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The Rhetorical Challenge of Social Justice

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We gather now to consider “The Rhetorical Challenge of Social Justice.” And the challenge is large indeed.

I confront this challenge regularly as an American academic—and particularly as one ensconced in a Catholic liberal arts college. I’m very much aware of the ubiquity, and talismanic power, of the phrase “social justice.” It’s routinely deployed by academics in more than one context: for example, to approve or oppose certain public policies, or political figures.

So when then President George W. Bush gave the commencement address at my institution several years ago, he was vocally condemned, and boycotted, by faculty members who claimed he was contrary to principles of Catholic social justice. No argument seemed necessary. To them, the assertion was simply self-evident. (Barack Obama, by contrast, is self-evidently consonant.)

But even more comprehensively, and disturbingly, the phrase “social justice” is deployed to provide a kind of comprehensive, meta-narrative of the purposes of contemporary higher education in order to distinguish our new, progressive educational aspirations from the old.

“Social justice” thus belongs in that pantheon of educational—I would like to call them fads, but they might be here to stay—of educational tropes like “multiculturalism,” “diversity,” and “sustainability,” each of which offers an alternative educational narrative, one whose purpose is to supplant the old one, which was more centered on the history and Great Books of Western civilization.

Each of these clichés offers the intellectual left what they take to be the unassailable intellectual high ground. But “social justice” is yet more comprehensive than any one of them, for it seems to include *all* of them, and then some.

So, what exactly is meant by “social justice?”

As we have already heard at this conference, “social” justice severs justice from its moral dimensions—volition, action, desert—so that it becomes not justice at all, but an opportunity for the exercise of power.

Plato, for one, spoke of justice simply. Yet surely Plato was interested in the social—in the political and cultural order. What’s the difference between his justice, and our *social* justice?

One important difference is that contemporary conceptions of social justice always seem to rely on, or assume, the primacy of the material realm, the here and now, the measurable and concrete, as opposed to the transcendent and the invisible. The devotees of social justice concentrate their gaze relentlessly on those things that can be manipulated by the cognoscenti, through the mechanisms of state power.

Ironically, given this concentration on the here and now, the rhetoric of social justice became deeply ingrained in America thanks to its being informed not simply by secular theory, but also by religious doctrines: certain strains of Catholic and Protestant social teaching merged with the progressive ideology that took hold of American intellectual classes in the early part of the twentieth century, to create a perfect storm of philosophical, theological, and rhetorical excess whose waves continue to wash over us.

Contemporary use of the phrase “social justice” is often informed, for example, by the progressive belief that History is going somewhere—in an ever more rational, liberal direction—and it’s the job of enlightened elites to help guide History down its more or less inexorable path.

Under the influence of progressivism, the idea of fixed moral truths—and a fixed Constitution—disappeared as objects of study and public veneration. And with them, so did the realm of the private and the invisible. For both secular and religious thinkers, the most important forms of social, economic, and political progress came to be seen as depending on the state, and the manipulation by the state of measurable phenomena. Human flourishing—under the banner of social justice—was most often seen by progressives as an incident of politically engineered growth and transformation.

American Catholicism and Protestantism in important ways assimilated themselves to this progressive synthesis, in their calls for social solidarity through economic policy. Whether through the Catholic social thought of Fr. John Ryan (*A Living Wage*, 1906), or the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch (*Christianizing the Social Order*, 1913), significant portions of religious opinion turned against limited constitutionalism in the quest for more rational, scientific state administration.

Such assimilation of secular thought and theology to the aims of progressivism continues to have important ramifications in the realms of both constitutional interpretation and public policy. Current controversies over federal mandates on religious institutions are but one example of those ramifications. Does social justice trample justice simply, including freedom of conscience, the culture of life, and the hard-won political justice eked out by our Constitution?

We must begin to separate the rhetoric from the reality—the *claims* of social justice from its consequences.