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Conclusion: Barriers and Conduits to Social Justice—Universities in the Twenty-First Century

Harry F. Dahms and Eric Royal Lybeck

Reflecting universities and social justice

At the close of a collection of analyses and reflections relating to whether and how universities should and do play roles in promoting social justice—intellectually, practically, pedagogically, politically, or by means of public policy—it is necessary to begin to address explicitly the broader issues and perspectives to keep in mind, to consider the present and future status of social justice as a social and political goal in human civilization. More specifically, how does the project of advancing social justice present itself in the twenty-first century as a context that appears to be fraught to an increasing extent by doubts about the prospects for greater democracy, social welfare, and equal opportunities for individuals around the globe? From the vantage point of social theory—as the rigorous effort to locate the social justice project and its current status within the modern age overall, and to reflect upon its practical–political feasibility—we need to ask: how important is it, in industrialized societies as the purported vanguard of advancing and sustaining social progress (given the economic resources at their disposal), to illuminate critically the willingness among political and economic elites, to allocate (or, to support the allocation of) resources required to promote and pursue social justice—as a medium-term objective that is central to the legitimacy of modern politics, society, and economics?

Evidently, universities provide a unique and indispensable venue for investigating and scrutinizing the multifarious functions and ideas that correspond with the promise and practices of social justice in modern societies, including how the legitimacy of the latter—both socially and politically—depends on the active promotion (or at least the projection of the promotion) of social justice. These agendas may be pursued in the interest of certain constituencies or of society as a whole, on the part of those who are charged with doing so, including politicians, policymakers civil servants, professionals in the legal field, or an entire spectrum of activists. In
addition, universities also are sites which ensure, pursue, or agitate for social justice, while engaging in research whose purpose it is to determine, first, the degree of compatibility between existing conditions and the practicalities of advancing social justice, and secondly, the kinds of agency required to pursue related programs and objectives effectively, so as to maximize success.

To begin with, universities are sites that reflect the socio-historical contexts in which they are embedded, while also providing opportunities to actively reflect on the structures of power and inequality, and adjacent societal patterns in modern societies that maintain or protect systems and cultures of social injustice. For this reason, it is not possible to discuss the roles of universities in modern society, in relation to social justice, without at the same time addressing the larger socio-historical context not just in general, but in its specificity: how and to what extent the structures and systems through which modern societies function and reconstitute themselves are conducive to better understand the societal context, and how and to what degree they rely on interpretive frames and particular types of ideology that actively obscure, distract from, conceal, or perpetuate that very context in its particular form.

The social sciences constitute just a small component of any university, so that far less time, energy, resources, and human capital are allocated on scrutinizing the social, political, and cultural world than on the study of the corresponding dimensions of our world that the natural sciences, the (less-and-less) social science of economics, business schools, and the applied sciences, especially engineering, are responsible for. The natural sciences, business schools and engineering, in particular, are largely oblivious to the social implications of their research and related activities, or operate with constructions of “society” and the “social” that have been problematic in the past, and which are becoming exceedingly more so, today.

Among the social sciences, as a discipline, sociology has a particular responsibility and analytical capacity with regard to the socio-cultural and political code that social justice represents. Sociology has at its disposal tools, concepts, and methods that are uniquely well suited to illuminating the vicissitudes of the modern society–social justice link, across a range of dimensions, respectively (including ideology, politics, functions, history, comparisons, social and economic structure, and public policy). “Social justice” exemplifies the kind of symbolic place-holder without which modern societies may not be able to function (along with liberty, democracy, and several more), even though it may be impossible to delineate their spectrum of meanings with any degree of precision. Rather, to address “social justice” effectively and in ways that are not fraught with arbitrary designations, elusive or misleading connotations, and vague notions, it is essential that the relevant reference frame be made explicit.

In the absence of clear understanding, efforts to reconcile realistically and effectively material “facts” and shared social and cultural “norms”—as