A standard used to assess the fairness of a society. Justice is a central moral standard that requires the fair and impartial treatment of all. Social justice differs from other realms of justice, such as that relating to the application of law, being centrally concerned with the fairness of a social order and its attendant distributions of rewards and costs. Determining how fairness is to be assessed, and according to which principle, is an issue of fierce debate. Different criteria, including equality, entitlement, recognition or need, yield different principles of justice. While some scholars view social justice in essentially descriptive terms, the literature within fields such as geography has been more normative, with an emphasis on using some definition of social justice in the moral evaluation of prevailing social arrangements (see also ethics).

Social justice has long been a rallying cry for many social movements. The arguments of poor communities of colour that they are disproportionately burdened by environmental externalities, the claim by unions for better compensation or the democratization of the workplace, or the organizing of anti-capitalist globalization (anti-globalization) movements are all motivated, in part, by the powerful claim that prevailing social arrangements should be fairer. The injustice of many social relationships, distributions and arrangements has long been the focus of a rich scholarly and activist tradition (activism). Broadly, three perspectives can be identified:

1. The most extensive body of scholarship is to be found in liberal political theory that seeks variously to determine the essential characteristics of a ‘fair’ society (see liberalism). John Rawls’ (1971) *A theory of justice*, for example, imagines an original position, prior to the creation of society. The just social order is that which those in this original position would agree to, he argues, if they did not know in advance whether they would be rich or poor in the resultant society. From this, he derives a number of yardsticks to assess social justice, of which the most famous is his ‘difference principle’, which holds that inequality can only be justified if it benefits the least advantaged.

2. Particularly influential within geography is a Marxist analysis of social justice (departing from one strain of marxism that sees social justice as an ideological construct). Since his seminal *Social justice and the city*, David Harvey (1973) has been concerned with the topic, abandoning a liberal characterization as ‘a matter of eternal justice and morality’ in favour of a view of social justice as ‘contingent upon the social processes operating in society as a whole’ (p. 15). He judged questions of spatial distribution not according to the prevailing standard of efficiency but, rather, according to some measure of distributive justice. Social justice was said to apply to the distributions of benefits and burdens, as well as the social and institutional arrangements arising from production and distribution (including power, decision-making). In sum, he sought ‘a just distribution, justly arrived at’ (p. 98). In subsequent work, Harvey (1996) has extended his scope to include questions of environmental justice. While he acknowledges the importance of social difference and positionality, he continues to argue from political economy.
3. A post-structuralist reading of social justice supplements a Marxist emphasis upon class and economic relationships with the inclusion of multiple axes of social differentiation – such as gender and race. For example, while recognizing the injustices of class exploitation, Iris Marion Young (1990a) constructs a pluralist reading of oppression that includes marginalization, violence, powerlessness and cultural imperialism. She advocates a politics that ‘instantiates social relations of difference without exclusion’ (p. 227).

Social justice has been of occasional concern within geography since Harvey’s original intervention. The collection edited by Merrifield and Swyngedouw (1997) for example, provides one example, as do recent arguments by Don Mitchell (2003a). Drawing, in part, from a Rawlsian analysis, David Smith has also written thoughtfully on the topic. In an important paper, Smith (2000b) constructs a geographically sensitive argument for equality as a basis for social justice, and articulates an argument for the morally significant aspects of human sameness as a way out of the relativism of difference. Smith also considers the injustices of an uneven geography of global resource endowment as a basis for a territorial social justice. In a more post-structuralist vein, Kobayashi and Ray (2000) argue for a pluralist notion of justice that embraces positionality. They eschew a calculus of rights, with its logic of impartiality, arguing instead for an emphasis upon risk (cf. Peake and Ray, 2001). Noting that differently positioned people face differential exposure to injustice, they insist on the importance of geography to social justice. That said, social justice demands more careful and sustained attention by geographers. As Merrifield and Swyngedouw (1997, p. 2) note, it has all to often been relegated to the ‘hinterlands of academic inquiry’. For while social justice is often invoked, or implicit to much geographic work, particularly of a critical bent (critical geography), it is all too often left untheorized (although see the special issue of the journal *Critical Planning*, 14, 2007, which is dedicated to the theme of spatial justice: see [http://www.spa.ucla.edu/critplan/](http://www.spa.ucla.edu/critplan/)).

**Suggested reading**

Full bibliography is available here.

Holloway (1998)


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