The Return of Social Justice
and the Possibility of Universals

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Social justice is back on the geographical agenda. This paper briefly sets the scene, and goes on to explore the possibility of universals in the theory and practice of social justice. After examining the obstacles of relativism and partiality, a case is made for social justice as equalization, with John Rawls' principle of advantage to society's worst-off acting as a constraint. Such a conception of social justice gains strength from being viewed as an integral component of a good way of life, which responds to the universality of basic human needs while recognizes cultural diversity in the manner in which they are met.

"The crisis of modern consciousness cries out for a new ethico-political concept of justice" (Heller, 1987).

Debates about social justice are firmly back on the geographical agenda. This may be exemplified by David Harvey's return to a subject to which he made such a notable contribution two decades ago (Harvey, 1992, 1993), by a session at the 1993 annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers celebrating the twentieth anniversary of *Social Justice and the City* (Harvey, 1973)—which has generated a special issue of *Urban Geography*, and by a session on relevance, policy and social justice at the 1995 conference of the Institute of British Geographers. I have closely associated myself with this movement (Smith, 1992a, 1992b, 1994, 1995), resurrecting an interest in social justice first explored in the development of a welfare approach to human geography (Smith, 1977). Here I begin by sketching out the context within which questions of social justice, and morality more generally, have recently come to the fore in human geography, and then go on to address a central question of current concern: the possibility of universals.

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The explicit engagement of human geography with social justice dates from the latter part of the 1960s, when growing dissatisfaction with the spatial science approach provoked what became known as radical geography. This came to a head in David Harvey's *Social Justice and the City* (1973). Spatial or territorial aspects of justice have continues to attract some attention ever since (e.g. Pirie, 1983; Boyne and Powell, 1991). However, geographical interest in social justice more generally evaporated as the analytical aspects of Marxism which came to captivate an increasing number of human geographers tended to subdue a normative perspective.

It was the post-structural turn in the 1980s which eventually generated renewed interest in what might broadly be described as the moral dimension of geographical inquiry. Values had been involved in the earlier radical movement, as exemplified by Buttimer (1974), but geography's new preoccupation with moral issues has taken place in the context of a fundamental change in the intellectual environment. This is the emergence of postmodernism, as a challenge to the established Enlightenment thinking of the modern era. Important themes within postmodernism include skepticism concerning the universal truth claims of grand theory or meta-narratives, and an emphasis on human diversity and difference.

The (re)discovery of a moral dimension has been a major feature of human geography in recent years. A statement by the Social and Cultural Geography Study Group Committee (1991) of the Institute of British Geographers refers to investigations of the geography of everyday moralities, or how particular peoples in particular places hold their particular views on good or bad, right and wrong, just and unjust. This reflects a shift of emphasis from the narrow distributional issues central to radical geography in the early 1970s to a less explicitly spatial concern with problems of social justice very much on the agenda of contemporary moral and political philosophy.

TOWARDS A BROADER CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

In *Beyond Justice*, Agnes Heller (1987) explains how the ethical and political aspects of the traditional concept of justice were torn apart during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The former came to constitute the modern field of ethics or moral philosophy. The latter became focused on institutional arrangements (socio-political justice, as Heller terms it), less and less concerned with the best possible moral world. The question of the best possible social world became largely a matter of the just distribution, or what is now commonly referred to as social justice. Even the attempt by John Rawls (1971) to replace the teleological theory of utilitarianism by a deontological conception of justice as fairness and right in itself is thus "the shabby remnant of the 'sum total of virtues' that was once called 'justice'" (Heller, 1987:93).

The purpose of what follows is to explore the possibility that something more like an ethical-political concept of justice might be created from certain strands of

contemporary thought on distributive or social justice, linked to a broader concern with the nature of the good life. The reference to the *possibility* of universals is intended not as a claim to the universality of what is proposed, but to the need for something capable of at least challenging the threatened universalisation of the way of life (and the injustice) associated with contemporary capitalism. The argument is advanced with hazardous brevity, conscious that a number of important issues raised (and some matters of relevance not even mentioned) have to be skipped over in order to concentrate on the main points of what may, stripped to its simplicity, seem resoundingly self-evident. But first, brief reference to two obstacles to the kind of conception of justice that I have in mind: relativism and partiality.

THE OBSTACLES OF RELATIVISM AND PARTIALITY

The postmodern attitude encourages ethical or moral relativism, in line with the disdain for meta-theory. In both morality and social justice, particular groups of people (in particular places) develop their own codes and practices, a consequence of the process of learning to live together with sufficient cooperative endeavor and mutuality to ensure material existence and reproduction. Their cultures incorporate functionally necessary or at least tried and trusted ways of regulating behavior and distributing life chances. Any attempt to judge codes of morality as better or worse invites such charges as cultural imperialism: as Williams (1985:159) puts it: "a properly relativistic view requires you to be equally well disposed to everyone else's ethical beliefs."

But this vulgar relativism, as Williams (1972) describes it elsewhere, can be sustained only at the price of approving (or at least being indifferent to) such local practices as the physical mutilation of criminals, the psychiatric torture of dissidents and the oppression of others (such as women) deemed unworthy of full membership of the society in question. Furthermore, to deny the possibility of comparative evaluation deprives us of means of judging human progress, for how is the vulgar relativist to say life is better now than then, here than there? It is sometimes asserted that the specifics of justice are more amenable to a relativistic view than is the broader project of morality; the modern stress on equality with respect to a range of individual rights, central to social justice in liberal democracies, may be considered irrelevant to hierarchical societies of the past (and possibly the present). But such practices as the subordination of the slave or surf, the exclusively male franchise and execution without trial are surely wrong, whenever or wherever they take place, just as the Romans were surely wrong to throw Christians to the lions—entertaining though the masses may then have found it.

There must therefore be defensible ways of judging rules of justice as well as moral codes on the basis of better or worse. The customary appeal is to some high-order or supreme moral value, such as the Kantian concept of equal respect

for individuals who should not be treated merely as means for the benefit of others. However, this does not necessarily entail some universal standards against which all possible rules and codes (or complete cultures) can be compared and ranked. Nor is this possibility excluded: human reason may yet develop such a capacity. Some might even argue that there is at least one principle with such a claim: that of impartiality.

A society's codes of morality and rules of justice might be commended to the extent that the principle of impartiality is upheld. By impartiality is meant treating people the same in the same circumstances, such that the same moral credit, reward or retribution is assigned for the same virtue, contribution or violation, irrespective of status, wealth, race, gender or other irrelevant characteristics of those concerned. Further: "Someone who was engaged in impartially choosing principles to govern his [sic] life with others would not endorse a principle on the basis of it favoring himself, his friends and relations, and those with whom he felt some kind of affinity" (Barry, 1989:290).

However, these familiar sentiments have recently encountered the broader critique of Enlightenment thinking associated with postmodern attitudes (e.g. Young, 1990). Friedman (1991:818) begins a discussion of the practice of partiality with the following recognition: "Hardly any moral philosopher, these days, would deny that we are each entitled to favor our loved ones. Some would say, even more strongly, that we ought to favor them, that it is not simply a moral option." Partiality in this sense is closely related to what is sometimes referred to as an ethic of care, a concept first deployed by Gilligan (1982) in revealing gender differences in thinking about morality, and subsequently adopted in some feminist critiques of conventional conceptions of social justice (see Kymlisca, 1990). Like partiality, an ethic of care refers to a natural human sentiment, a source of personal integrity and fulfillment, part of a mutuality which contributes to human well-being or the good life.

However, the uneven capacity to favor close people raises serious problems with partiality, especially when viewed geographically. Local networks of friendship, kinship and mutual support may be better developed and resourced in some places than others. Friedman (1991:828–9) elaborates:

> The one who really needs moral attention is the person who lacks resources and who would not be adequately cared for even if all her friends and family were as partial toward her as they could be … whether or not, and to what extent, someone benefits from certain partialist relationship conventions has a lot to do with her 'social location', the sort of luck she had in being born to, adopted by, or linked by marriage to, relations with adequate resources for caretaking, nurturing, and protecting.

If partiality is everyone's moral prerogative and responsibility, good both to receive and to give, then an argument for redistribution follows. Friedman

(1991:831) concludes: "by viewing partiality as morally valuable because of what it ultimately contributes to integrity and human fulfillment, and by considering the reality of unequally distributed resources, we are led to a notion that sounds suspiciously like the requirement of moral impartiality."

So, while all forms of partiality cannot be dismissed as immoral or unjust, their defense (e.g. in local communities) seems to require a prior commitment to a wider application of impartiality, expressed as equality in the capacity to care and to be cared for. Otherwise the practice of partiality risks reproducing existing patterns of injustice manifest in uneven development.

While my arguments concerning relativism and partiality have been necessarily sparse, these conclusions follow: (1) Although differences from place to place and time to time in moral codes and rules of justice certainly exist, this is no obstacle to their comparative evaluation; therefore attempts to construct a broad (and perhaps universal) conception of justice as an integral part of a moral perspective on the good life is possible (and desirable). (2) Although favoring nearest and dearest people is a natural and laudable human sentiment, it gains moral strength to the extent that the necessary conditions for care are equalized, or at least consistent with some morally relevant differences; therefore a broad conception of justice should be concerned initially with human equality, and only then with the circumstances in which inequality (and partiality) can be justified as a response to relevant difference.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AS EQUALIZATION

The case to be advanced is for social justice as equalization. By this is meant a process of returning to a state of human equality, grounded in recognition of human sameness in a natural sense, and of the morally arbitrary character of almost all sources of inequality. It is possible (but no more than this), that a carefully formulated elaboration of the principle of social justice as equalization could attain universal validity, in the sense that people aware of relevant facts about the world and adopting a moral point of view, might, by a process of reason and discourse, come to agree that such a principle is applicable independent of time and place, at least to the extent of requiring refutation in particular circumstances (times and places). The skeletal structure offered here falls well short of the detail required for conviction (Smith, 1994, provides further elaboration).

The starting point is human sameness. The emphasis (or celebration) of difference in postmodern discourse risks diverting attention from human sameness, or at least close similarity. Of course, the one need not preclude the other: to observe that people (as individuals or groups) are different in some respects, such as tastes, values, culture or gender, and even in their conceptions of justice, does not mean that they have nothing in common—just as the old geographical proposition concerning the uniqueness of places does not mean that nothing is shared.

For example, if we accept the two ultimate universal values of freedom and life which Heller (1987) associates with modernity, then these could be said to be equally applicable to all human beings whoever and wherever they may be: "whenever people claim equality, they claim equality in something. 'Something' can stand for many things, but all of them can be reduced to two forms of equality: equality in freedom(s), and equality in life chances" (Heller, 1987:121). Equality of freedom(s) concerns the rights and possibilities to participate in the political sphere; equality in life chances is concerned with the rights and possibilities of choosing a way of life in the social sphere.

While moral philosophers and theoreticians of social justice are content, for the most part, with this level of abstraction, further progress can be made by recognizing natural grounds for a more specific set of human needs, the unequal satisfaction of which might invite moral judgment. Particularly important needs are sometimes described as basic needs we all have by virtue of being human: "humans need food and rest and health—not for anything; they just do ... they are what we need to survive, to be healthy, to avoid harm, to function properly" (Griffin, 1986:42).

Lists of such needs are commonplace in more applied fields, such as development studies in which the concept of basic needs has featured prominently in recent years. They usually begin with food, clothing and shelter and may even include a place in the world for home and community life. A particularly helpful elaboration has been provided by Len Doyal and Ian Gough in their book *A Theory of Human Need* (1991). Their starting point is that all people share one obvious need: to avoid serious harm. This goes beyond the failure to survive in a physical sense, to include impaired critical social participation or pursuit of objectives deemed valuable by an individual in a specific social milieu (which can vary with culture and place). This notion of human need is objective, "in that its theoretical and empirical specification is independent of individual preference", and universal, "in that its conception of serious harm is the same for everyone" (Doyal and Gough, 1991:49). There are echoes of Heller's two universal values here, in the invocation of freedom and capacity to participate is a chosen form of life, and also similarities with the emphasis on capabilities in the work of Amartya Sen (1992) and on empowerment in the attempt by John Friedmann (1992) to elaborate alternative development strategies with explicit moral content.

Doyal and Gough's universal goal generates two basic needs (their term): for the physical health to continue living and able to function effectively, and for the personal autonomy or ability necessary to make informed choices about what to do in a given societal context. Meeting these needs requires the satisfaction of certain intermediate needs, as they term them: for food, housing, health care, education and so on. The specific need satisfiers, in the form of actual goods and services, may be culturally variable, but the needs are universal. This is similar to Sen's treatment of poverty, which is absolute with respect to impaired capabilities but relative with respect to the particular commodities required to alleviate it.

The authors go on to explain how levels of need satisfaction may be measured and compared, using specific indicators. They conclude: "Relativists are wrong: objective welfare can be compared and evaluated over space and over time" (Doyal and Gough, 1991:269).

Doyal and Gough have, in effect, resurrected something of the social indicators movement of the 1960s and 1970s, with its claims to comparative evaluation of levels of living, well-being or development. However, they have replaced the flimsy conceptualization and speculative empiricism of those days with a more carefully considered grounding in human nature: in the needs we all share by virtue of being human. And, it must be stressed, this is done without prescribing either particular ways in which people must feed, cloth or house themselves, for example, or a particular preferred culture or way of life to which all people everywhere should conform. In short, a universal approach to human need does not deny the importance of human differences, except with respect to basic needs objectively shared by everyone.

If we can at least accept the possibility of the empirical identification of levels of basic human need satisfaction, then this can provide a more specific answer to Heller's question of the *something* over which people may claim equality. However, the meaning of equality in this context raises further questions. As Heller (1987, p. 198) herself points out: "realizing the universal idea of 'equal life chances for all' does not presuppose either the satisfaction of all human needs or the distribution of an equal share of the available material resources to everyone. What it does presuppose is the satisfaction of all needs for the cultivation of our endowments", turning them into the talents required for one's chosen way of life. This raises the familiar distinction between equality of outcomes (manifest in self-actualization in community with others, or some such sentiments), as opposed to equality of resources or opportunities. In order to progress we will sidestep further complexities of this kind, simply accepting that there is something the equalization of which can sensibly be considered.

In view of the comment made about John Rawls at the outset, it may seem perverse to introduce elements of his *Theory of Justice* at this point. However, his central proposition still carries great conviction as a universal approach to social justice. Rawls (1971:303) stated his general conception of justice as follows: "All social primary goods—liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favored." Among the attractions of this famous difference principle is an appeal to those common human intuitions which tend towards egalitarianism but recognize that some inequality may be justified in the general interest. In his further elaboration, Rawls (1971) prioritized an equal right to the most extensive system of liberties compatible with a similar system of liberties for all, followed by equality of opportunity to offices and positions from which advantage may arise, after which the difference principle comes into play.

Rawls' theory has attracted much critical review since its publication (summarized in Kukathas and Pettit, 1990; Kymlisca, 1990; see Rawls, 1993 for his response to critics). The abstraction of a social contract arrived at in an original position or state of nature has been challenged on various grounds, and Rawls has also been taken to task for seeking, in effect, to justify the particular institutions of liberal democracy. However, there is an argument for the difference principle independent of the device of the social contract, to which Barry (1989) has drawn particular attention. Rawls made a distinction between people's natural assets and environmental effects, and identified equal opportunities with the elimination of all factors except genetic endowment. It may well be asked why Rawls confined his initial equality to social primary goods, rather than also including such natural goods as health, intelligence and other talents which may be affected by social environment and institutions, and hence are merely matters of luck arising from the accident of birth to particular kinds of people in particular places. This is the point that Barry (1989:225) takes to the following conclusion:

> (1) the (liberal) ideal of equal opportunity is that all environmental differences that affect occupational achievement should be eliminated; (2) this will entail that all remaining differences are of genetic origin; but (3) if (as assumed) the case for eliminating environmental differences is that they are morally arbitrary, all we should be doing is making occupational achievement rest on genetic factors which are (in exactly the same sense) morally arbitrary; therefore (4), since what is morally arbitrary should not affect what people get, differences in occupational achievement should not affect income.

Thus, as everything about sources of occupational achievement is contingent and morally arbitrary, there is no case at the most basic level of justification for anything except equality in the distribution of primary goods (Barry, 1989). The difference principle can then be regarded as a concession to the reality that unequal incomes and so on can work to the advantage of all and especially of the worst-off.

Further support for a theoretical perspective incorporating Rawls's difference principle can be found elsewhere in the contemporary literature. Doyal and Gough (1991:132) ground their theory of human need in the following extension: "inequalities will be tolerated to the extent that they benefit the least well off through leading to the provision of those goods and services necessary for the optimization of basic need-satisfaction". Indeed, the satisfaction of basic material needs might be regarded as a necessary condition for the achievement of those rights and liberties prioritized by Rawls and other liberals. Peffer (1990) explicitly places security and subsistence rights before equal basic liberties, but otherwise finds Rawls's approach largely consistent with a reconstruction of Marx's moral stance (see Smith, 1994, for further discussion). Even if capitalism is pre-

ferred to socialism, the disparities that arise from barriers to advancement and such benefits as inheritance lead Miller (1992) to advocate the difference principle as a constraint on inequality.

Of course, the severity of this form of egalitarianism is by no means uncontentious. Libertarians like Nozick (1974), along with many of less extreme persuasion, would see people entitled to benefit from whatever natural talents good fortune had bestowed, along with earnings from property holdings justly acquired. This is what tends to happen under capitalism, opening up, reproducing and exacerbating disparities which defy moral justification other than the acceptance of (imperfect) market outcomes as right. Hence the proposition, albeit intuitive, that real-world inequalities have gone beyond the point of benefiting the worst-off, at least under capitalism and possibly universally.

This is the nub of the argument for social justice as equalization: that departures from equality have gone too far. In an earlier excursion into questions of social justice, I concluded with the axiom of *the more equal the better* (Smith, 1977:152–7). Particular support was found in the work of Amartya Sen (1973:61), who gave normative content to the Lorenz curve, as follows: "The fact that one distribution has a higher Lorenz curve than another can be taken as a prima facie case that it is a better distribution from a welfare point of view ... While the Lorenz curve ranking is not in itself compelling, the onus of demonstration may well be thought to lie on the person wishing to reject this ranking on other grounds". While the terminology is that of welfare economics, and while the Lorenz curve (and Gini coefficient of inequality) are not without technical problems, translation into social justice is straightforward: *the more equal, the more just*—or provide a convincing argument to the contrary.

Further elaboration of this principle is impossible here (see Smith, 1994). All that needs to be added is that justice as equalization need not imply perfect equality, or indeed something close to this. There are grounds on which inequality can be justified, the one with strongest moral conviction being the Rawlsian criterion of benefiting the worst-off, which would define the limit of permissible departures from equality, or in our terms the limit to the process of equalization as returning to equality. How this point might actually be identified is a difficult matter. But if the underlying argument for equality carries conviction, then the onus of demonstration is on those who hold a contrary view: they should accept that social justice is promoted by equalization, or explain why not. As Barry (1989:3; emphasis added) puts it: "the central issue in any theory of justice is the defensibility of *unequal* relations between people". The one defense we immediately acknowledge is Rawls's difference principle.

That geographical space is but one of the dimensions in which equalization might be advocated should be too obvious to require elaboration. Other dimensions will include class, gender and race, which may require more or less priority than space, depending on the prevailing degree of inequality and its possible justification. However, there is another point of some significance. If the principle

of social justice as equalization can make any claims to universality, its elaboration requires careful attention to the geography (and history) of particular situations. For example, the application of this principle, along with the Rawlsian constraint, would be different in post-apartheid South Africa than in post-socialist eastern Europe (Smith, 1994).

BACK TO THE GOOD LIFE

It remains to return the Agnes Heller's point about a new ethico-political concept of justice, with which this discussion began. Heller is not alone among contemporary moral philosophers concerned with justice, in contemplating a broader project than that typically conducted under the rubric of distributive or social justice. For example, Iris Marion Young (1990) is scathingly dismissive of what she refers to as the distributive paradigm, almost to the extent of overlooking the clearly expressed concern of others, from Rawls (1971) to Barry (1989), with institutions and their evaluation. Young (1990:36) refers to "a postmodern turn to an enlarged conception of justice, reminiscent of the scope of justice in Plato and Aristotle". Some see a return to the virtue ethics associated with Aristotle, and the concept of *eudaimonia* (human flourishing or well-being), within which justice would be one of the virtues of individual human character. That justice could be an integral part of the good life created by groups of people learning to live together is also suggested by communitarianism.

However, any attempt to prescribe the good life assails the conventional liberal position that this is a matter of individual preference. It is also discordant with the suspicion of those, like Young (1990), who adopt a postmodern attitude of hostility towards prescriptions of how to live, and of related conceptions of human nature which threaten to devalue some individual inclinations, cultures or ways of life. The challenge is therefore to find common ground with respect to a good way of life (if not necessarily claimed to be the best), incorporating human diversity rather than excluding different others, within which a particular conception of justice would arise from its broader moral context. The sameness of humankind, within a range of important characteristics, would be part of such common ground, sustaining the moral case for social justice as equalization.

Lest this argument be though of as devoid of political purpose, reference can be made to the not infrequent complaint these days that we risk yielding to the universalization of what David Harvey (1992:597) has described as "the rough justice administered through the market". As the way of life associated with capitalism extends its scope ever wider, across the former socialist realm of eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the need to challenge its hegemony becomes the more urgent. Brecher (1993:42, 44) gets to the heart of the matter: "Rather than counterposing a left version of the good society to that of the Right, we are inveigled into arguing that no such vision is possible, let alone respectable. ... Socialists, of all people, should surely know that if socialism is to make any sense,

let alone have any appeal, then it will do so by virtue of its vision of life". And central to this vision must surely be the traditional commitment to egalitarianism.

A fitting conclusion, which resurrects some of the concerns raised earlier in this paper, is provided by the following observations by Ross Poole (1991:85–6):

> Liberalism has given up trying to discover what constitutes the good life; it leaves this in the domain of individual choice. It has limited itself to providing a theory of justice. ... The arbitrariness which liberalism concedes to the good cannot but return to infect the domain of justice. If we are to do better than liberalism we must provide reasons why people ought to be just. We must go beyond liberalism and locate a concept of justice within an account of the good ... . Justice must be conceived, not as a constraint on individual's pursuing the good, but a component of it. ... For justice to become part of our good, the claims and concerns of others must enter into the structure of our desires, not merely as contingently available means to their satisfaction, but as their objects. They must enter into the conception of our own well-being. While desires of this 'intersubjective' sort are familiar enough, they are usually limited in scope, concerned with specific others connected by ties of intimacy, emotion or family commitment. Justice in the public sphere concerns relations with people who are far beyond our ordinary emotional reach; it requires, therefore, a bond of a more impersonal kind.

If this sounds like a plea for a return to impartiality, it might also be recognized as a fair (just) response to the increasing interdependence of humankind, under which distance ceases to be a barrier to responsibility, and to compassion. Empathizing with distant others may be one small step towards enlarging our sense of human sameness, from which a commitment to equalization as a universal proposition might eventually form an integral part of the good life, as lived individually and collectively.

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