

**Concepts of social and distributive justice –  
neglected but necessary tools for social reform.**

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With a federal election approaching, many political debates hinge around contests for who gets what in the distribution of funds and resources. Much of the wheeling and dealing is done behind closed doors, but the electoral contest itself allows the public to have a decisive say in the general use of resources. These debates are of great concern to the churches and social service agencies, which must shoulder much of the advocacy for marginalised or voiceless groups.

Underlying these debates about distribution are important philosophical issues that are not always spelt out clearly but which are nevertheless very influential. Such philosophical concepts can be even more powerful when they are absorbed unconsciously or unreflectively.

In the classical traditions of political and Christian thought, distributive justice is the virtue that ensured that goods were distributed in relation to what people were due. What they were due was in turn depended on the larger context of the type of society they belonged to, a tribe, a medieval hierarchy, monarchy etc.

More recently, the concept of distributive justice has been closely linked with that of social justice, which sought to arrange the institutions of society so as to promote the wellbeing of all people in a society as fully as possible.

**The neoliberal attack**

However, these concepts of distributive or social justice have come under attack by versions of libertarian or neoliberal philosophies, with the iconic economist, Friedrich von Hayek, once dismissing them as nonsense. At least he was prepared to discuss his views openly and robustly. In the high tide of Keynesianism, von Hayek's ideas were regarded as extreme and eccentric, but with the stagflation of the 1970s, von Hayek's views were more widely heard, and especially influenced the so-called Chicago School of Economics.

The burgeoning neoliberal economics swept through the capitalist world, emphasising the role of markets as a better and almost automatic agent of redistribution, and resulting in the dismantling of regulatory mechanisms that had been developed over generations in many cases. Some of the reforms were needed, and have resulted in improved economic performance in many industries and countries. But at times also 'the market' became a mantra that pushed into all areas of economic life, without proceeding on a case-by-case basis to avoid excessive and undesirable social outcomes.

Some consequences of these neoliberal views can be seen in growing inequality of wealth and living standards in many parts of the world, government policies that restrict social entitlements and challenge the legitimacy of the welfare state itself, and deepening impoverishment of certain populations, including in the United States. It is not difficult to interpret this neoliberal ideology as the philosophical justification for a new class war of the rich against the poor.

The fact that neoliberalism presents such a philosophically unsophisticated view of the world suggests that it has been widely adopted for its convenience to self-interest, rather than out of conviction about its truth. It is an ideology ideally suited for the rising upwardly-mobile classes, emphasising merit and effort as justification for greater wealth.

The other side of this coin is a judgment that others who have not been successful in the market economy are themselves to blame, and hence redistribution of income through taxation and services should be constrained to the 'deserving' poor. The phenomenon of 'downwards envy' has been readily exploited by conservative political parties, resulting in great efforts to restrict welfare entitlements, while at the same time often giving generous tax concessions to upper-income groups.

### **Philosophical assumptions**

Our pragmatic Anglo-Saxon temperament is averse to philosophical analysis, but it is critically important to expose the ideological assumptions in neoliberalism. The churches especially, must rise to this task, in a joint effort with social agencies and other thinkers and organisations.

Indeed, various economists and philosophers have argued strongly that we should be developing more equitable policies of economic growth and development, especially to ensure everyone has a decent, though perhaps modest, standard of living and life opportunities. Particularly important has been the work of development economists, including Amartya Sen, urging a new conversation between ethics and economics. Sen has been helped in his work by the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who has contributed significantly to a revival of Aristotelian philosophy, arguing for what she calls a 'thick, vague' notion of the Good. This notion of the Good is vital in her view, for it provides a key principle around which to develop social and economic priorities and policies.

Unless nations can forge a wider agreement about the nature of the goods we seek, then it is unlikely that richer countries will be prepared to look beyond their narrow self-interest, or concern themselves overly about the wellbeing of others. However, especially after recent terrorist emergencies, many observers insist that the cause of world peace itself will hinge on rapid efforts to eradicate hunger and poverty. It is likely that terrorism will feed on perceptions of gross inequalities and injustice within and between societies, unless richer nations demonstrate a decisive will to promote social equity and equality of opportunity throughout the world.

The development crisis in the third world has exposed the inadequacy of some assumptions in modern philosophy, especially post-modernism. If there is no such thing as truth or the Good, an objective basis for morality that all are capable of knowing through reason and can appeal to, if everything is merely based on contract or power or arbitrary will, then how can the international community create the conditions for prosperity and peace for everyone? How can we avoid collapsing into a Hobbesian scenario where the will of the most powerful becomes the right?

As demonstrated by the ill-conceived US invasion of Iraq, at stake is the whole structure of international relations and law: are we to be governed by universal principles of morality, or pursue the neo-conservative road to a new imperial system? The conflict between Pope John Paul II and the Bush Administration arose precisely because of the Vatican's attempt to defend universal moral principles, including social justice and human rights, as the basis for a renewed system of international law and governance.

If the Enlightenment project, at least in its individualism and subjectivism, has reached a crisis, leading to a new interest in metaphysics. Without abandoning the achievements of modern notions of human rights and democracy, there is a major new conversation under way about the relevance of the older classical tradition, especially to explore its resources about establishing an objective moral order.

### **The common or human good**

Central to this social philosophy is the common, or the ‘human good’ we all share. The notion of the common good has a long history in western philosophical thought, but has been somewhat tarnished at times by the wooden and ideological way it has been used. This resulted in a reaction against the term, especially since it seemed to challenge the critical contemporary notion of pluralism.

Yet in the great western tradition, Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas were all familiar with a pluralism of competing worldviews. In contrast with some post-modernist views today, they argued that it was possible to converse across boundaries of language and culture, and to identify areas of agreement. The concept of the common good presupposed a substantive view of the human person as a social being, not as an atomistic individual acting out of self-interest as in much Enlightenment philosophy.

The eminent American Jesuit theologian, Bernard Lonergan, though not identifying the two terms, explored aspects of the common good under the title of the ‘human good’. He wanted to find a new language to avoid unhelpful connotations from the past. He saw this human good not as an abstract ideal or remote goal, but as the concrete outcome of whatever results from human intelligence and choice to overcome difficulties and promote human wellbeing. This is precisely what we are urgently seeking today.

### **Conclusion**

If the churches and welfare agencies are to move beyond being confined to a reactive mode or to a charitable function, however much neoliberals would applaud that, then it is vitally important to articulate and defend strongly our social philosophy, particularly around the principles of the common or human good, the dignity of each person as a social being, and distributive and social justice. This will require fresh resources, new alliances and a clearer engagement in debate over the public philosophy.