the modern conception of social justice emerged with Enlightenment thought, rising prosperity, and the upheavals of industrialization, and has since been reshaped by diverse cultures and institutions. The article examines how social justice influenced major revolutions, inspired anti-colonial and civil rights movements, and guided the development of welfare states and international organizations such as the ILO. Despite major progress, profound inequalities persist, requiring renewed commitment to rights, solidarity, and inclusive public reasoning to advance social justice in the twenty-first century.

About the authors

Sergei has worked at the Institute for Applied Economic Studies (Ipea) in Brasília since 1998 and has been at the IPC-IG since 2015. His work has been on inequality, poverty, education, racial discrimination, social protection, and the labour market. He has been at the ILO since 2020 and is now in the Research Department.

Silvia is a 26-year-old public policy and international development professional. She has built her experience across both national and international institutions, working in the public sector in Italy and within UN organizations. She has contributed to research on inequality at the International Labour Organization (ILO) in the Research Department and is currently working with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in the Nutrition Department, strengthening her expertise in policies for sustainable agri-food systems and inclusive development."

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▶ Introduction

In the Georgian Lesser Caucasus Mountains, bordering Armenia and about ninety kilometres from the capital Tbilisi, there is a small town called Dmanisi. In this cold and windswept place there is a cemetery adjacent to a medieval cathedral. Archaeologists digging in the cemetery in the eighties and nineties came upon some bones much older than the early medieval remains they had been excavating. In fact, they unearthed a series of skulls about 1.8 million years old belonging to an archaic human species¹ known as *Homo erectus*.

These human ancestors led extremely difficult lives. The teeth of almost all individuals found in the various sites from this period show periods of starvation. Lives were often short, as can be seen by the many child skeletons found.² The Dmanisi skulls belonged to hunter-gatherers whose diet was heavy on meat and one of the skulls belonged to an older adult who had lost all his teeth long before his death. While it is impossible to assert with certainty the circumstances of his life, he was probably helped by his companions for many years, including by chewing his food for him, allowing him to survive years longer than might otherwise have been possible (Rightmire et al. 2017).

Whether due to compassion or a sense of duty, he was cared for.

Archaeological sites that show humans going to great lengths to care for each other are not exceptional. Neanderthals in Shanidar Cave in Iraq show signs of injuries so severe it likely impeded their ability to walk for many months or even years. Yet the evidence suggests they were cared for by others in their group until they recovered (Trinkaus and Zimmerman 1982). Similarly, a Neanderthal child found in Sima de los Huesos in Spain and a young adult *Homo sapiens* found in Salé, Morocco, both showed signs of congenital diseases that would have likely immobilized them, which means that they were cared for their entire lives (Hublin 2009).

Even in conditions at the edge of survival, humans have always found ways to support and care for one another. This has, of course, coexisted with the human capacity for cruelty and indifference to suffering, particularly regarding those not considered “us”, but the human capacity for empathy, a sense of duty by the stronger to the weaker and a sense of shared destiny have always been among our defining features.

Today humans have expanded to all corners of the globe and created societies that are prosperous in ways that our ancestors could only have wondered at. Yet despite these accomplishments, modern humans have also created inequalities that must have baffled the Dmanisi humans. How would one explain societies that have more than enough food to waste yet still allow some of their members to go hungry?

But humans have never given up on caring for each other. The human capacity for compassion, to put oneself in another’s place, is what underlies social justice. But empathy and compassion work better in small human communities where everyone knows each other. As societies become larger and more complex, people affected by each other’s actions will fall further and further

¹ “Archaic humans” is a term used to refer to people who belong to the genus “homo” – and are therefore humans – but are not classified as *Homo sapiens* (modern humans). The archaic humans in Dmanisi had brains smaller than ours and were also shorter than us, but they were humans.

² The child skeletons are not from Dmanisi itself, but palaeolithic sites are rife with child skeletons.

from each other's empathy circles (Sahlins 1954).³ In a large complex society, compassion must be reinforced (and in some cases even partially replaced) with rights and guaranteed by institutions.⁴ Rights and the institutions that guarantee them, even if premised on human compassion, are the fundamental basis for social justice in complex societies. Rights and institutions are also seen in an incipient form in early complex societies and the philosophical thought that underlies them from very early in history, as detailed below.

In today's world we discuss the right to food, to shelter, to medical care, to knowledge, to a voice and to decent work, among many other rights. The debates over how the benefits and burdens of society are shared constitute the quest for what we call social justice.

³ An "empathy circle" refers to the fact human beings usually find it easier to empathise with those closest to them. Empathy usually comes easier to members of one's own family, tribe, city and so on. Sahlins did not use the term "empathy," talking instead about positive and negative reciprocity, but the meaning is the same.

⁴ Evidently, not all institutions work towards a more just world. History is littered with exploitative institutions such as feudal servitude, slavery, monopolies and oligopolies, debt bondage and disenfranchisement, to name just a few.

▶ 1 The idea of social justice: a brief historical overview

Philosophical views on social justice can be influenced by contextual variables such as time, place, culture, and socio-economic conditions among others. But elements of what we would call today social justice are present in almost all philosophical traditions.

In Eastern Asia, the Confucian ideal of “Benevolence” or “humanity” (*ren*, 仁) emphasizes compassion and intolerance of human suffering (Chen 2024). According to Mencius, a truly benevolent government should prioritize the needs and interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. The Book of Rites, one of the pillars of the Confucian Canon, lays out what such good governance entails:

▶▶ *A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained.*

Book of Rites, Book VII, The Li Yun

The Buddhist *Sutta-Nipata* emphasizes that those who have power also bear corresponding responsibility for those who have less power. According to Buddha, the mother is responsible for her child not because she has given birth to the child, but because it is in her power to do for the child what the child cannot (Sen 2010, Pp 205-206).

In the Greek tradition, Plato devoted significant attention to social justice, even if he never used the term. His most famous dialogue, *The Republic*, can be understood as a foundational text on social justice, examining the distribution of wealth, the relationship between happiness and material conditions and the ideal structure of governance. Like many of his works, it offers few definitive conclusions, but it raises enduring and still-relevant questions about what a just society should look like.

Building on the foundations laid by his teacher Plato, Aristotle approached the question of social justice in a more systematic and prescriptive manner. He distinguished between two forms of justice: corrective and distributive. Corrective justice concerns the rectification of wrongs—what we might now call criminal justice—and is of limited relevance to the present discussion. More pertinent is distributive justice, which focuses on how honour, power and wealth should be allocated. According to Aristotle, such distribution should be based on merit⁵ rather than need (Aristotle and Ross 2005). Although his views were shaped by the values of his time and fall far short of contemporary understandings of social justice, Aristotle's work marks a significant early effort to frame justice as a question of how individuals relate to the larger society.

Arab philosopher and historian Ibn Khaldoun introduces the concept of *asabiyyah*, or social cohesion, which he associates with morality and human values. He argues that poverty is a result of lack of social cohesion. “All human beings must co-operate ... But what is obtained by the

⁵ And applicable only to citizens, not slaves or women.

cooperation of a group of human beings satisfies the need of a number many times greater than themselves. (Mohamed 2017) Ibn Khaldoun thus viewed poverty as a scourge that could be eliminated through social action. Ibn Khaldoun also was one of the first to put forth the idea that injustice threatens civilizations.

Across the world's major religious traditions, duties by the stronger to the weaker have been framed not just as a political or philosophical concept but as sacred obligations. The holy books of the great monotheistic religions such as the Talmud, the Bible and the Quran are filled with references to distribution, fairness and, in some cases, societal formulations that come very close to social justice. The Christian thinker Thomas Aquinas saw justice as the medium that binds individuals together in a society (Dierksmeier 2011). Without justice, a society is no more than bands of criminals seeking to impose their will on each other. *Zakat*, one of the five pillars of Islam, mandates each individual to give a share of his wealth to the less fortunate. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jain philosophies share the concept of "Daan," which means selfless charity to others without expecting rewards.

These moral imperatives also found their way into the legal codes of early civilizations. Hammurabi's code (1755 BC), well-known today for its cruel elements, also contained provisions that address economic vulnerability. For example, farmers whose crops are wiped away by floods pay neither their debts nor interest in that year (Hammurabi 2007). Not only does this provision deal with social justice but also put human labour as central to the reciprocal obligations that define it.

These historical concerns about distribution were not only theoretical, but can also be seen in social practices in antiquity. Aztec writings tell of a building in their capital city Tenochtitlan that was used exclusively for food storage to be distributed to those in need (Aguilar-Moreno 2007). Similar practices are well documented in Pharaonic Egypt (Bardonová 2019), Han China and the Roman Empire. In both Han China and the Roman Empire, in times of famine the wealthy were legally bound to help with distribution efforts, supplementing governmental efforts (Kim 2021).

While attention to fair distribution in emergencies can be found in these early societies, issues relating to paid work and compensation were addressed less consistently. There are few recorded laws or practices on working hours or earnings, but some shards of evidence can nonetheless be found. The law-book of Daduša from Ešnunna in Sumer stipulates that wages of textile workers must be based on the weight of the garments they produced and there are indications that workers who built the great monuments of Mesopotamia and Egypt were relatively well paid waged workers (Steinkeller and Hudson 2015).

Still, these early systems and ancient sources all fall far short of the modern view of social justice, which requires fairness for all human beings. Exclusions of large groups such as women and slaves are common, poverty is accepted as a permanent feature of human societies, the poor are time and again held responsible for their plight, and the solutions to social ills are frequently left to private charity and not institutions based on rights (Fleischacker 2004). Evidently there is immense variation in views, actions, laws and social thought – Sutta Nipata's claims to universal compassion and the responsibility of the powerful for the powerless are a far cry from Aristotle's defence of slavery – but nowhere do you find a statement of social justice as we understand it

today: a fair and full distribution of benefits and burdens among all human beings. And of course, these laws and social thought did not imagine a globalized world in which capitalism is the dominant economic system.⁶ This was to come later, and it was to come in a particular time and place.

The Enlightenment and political and industrial revolutions

In 1794, a fifty-year old mathematician named Nicolas de Condorcet lay dying of hunger and neglect in a French revolutionary prison. Shortly before his death, he finished an appeal for a new society without hunger or poverty. This appeal was called *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* and was backed up with numbers on income, revenue and costs, showing that, in theory, a society without want was not only desirable but possible.

Across the English Channel, another writer, Thomas Paine, was publishing an equivalent appeal, *Agrarian Justice*, drawing on new data on production and population that were becoming increasingly available to argue that it was possible to lift all citizens of the United Kingdom out of poverty. Both thinkers, using newly emerging statistical tools, demonstrated that material abundance — if distributed fairly — could ensure a dignified life for all.

Three years after the death of Condorcet, François Noel “Gracchus” Babeuf was guillotined for leading a conspiracy to establish a society along the lines argued for in the *Tableau* and in *Agrarian Justice*. While Babeuf’s conspiracy did not come even close to fruition, the “social question” was to dominate the revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Political rights alone were increasingly seen as insufficient to peasants and workers dying from cold, hunger and overwork in fields and early factories. A new concept, later called social justice, was taking shape. This concept demanded not just political equality but a fair distribution of burdens and benefits across society.

But Condorcet and Paine did not write in a vacuum. Two transformations were underway which opened the space for their contributions. The first was conceptual and the second material.

Condorcet and Paine were heirs to a host of Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke, Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Hobbes, Voltaire, Olympe de Gouges, Immanuel Kant, Mary Wollstonecraft and Adam Smith. These thinkers had been for a century challenging the divine and traditional foundations of hierarchy in Europe and proposing instead a new society based upon liberty, reason and the premise of equality. While their critique was initially against inherited privileges of the aristocracy, it was later extended to class and the exclusion of the working classes from civil rights and political participation. The Enlightenment critique of social stratification began to change public sentiment. While in the beginning of the eighteenth century, European writers warned darkly against lowborn people aspiring to “a degree beyond that which belongs to them,” formerly casually accepted terms like “the better sort of people” became morally suspect by the century’s end (Fleischacker 2004).

This change must be taken in context. During the period in which attitudes on class were changing, racism, sexism and colonialism were rampant. Slavery was widespread and social rights were few and far between. What is relevant is that the old ideas of hierarchical societies as natural or

⁶ Trade and finance have existed for centuries. While global trade only began in earnest in the 17th and 18th century, inter-regional trade had been going on for centuries prior to this.

given by God were increasingly on the defensive. Equality between men and women was often absent from many Enlightenment works, in spite of the efforts of the early feminists Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft and their later inheritors such as Beatrice Webb and J.S. Mill.⁷ Likewise, slavery would not be legally abolished in Europe and its colonies for another century, but the ideas in circulation in Europe and increasingly elsewhere clearly pointed to another world being possible.

This questioning of hierarchical society was influenced by European contact with other cultures (Graeber and Wengrow 2021), as well as from Greco-Roman ideas, many arriving via the Islamic world. Indeed, some of the Enlightenment philosophers explicitly acknowledged the influence of other cultures in their writings. Thinkers such as Kandiaronk, a chief of the Huron people whose thoughts were published by French explorer and philosopher the Baron Louis-Armand Lahontan, did not just defend their own traditions but also analysed and criticized European societies. Montesquieu also used the perspective of non-Europeans to criticize European societies. The great navigations and the confrontation with alternative systems of thought were a crucial component of the Enlightenment (Graeber and Wengrow 2021).

Accompanying the Enlightenment's challenges to existing hierarchies was a material transformation which constitutes the second precondition for executable social justice in a market economy: increasing levels of prosperity and the birth of social statistics to assess its levels. The Industrial Revolution began in Britain in the eighteenth century and spread over the course of the nineteenth into other Western European countries and the United States. Table 1 shows GDP per capita in the United Kingdom in two centuries before the Enlightenment (1600 and 1700) and at the publication dates of some relevant works that laid the philosophical foundations to social justice.⁸

► **Table 1 GDP per capita in the UK and publication dates of enlightenment works**

Year	Author/Work	UK GDP per capita in 2011 prices
1600		1,691
1700		2,412
1762	J. J. Rousseau. <i>The Social Contract</i>	2,917
1776	Adam Smith. <i>Wealth of Nations</i>	2,962
1780	J. Bentham. <i>Principles of Morals</i>	3,049
1787	Immanuel Kant. <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i>	2,898
1795	Nicolas de Condorcet. <i>Tableau Historique</i>	3,207
1797	Thomas Paine. <i>Agrarian Justice</i>	3,167
1859	J. S. Mill. <i>On Liberty</i>	5,031
1875	Karl Marx. <i>Critique of the Gotha Program</i>	5,950

Source: Madison Project.

⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft was also vehemently opposed to other exclusions from the pool of those who have human rights, such as slaves. She condemned the American Revolution for its lopsided fight for the liberty of only some while ignoring the liberty of others (Sen 2005).

⁸ These are all western European authors, but the concept of social justice burst out into the Americas, Asia and Africa as well.

When Rousseau published *The Social Contract* in 1762, GDP per capita in the United Kingdom was about 20% higher than in 1700 and about 70% higher than in 1600.⁹ It grew throughout the nineteenth century to the present day, creating an ever greater surplus that could be, in principle, used to right distributive wrongs. Yet until the late nineteenth century the fruits of these productivity increases were almost entirely appropriated by a small group of people. The benefits of industrialization accrued to a narrow elite, while the working classes endured long hours, hazardous conditions and poverty. In addition, slavery, colonialism and other primitive forms of exploitation were still rampant and growing throughout the nineteenth century.

But with improvements in statistics and accounting, authors such as Condorcet and Paine could do the arithmetic and show that it was possible to improve the lives of wide swathes of society. The arithmetic of social justice did not go unchallenged. Writers such as Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo reasoned that a society without want was impossible. Their arguments, though entirely logical, were premised on an antiquated and highly prejudiced view of the poor that predicted that any income gains would be erased through unfettered population growth, thus limiting any material gains for that class. But Malthus and Ricardo were wrong: when the poor leave poverty behind, get an education and women have some control over their reproduction, the fertility rate invariably falls (Galor 2012). Malthus and Ricardo also underestimated the power of increases in productivity to raise outputs to unprecedented limits.

⁹ GDP per capita of economies three or four hundred years ago can be calculated only approximately. Statistics were imperfect and concepts like the value of production also evolved over time.

► 2 Refinement, evolution and redefinition of the concept of social justice

The new conditions brought about by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution not only continued but intensified during the course of the nineteenth century. Incomes and inequality rose in tandem, propelling arguments in favour of social justice. These calls took on the various forms but three in particular are of interest: utilitarianism, Marxism and liberalism. All three continue to influence the debates of today on social justice.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a philosophical approach stipulating that what is morally right is what produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Ohlsson and Przybylinski 2023). The limitations of utilitarianism become evident when attempting to weigh the good of some against the good of others. Can the enjoyment of a delicious meal come at the cost of those who toiled to make it? Can the flourishing of a society be desirable if it comes at the expense of the misery of a minority? Utility is necessarily a subjective assessment. To those who raise this objection, comparisons of utility between people are simply impossible. Economists such as F. A. Hayek, who opposed the search for social justice (Hayek 1963), and Amartya Sen, who is one of its greatest champions (Sen 2000), are in agreement that the utilitarian calculus is simply impossible.¹⁰

Yet in spite of its shortcomings, utilitarianism has made a crucial contribution to the social justice debate: justice must be for the many, not the few. Any system which leaves large swathes of the population with meagre means of subsistence and opportunity is compromised both in theory and practice.

Marxism

While widely recognised for their analysis of the relations between capital and labour, Marx and Engels had an equivocal relationship with the idea of social justice. On the one hand they viewed justice as historically determined. Slavery was perfectly just in antiquity; serfdom was just under feudalism; and exploitation of workers is just under capitalism. Within the workings of the capitalist system, according to Marx, the exploitation of the worker by the capitalist cannot possibly be unjust since it is exactly what made the system work. Theirs is an analytical and historically determined justice concept, devoid of a moral dimension. On the other hand, justice as an ideal can provide a standard according to which each society can be measured. The ideal of justice would be human emancipation in which humanity would achieve its full potential and using this ideal Marx and Engels find the capitalist system wanting and doomed to be eventually overcome (Ohlsson and Przybylinski 2023).

¹⁰ This argument is very well laid out in the short story *The ones who walk away from Omelas*, by Ursula LeGuin. It tells the story of a near-perfect society whose flourishing comes at the expense of the utter misery of a single child.

However, their framing of alienation and exploitation provided insights into the workings of the capitalist system (Marx 1932). According to Marx and Engels, as capitalism stripped workers of their humanity, they became alienated from what they produce, from their own labour, from other human beings and, finally, from their own selves. The idea that work should never be divorced from the human being providing it is valid to this day and the ILO principle that “Labour is not a commodity” can be traced back to this analysis.

The second crucial contribution of Marx and Engels was their analysis of exploitation. Exploitation comes from the fact that the worker is paid less than the value of the commodities produced. While this definition must be modified in today’s world, it provides a starting point from which one can arrive at fair remuneration through rigorous reasoning.

While undoubtedly social justice goes beyond the exploitation of workers and must address distributive issues among all human beings, the centrality of the world of work to distributive issues under capitalism means that the above contributions of Marx and Engels are today an integral part of the social justice concept. It is difficult to imagine social justice in a world defined by alienation and exploitation.

Liberalism

Among the post-Enlightenment traditions, Liberalism has grappled the most with social justice. Inspired in part by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, liberal social justice theory is grounded in respect for individuals as free, rational agents with dignity and agency. While nineteenth century philosopher J. S. Mill was also a utilitarian (or at least claimed allegiance to utilitarianism), he differed from previous utilitarians by emphasizing that justice must be realized not just in outcomes but in process, through rights and social dialogue and public deliberation. He also believed justice could only be realized if it respected individual rights, including those of women (Mill 1869).

But today the best-known formulation of liberal social justice is that of John Rawls. Building on Kant and Mill, Rawls (1971) formulated both a thought process to arrive at a just society and a guide to what such a just society should look like.

The process is what he called the veil of ignorance. Rawls created a thought experiment whereby all questions of distribution of those essential goods such as income, wealth, health, knowledge, power, respect, recognition should be decided as if one is ignorant of one’s societal position. Each would know neither who they were nor their allocated income, wealth, health, knowledge and so on. Individuals should debate social justice as if they did not know their station in life so as not be self-serving in their arguments

By using the veil of ignorance, Rawls (1971) concludes that a just distribution of anything would have three characteristics:

1. All individuals would have access to basic liberties and human rights. There can be no social justice without basic human rights. This is sometimes called the greatest equal liberty principle.

- 2a. Inequalities in the distribution of any of these goods (income, power, knowledge) are only allowable if they obey equality of opportunity. There can be no social justice if certain opportunities are only open to some.

2b. Inequalities, even those that flow from equal opportunities, are only legitimate if they are to the advantage of the least advantaged. In other words, making oneself richer than others is only acceptable if all others are made at least somewhat richer as well. This is usually called the difference principle.

Rawls's framework was powerful, but it came with limitations.

Rawls never defined what level of inequality is acceptable, only how to think about it.

A second limitation is that Rawls never provided much of a practical roadmap on how to go from one distributional situation to another, nor did he provide good methods to compare two distributions that fail to live up to his three principles. His was a vision of ideal justice rather than a practical guide for reform.

Partially in answer to the limitations of the Rawlsian approach, the Indian economist Amartya Sen argues that we can never achieve a perfect state of social justice and, moreover, it is not even necessary (Sen 2010).

To illustrate that perfect social justice is unattainable, he uses the parable of the three children and the flute. According to this fable, one child made a flute with his own labour, but does not know how to play it, a second child did not make it but knows how to play it and a third neither made it nor knows how to play it but has no other toys to play with. All three have a valid claim on the flute and there is no set of non-arbitrary rules that will favour one over the other. None of Rawls' principles help us in deciding who gets the flute.

Likewise, even if there was a unambiguous ideal of a just society, it would not necessarily help in charting a course towards greater justice in the here and now. The only way to do this is through social dialogue, which Sen calls public reasoning. In this, Sen echoes German philosopher Jurgen Habermas who has long argued that the only way to achieve social justice is through communicative rationality – defined as a societal dialogue in which each side presents their case as they see it and all attempt to achieve a compromise, even if it leaves no one fully satisfied.

Sen also provides elements for public reasoning through his theory of capabilities (Sen 2000), further developed by Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2011). This theory holds that using metrics that result from things actually achieved by humans, such as income or consumption or even caloric intake, are a limited measure of well-being since they do not take liberty into consideration. People must be free to decide what to choose and they will choose different things. While Bettina may value consumption and be willing to work hard to achieve it, Marwan may value contemplation and thus wish to work only enough to get by (Sen 1980). In this sense, Sen and Nussbaum argue that what societies should aspire to and what underlies social justice is equality of the freedom to do as one chooses, or in their words, equality of capabilities.

While this is far from a complete review on the evolution of the idea of social justice, it shows how social justice evolved from a vague moral ideal to a political imperative, ever more precisely defined. We now turn to how the quest for social justice shaped our societies.

► 3 Social justice in practice: worldwide revolutions and the construction of the early welfare state

After the American and French revolutions, the social question – by definition premised on social justice and the challenge to existing hierarchies premised on birth and wealth – largely defined the century in Europe, in the Americas and elsewhere. The American Revolution of 1776 began over a distributive quarrel over taxation and representation – in other words, over the distribution of income and voice. In France, concerns about social inequality grew more prominent as the French Revolution marched forward and became the defining issue in the July Revolution of 1830 which overthrew the Bourbon monarchy. Social justice also animated the nationalist revolutions. While the 1830 Belgian revolution succeeded, uprisings in Ireland, France, the German Confederation, Hungary, the Italian states, Denmark, Moldavia, Wallachia and Poland that took place in 1848 mostly failed. The Paris Commune of 1871 exemplified the centrality of the social question in the revolutionary discourse.

The concept of social justice also began once again to travel, changing and incorporating strands of thought outside the Atlantic context in which it was born.

Social justice outside of Europe: the battles against slavery, servitude and colonialism

In 1791, just fifteen years after the American Revolution, the enslaved people in the French colony of Saint Domingue (now Haiti) rose in revolt against their oppression and expropriation. The entire Haitian Revolution was about the relationship between production and distribution – slavery being the ultimate violation of social justice. Toussaint Louverture, the movement's leader, was inspired not only by Enlightenment philosophers but also by African traditions (Nicholson, n.d.). The synthesis of these two traditions resulted in an ideology that led to the second independent state in the Americas.

Social justice was likewise central to the ideologies guiding the independence of the Iberian colonies during the nineteenth century. Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, who started the Mexican War of Independence and whose statue today stands at the entrance of the International Labour Organization, was inspired by Enlightenment philosophers but also indigenous thought (Saladino Garcia 2014). Consequently, issues such as indigenous servitude and land reform were at the centre in the Mexican War of Independence, which began in September of 1810. In November of that year, Hidalgo published a decree abolishing slavery in Mexico and the following month he declared an agrarian reform according to which all land would belong to those who worked it, thereby also abolishing servitude. Hidalgo did not live to see the implementation of his policies since he was executed before Mexico achieved its independence in 1821. De jure slavery ended shortly after independence, in 1829, but land reform and thereby the effective end of indigenous servitude would have to wait for the Mexican Revolution, nearly a century later.

The two leaders of South American Independence, Simon Bolivar and José de San Martín, both spent years of their lives studying in Europe, exposed to Enlightenment philosophy. Upon their return, they also participated in the contemporaneous debates over independence and social justice that were taking place in South America. In 1816 Bolivar freed the slaves who fought for independence and in 1819 proposed a bill to the Congress of Venezuela to free all remaining

enslaved individuals. The bill took 38 years to be approved, but finally in 1854 slavery was entirely abolished in Venezuela. San Martín equally abolished hereditary slavery in Peru, following the example of laws passed in Chile in 1811 and in the Virreinato del Río de la Plata in 1813.

On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Enlightenment ideas interacted with previous Chinese thought on social justice. During the Qing Dynasty, thinkers such as Liang Qichao (梁启超) and Kang Youwei (康有为) reinterpreted Confucianism through the lens of Enlightenment philosophy (Chen 2024). They were the intellectual mentors of the Hundred Days' Reform, an ultimately failed effort to modernize and humanize China. These reinterpretations of traditional Chinese thought became increasingly urgent considering the failures and humiliations of the nineteenth century, when China lost wars, territory and also dignity at the hands of the western powers and Japan.

In India the concept of social justice likewise gained traction during the nineteenth century. Jotirao Phule lobbied the British Colonial Government during the late nineteenth century to promote policies that would benefit low caste farmers and labourers. At roughly the same time Tarabai Shinde campaigned for equality between men and women. Some years later, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, an upper-caste Indian, dedicated his life to fighting against social injustice and promoting independence. Gokhale campaigned in favour of education against child marriage, against indentured servitude and in favour of independence from Britain. As one of the early intellectual leaders of the Indian National Congress (Guha 2024), Gokhale laid the ideological groundwork that would later lead to the movements of the twentieth century led by Gandhi and Nehru. All of these Indian thinkers merged Enlightenment thought and Indian philosophy, redefining the concept of social justice.

While not all these revolutions led in the short run to more prosperous, egalitarian and humanitarian societies, they do show how in the nineteenth century the idea of social justice emerged in various societies and evolved in light of different intellectual and cultural traditions.

In addition to the intellectual traditions that argued for redistribution of societal benefits, leading to massive political change and revolutions such as those in Latin America, China and India, other intellectual traditions value reciprocity, collective responsibility, social bonds and relationships. These traditions also contributed to the intellectual foundations of social justice.

One of the best known is Ubuntu, best summarized through the statement “a person is only a person through other people.” This African philosophy emphasizes that “humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me.” (Eze, 2010).

In the Pacific Islands social justice is expressed in traditions of sharing, reciprocity, communal living, and collective well-being. Practices such as Fiji's *kerekere*, Samoa's *fa'a Samoa*, Tonga's *faka Tonga*, Vanuatu's *namangi*, and Kiribati's *bubuti* reflect systems in which resources and support are distributed according to need, mutual obligation, and community responsibility rather than individual accumulation (Ongolea and Houkamau, 2024). These traditions embody core principles of fairness, equity and care for the vulnerable.

The incipient welfare state

Concurrent with the growing attention to the concept of social justice and the revolutionary fervour it inspired, both incomes and income inequality continued to rise as industrialization advanced.

The labour demands of industrialization also meant that workers who were minimally healthy and educated were increasingly needed for production (Wilensky 1974). It was also clearer by the day to workers and peasants that life could be better than the meagre existence they had been told were all they could expect out of this world. Workers and peasants in colonized areas of the globe also became increasingly aware of rising inequalities and the possibilities, however distant, of a better life. Factory workers, in particular, were facing dismal living conditions. Industrialization weakened the pre-existing traditional social protection mechanisms based on family and community. However inadequate these institutions may have been, when workers left the rural areas to work in what some called the “dark satanic mills” (Blake 1810), they also left behind the social supports that they had available prior to their move. Finally, higher productivity meant there was more to distribute, be it through higher wages or through taxation.

Despite frequent violent repression, an increasingly organized and politically effective labour movement took up arms – usually metaphorically but sometimes literally – against these conditions and pressed for change.

As a response to socio-economic unrest and the growing mobilization of the labour movement, states eventually began to respond with what would later become known as the welfare state. Although the process was far from linear, rising pressure from below eventually led to action from above.

One of the earliest successes was more humane working hours. Labour historians estimate that in the United Kingdom average working hours rose from 1620 hours per year for peasants in the thirteenth century to 3105-3588 for factory workers in the Eighteenth (International Labour Organization 2008). Reducing working hours thus became a foundational aim of labour law (Lee et al. 2007). Child labour and working hours for children were also a central concern. The 1819 Factory Act in the United Kingdom limited working hours for children in the cotton industry to 72 per week. This was extended to all factories in 1833 and then lowered to 60 hours in 1847. Women’s working hours were similarly limited: capped at 72 hours in 1844 and then reduced to 60 per week in 1847 (Rasmussen 2023). In France, working time for children aged 8 to 12 was limited to eight hours per day (Le Crom 1998). Over time, these early and very limited protections were expanded to all workers, so that the ten-hour workday was relatively widespread in Europe by the start of World War I (Lee et al. 2007). New Zealand and the United States went further and introduced the 48-hour work week in the early 1900’s.

Another important issue that workers (and employers and governments) pursued to achieve social justice was the creation of social insurance systems (i.e., social security). In response to social pressures, governments began offering sector-specific social protection schemes. These included provisions for seamen in France (1791), miners in Norway (1842), military and civil servants in Uruguay (1829 and 1838) (Sienra 2007), railway workers in Prussia (1844), miners in Austria (1854), factory workers in Switzerland (1877) and Civil War soldiers in the United States (1862).

The first universal compulsory social insurance system for workers was established in Saxony (today part of Germany) in 1868. The adoption of old-age pensions by the new nation of Germany in 1881 coupled with sickness and disability insurance, a few years later created the first full-fledged social security system in the world by 1889. This model inspired similar initiatives in the United Kingdom in 1908 and in France in 1910 and 1928. By the First World War, 32 countries had adopted some sort of legislation providing accident or occupational hazard insurance, 18 countries had adopted sickness insurance, 13 countries had some kind of old-age pensions and 7 had adopted unemployment benefits (Samans 2021).

Social insurance is a good example of why it is too narrow to evaluate social justice only from the lens of income distribution. Accident and sickness insurance, old-age and survivors' pensions, and unemployment benefits all redistribute large amounts of income, but they are as important in sharing and reducing risk. In a world characterized by radical uncertainty, sharing and reducing risk is as important as distributing income.

Finally, wages are a crucial part of fair distribution. The end of the nineteenth century also saw the world's first minimum wage enacted by New Zealand in 1894, followed by the Australian state of Victoria two years later and the United Kingdom in 1904 (International Labour Organization 2017). Most Canadian states followed between 1918 and 1920 (Employment and Social Development Canada 2019). A few countries, such as the United States (1938), Uruguay (1923) and Mexico (1931) (Cotonieto-Martínez 2020), established minimum wages during the interwar period following the ILO Minimum Wage Fixing Machinery Convention (No. 26) of 1928.

Conterminously with the rise of the welfare states through conflict and compromise, the first age of globalization was also reaching its apogee. The global trade to GDP ratio rose from about 10% around 1870 to nearly 25% at the eve of the First World War (Estevadeordal et al. 2003). The countries most engaged in trade were exactly those in the process of constructing nascent welfare states. It did not take long for governments, workers and employers to realize that differences in labour protections could create competitive imbalances between firms operating in different countries. Among other reasons, this led to the creation of the International Association for Labour Legislation in 1900, an association dedicated to the promotion of labour standards in all countries (Maul 2019).

In 1914, growing nationalist tensions erupted into the First World War, and much of the world entered an era in which citizens were asked to make heavy sacrifices – and many millions were asked to make the ultimate sacrifice – to ensure victory for their side. At first, patriotic fervour fuelled these sacrifices, but this enthusiasm waned as the war dragged on (Morelon 2018). There was, on all sides, a growing feeling that the burdens of war were not fairly shared. While some made fortunes off war, others had to endure long hours for limited pay. Food shortages and riots became increasingly common. These tensions culminated in major upheavals, including the Russian Revolution and unsuccessful revolutionary attempts in Germany, Hungary and Finland, among others. By the time the Great War ended, the world was engulfed by rebellion.

► 4 The twentieth century: social justice and the creation of the multilateral system

Two centuries of Enlightenment thought, a nineteenth century marked by industrial progress and social unrest, a pre-war recognition of the need for international regulation of labour standards, the horrors of the Great War and the desire to prevent its recurrence, coupled with fears of revolution, all came together to embody the idea of worldwide social justice into an institution: the International Labour Organization (ILO). Forty articles of the Versailles Treaty were devoted to the international regulation of labour and the ILO. The final article on labour (article 427) lays out the principles that should apply to all workers.¹¹

The ILO's connection to social justice is embedded in the very foundations of the institution. It lies in the first phrase of the preamble: "Whereas universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice." Labour rights are thus a projection of social justice upon the world of work.

From its inception the ILO grappled with contradictions of the society that created it. The tension between universal labour rights and the reality of colonial empires where these rights were denied and the difficulty in integrating the rights of women workers were particularly salient. Nevertheless, the ILO succeeded in establishing a comprehensive body of international labour standards. In the few interwar years, conventions were adopted on working hours, unemployment, maternity protection, night work, forced labour, occupational safety and health, child labour, the minimum wage, old-age and invalidity insurance, paid leave and labour statistics, among others.

Equally important was the method the ILO followed to establish international labour standards: tripartite social dialogue. The ILO has never mandated labour rights in unilateral top-down decisions. Every convention and recommendation must be discussed and approved by its constituents: unions, employer organizations and governments who represent workers, employers and the public at large. This echoes the views of Rawls, Sen and Habermas on how to achieve social justice.

Ultimately, the international system, overseen by the League of Nations and to which the ILO initially belonged, collapsed in the chaos of the second world war. Once the war was over, the only pre-war multilateral institution that survived was the ILO.¹² It was subsequently integrated into the new international order: the United Nations. This moment can be seen as a second foundation of the ILO and the guiding document of this period was the 1944 Declaration of Philadelphia (Maul 2019). The Declaration articulated the ILO's philosophy of social justice through four key principles:

"(a) labour is not a commodity;

(b) freedom of expression and of association are essential to sustained progress;

¹¹ Labour is not a commodity, employers and employees enjoy the right of association, all are entitled to fair wages and working hours, none should be discriminated against and children should not be engaged in work that is detrimental to their development.

¹² The ILO's original mandate was established in the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919.

(c) poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere;

(d) the war against want requires to be carried on with unrelenting vigour within each nation, and by continuous and concerted international effort in which the representatives of workers and employers, enjoying equal status with those of governments, join with them in free discussion and democratic decision with a view to the promotion of the common welfare.”

The Philadelphia Declaration expressed the ILO's commitment to social justice more clearly than its original Constitution, which primarily focused on the Organization's functions. The Declaration, by contrast, was entirely devoted to the Organization's guiding philosophy which at its core is social justice.

Likewise, key principles of United Nations were inspired by the concept of social justice. While the term itself does not appear in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, wording such as “inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” embody the concept.

Late in the twentieth century – following the end of the Cold War – the United Nations in general and the ILO in particular, renewed their commitment to social justice. In 1998, the ILO published the *Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work* in which freedom of association and collective bargaining, the end of forced or compulsory labour, the end of child labour, the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation, and a safe and healthy working environment are recognized as fundamental and enabling rights, which all countries must seek to enforce, irrespective of whether or not they have signed the corresponding conventions.

In 1999, the ILO formulated the Decent Work Agenda structured around four pillars:

- I)** employment creation, meaning that more people will be able to contribute to society through their labour;
- II)** social protection, meaning that those unable to make a living on their own will be protected from living in want;
- III)** rights at work, meaning that workers will not be subject to unacceptable risks, not be over-worked and adequately compensated for their contribution to society;
- IV)** social dialogue, which provides the mechanism for collectively determining how to achieve these outcomes.

It can be argued that Decent Work is the materialization, or at least one possible materialization, of social justice in the world of work.

In 2006, the United Nations issued the *Social Justice in an Open World: The Role of the United Nations* declaration, explicitly engaging with the concept. Two years later the ILO followed with the *Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization*, updating the principles of the Philadelphia declaration for a world undergoing rapid economic and technological integration. This agenda was later adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015 and became integral to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 2019 *Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work* reaffirmed these principles.

The concept of social justice was also taken up and modified by social movements of all types and in all places including national liberation movements, the feminist movement and civil rights movements.

Decolonization and civil rights

One of the defining features of the post-war era was decolonization. Forty-nine countries signed the United Nations Charter at its founding; today there are 193 member states. Decolonization was a heterogeneous process: in some places it was (mostly) peaceful while in others it was a result of wars of liberation, some of which were very bloody. While some former colonies retained strong links with their former colonizers, others severed all links.

All or almost all colonial states involved oppressive social hierarchies in which the colonizer held a superior status. The psychoanalyst and revolutionary Frantz Fanon described colonial Martinique as a rigid pyramid: big whites, poor whites, mixed race, “evolved” blacks and finally other blacks (Fanon 1952) – a strict hierarchy in direct denial of all humanist thought. Rebellion was commonplace and colonial rule was maintained almost everywhere through extreme violence or the threat thereof. Given the systemic denial of social justice in colonial rule, the anti-colonial struggle was not only about independence but often also for social justice more broadly.

Yet independence frequently brought shattered dreams and broken promises. In most countries, it paved the way for civil wars, political instability, coups and countercoups, massacres and dictatorships. The realities of the Cold War, the lack of governing experience of many liberation leaders, an international economic order tilted against newly independent states as well as the difficult colonial legacies made the road to both prosperity and social justice difficult and turbulent.

Nevertheless, much has changed and much was achieved. In India and Indonesia, for example, pre-independence growth rates of per capita GDP¹³ were 0.3% and 0.6%, respectively, compared to post-independence growth rates of 2.6% and 3.3%. From 1975 to the present, the gap in life expectancy between the 24 member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the rest of the world narrowed from 15 to 10 years. Globally, life expectancy for the non-OECD countries increased by about 25 years between 1950 and 2019. Much of this can be attributed to vaccines and other medical and sanitation technology, but these improvements in living conditions contrast starkly with the flat trends observed before independence.

Racism was a particularly pernicious driver as well as result of the colonial enterprise. While racial or ethnic discrimination has long been a blight upon humanity, the institutionalized racism of the colonial era sowed the seeds for many of the racial and ethnic differences we still observe among us, and intolerable racial disparities persist in our midst today.

Few figures better embody the intertwining of racial justice, peace and poverty alleviation than Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. Their lives exemplify the ongoing global struggle for social justice.

¹³ India and Indonesia were chosen because there are long series of production and population, that cover both the pre and post-colonial periods (The Maddison Project). In many colonies, the colonial power did not even bother to count the population.

Women's rights

The struggles for equality between men and women and for social justice have been closely intertwined in the twentieth century, but this has not always been so. Early theorists of justice from the Enlightenment and nineteenth century often ignored or explicitly excluded women. While exceptions such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympia de Gouge, Harriet Taylor, Beatrice Webb and John Stuart Mill did exist, women were generally absent from these works, written mostly by men. The inclusion of women through gender-neutral language, such as saying “men and women” as opposed to “men” or “humanity” as opposed “mankind” does little to address the deeper omission of women’s experiences and their condition.

In order to include women in discussions of justice, certain issues must be broached.

First, the family must be recognized as a political and economic institution. Many theories relegate it to the private realm, outside the discussion of justice, failing to recognize the burden placed on women by home and care responsibilities (Ohlsson and Przybylinski 2023). While the private realm is far from the only place where unequal gender relations exist, that inequality must be addressed for social justice to be achieved. The inclusion of the family in the discussion of justice also has consequences for the relations between individuals and the State: the welfare state and labour rights were originally (and to an extent still are) built around the male breadwinner model.

A second issue is that recognition, voice and representation are as important as (economic) redistribution. While undoubtedly many non-feminist authors have raised the issues of recognition, voice and representation, these are central to gender equity. Women are often ignored because they have been first denied a voice.

Finally, the methodological individualism of liberal social justice theory must be broadened to include not only individuals but also groups as the subjects of social justice. According to feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young groups “... are not simply collections of people, for they are more fundamentally intertwined with the identities of the people described as belonging to them” (Young and Allen 2022). Patricia is not only Patricia and Peter not only Peter. Patricia is Patricia and a woman and Peter is Peter and a man. Quite possibly, Patricia may not just be a woman, but an afro-Colombian woman, or an afro-Colombian working-class woman. How these different identities interact, both as an individual sees her or himself and, crucially, how others see her or him, is called intersectionality and it has become central to discussions on social justice during the second half of the twentieth century, bringing together new debates such as LGBTQ+ rights, disability and racial identification.

The Environment

One of the consequences of population growth and increased consumption is that the environment has come under increasing stress. While our ancestors certainly fouled their environment and thereby often harmed themselves, the scale of devastation of the 20th and 21st centuries is unprecedented. The air, water and land have become increasingly polluted. The International

Union for Conservation of Nature¹⁴ reviewed the status of 127,596 species and found 1406 extinctions. This amounts to more than 1 per cent of all species, which may not appear alarming, but a third of all species are at danger of extinction and the extinction rate has increased at least 100-fold. In the last few decades, carbon dioxide emissions in the atmosphere have changed the climate of the entire planet, leading to droughts, floods, hurricanes and also many more hot days.

The impacts of changes in nature and the environment have not been equally distributed among us (ILO 2019). The distribution of the benefits and burdens associated with environmental degradation is *par excellence* a social justice issue. For example, if we look at the pressing issue of carbon dioxide-induced climate change, the bottom half of the income distribution responsible for a mere 12 per cent of emissions, will suffer three-quarters of the climate-induced losses (Chancel, Bothe and Voiturez, 2023). Since the late nineteenth century, caring for the environment has been a political issue. More recently, the fair sharing of the benefits of a healthy environment and of the burdens of caring for it has been part of the social justice debate (Wood-Donnelly, 2023).

¹⁴ <https://www.iucnredlist.org/>

▶ Conclusion

Social justice in the twenty-first century

Today, we find ourselves in a world in which paradoxically, the ideas underlying social justice have widespread acceptance (even if the term “social justice” has become associated with specific partisan leanings in some political contexts) but its effective implementation remains somewhat elusive. We are the heirs of a grand tradition spanning centuries of theoretical formulation as well as political struggle. This tradition has sought to advance a vision of a world ruled by fairness and not by arbitrary injustice.

Today, the concept of social justice – understood as a fair sharing of burdens and benefits among the members of a given society – is expansive. After two centuries of refinement since its birth, we have a clearer idea of what social justice is and isn't. It must be for the many and not the few; it applies to all people; it must be premised on human rights, equal opportunities and fair distribution; it does not concern only income and wealth but also risk, recognition and voice; it is incompatible with slavery, servitude, exploitation, alienation or the subjugation of one group of people by another; and it must be compatible, and indeed premised on, human liberty. We know that the means to achieve social justice is through societal dialogue. Today, we have legal and policy tools, such as social protection and labour rights, among others, to address social justice and we have statistical tools to measure it.

Yet we are still painfully far from any state resembling in which benefits and burdens of living in society are fairly shared. A randomly selected human being from the eight billion alive today is more likely to have their opportunities and life chances shaped by birthplace, gender, or parental background than by individual merit, effort or need. Progress has undoubtedly been made: the randomly chosen person today will likely live a longer, healthier, wealthier and more productive life than a randomly chosen person one hundred or even fifty years ago and much more so than the Dmanisi mammoth hunters. It is less clear that the gaps in these desirable outcomes are smaller between any two randomly chosen people today than fifty or one hundred years ago. We have undoubtedly gone far in our quest for social justice but remain today far from Martin Luther King's dream that “little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

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► Advancing social justice, promoting decent work

The International Labour Organization is the United Nations agency for the world of work. We bring together governments, employers and workers to improve the working lives of all people, driving a human-centred approach to the future of work through employment creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue.

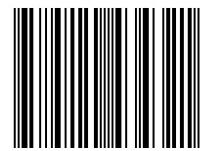
Contact details

Research Department (RESEARCH)

International Labour Organization
Route des Morillons 4
1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland
T +41 22 799 6530
research@ilo.org
www.ilo.org/research



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