



Book Review

Issues in Social Justice: Citizenship and Transnational Struggles

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Issues in Social Justice is an excellent overview of core concepts that inform the debate on social justice within an increasingly global context. Authors Tanya Basok and Suzan Ilcan, both sociologists, combine a strong theoretical analysis with more of an “on the ground” perspective that makes this text accessible not only to academics and professionals but also to students and the general public. In the introduction, the authors clarify that their study is intended to answer the three basic questions *what*, *who*, and *how*: *what* is relevant within a social justice context, *who* is included or excluded within the social justice discourse, and *how* decisions about the content of social justice are made (p. 4). They also define the meaning given throughout the text to the concept of social justice, understood as a process of change rather than a fixed status, a process that is not linear, but rather proceeds with advancements and reversals.

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive and clear outline of social justice in relation to social inclusion and its three fundamental dimensions: equal access, democratic political participation, and cultural diversity. The discussion highlights how struggles for social justice do not necessarily encompass everyone, but rest on the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. It is therefore essential to ask not only *what* kind of rights, benefits, and privileges should be provided to people in a socially just society, but also *who* is allowed to claim these rights and who is excluded from them.

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The concept of citizenship and its relation to social justice is the focus of Chapter 3. Beginning with a discussion of the Westphalian system and the primacy of the nation-state, the authors elucidate how in today's world, social justice principles do not yet have universal application, but remain tied to citizenship status. A good summary is provided with respect to the evolution through time of the idea and practice of citizenship. References are made to T. H. Marshall's contribution to the notion of citizenship as well as to its limitations. Throughout the chapter, the authors define citizenship both as a status that some people have and others lack, and as a set of practices shaped through social struggles.

The Welfare State developed after the Second World War; its decline and the rise of Neoliberalism are the subject of Chapter 4. Basok and Ilcan offer a good analysis of the welfare system and its limitations, including the way "it produced exclusion, inequalities, and social divisions" (p. 85). They also provide a clear picture of what the rise of neoliberalism (with its emphasis on free-market solutions, entrepreneurialism, and individual responsibility) and the consequent displacement of social citizenship have meant for those people who are in a socially and economically marginalized position.

Chapter 5 represents a continuation of the discussion that began in Chapter 4. Here the authors discuss how, within the current system dominated by neoliberalism and characterized by the decline of a welfare approach, voluntary organizations have acquired a critical role in the delivery of public services to marginalized populations. In fact, voluntary organizations have assumed responsibility for a job that was in the past done by the state and have become "*de facto* agencies of the state" (p. 97), since the latter is largely responsible for their financing and does in effect end up determining policy. After a brief history of voluntary organizations since the Second World War, the chapter explains how the downsizing of the public sector under neoliberal agendas has left voluntary organizations, whose initial mandate was advocating for policy changes, scrambling to fill a void in service provision. By developing an unequal partnership (unequal because they do not control funding) with the state or the private sector, voluntary organizations have lost their independence as the state or private sector can now control how these organizations operate, how their policies are implemented, and how effectively their tasks are carried out. The practice of auditing that has become common among voluntary organizations and is a prerequisite to obtain funding has resulted in the transformation of these organizations into market-oriented and less politicized entities. This loss of independence and depoliticization might significantly imperil the ability of voluntary organizations to effectively advocate for social justice.

The sixth chapter shifts the focus to human rights, and questions whether human rights norms and institutions can really provide universal protection and therefore address the social exclusion inherent in the concept of citizenship, a concept that remains under the purview of nation-states. Overall, the chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the human rights

system, and highlights its strengths as well as its limits, particularly a still unresolved tension between “social and economic rights, on the one hand, and civic and political rights on the other” (p. 114). The authors also address the challenge of reconciling the idea and practice of *universal* human rights with the respect for cultural diversity.

Transnational activism is the topic discussed in Chapter 7. Here Basok and Ilcan distinguish between transnational activism “from above” and transnational activism “from below.” The first refers to activism carried out by international organizations, such as Amnesty International or various United Nations agencies, whereas the latter refers to advocacy efforts by transnational activist networks operating at the local or national levels and having a global reach. The chapter aims to demonstrate that transnational activism has the potential to bring forward social justice demands on a global scale, irrespective of the resistance of individual states, private agencies, or international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank (WB).

Chapter 8 expands the discussion to the global sphere by focusing on “global social justice” and “global justice networks” (p. 168), as a way to assess whether a more socially just world can be reached. The World Social Forum is used as a model for creating a space where various individuals, social movements, and organizations from all over the world can develop alternative visions to the current neoliberal reality. While the authors appreciate the importance of the World Social Forum, they also maintain that there is a need to further expand spaces of democratic participation.

Overall, this is an excellent academic textbook largely addressed to undergraduate students that provides a valuable contribution to the discussion surrounding social justice in an increasingly globalized world. By adopting a thematic focus, the authors have been able to examine core concepts animating the social justice debate, from citizenship to human rights to transnational forms of activism. Most of the limitations of the text are inevitable when trying to cover such a multifaceted and complex topic in a necessarily limited space. Nevertheless, I would have liked at least a mention in Chapter 5 of local voluntary organizations that have refused to be coopted by the state and that have successfully demonstrated how to maintain an advocacy orientation. The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP; see www.ocap.ca) in Toronto, Canada, would have been one excellent example worth mentioning. The discussion of human rights in the text correctly notes how their enforcement is severely limited by the dominance of national sovereignty, yet it fails to recognize that nation-states are organized globally along a very precise power hierarchy. Clearly, some states can get away with repeated violations of human rights much more easily and frequently than others (for instance, few states but the United States would have been able to survive unscathed the scandal that has been the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, a place where human rights have been systematically and continuously violated). In the chapter discussing transnational activism, it would have been

helpful to point out a number of limitations with the activism of international and national organizations that have increasingly developed close partnerships with state actors and become part of a trend usually identified as “revolving doors,” whereby those working for various non-government organizations (NGOs) move back and forth throughout their professional career between the NGO and government sectors (see, e.g., Hilton, Crowson, Mouhot & McKay, 2012). This is certainly a worrying trend that should have us critically question the impartiality of several major NGOs. Finally, whereas the text offers an effective analysis on how economic decisions and shifts impact on social justice, it is largely silent on how geopolitics also plays a significant role in the maintenance of a world that is still socially unjust to many. A brief discussion of imperialism and neoimperialism would have made the analysis more complete and convincing.

Each chapter is accompanied by several text boxes that provide the reader with a more in-depth look at authors or concepts mentioned throughout the text. At the end of each chapter, readers can also find some provoking questions for critical thought, useful annotated readings on the topics discussed, and a short list of related websites. Overall, this is a well structured and effective text that should be read by scholars and students in the social sciences, those involved in policy making, activists, and all those readers interested in social justice and the possibility to achieve a more socially just world.

References

Hilton, M., Crowson, N., Mouhot, J., & McKay, J. (2012). *A historical guide to NGOs in Britain: Charities, civil society and the voluntary sector since 1945*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.