Imagining Social Justice within a Communicative Framework

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What is social justice? Various political, philosophical, and theological accounts offer definitions. Rather than defining social justice, this project seeks to provide a set of narrative, imaginative tools for visualizing more just societies. By taking a communication framework, it becomes clear how modes of acting/organizing—like advocacy and charity—constitute social justice. Specifically, this paper looks at two allegorical thought experiments, the broken river and the just city, as ways to imagine the social and communicative dimensions of a socially just world. [*Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: http://www.transformativestudies.org ©2014 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.*]

What is social justice? Conversations about social justice can be found in various spheres. Coined by Catholic social thinkers in the 19th century, it is also used by contemporary, humanist activists. Positioned as a field of scholarly and philosophical inquiry by some, it is seen as shorthand for liberal or progressive political inclinations by others. Despite its varied contexts, proponents, and detractors, conversations about social justice do have some common themes, including wealth and/or rights, equity between persons, and social structure.

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In this essay, I attempt to answer the question, "What is social justice?" However, instead of proposing a definition, I offer several "visions" of justice by articulating a set of visual, narrative, and imaginative accounts of social justice. While conceptual clarity is good, I take seriously James' (1896) critique of philosophy that encourages us to move beyond the mere true and false and toward creating and valuing ideas that are living as opposed to dead. As such, imagining social justice is best done in ways that captivate the mind and limber us for action. While conceptual definitions do have a function, I find traction in Parker's (2014) argument that narratives have more pragmatic power than abstract principles.

I also hope to extend what Swartz (2006) calls the communication imagination. Since our lives are "created, conditioned, helped, accentuated, and positioned by the decisions we make about, and through, our communicative practices" (Swartz, 2006, p. 11), communication becomes an important lens for imagining what social justice might look like. Communication as a frame offers theoretical, practical, methodological, and paradigmatic tools for articulating what social justice and injustice are, how just and unjust conditions emerge, and tools for pursuing the most fair, free, and life-enhancing social worlds. Paying attention to communication helps illuminate the *social* dimension of social justice (St. Hilaire, 2014).

First, I will lay out three ways of thinking about social justice: a state of affairs, an aspirational ideal, and the process of striving. Second, I will articulate how social justice can look from a communicative perspective. This vision involves looking at the relationship between charity and social justice and takes up Irving Zola's metaphor about saving people from a river versus going upriver. Based on the communicative spheres offered in the second section, the third and final section offers a thought experiment for imagining socially just interpersonal, organizational, and cultural communication. The "just city" experiment offers a crucible for testing ideas about access, support, and social structure in the context of mutual destruction as a way of illuminating the sorts of conditions we should desire for our society.

IS SOCIAL JUSTICE A STATE, GOAL, OR PROCESS?

There are various ways of thinking about social justice. It can be conceived of as a state of affairs, as an aspirational goal, or a process.

Social justice can be understood as a state of affairs. Under this mode of thinking, there are socially just and unjust sets of circumstances. For

instance, one might say, "This situation is socially just because A, B, and C are arranged in a just way." Similarly, a situation could be unjust because of various conditions. While these conditions may not be the traits of an entirely perfect society, a just society will have some ethical foundation in fairness, equity, and dignity. Of course, different accounts of social justice may have differing standards for whether or not the conditions of a social arrangement are just.

Social justice can also be understood as an aspirational ideal. Like the above conceptualization, social justice is a set of conditions that are fair and equitable. Unlike above, however, seeing social justice as aspirational admits to the unavoidably partial and incomplete nature of humans' ability to organize. However beautiful, it is a goal that can never be reached. This is not to say that social justice is not real, but rather to say it is never perfectly arrived at. Analogously, perfect circles can never be made, but circularity exists in nature and artifice. In the way that the idea of circles is helpful in prediction, construction, drafting, and artistry, social justice as an aspirational ideal is useful for imagining, organizing, and participating in a fair society.

Yet another way of conceiving of social justice is as a process. This means dispensing with the idea of social justice as a place at which we arrive or for which we strive. Instead, the work of social justice is the *striving*; it is not a place but rather a process. The process of social justice means striving for each other's wellbeing. As such, a more socially just world is more people striving for and with each other.

Albeit divergent, these conceptualizations are not mutually exclusive. When I listen to or read Dr. Martin Luther King's words in Montgomery, Alabama, about how the arc of the moral universe is long but bends toward justice, I am stirred, viscerally, spiritually, and hopefully to see all movements of the world as the slow but unmistakable and unstoppable walk toward justice (Carson & Shepard, 2001). As King speaks, I can see a place—a half-imagined, half-sensed, but entirely real place—that we are indeed going toward, and in that moment, social justice is a state of glorious affairs where equity and freedom mingle in fairness.

That vision of glory is less clear when reading about or seeing the social and material histories and realities of poverty. I have humanist/historical/political moments when I am very aware of how any particular solution to a problem favors one good over another. From this more critical vantage, a triumphant Promised Land of justice seems impossible, or at least profoundly improbable. Even as I see how racism is constructed and can imagine alternate constructions of society, I am

troubled by the fact that while the Greeks did not discriminate based on skin color they enslaved people based on language and culture (Bakaoukas, 2005). Patterns of in-group and out-group differentiation seem perniciously human. In this critical light, the version of social justice as an aspirational ideal seems more tenable. It is good to have a world worth imagining and working for, even if it never attains. The North Star is useful for navigating, but we never actually get to it.

Finally, there are moments in my work with people living homelessly when social justice is not distant, transcendent, and untouchable but imminent, present, and unfolding. The acts of being with, serving, and being served unknot my fixations on boundaries and inequities, and for precious though fleeting moments, what we do together is the clearest picture of the just society I could ever have. In that moment, social justice is not some place. It is not some place we keep going toward. Social justice is had when we, together, keep going.

At varying moments in my own work, social justice has seemed to be a state of affairs, an aspirational ideal, and the process of striving. Since each of these versions has come alive for me, I will not argue the primacy of one over the other. They are each inspired by different realities, be it transcendent and spiritual, critical and sobering, or imminent and personal. Rather, I include them here as a way of broadening the imaginative palate. They offer resilience, guidance, inspiration, and reflection in different turns. Social justice is place, seeking place, and seeking; each of these accounts serve as a "tool for working." Together, these variations nuance a picture of justice, particularly when taking a communicative perspective.

THE BROKEN RIVER:
COMMUNICATION, CHARITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Often, social justice is defined in relation to or in negation of charity (Wade, 2000; Marullo & Edwards, 2000). As the traditional distinction goes, charity is attending to the immediate needs of others by giving, while social justice looks at and seeks to change broad societal trends and realities. In these formulations, charity is given varied assessments. In some cases, charity can be part of social *injustice*, as it can reinforce power differences between social classes. Dewey (Gouinlock, 1994) argues that "deliberate benevolence is used as a means of keeping others dependent and managing their affairs for them" and "magnificent philanthropy may be employed to cover up brutal economic exploitation" (p. 118). In celebrating the generosity of the giver, charity is complicit in

obfuscating the social and material realities that lead to some having far too little while others have far too much. Some scholars render charity more neutrally, seeing it as nice but ultimately impotent as a mechanism of addressing root causes (McKinlay, 1979). Still other scholars see charity as a necessary social triage that helps those in immediate need survive while also addressing the broader issues (Borg, 2002; Tompkins, 2006). In the section that follows, I will make the case that there is no strict distinction between social justice and charity. To do so, I draw on the discipline of communication to provide an alternate articulation of social action and change.

Human communication exists on various levels: micro (interpersonal, familial), mezzo (organizational), and macro (cultural, national, and international). The micro/mezzo/macro frame is helpful for understanding social inequity, since injustice manifests across all scopes. This is quite clear to me in my work surrounding homelessness in the United States. On a micro-communication level, interpersonal communication can be problematic, as passersby strategically deny homeless others eye contact. Conflict in familial communication can also be part of homelessness. At a mezzo-communication level, nonprofit, governmental, and for-profit agencies organize to respond to various aspects of homelessness (policing, serving, employing, empowering, etc). At a macro-communication level, national and cultural discourses about wealth and poverty surround homelessness and related issues.

Under this framework, one might be tempted to call charity a micro-action and social justice a macro-action, as charity is caring and immediate while social justice addresses broad structures. However, this view is flawed for two important reasons. First, communication, regardless of its level, is social. Interpersonal, organizational, and rhetorical acts all engage social reality. While some deploy the term social justice to mean "not criminal justice but wealth distribution," the notion is far richer than that. By taking a communicative approach, the *social* in social justice comes to represent a broad set of inter-human affairs. These communicative affairs can be ethical and fair or unethical and unfair and, therefore, can be just or not. Now, what justice looks like on different social levels varies. Justice might involve dignifying or humanizing interaction at the interpersonal level, while it would also include policy and practice at an organizational level. But regardless of the scope, where there are people communicating there is social justice to be done.

Separating micro-charity from macro-justice is also misguided for a different reason. Cleanly differentiating between micro- and macro-

communication is more of a conceptual pursuit than an actual identification of causally distinct phenomena. Communication at one level bears down on lower levels and scales up to higher ones (Giddens, 1984; Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1996). Micro-discourses of employees and managers develop into mezzo-organizational practices and policies, and as practices spread between organizations they inform macro-national conversations. Similarly, macro-governmental action disciplines mezzo-level organizational function and form, which in turn influences how micro-action is taken by individuals (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009). There is a duality to structure (Giddens, 1979). The little makes the big even as the big makes the little. As such, even if it made sense to differentiate charity and social justice on the basis of scope, that distinction does little real conceptual work.

The interplay between micro, mezzo, and macro scopes of social reality challenges an oft cited allegory separating charity from social justice. Adapted from a story told by Irving Zola, McKinlay (1979) asks the listener to imagine a peaceful river town that starts finding wounded and dead people in their river. As the story goes, people dive into the river and pull out the bodies. They bury the dead, heal the wounded, and adopt the orphans. McKinlay suggests this is charitable. Social justice, on the other hand, requires more than just immediate care. It means going up river, discovering the source of the conflict, and trying to solve it. I do not believe the story has a name, but I call it the allegory of the broken river.

When read with notions of micro, mezzo, and macro in mind, the story seems to be articulating a downward and unidirectional account of social issues. The immediate micro-need is caused by the structural and political macro-events. If only the villagers could solve the political strife upriver, the bodies would stop floating downstream. In this version, broad problems cause particularized suffering, and it is not enough to solve the individual problems. The story seems to suggest that the need for charity arises from a lack of social justice. The proliferation of this allegory is evidenced by the common use of the term "looking upstream" in social justice, public health, and policy discussions.

However, in light of the duality of structure and the fact that macro, mezzo, and micro realities influence each other, this broken river's allegorical universe can be expanded. Imagine a third town, even farther downstream. Because of a large dam, the bodies of the first town's conflict never reach the third town. But should the second town refuse to care for the dead and wounded caused by the first, the river's water will become rancid and dangerous to drink. This lack of fresh water is not

particularized, but general. It does not cause merely immediate problems, but long-term ones. It is not an individual problem, but a structural one. In this case, a lack of charity (care for the wounded and dead) leads to a social injustice (the right to clean water) downriver.

As society moves through chronological rivers, there are certainly causal factors that lead to current conditions. As such, I do not mean to erode the courage or insight it takes to solve problems before they happen or to alleviate suffering in the long run by addressing structural issues now. What I aim to disabuse is the notion that the pursuit of social justice is only macro and political. Social justice is also micro and personal. Consider.

Self determination is a condition for human thriving. Because of political and economic realities, many people cannot choose to participate in market structures for lack of resources. This forces them to meet critical needs by accessing human services. If those human services are administered in an overly technocratic or paternalistic way, it will seriously cut down on the individuals' ability to make their own choices about their lives. However, if those organizations and the people who constitute them interact with clients in a dignified, respectful way and allow the clients to choose for themselves, self determination continues to contribute to their thriving and the moral arc continues to bend toward justice. As this example illustrates, the issues move dynamically between the personal and political, the interpersonal, organizational, and cultural.

For three years, I worked with an organization that provided outreach and a drop-in center for homeless young adults. While some might call the provision of food, showers, safety, and space to the homeless an act of charity, it is simultaneously the reconstitution of the social order in a way that contributes to human flourishing. At the time, I certainly felt as though I was part of a community that was contributing to social justice. My feelings mirror others engaged in micro-practices; Morgaine (2014) finds that the majority of the direct-service social workers she interviewed saw their work as contributing to social justice. Adopting a communicative frame helps reveal the interconnectedness between charitable care and justice-based advocacy. Since individual interactions are influenced by cultural narratives, how we treat others is based on public discourses about the part they play in society. This is an example of macro-communicative norms influencing micro ones. But interaction is also how we organize solutions. Ultimately, communicative encounters at the individual level create various organizational realities. Trends in organizational realities impact political action and media coverage in ways that change public discourse. In this way, the

individual influences the structural. Simultaneously, individual acts are downstream from structure, but structure is also downstream from individual acts.

As such, I do not strongly separate charity from social justice. Rather, I argue that charity is a mode of acting and organizing that is focused on providing for needs in a noneconomic exchange. As I consider what a socially just world looks like, I imagine people being willing to help others in need without expectation of payment. Charitable action and organizing can be a deeply humanizing and profoundly practical way of pursuing justice.

Does that mean all acts of charity lead toward justice? No. For instance, evangelical Christian churches often do outreach to people experiencing homelessness. Some do so with no need for thanks or reciprocation. Others use such outreach as a religious recruitment tool and force those they serve to attend religious services as a condition for continued assistance. If a city had 10 outreach organizations and seven of them demanded religious participation in exchange for help, I would consider that an unjust social formulation on the grounds of coercion, despite there being lots of charitable action. This is not to say that religious-based charity is essentially unjust. There are successful recovery programs that systematically incorporate religious doctrine. The unjust elements arise in conditions where no other choices are tenable. A world where nonreligious persons can restrict their affiliation to nonreligious services without meaningful opportunity loss seems reasonable and fair to me. Charity is not essentially socially just, but ethical, structurally sensible, and humanizing charity is necessary for pursuing social justice.

Social justice relies on various modes of action and organizing, including advocating change, building community, improving governance, and reorganizing markets. Looking at these other forms of acting and organizing helps solidify the relationship between charity and justice. For instance, social justice cannot be attained without advocacy. Advocacy is necessary for changing formal and informal social arrangements. But is all advocacy socially just? Certainly not! Advocacy is a mode of acting and organizing that seeks to change policy and opinion on a particular issue. All manner of stakeholders advocate for their particular interests, some of which are for the benefit of a few. Advocacy, therefore, is not essentially socially just, but it is all but impossible to imagine the pursuit of social justice without ethical, structurally sensible, and humanizing advocacy.

Community has a similar relation to social justice. Many argue that community is an essential criterion for a socially just world. I agree. But not all formulations of community are fair. Communities can be exclusionary, exploitative, socially oppressive, hate-driven, and resource-mongering. But though unjust modes of community exist, community still serves as an indispensable cornerstone of social justice. Advocacy, community, and charity all hold parallel relations to social justice. They are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for social justice to be attained.

In summary, social justice does not always mean going "upriver" of immediate problems to solve their causes. There is a downriver, too, and solving immediate problems helps improve proximal and distal outcomes that are both personal and political. Ultimately, working for social justice does not mean privileging the labor in one town or another, but rather, it means living in light of the fact that we all drink from the same river. Micro, mezzo, and macro communicative realities influence each other. And social justice and charity co-operate. In the section that follows, I make the case that access is a powerful way of imagining what social justice is.

THE JUST CITY: IMAGINING SOCIAL JUSTICE

Conceptualizing social justice is considering what "better" looks like. According to Rawls (1971), the answer to that is fairness. Fairness, in his vision, is a blend of freedom and equality and serves as the basic foundation of considering a just world. Social justice takes up inequities of all kinds (Barry, 2005). However, income and wealth inequity can dominate these conversations. Clearly, there are radical wealth disparities in the world. There is also a strong case to be made that these disparities contribute to widespread suffering and exploitation of both human and natural resources. Wealth is not arrayed fairly, equitably, or in a way that contributes to broad freedoms. As such, it is not surprising that wealth becomes a key issue in conversations of social justice.

However, I propose that wealth distribution is a limited starting point for considering what social justice is. Rather, when pursuing social justice, it is more helpful to consider what humans need to thrive and the processes that lead to those conditions. Social fairness is not about everyone owning the latest iPod or driving giant SUVs. It is about all people having decent and humane access to the conditions of living well. Socially just conditions arise when people can access what they need,

regardless of the level of their personal wealth. Access undergirds social justice.

In many ways, all societies are constituted by negotiating access to resources. Societies establish (and are established by people determining) who can use this thing or that place. But to use the notion of access also subtly invokes a corollary notion: restricting access. To say that a shift manager can access a store before opening is also to say that other people are restricted from accessing it. Societies often restrict access through implicit and explicit uses of coercion, deception, and force. Being moved along by security guards and police officers is a common experience of homeless people. Material and spatial arrays prevent certain people from going certain places. I do not assert that all people have the right to go wherever they want whenever they want. To be sure, privacy is also a right. But when conceiving a better world, much can be revealed by thinking about access and the coercion that undergirds access. With that in mind:

Imagine a city.

Imagine buildings large and small, roadways and walkways, shrubberies and trees. Populate it with people. Some are old, some young. Some are short, some tall. This city need not be a shining golden edifice on the top of a hill. It need not be carved from marble or alabaster. It need not be *utopic*. But this city is a just one. What sets this city apart is its central building. Slightly raised for all to see, the building is known by all who dwell in the city. The building has no locked doors. It has no guards. In fact, the only thing in the building is found at its center. It is a short pillar, with a small, clear, easily removed plastic box that houses a single button. All the city's promise and tragedy rests in that small button, for if anyone pushes it, even once, a series of explosive devices buried beneath the city will destroy it and all its people.

Now I ask: how would the city need to be organized to prevent the button from ever being pushed without resorting to coercion, deception, or force?

I begin to answer that question by turning to empathic perspective taking. Imagine what might cause someone to push the button. Scorn. Rage. Loss. Righteous indignation. Nihilism. Despair. A deep sense of being wronged. Pick one and imagine the person who feels that way. Empathize with him or her. Consider what events in his or her life have led to that emotion. Now imagine you are standing outside the building. What would you say to him or her? Without force, deception, or coercion, save your city.

I suspect such a city would keep people in and around the central building to do just that. Not guards, but communicative healers, whose job it is to attempt a last-ditch effort to restore hope and humanness to those who have no stake left in the social order. In a way, the central building would be something of a temple, a place of healing, and I like to imagine the button would be known as the "temple button." While the healers' original function would be as the city's non-coercive way of preventing people from acting on despair, I suspect that after a time people would intentionally go to the temple to have their hope restored.

But some hurts cannot be healed by a single conversation, and the temple healers would be insufficient for saving the city. As such, I also believe the city would take a community approach to wellbeing and try to address problems as they developed. This would require an ethos of caring for one's neighbor and an attention to the trials of others and a sense of shared stake in each others' wellbeing.

But citizens healing and supporting each other only works when the communicative healers keep faith in the social order, too. Whole communities could lose heart. As such, it would be essential to keep communities engaged by giving them a stake in how the city runs and ensuring they have a place. Keeping the city safe would require foresight about the conditions people would need to thrive and the active pursuit of those conditions.

I think the thought experiment has more value if I refrain from answering too much of my own question and leave room for others to consider their own answers. I believe that the answers to the question "How would the city need to be organized to prevent the button from ever being pushed without resorting to coercion, deception, or force?" would ultimately render a picture of what social justice is. Rodriguez (2006) suggests the most productive and profound definition of communication involves vulnerability to each other's humanness. In this case, the vulnerable city helps us imagine what social justice is because it asks us to consider ways people would need to communicate and organize so that all people have a deeply held stake in the social order. Would such a city need complete wage equality? Likely, no. Some jobs are harder than others, and people reasonably apprised of those difficulties would probably let people willing to work much harder make more money. On the other hand, even a reasonable person might consider pushing the temple button if a health problem prevented him or her from working and loss of work led to loss of medical access. Note the difference. Social justice doesn't necessitate enforced sameness. It requires legitimized humanness.

For those who find this thought experiment outlandish, I propose that we are closer to this world than one might think. Certainly there are people who would feel called to push the button. When someone walks into a school or movie theatre with assault rifles and tear gas, ready to kill and die, is not his finger on the temple button? When a people raze their own neighborhoods in response to police mistreatment, are their fingers not on the temple button? And while no such temple of destruction currently exists, we live in a time when nuclear technology is slowly but ever proliferating and 3D printers can print firearms. I do not share these facts to be a harbinger of doom, but to call attention to the ways the social order is undergirded. The thought experiment works in the inverse. If force, coercion, and deception could not prevent any person from ending society as it currently is, how long would it exist? I suspect not long.

To be clear, I do not think building a temple of destruction in the middle of all cities is the best route to social justice. I would find residence in such a place very anxiety producing. But it is good to meditate on the fact that we are mutually vulnerable in the face of each other. Indeed, the temple button serves as a fantastical way of arriving at a simple but far-reaching notion of social justice: the socially just society is one that all members would voluntarily participate in and desire to continue.

The just city also echoes the points made in the two sections above. The city would need to have social justice in all three senses: as a place, as a goal, and as the process itself. It would not survive if some version of justice could not be arrived at. But it would also be doomed by settling into a social formulation that seemed to work for now and, therefore, stopped engaging in ongoing, aspirational efforts. Similarly, the city's success would rely on socially just communication at micro-interpersonal, mezzo-organizational, and macro-cultural levels. It is helpful to imagine the small, medium, and large scale social realities that would be required for survival.

CONCLUSION

Frey, Pearce, Pollack, Artz, and Murphy (1996) argue that communication enables the pursuit of social justice. Clearly, activities like advocacy and organizing rely on communication and, therefore, make communicative practice an indispensable tool for activists. What I argue here is that *thinking* communicatively is a profound, imaginative resource when trying to visualize social justice. Whether approaching

justice as an achievable state, an aspirational ideal, or a process toward said goals, we do well to attend to the interpersonal, organizational, rhetorical, and cultural realities, possibilities, and constraints.

This is not to discredit other renderings of social justice. Economists, philosophers, theologians, social workers, sociologists, public health scholars, and others all have valuable frames for articulating what social justice is. But even within these disparate fields, I call thinkers and activists alike to consider not only the material arrangements of society, but also the interactive, social arrangements. For while two people may be able to lift unequal amounts of weight from a squatting position, or two people's skin may absorb and reflect unequal amounts of light, what our differences mean is always a social question. As such, questions of social justice, regardless of the disciplinary frame, are deepened by answering Pearce's (2007) question, "What are we making together?"

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