

1-1-2006

## SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE DIALECTICS OF DAILY LIVING

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### Recommended Citation

Boakari, Dr. Francis M. Ph.D. (2006) "SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE DIALECTICS OF DAILY LIVING," *Verbum Incarnatum: An Academic Journal of Social Justice*: Vol. 1 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://athenaeum.uw.edu/verbumincarnatum/vol1/iss1/18>

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You see that stranger, she was your mother:  
Yes, that unfamiliar individual way over there, will be your father:  
Come to your senses, that unknown person should be your sister.  
Re-member, that obscure fellow ought to be your very own brother.  
Be mindful that she/he was and still is, your very self.  
In fact, all of them were, are, and will be, ALL THAT YOU ARE.  
(FMB, San Antonio: March, 2006).

*Abstract*

*I argue that for social justice to be real, it has to be understood in its essence as a relational requirement whereby every individual human being must be equitably and permanently contemplated in everything that a society or community values so that people can become totally human. Its complex and ubiquitous nature is discussed, while I present some experiences to emphasize that formal education can contribute to some understanding and operationalization of social justice principles. I posit further that though social justice is collective, only individuals can make it a possibility. Finally, there is a reminder about the need to transfer priorities from social justice discourse to actively living social justice in an unquestionable manner.*

**What Is At Stake In Discussing Social Justice?**

Social justice, like culture, is a complex concept to discuss. Both are integral parts of our lives as members of human society. Culture makes us what we are as human beings in society. It is our way of life. For some, it defines our existence itself. It determines how we relate to one another. Because of culture, we are able to make sense of the reality in which we live. Culture provides the dimensions from and within which we produce the materials and symbolic elements that make our existence as persons who interact with others possible. Culture expresses our beliefs and values, while it guides our behaviors. Indeed, culture is all that we are though we give it the power to influence our lives by determining and then collaborating with the different elements that compose it.

In the same way, it is social justice, or equity or social fair-play, in human relationships that determines how we understand, shape and operate being together as individual persons dependent upon other people. It is this dependency - better still, interdependency - that essentially makes us living beings whose humanity is basically possible because of other people. In the absence of some degree of social fair-play, life with others would be difficult, if not impossible. Because of social justice, we can afford to be future-oriented by hoping, planning, and developing expectations whose realization we consider highly possible. How then do we discuss that which is the essence of what we are? Will such a discussion be realistic without a totally human engagement that involves our thinking and feelings, as well as our physical, moral, and spiritual endowments? If social equity serves as the instrument and the framework within which we can be considered humans in relationships with other individuals, how can this concept be approached without an appeal to the human condition in all its richness and

limitations? In other words, how best can we explain, describe and even give examples of justice that is social in order to communicate about our essence as human beings?

I think it is possible to do so if we accept that no matter how complex a concept, as rational and intelligent beings, we can attempt to discuss it. Sometimes, as in the present situation, success in such a discussion or explanation should not be measured in terms of completeness. Rather, accomplishing the goal should reside in how far we succeed to raise those questions that could lead people to think in a more focused manner about an idea judged to be difficult to understand because of its multiple interfaces and manifestations. I believe that in the case of social justice, it has to be explained and its interrelationships described because without doing so, there is no guarantee that our sociability will continue. Equity in human relationships needs to be “understood” in order to begin to understand ourselves as we are, and even more necessary for how we should be in order to be more of what we already are – ever better human beings in relations with other persons. It is the beauty of this co-existence that has to extend to our natural environment that led the French Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin, to state that human beings are naturally called to engage in the continuous process of “hominization.” That is, it is necessary to gradually improve upon our conditions, opportunities, attitudes, and behaviours while we become more integrated persons. The term human is a reference to all peoples, in all places, and at all times! Social justice refers to the equal treatment and access to opportunities by all persons in society who continuously seek to co-exist as harmoniously as possible in balanced social and natural environments. Social justice has everything to do with inclusion. It is against any form of social exclusion.

If we agree that social justice is complex and difficult to discuss, all the more reason why we should approach its analysis with caution, lots of questioning, justifications, and maybe, some careful suggestions. It is in this spirit that I intend to develop these reflections. Initially, I will try to give a working explanation of what social justice could be in an attempt to lay the bases for the discussion. In the same section, I plan to introduce ideas that problematize social equity so as to underline its complexity in an ever-changing world best characterized by its different levels or types of contemporary diversities. Some of the possible implications of these ideas will also be introduced, not in order to confuse the discussion, but to emphasize further, the concept’s degree of difficulty.

The next step will be a discussion of the role of educational institutions in helping students come to a more comprehensive understanding of what social justice is really all about. Underlying the ideas to be introduced are two other fundamental considerations. One will deal with the question of basic primary socialization that all children are expected to go through in order to become responsible members of society. How the family, institutions, other social agents, and the socializing individual interact in this continuous process of being and becoming, will be the highlight of my concerns. The other related element will be the role of a university like the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW). The main objective will be to introduce aspects of those characteristics that should set such an institution apart from other agencies of higher education. As a follow-up to these reflections, I will approach the question of deconstructing knowledge

and conscious social participation as integral elements for appreciating not only the complexity of social justice, but even more so, any serious efforts to be socially just in a world whose most evident driving force is the consumption of material and symbolic goods.

To further the field for these reflections, I will cite examples of UIW-based experiences that could be helpful in exploring social justice in some of its practicalities. In these efforts, I hope to indirectly call attention to the theory of social justice and its practice. Though the two may be intellectually treated separately, in reality, one cannot make sense without the other. It is this praxis of equity in social relations that makes social justice a worthy theme to continue reflecting upon while simultaneously making every effort to make it reality in our existence as responsible world citizens. Finally, I will return to my initial thesis that social justice is indeed a complex concept. Nonetheless, this complexity should serve as invitation to learn more about it, especially from a critical stance. To do so with any chance of really understanding what being socially just could all be about, we have to be active agents engaged in the dialectical struggles of everyday social equity.

### **How Best Can Social Justice Be Understood?**

Underlying the attempt to approach this question within the context of an educational institution is the belief that social justice or equity can also be looked at from examining such opposite terms as social injustice and oppression. In this sense, there is need to remember that “the struggle against social injustice does not stop at the classroom door, but is never-ending and continues during every waking minute, in every single day, in every situation that calls for human engagement, for trust, for solidarity, for respect, for peace, and for a willingness to make concepts, principles, and ideas our weapons – and not bombs and missiles - in the ongoing class struggle” (McLaren, 2003, p. 48). When there is an excess of unjust human situations, social justice disappears. Under conditions of social oppression, the human elements in each person become targets for all kinds of violence – physical, psychological, spiritual, cultural, economic, and political. And on these notes, what is one way of understanding equity in social life?

Social justice refers to those elements in any relational situation wherein all the individuals involved have their humanity respected. There should also be explicit and open opportunities for everybody to achieve their own goals while respecting others. Social justice is human, interactive, existential, and real. It entails the use of wisdom (non-subjective discernment), courage (mediation), moderation (balance) and justice (fairness) in the human relations that are part of daily existence. Without discernment in which the individual distances her/himself from the phenomenon under examination, it becomes impossible to see the tree (specific interactive situation) for the forest (society’s levels of human interactions) because each of us has her/his own interests, preferences and objectives. To know whether a particular situation is socially just, one needs to “remove oneself” in order to examine and reflect upon that situation. In dealing with social justice, wisdom cannot be easily confused with other concepts. It would seem to stand out when one person relates to other persons.

Courage, justice and moderation are without doubt, core elements of social equity. Together with wisdom, they constitute the foundation stone upon which social equity is built. Determination, goal-directedness, and readiness to become involved in relational contexts as a mediating agent that makes social justice a possibility is a necessity. Without men, women, and children who concretely exhibit levels of balanced courage, equity in human relationships would continue to be a very intelligible concept but would have nothing to do with the daily engagements we are concerned with as human beings. Justice in this discussion must not be confused with its official and legal forms that constitute a formalized and structured system that is organized and interpreted and whose goals are not easy to generalize or universalize. Justice systems and their related structures, in combination with their accompanying procedures, are socioculturally contextualized. Power as controlling force (to and over) is highly determinant in the way the formal justice system works. The main focus of justice that is social in nature is fairness, fair-play, and equity in all human relationships everywhere and at all times.

Moderation is the benchmark for the wisdom, fairness and determined engagement that make social justice real within society, for real people whose existence guarantees our own. The need to establish balance in what we do and how we relate to other people serves as continuous reminder (become mind-filled) of our own limitations insofar as creating further possibilities for reaching out. Reaching beyond ourselves to touch and connect with others in positive ways is how we are able to bring some equilibrium and richness into relationships. Merely reaching out is not enough if enriching the lives of others in diverse forms and in unpredictable ways is not the target of these efforts. Meaningfully breaking away from our relational comfort zone has to be directed towards helping develop healthier relationships with others in order to make all parties better persons.

Social justice cannot be anything but human. And since the very nature of humanity is fundamentally social, the concept of fairness in question resides in those relationships between two individuals as much as relationships that involve the members of a small group and those interrelationships involving several/numerous individuals on a larger social scale. This latter can appear to be circumscribed by geographical, economic, cultural, and other frontiers. Nonetheless, in the final analysis, there are no barriers to the reach of social fairness because all human relations are all-human and universal. So no matter the relational level, whether micro or macro, social justice is still the glue that makes these relationships potentially meaningful. Moreover, human relationships are always established in time, space, and within specific relational contexts. These elements need basic resources for human connectivity to take place. These resources can be material, financial, spiritual, capacities, abilities, and even natural (environmental factors). The political (elements of power and hegemony) and cultural factors give the required dimensions to these other resources. Social justice is as relational as it is resource-based; and it is politically and culturally affected. In this sense, relations on the larger social level fall into the domain of policies, especially those of a public nature. Public policies assist larger groups to ascertain that there is fair-play in the access to (opportunities) and concrete utilization of available resources (rewards). Guaranteeing that these resources are distributed in such a way that all individuals actually receive that

which is their due determined by skills, efforts, and comparable responsibilities is what public policy tries to accomplish. This redistributive responsibility is the essence of fairness in society as humans have organized themselves in ever more complex relationships with even more sources for developing skills and increasing society's resources. How to go about distributing these resources in ways that are fair to everybody is the problem that needs equitable, respectful, dignified, and humanizing solutions.

I think we cannot begin to appreciate the real dimensions of the complex nature of social justice if I do not briefly mention the question of wealth while we are reflecting on fairness in distributing the resources necessary for meaningful social relationships. A good proportion of the resources available in any society are developed by some people. Due to this, the logical question as to how resources made available because of individual creativity and skillfulness should be redistributed presents another problem whose solution still escapes humans in society. However, I think it is necessary to recall that wealth, as an excess of resources, in any of its forms, has never been created *ex nihilo*; it has always resulted from some form of transformation of something that already existed. So while it should be admitted that the individual who spearheads the availability of a transformed resource deserves more of the benefits that accrue from such production (transformation), it still remains unsettling that the rights of others to this good or service are not respected. In most cases, this process of transformation is only possible because the knowledge, capacities, skills, and labor (personal endowments) of others are employed. It is almost impossible for an individual to single-handedly execute those responsibilities that make resource transformation successful. The fact that in order to accumulate surplus resources and become wealthy the endowments (power to labor, giving of self through work) of others have to be utilized does justify social fairness in distributing any consequent benefits. Surplus resource means gaining above and beyond that which was invested in the control of natural resources or in the employment of the labor-power of other persons, called human capital in capitalist societies (Marx, 1977; Rikowski, 2001). This situation also justifies the need for more equitable and rational resource distribution among members of society. As far as the satisfaction of primary human needs goes, no group has a monopoly. All persons share in this condition!

### **What Are The Dialectics Of Daily Social Justice?**

Daily life can be best characterized by such factors as dynamism, interrelatedness, contradictions, relationships, and unpredictability. From waking up till we return to sleep, we normally engage in diverse activities either alone or with others. In each case, these involvements do affect other people, and sometimes, on both a continuous basis and for some time. However, because daily life is characterized by elements like those cited above, we continue making the necessary efforts to achieve goals we consider worthwhile. Under normal circumstances, daily life can be built upon repetitive structures, values, activities, and behaviors. Some of these may be contradictory by their very nature. But we continue engaging in or with them in ways that tend to make sense to us. These contradictions and repetitions might lead us to develop alternatives in order to be more objective; we may change so as to improve upon our daily living styles and/or conditions.

For a dialectical way of thinking about and viewing the world, contrarities, like the other side of a coin, form the essence of reality. Our world is built upon contrarities, the negation of negation in Marxian terms. The thesis-antithesis-synthesis formulation that we seek in scientific inquiry is another form of this perspective. Underlying this way of thinking is the belief in change that arises from apparently competing factors such as ideas and their materialization. Both are united in that one is not possible without the other, though they are different. They are contrarities that complete each other. This could also lead to new possibilities if we are courageous enough to continue this process.

The dialectics of daily living is reference to the fact that under normal conditions as rational beings, we tend to lead thinking lives. Faced with any particular situation, we think about it and then reflect upon our response alternatives. Reacting in one way or the other is generally based upon our definition of the situation, and this is always real in itself. Through this process of reflection, selection and then action, we are able to carry out our daily responsibilities. At the same time, we can incorporate our perspectives about the future. In other terms, the thinking-acting-reflecting spiral denotes the dynamic nature of daily living. While facing the challenges of today, we evaluate them based upon past experiences and simultaneously contemplate the consequences and challenges that will follow. This is dialectical because as one phenomenon gets completed, another is already on the verge of becoming real. We are living today (being) and self-organizing (becoming) for the future.

In society, these responses are most frequently relational, and being so, they are dynamic and changing depending upon how the situation continues to be defined. There is no guarantee that the same reactions will always follow “provocations” that are similar to those in the past. Maybe one fact that can be guaranteed is that of a response-reaction as a way of being an active agent in relational situations. The apparent contradictory connections between living our lives now while we reflect upon this same existence for the future, based upon the experiences from our past living, constitute daily life. At the same time, this situation provides opportunities for us to change in conscious ways when we find out that our response set in relations do not integrate very well with the conclusions arising from our reflections. In daily living, we can choose to merely live life (breathe) or become more actively engaged agents (exist) as a general response to the relational contexts and times in which we find ourselves. Daily living involves reflections, evaluations, choices, responses, re-assessments, and new choices. In fact, this is the dialectics of daily living. It consists of the spiral form in which observations in relations become focused-upon subjects for more specific reflections, which in turn prompt the construction of alternatively possible reactions, and from these, one set is selected to be followed through with. And even during this execution, the whole process re-commences in some way.

In living our daily lives, dialectics and social justice could be primarily synonymous when we think in relational terms. This is more so when you and I, together with all the others, interact in our different ways in order to continue living (existing) in a meaningful manner. The meaningfulness of any relational connection depends upon the members involved in that spatio-temporal reality. Social justice, as an essential factor in human

relations. cannot be static, because such interactions are dynamic and dialectical. Human relationships that are guided by reflective engagements built upon fairness in the distribution (re-distributive justice) of resources (goods and services) are the building blocks of a daily living that most human beings work to foster.

I have tried to establish that the terms in the title of this paper are interrelated. In the same way, I repeat that in order to fully understand any of the central concepts, the others too need to be deciphered accordingly. I will discuss different levels and spheres in which these same categorical elements are manifested in daily social interactions, the inter-relationships we engage in with other people. This is another way of not only emphasizing their complexity but also of stressing how crucial they are for reaching out to others in an ongoing manner so that we can continue to be human ourselves.

Social justice can be conceptualized in different ways depending upon the particular context in which it is being considered. One of these contexts or levels is that of the political, the sphere in which policies are determined. Good examples of these are general education, health, housing, immigration, welfare, transportation, food, racial and ethnic policies, just to cite a few. At each of these levels or spheres, basic definitions and determinations are made by persons (elected as representatives, imposed by a few, or self-appointed) to take care of the needs of other people. These determinations can either be restricted to those within a specific national boundary or even to those from outside these boundaries. In one way or the other, the focus is on the multitude, as many persons as determined by the laws and procedures in place. Even these laws and procedures also would need to fall within the scopes of social fairness and inclusiveness.

The next level or area in which social justice is the focus is that of mediation. At this level, general policies are interpreted, implemented, accompanied, and assessed by intermediaries. When effectively undertaken, this intermediation would entail the inclusion of those modifications discovered during the assessments undertaken. The main goal is to make sure that not only the explicit nature of the determinations are followed through, but even more importantly, that their underlying purpose is attained. This objective, when carefully explained, must involve making society more just and fair in the treatment of everybody. That is, within the means of the larger society, the group of implementers (public policy officials, managers, and operational agents) honestly strive to do everything possible so that all the members of that larger group, or maybe the whole community of human beings, have an equal access to the resources that are available. It is normal that working in collaboration with the official implementers are other agents much closer to the smaller social units and even the individuals who may be most directly affected by the policy being implemented. Though these terms and expectations may not be fully made explicit, at least they constitute the ideal that underlines all public policy.

To admit that a society is wealthy but that its members are poor is a good example of how these mechanisms for guaranteeing that people have due access to possible opportunities and available resources may in fact be failing. That is to say that even though this system (redistributive justice) may be formally established, that does not



warrant passivity because it could be operating in such an inefficient way that it only justifies its name and purpose because it benefits some people and exploits many others. The use of such mechanisms as foreign aid, involvement of philanthropic organizations, so-called development assistance, debt-relief, and many other forms through which social justice is claimed to be targeted at the more general level, remains problematic.<sup>1</sup>

These interventions by the wealthy and consequently more power-filled involve dealing with social justice both at the policy and implementation levels. Most of the programs and/or projects that arise from these mechanisms are normally defined and determined by “others,” the controllers of the resources that are used. Troubling in this regard is that these controlling agents consider themselves as saviors, who, even though not explicitly self-proclaiming as such, employ the discourse of all-competent social agents. They appropriate themselves of “the talk of the needy,” behave like “sole experts,” and offer their “specialized knowledge and skills” (efficient manipulation) to those “whom they have gone to save.” Strategies believed to be against exploitation and dehumanizing conditions that have been defined in top-down manner and solutions distributed as pre-packaged hand-outs have for a long time been the consequences of this attitude. However, as evidence from the field continues to mount showing the contrary, this perspective forces the question as to whether these “specialists” know what the needy really need. Maybe the Chinese proverb, “you cannot know what the fish wants because you are not a fish,” is worthy of attention in this regard!

To highlight the importance of really understanding social injustice in the line of such socially conscious researchers and engaging educators (critical theorists) like Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Paul Willis, Paulo Freire, Jonathan Kozol, Henry Giroux, and many others, McLaren (2003) reminds us that:

I realize now that observations of events ... *never* speak for themselves... Every description is ideologically loaded, codified, and intertextually related to larger interpretive contexts... Ideas are always and necessarily tied to particular interests and enciphered in particular relations of power, and tied to particular power/knowledge configurations....To ‘know’ anything is always an effect of power/knowledge relationships. The crucial question is: Who has the power to make some forms of knowledge more legitimate than others? (p. xxxii-xxxiii).

Some recent philanthropic endeavors, however, have tried to work with a different paradigm. Organizations that use this perspective try not just to “throw money at the needy and push material goods at their conditions of desperation,” but really get involved in the daily lives of these other people as real human beings. It seems there is the understanding that though they cannot fully know these others (the poor), these resource controllers can at least be as “close to them as possible.” Some organizations are pointing to the “demise of aid donations” and the “death of philanthropy” as we know them by developing new strategies that are integrated and entrepreneurial. An essential

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<sup>1</sup> That social injustices continue to spread and become deeper is the point for consideration here (see data from the UNDP, US Census Bureau, World Bank, United for a Fair Economy organization, and other such entities regarding different countries and groups worldwide).

component. not an additive of these business entities or nongovernmental agencies themselves. is a focus on reaching people at “the street level” (Fortune Magazine, 2006). These endeavors include providing start-up financing for small business enterprises as low-interest or interest-free loans. The small installment repayments are then re-invested as new loans that are given to others so as to widen the cycle of “re-membering” more persons into the community. The main advantage in such struggles against social injustice is the return of dignity, responsibility, and self-determination of victims of exploitation. It may be too soon to tell whether these new techniques will be any better than the “saving grace” practices of the past. However, this style of helping others help themselves more responsibly is dialectical in that change surges from within and between people in their relationships as agents of daily life.

Social relationships at the primary levels in the domestic and private spheres are also very important when the focus is equity in human relationships. At these levels, the interest would be upon how these agents as individuals or a group strive to incorporate the meaning of social justice in their relationships. One individual may be the most influential, but in the final analysis, the smaller collective unit such as a family or some other social form of organization is really accountable for making sure that their whole relational context and all their activities are essentially fair. When there is fairness at the domestic and other micro levels, justifications are usually not necessary because social justice announces itself in unmistakable ways. Just as “the tiger does not need to proclaim its tigritude,” so does social justice not have to announce that it’s the backbone of respect-filled human relationships and interactions. At this level, it is easier to see when relational responses are consequences of reflections and conscious choices. When knowledge and action combine, there could be greater possibilities that social justice is being developed as the individuals involved have made an option for fairness in their social relations. Social justice could have greater possibility of turning into reality when theoretical knowledge, methodological clarity-focus, and operational skills are all dimensioned equally in favor of all human beings as full members of society.

### **What Is The Relationship Between Education And Social Justice?**

In discussing education as a determining factor related to social justice, I will make some initial observations about education as an all-inclusive concept and then its informal and non-formal kinds. First, education generally refers to any relational process through which some kind of information is transmitted, received, and may be put to use in one way or the other. This process of transfer leads to some intellectual change (knowledge content), and that may stimulate behavioral modifications. The information, in one form or the other, may be organized or disorganized, transmitted through one mechanism or another. Today, it may be either spatio-temporally or synchronically delivered. The essential detail is that all educational processes have goals; these could be well defined or even only loosely understood. Education only takes place in the relational context between the information transmitter and receiver, and the mediating elements could be diverse.

Next, the informal education process is wherein information, the main element, is made available in any way possible so that those interested may pay attention to it. This information includes all the sensory stimulations we receive as we go about our daily activities. Since we can be stimulated in several ways, it implies that we are being informally educated all the time. Once alive, the likelihood is that we continue to be influenced by informal education. The information could be organized in any particular fashion and could target any member of society. In a world mediated by diverse technological systems that help produce and disseminate information, informal education may be more powerful than ever before. It is almost impossible to escape its reach.

In non-formal education, the information is usually organized and those responsible for its transmission have to be approved by others. There may be no restrictions based upon such factors as age or a previously acquired knowledge base. Progress from one stage or level to the other may depend upon some criteria, though these may not always be the same for everybody. In most cases, this kind of education may be geared towards knowledge construction, the development of skills, or changes in behavior. The underlying goal is that some specific outcome is expected. There may be numerous forms of interactions between the transmitting agents (instructors) and the learners. Some good examples of non-formal education include activities developed in different organizations, societies, interest-groups, or even agencies and government units specifically responsible for either delivering some specific kinds of information or teaching pre-defined skills. Youth clubs and associations are some instances where non-formal education may be widely developed.

Socialization, the process whereby an individual is educated to become a member of some human society or any society of human beings, is an important form of education. Everybody generally goes through this training to become socioculturally efficient and effective, a competent social being. Social competency involves growing up physically in an integrated and healthy fashion, demonstrating mastery to some level of some basic cultural knowledge and social skills. Language acquisition, recognition of and respect for different kinds of relationships, as well as behaving as an adult member of a particular society are some of the objectives of the social training. The fact that socialization includes all forms of education indicates how central it is for the continuation of society. The roles of parents, other primary significant others, as well as the whole of society through institutions are very important in the socialization process.

For the construction of morality, the ability to discern between “right and wrong,” certain individuals, especially those from a child’s domestic environment, play a vital role. The power of modeling in the relationships between the young and old during this process is also an important form of socialization as education. Finally, the individual being socialized also contributes to this ongoing process, and in fact, it only ends with death. Since socialization is fundamentally relational, it has everything to do with social justice and the times in which we live (Hall, 1997). Knowledge of social equity as an essential value to be practiced since it forms the basic fabric of society itself can be strongly influenced during this early period of social guidance. From birth to the grave, we are learners of how best to adjust to the conditions, resources, expectations, and

norms of the society in which we live. We show that we have been adequately socialized as members of a particular society through the acquisition and appropriate use of certain social skills. It is expected that when we relate to others, these skills are rooted in fairness and respect.

Formal education as the schooling process is similar to the other kinds. It is fundamentally distinguishable because of its methodology (pedagogy), defined content (curriculum), standardized levels, and comparable universal recognition. Both traditional and contemporary elements are constantly at play in the formal education system and practice. For formal education to go on as expected, culturally approved information developers (discipline specialists) and transfer agents (teachers) have to be officially trained and recognized. The certification procedures, proof of level attained, and the knowledge-practical competencies acquired are basically very similar world-wide. The general levels, fundamentally based upon cognitive skills, include elementary and high schools as well as college and university education. Factors of age, demonstrable knowledge content, skills, and behaviors are also elements that are comparable in different societies regarding formal education. Through schooling, we acquire the knowledge contents that society values, and we may have access to certain kinds of opportunities and rewards based upon our attained levels. It is mainly because of this that formal education easily becomes the most commonly justified instrument for social exploitation and criterion for distributing the resources available in society. It is worth remembering that schooling and its diverse levels, contents, and pedagogies are strong determinants of practical social justice (Banks, 2006).

Schooling can be considered a double-edged sword. Just as it can open many doors to opportunities and rewards, it can also serve as the barrier that prevents many people from having access to these benefits (McLaren, 2003). At the same time, the knowledge content in schooling has much to do with how we understand, interpret, and respond in relational contexts. The question as to whether formal education is to justify oppression (violence in different forms) or to become an instrument for bringing about greater social justice is another of those concerns human societies do not seem to have dealt with competently. McLaren reflects upon this, wondering whether the school should “develop a pedagogy that would... [be] more effective in both empowering my students and transforming conditions in the existing community” (p. xxxii)? This should not be anything strange. Schools and all they produce are a mere microcosm of the social macrocosm of which they are a part. A society that does not give priority to equality for all its members and preeminence in dealing with social justice cannot be expected to have a formal educational system where these characteristics are present. Because of this, those involved in school systems and practices (education professionals), but also parents and other social agents continue to struggle in favor of one school-type or the other. Formal schooling is a universal, but its operationalization (philosophy and pedagogical preferences) is socioculturally specific and temporal. It is with this understanding that I will introduce and discuss the next point for reflection in this paper.

Up to this point, I have discussed social justice by trying to explain, describe, and indicate some of the considerations that demonstrate its complexity as a relational category in being both a concept and its operationalization. Social justice is intricate and ever-present whenever, and wherever, there is human interaction. Similarly, as the central idea that permeates our human nature as rational, physical, psychological, and spiritual beings, it has theoretical and practical dimensions. It needs to be thought about objectively, and hopefully, operationalized according to our convictions. Social justice is both theory and practice. This duality (contrariety) defines it as fair-play when persons interact. So the role education plays in assisting us to make fairness in relationships real is of the utmost importance in order to guarantee our humanity as beings in existence. Consequently, the discussion will now focus on the connections between formal education and social justice, especially on the ways in which these linkages can be understood in/from the university experience.

It is customary for these institutions, like most others, to have mission statements, an explanation of their *raison d'être*. These philosophical and universalizing goals normally cite development of social justice as a vital value. This is even more evident at colleges-universities that are faith-based. For example, the mission statement at the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW), San Antonio, Texas, stresses that the school

promotes life-long learning and fosters the development of the whole person...serves ever more effectively the spiritual and material needs of people. The curriculum offers students an integrated program of liberal arts and professional studies that includes a global perspective and emphasis on *social justice* (italics mine) and community service...welcomes to its community persons of diverse backgrounds...their respectful interaction advances the discovery of truth, *mutual understanding, self-realization, and the common good* (italics mine) [UIW, 1996].

As can be seen from these sections of the UIW mission statement, social justice is not only explicitly mentioned, but its elements are all over. In fact, it can be proposed that the whole philosophical foundation of the institution is built upon an understanding of fairness in society and a commitment to helping make the related expectations become real. How else can we understand “development ...whole person,” “spiritual and material needs,” “respectful interaction,” and the other sections italicized, if not within the context of relational fair-play? What can an educational institution do in order to develop some basic conditions so that the ideals of the mission statement may become reality? Talking of an institution may seem pointless since any institution is merely a social organism that exists because of the individuals and groups that guarantee its continuity. To talk of an institution is to refer to the whole society but without neglecting to recognize that the individual members make it possible. At the university, the direct stakeholders include the service staff, students, faculty, and administrators. The whole of society, family, and friends of the immediate stakeholders also have stakes in what takes place at the university. However, to concentrate on the connections between university training and the social justice enterprise, the direct stakeholders’ roles must be discussed.

Though administrators are important agents in the education activity-process, what faculty and students develop in their different relational contexts may be considered more determinant with regard to the outcomes that could most affect students. Answers to the question about what a university can do in order to help bring about social fairness and balance in society as a whole are not easy to determine because as an institution, the university also has different interest groups whose understanding and interpretation of social justice are diverse. Because of this situation, I will offer a brief discussion about barriers to introducing more critical elements that could concretely make the theory and practice of social justice the life-line of the education offered at the university.

Of primary importance as a barrier to more critical discussions of social justice is the refusal to engage in educational experiences that could offer alternative ways of viewing the world, especially in terms of the relational contexts of people. This pedagogical refusal can take several forms. One of the most effective is to adopt the defensive posture of blaming the victim. In this position, people who suffer from oppression in different ways, those victims of a society where social injustice is not appropriately attacked, are blamed for the conditions in which they find themselves. The characteristics that basically apply to members of the group are defined as those very causes of their problems. There is a conscious attempt to turn the social question of fairness around by examining the victims' characteristics and never the problems themselves or their ultimate causes. Blaming the victim amounts to the use of scientific enquiry as a tool for maintaining the *status quo*, a very comfortable choice because by explaining away problems that dehumanize people, we would in fact be siding with those responsible for their problem-rife conditions. To side-line critical examination and analyses of conditions of oppression as a pedagogical option is basically to validate a culture of privilege wherein those with power in its diverse forms also consequently define truths and its various forms of manifestation. As Foucault (1980) explains,

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: ... the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; ... the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (p. 131).

McLaren (2003) goes on to remind us that the members of oppressed groups do not only generally accommodate themselves to their condition but also assimilate "the truths" that make them responsible for their suffering. This a discourse that uses explanations that only beg the critical questions of what, when, how, why, and by/for whom. Resistance to bringing up these questions in pedagogical interactions between faculty and students sows the seeds for not rocking the boat of the powerless masses (poor). For Freire (2003), those who prevent others from engaging in inquiries about the world in which they live are committing acts of violence. In this particular case, pedagogical violence could lead students to nurture non-questioning attitudes and passive postures that could flourish into social numbness and non-involvement later.

This barrier of self-negation as agent in relational contexts could effectively prevent more profound examination of situations of social injustice through bad faith. Introduced by the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, bad faith involves a denial to recognize our freedom to choose to act based on the argument that we cannot really do anything: that either the situation itself, or its component elements, make it impossible to do that which we would really want to take on. This line of thinking transforms us into objects of circumstance, holding that either the larger community or other persons have much more power to determine our choice of reaction. Bad faith, though closely related to self-deception, is an all-encompassing condition because it immobilizes the individual's rational capabilities, making it impossible to clearly perceive that there are other alternative response sets in any human situation. It is both contradictory as someone using bad faith employs his/her freedom to choose while denying this condition at the same time. It is also a paradoxical condition as it can lead an individual to be aware of the ramifications present in a relational context while opting for only one alternative out of several others that he/she claims to be unaware of. By siding with bad faith, university faculty, and even students, are able to make themselves blind to issues of social injustice: and at times, so blind that they even fail to see that their options are tantamount to a decision to side with an existing situation where violence permeates the relations.

Under circumstances like the above, what other options are there for engaging in an educational process that potentially enables people to see through the screens of the discourse of power and negation of individual agency in human relationships? Freire (2003) offers a helpful insight in the following words:

Humans, however, because they are aware of themselves and thus of the world – because they are *conscious beings* (italics in the original) – exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom. As they separate themselves from the world, which they objectify, as they separate themselves from their own activity, as they locate the seat of their decisions in themselves and in their relations with the world and others, people overcome the situations which limit them: ‘the limit-situations’ (p. 99).

The Brazilian educator seems to be reminding us that when all is said and done, the individual always has the possibility of choosing to remain the subject of her/his relational constructions. If we agree with this liberatory perspective, what would the implications be at the university where mostly the young are being “educated” for both the present and future that no-one really knows very much about? There may be some possibilities that we can realistically envision for the coming times – the validity of the principles of social justice (humanization of all) and the need to eliminate all forms of oppression (dehumanization), the injustices that presently plague most human relations.

In the “Introduction” to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Donaldo Macedo is mindful about the need for “a profound commitment to fight social injustices in our struggle to recapture the loss of our dignity as human beings” (2003, p. 25). There is good reason for this because the book in question is based on the understanding that *true education* is the activity that offers guidance for the purpose of engagements with the goal of social transformation. And since this education can never

be an individual act, it can only be social, an act in the relational context of a collectivity. A deeper understanding of this concept enriches those concerned about the oppression of the many by a few, enlightens their quest for more clarifications, and strengthens them to engage in activities that provoke change. This education embodies both a world-view and a decision either in favor of society as it is or a choice to collaborate in transforming those human relations that fertilize social injustice. To engage in an educational activity entails making a choice as to how we understand social justice, and consequently, what pedagogy to employ. The choice is between a pedagogy that encourages silence while an instructor bombards students with a monologue rooted in social maintenance and an approach that is dialogical, questioning, and communicative: one that seeks new relational possibilities in daily life.

Access to several sources easily indicates that there are enough data available pertaining to the conditions in which the world's populations live. There are easily accessible scientific techniques and other resources that make it possible to obtain data of indicators and less subjective analytical reports about almost any social phenomenon today in any part of the world, country, town, neighborhood, household, or even the personal life of an individual. There is sufficient understanding of the sub-human conditions in which most people live all over the world and the skills necessary to engage in solving some of the most urgent of these problems. Blaming political and economic systems, historical factors and cultural backgrounds for these difficulties has been found to be stretching the truth beyond the acceptable by the socially conscious. What is most evident now is that persons, acting collectively or individually, are responsible for causing, maintaining, and reproducing those conditions that perpetuate the dehumanization of other people in all parts of the world. In other words, if human beings cause the suffering of others, conditions about which there is enough knowledge, what then could be preventing focused attempts to deal death-blows to these problems? "What is lacking in solving social injustices are not the knowledge and skill but the will to change. What is needed is conversion", maintains Hellwig (1999, p. 29). Like religious conversion that has to be whole and all-consuming, changes in world-view and behavior modification are not easy in the relational environment. Radical transformations are the *sine qua non* conditions for this process that involves new ways of socially engaging in dignified relations between different human beings. Not even diversity in its several forms should be an insurmountable preventive factor against social justice.

Based on the ideas of Habermas who divided knowledge into "technical," "practical," and "emancipatory," McLaren (2003) explains the former as that which is measurable. This kind of knowing predominates in school and is generally called scientific-academic. Acquisition of technical knowledge can be assessed through scholastic testing techniques. Practical knowledge is generally constructed from the involvement in social reality, describing the situation, and going on to decipher its development and historicity. Practically knowing a phenomenon is object-specific. First-hand experience can be an important determinant factor.

Emancipatory knowledge is the ability, or better still, the disposition to consciously integrate the first two kinds of knowledge contents with an emphasis on engagement. It



assists us to reach a better understanding of phenomena, especially the workings of society and how power factors influence its organization. The ability to understand how power as an ubiquitous force determines the nature of social structures, either distorting or clarifying their interrelationships of oppression or liberation, are vital for the emancipatory way of knowing. It also entails recognizing when information is being manipulated for more effective exploitation of people. The individual who constructs knowledge that is emancipatory does so in order to work directly or indirectly in favor of social justice by helping bring about greater equality and self-determination in situations of injustice. It is important to emphasize that knowing social reality and its diverse dimensions/elements in a manner that emancipates people implies understanding the world in which we live in a way that is active (deconstructive) and engaging (actively reconstructive).

Deconstructing social relations is fundamentally intellectual. When the goal is that of attaining social justice, deconstruction has to be understood in three inter-related ways. First, when it pertains to human activity, the implication is that of unwrapping a phenomenon to free it from its fabricated coatings of misrepresentations. Only in this way will we reach its essence, its real significance. Second, deconstruction implies the thought-out process through which a social structure is intellectually dismantled in order to have a more comprehensive grasp of its components and to examine how these parts work together. In a way, it is to undo a phenomenon that seems to be a functional unit with the objective of really knowing the whole and its parts. The third mental perspective that makes deconstruction a crucial option in attempts to bring about fairness in human interactions constitutes social reconstruction. Re-integrating the different elements and conceptions regarding a social phenomenon to facilitate its examination further from other angles makes it possible to move on to an even more crucial stage in the intellectual conversion needed to more fully assimilate relations of injustice and engage in their undoing. Re-construction can only be developed through constant efforts and collaboration with others, with everybody being social agents who collectively work to re-construct their inter-activities and remove violence from relational situations.

It is most particularly in this regard that insitutions of formal education can be of greater impact. These are socio-political spaces wherein some more experienced and socially conscious individuals, instructors or other professionals, can lead the way in provoking younger individuals to engage in the processes of deconstruction, reconstruction, and transformative engagements based upon knowledge in its three basic forms. From experiences at the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW), I will cite three examples of opportunities for the kind of transformative engagement I am referring to.

First, a faculty development program was undertaken around the theme of social justice in the different courses (disciplines) taught by faculty. Initially, the group discussed the underlying principles of the Catholic Church's social teachings. These basic guidelines, present in all other forms of organized religion (San Antonio Express News, 2006), were examined under the following titles:

- Dignity of the human being;
- Community and the common good;

Option for the poor (miserable) and vulnerable:

Active, total and continued participation:

Rights of workers and the dignity of work in all its forms;

Respect for the environment and the whole universe:

Solidarity for all and in all forms;

Responsibilities of governing agencies; and

Promotion of peace as the result of all-pervading justice (Office for Social Justice, 2006).

The group was encouraged to investigate how these principles could be de- and re-constructed in their pedagogical engagements with students, colleagues, administrators, and service workers. The universal and continuous nature of these principles were emphasized, while faculty from the different disciplines shared their experiences of how they had tried to incorporate these elements in their classes. Instructors who had directly engaged in such activities as service learning and other forms of community involvement demonstrated the reconstructive and transformative aspects of their work through educational activities that were deemed emancipatory. This is the ideal for those whose social awareness permeates their professional engagements.

Second, since 2004, initially as part of Black History Month, conference-seminar-forum types of activities have been going on around the basic theme of Under-Represented Groups and Education (URGE). Sub-themes have included: Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2004), Human and Civil Rights Issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2005), Legacy of a Global Mission (2006), and for 2007, Immigration: Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. URGE is built around the idea that

Today's changing world may best be characterized by DIVERSITY. Societies are diverse both horizontally (gender, race, ethnicity, ability groups, religion) and vertically (socio-economic status groupings)...marked by the presence of under-represented groups...different forms of inequality and mechanisms for reinforcing social differentiation. Such situations have increasingly made us conscious of the need to learn how to be critical and responsible citizens in our daily interactions and responsibilities. Formal education is a mechanism for addressing the negative consequences of this unjust world reality. More than ever before, these and other related questions need to be reflected upon, discussed, and understood for effective, critical response. (URGE, 2006).

A third experience from UIW has been the annual peace celebrations. Having begun in 1986 as the Peace Fair, this event has provided a forum for highlighting activities built around such themes as: Peace as a Way of Life, Education for Peace, Creating Peace, Peace through Cultural Diversity, and Ecology and the Economy, among others. The Fair gave way to a one-day celebration in late October since 1997, when the First Peace Day was held. As described by Barnes and Kirk (2003), "Peace Day is a time for members of the U.I.W. community, as well as persons from the local area, to hear speakers on a variety of topics, to share food. ... listen to live music ..." (p. 113). It is also a time to reflect upon issues of social injustice with emphases on the belief that academic

knowledge has to be founded on action that is reflective. The goal is to assist those “seeking the promised land of justice and peace” (p. 118). The ideal of seeking peace through justice that is social, political, cultural, and economic is the essence of this celebration.

Apart from sharing experiences of how these ideals have been guiding pedagogical and research activities, the three events described have been used as spaces for stimulating different forms of involvement leading to social engagements that are emancipatory and therefore participatory. These activities and the spirit that underlies them can also be models for participants in their daily activities. As activities that are included in the regular school day-time, participants can also assimilate the idea that social justice is for the here and now, and that it can be consolidated later.

Finally, these three examples are simple examples of how a formal educational institution can assist its community and others to develop opportunities for incorporating their concerns about social injustice into different activities. The collective, sharing, and collaborative characteristics of these activities also need to be stressed. Truly knowing and engaging in relational experiences need to be collective; not only because justice has to be social (all encompassing), but also because individuals find their humanity in being with others. Collaborations that are reflective, collective, critical, and on-going are the seeds for social fairness and reduced injustice. Social justice is collective, but it is rooted in our individual understanding of human life, our purpose in society, and the ways in which we actively get involved to make other persons’ existence meaningfully satisfying.

### **Is Social Justice Not Really An Individual Responsibility?**

In the final analysis, fair-play in the relational contexts of persons is essentially a task that we as individuals have to undertake. It has to be rooted in our being as agents in all those activities that we engage in at every turn of our living lives. If social justice is not an integral part of daily life, then there is something missing because it is fundamentally a continued attempt to establish some reasonable balance in our everyday activities. As living persons, being human can only be real in relationships with other individuals. Though this may sound easy, experiences show that it is a challenging task that becomes more demanding in most contemporary societies where the market economy predominates. Since the basis of the inter-relationships in such societies tend to emphasize relations that feed upon habits of material and symbolic consumption, the interactions between individual persons merely as human beings do tend to suffer. For many people, merely relating with others for the purpose of enriching each other’s existence may in fact be very low on their list of socio-cultural priorities. With an overwhelming number of persons all over the world wanting to consume increasingly, as proof that they are better, those whose goals favor more just practices of resource distribution face an uphill battle in their relationships. Under such circumstances, maybe the story of the child and the king’s new robes would be very instructive. It is not always that the majority has a monopoly of that which is correct and congruent with regards to society and human living. The few individuals who see themselves in other people,

especially those who appear to be different socially, economically, culturally, and physically, could in fact constitute the human glue that holds society together.

So what is McCormick (2004) telling you in the words below? Could he not really be talking with each of us as individuals, and as members of different groups, always engaged in human relations? What does social justice have to do with “these others” about whom the author is calling attention?

The poor are all the somebodies in our midst who cannot meet their basic needs, who cannot find enough food and drink, clothing and shelter, or comfort from other bodies. ... cannot protect themselves or their children from hunger and thirst, cold and danger...bodies being devoured and disfigured by want...unprotected bodies invaded by disease and overrun by sickness ... cries of their bodies are a plaintive call for compassion and care...the poor ... are also, even largely, the victims of injustice, oppression, and marginalization ... (McCormick, 2004, p. 91).

In the political, economic, cultural, religious, gender, environmental, and social areas of our relationships, just to cite a few, what ultimately matters is how each individual treats other persons. At these macro-levels, the possibility of some individuals hiding behind the competent discourse of self-victimization is always very large. In an educational institution where human relationships form the basis of everything, social justice always has a long way to go. It is in this regard that faculty, students, service personnel, and administrators can all learn from one another about how fairness in human relationships can really play out in daily life. Our primary experiences as social beings can be very influential. Nonetheless, some of the experiences of the UIW community as mentioned above do provide rich opportunities for engaging in pedagogical activities that could get people to become more reflective about human life in society with other people. Social justice is what it is because we as individuals construct, shape, and develop it, but always in a web of interrelationships with other persons. It may be an individual decision to get involved, working for or against real dignity in social relationships, but the consequences of each decision are overwhelmingly collective.

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