
Social Justice

Intersecting Catholicism, Citizenship, and Capitalism

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JOHN A. MOORE

I refuse to accept the idea that the “isness” of man’s present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal “oughtness” that forever confronts him. . . . I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.

—Martin Luther King Jr., Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech,
December 10, 1964

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

—U.S. Declaration of Independence

This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism.

—Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*

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Without doubt, social justice is one of the most politically charged issues in American politics today. Social justice essentially looks toward attending to the needs of individual citizens. Contemporary commentators and activists see social justice through a variety of different perspectives. Although most current American policies address the material needs of less-fortunate citizens, this paper argues that any effective approach to the social justice question must also encompass spiritual and civic elements that go well beyond a simple materialist response.

Any consideration of social justice should address the whole of each individual human experience rather than simply the redirection of the goods and services of economic production. Social justice is about individual human beings, not about the distribution of economic output. This is precisely why consideration of individual life purpose, political activity, and economic well-being potentially serves as a useful lens to consider how social justice can be achieved as fully as possible in light of humanity's inherent limitations.

Technical dictionary definitions of the term *social justice* include examples such as “a state or doctrine of egalitarianism” (*Webster's*) or “justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities and privileges within a society” (*Oxford Dictionary*). However, these technical definitions do not necessarily provide clarity given the number of competing interpretations. For example, Michael Novak notes that “[s]ocial justice is really the capacity to organize with others to accomplish ends that benefit the whole community” (2000, 13). He adds that “[o]ne happy characteristic of this definition of the virtue of social justice is that it is ideologically neutral. . . . [However] we must rule out any use of ‘social justice’ that does not attach to the habits (that is, virtues) of individuals. Social justice is a virtue, an attribute of individuals, or it is a fraud” (2009, 1). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Catholic theologian Gustavo Gutierrez states in his work *A Theology of Liberation* that “[c]harity is today a ‘political charity.’ . . . [I]t means the transformation of a society structured to benefit a few who appropriate to themselves the value of the work of others. This transformation ought to be directed toward a radical change in the foundation of society, that is, the private ownership of the means of production” (1988, 116).

Novak's and Gutierrez's definitions represent starkly different interpretations of social justice. Novak's view rests upon a broader definition of social justice that addresses the needs of community members in terms of a state of well-being that is both tangible and intangible. Crucially, he considers the process to successfully achieving social justice as a voluntary one premised on free will exercised by the individual within the parameters of a market economy. Gutierrez, in contrast, views justice in almost purely economic terms. He entertains the position that social justice might likely be incompatible with capitalism. He also asserts that coercive redistribution of economic wealth is justified in the name of attaining social justice.

How has social justice been viewed in the past? If we look far back in history, we find a world contending with great uncertainty. Attaining the basic human needs of

food, shelter, and clothing was far from easy. Famine occurred with great frequency, and there was more violence. In this context, many great thinkers categorically rejected a materialist explanation for both justice and ultimate human happiness. Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* and Boethius in *Consolation of Philosophy* spoke to the question of human happiness. Aristotle (2012) concluded that a contemplative life is the pathway to personal happiness and fulfillment rather than fame, honors, or wealth. Boethius (2005) determined that happiness must come from within one's heart and soul and that one's own experiences of earthly power are of no importance as one faces one's own death.

In light of this brief introduction, how can we achieve social justice within the context of the American experience? Even as the United States has experienced significant economic, demographic, social, and cultural changes since its founding, there remain strong strands of continuity within our traditions of individual life purpose, politics, and economics. In the American experience, these three traditions have been more specifically represented by Judeo-Christian thought, concepts of citizenship, and the impact of capitalism.

All three of these "continuities" have evolved over time, but their foundational impact on the present American way of life remains quite strong. Even as fewer Americans belong to organized religious denominations and fewer regularly attend church services, the nation continues to reflect a significant Judeo-Christian worldview in its attitudes and behavior. Present American views on citizenship and the mutual responsibilities between government and citizens to each other remain foundationally similar to ideas circulating during the early-republic era even as Supreme Court decisions, constitutional amendments, and presidential addresses have shaped those ideas to be more inclusive and more clearly defined. Although the United States has never practiced unbridled laissez-faire capitalism, even in the wake of the New Deal and the Great Society, it remains fundamentally capitalist in its economic structure.

Catholicism

Catholicism has deeply influenced American thought and culture since the nineteenth century. Today the largest single religious denomination in the United States is Roman Catholicism. The Catholic Church has addressed the issue of social justice, and its proclamations have had an impact both in the United States and throughout the world.

Two significant Catholic papal encyclicals address the related issues of social justice and capitalism. Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum novarum* in 1891, and Pope John Paul II issued *Laborem exercens* ninety years later in 1981. At the heart of both documents are considerations of the human experience and right relationships in the world. *Rerum novarum* was written at a time when the Second Industrial Revolution was in full swing in western Europe and the United States and large numbers of workers were migrating from farm to factory. A significant number of workers were experiencing a dramatic change in working conditions.

In *Rerum novarum*, Leo XIII condemned both the prevailing capitalism and socialism. In critiquing capitalism, he noted that “a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself.” However, Leo did not see socialism as an acceptable remedy. He charged that “socialists, working on the poor man’s envy of the rich, are striving to do away with private property, and contend that individual possessions should become the common property of all. . . . [T]hey are, moreover, emphatically unjust, for they would rob the lawful possessor. . . . [E]very man has by nature the right to possess property as his own” (1891, 3–5).¹

The pontiff addressed issues of inequality. He commented that “[t]here naturally exist among mankind manifold differences of the most important kind; people differ in capacity, skill, health, strength; and unequal fortune is a necessary result of unequal condition” (1891, 17). However, in the eyes of the church, these differences did not amount to simply a world of competing winners and losers. Leo insisted that, “[a]s for riches and the other things which men call good and desirable, whether we have them in abundance, or are lacking in them—so far as eternal happiness is concerned—it makes no difference; the only important thing is to use them aright. . . . It rests on the principle that it is one thing to have a right to the possession of money and another to have a right to use money as one wills. Private ownership, as we have seen, is the natural right of man” (21–22).

Although Leo clearly endorsed the concept of private property, he also clearly addressed the *voluntary* moral *obligation* to concern oneself with the well-being of others. He declared that, “[t]rue, no one is commanded to distribute to others that which is required for his own needs or that of his household. . . . But, when what necessity demands has been supplied, and one’s standing fairly taken thought for, it becomes a duty to give to the indigent out of what remains over” (1891, 22). This exhortation to look out for others, however, was not intended to completely alleviate the frailties and challenges of the human experience or to establish material equality. Leo noted that “[a]s for those who possess not the gifts of fortune . . . poverty is no disgrace, and that there is nothing to be ashamed of in earning their bread by labor” (23).

Leo described a worldview of the human experience that transcends simple materiality. He asserted that “the true worth and nobility of man lie in his moral qualities, that is, in virtue; that virtue is, moreover, the common inheritance of men, equally within the reach of high and low; rich and poor; and that virtue, and virtue alone, wherever found, will be followed by the rewards of . . . happiness” (1891, 24). In Pope Leo’s view, the quest for human fulfillment and happiness was ultimately dependent more on the egalitarian distribution of virtue than of possessions.

Almost a century later, John Paul II supplemented Leo’s commentary, offering in *Laborem exercens* (1981) an updated view of the nature of work by noting that “[man]

1. Citations to the papal encyclicals refer to paragraph numbers rather than to page numbers.

is *called to work* . . . [M]an's life is built up every day from work, from work it derives its specific dignity, but at the same time work contains the unceasing measure of human toil and suffering." He added that "the general situation of man in the modern world . . . calls for the discovery of the *new meanings of human work* . . . [and] it indicates that the social question must be dealt with in its whole complex dimension" (intro, 1–2, emphasis in original).

Clearly, further technological advances were a major part of this new world. John Paul acknowledged that "man's work has today in many cases ceased to be mainly manual, for the toil of human hands and muscles is aided by *more and more highly perfected machinery* . . . [but] even in the age of ever more mechanized 'work,' *the proper subject of work continues to be man*" (1981, 5, emphasis in original). John Paul's primary concern with postindustrial economies centered on the dangers of materialism. He stated that "from the beginning of the industrial age, the Christian truth about work had to oppose the various trends of *materialistic and economic* thought. . . . [T]he *danger* of treating work as a special kind of 'merchandise,' or as an impersonal 'force' needed for production . . . *always exists*, especially when the whole way of looking at the question of economics is marked by the premises of materialistic economicism" (7, emphasis in original).

A number of recent Catholic authors have taken issue with the foundational positions of both *Rerum novarum* and *Laborem exercens*. Andrea Torielli and Giacomo Galeazzi quote Pope Francis's exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), in which he stated that "some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world." They conclude that "we are facing not only a financial-economic crisis or a stock market crisis due to speculative investments but first and foremost a crisis of *humanity*, one dominated by consumerism and one reduced to its needs alone." They add that contemporary capitalism calls "for the total freedom of markets, while any willingness on the part of nations to assume responsibility for the common good in order to protect the people 'discarded' by the economy that 'kills' is labeled as state control (2015, 36–37).

Angus Silbey further explores this theme of distorted economic distribution when he states that "Catholic social teaching emphasizes the doctrine of the *universal destination of goods*, which means . . . every human being [should] have at least a basic sufficiency of this world's goods. . . . Today, the majority of Americans . . . are suffering a kind of oppression by a minority group, the very rich, who contrive to capture most of the benefits of American growth, leaving the rest to put up with static or declining incomes, high unemployment or underemployment, and increasingly precarious, frustrating, and over stressful jobs" (2015, 9).

However, many authors take the opposing view that the encyclicals discussed are fully compatible with free markets. Maciej Zieba maintains that John Paul's writings limit the state to "guaranteeing the rights and safety of working people." In Zieba's view, the pope did not find inherent bad in a capitalist economy but rather critiqued

capitalist societies “on the error of believing that economic reality is the only reality—what he [John Paul] calls the ‘absolutizing’ of life. He reminds us that ‘the economy in fact is only one aspect and one dimension of the whole of human activity’” (2013, 83, 104).

Gabriel Martinez provides a specific counterargument to Silbey, noting that “there is abundant evidence of a high correlation between economic growth and the average incomes and the average incomes of the poorest fifth of society” (2017, 81). The studies he cites do not prove causality, but they identify empirical examples where the poor have experienced an improvement in their economic condition while living under capitalism. Silbey’s charge that capitalism “kills” is certainly a hyperbolic overreach.

The heart of Catholic teaching on social justice harkens back to the past. Just like Aristotle and Boethius, the church views justice with a far greater emphasis on personal conduct. Although it is crucial that all human beings should have access to basic needs, the purpose of life should be far more attached to spirituality than to materialism. The encyclicals tacitly endorse economic activity as inherently good.

In the twenty-first-century United States, Catholic teaching contends with the fruits of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Americans are awash with material prosperity and a culture that fully embraces conspicuous consumption. Many Americans see social justice as an issue that revolves solely around income inequality and a need to provide a certain minimum basket of goods and/or services to less-fortunate citizens. The countercultural message from the church declares that the greatest benefit from a genuine application of social justice derives from the spiritual gains to both the providers and the beneficiaries of good works.

Citizenship

Citizenship concerns both the rights and obligations of individuals within a political community. The U.S. Founding Fathers were deeply concerned that a successful experiment in representative government required “virtuous” citizens. They consciously built checks and balances into the Constitution and ratified the Bill of Rights because of their cautious views about the deficiencies of human nature.

The historian Gordon Wood notes that “[p]erhaps everyone in the eighteenth century could have agreed in theory no state was more beautiful than a republic, whose whole object was the good of the people” (1998, 65). The Founders were keenly aware that there was a risk in any political structure where sovereignty rested in its citizenry. Wood further states that “[i]n a republic, however, each man must somehow be persuaded to submerge his personal wants into the greater good of the whole. This willingness of the individual to sacrifice his personal interests for the good of the community—such patriotism or love of country—the eighteenth century termed ‘public virtue.’ A republic was such a delicate polity precisely because it demanded an extraordinary moral character in the people” (68).

An entire section of Adam Smith's work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* ([1759] 1997) addresses the subject of virtue. Smith declared that "[t]he man who acts according to the rules of perfect prudence, of strict justice, and of proper benevolence, may be said to be perfectly virtuous. But . . . his own passions are very apt to mislead him. . . . [T]he most perfect knowledge, if it is not supported by the most perfect self-command, will not always enable him to do his duty" (VI.iii.9). Smith, like the Founding Fathers, acknowledged the shortcomings of human nature.

In the *Second Treatise* ([1689] 2018), John Locke defined the key rights of human beings under the social contract to be "life, liberty and property." Thomas Jefferson's final draft of the Declaration of Independence accepted Locke's premise subject to the politically expedient rephrasing "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Both Locke and Jefferson believed that rights can only be "natural." Rights, as understood by Locke and Jefferson, link to concepts of individual happiness and fulfillment more so than economic outcomes.

One of the great problems in modern American politics is confusion concerning what constitutes a right, and this confusion spills over into talk about social justice. Rights derive from the nature of human beings and their relationship to the world. As a consequence, issues such as health care and education should not be viewed as rights. They may represent issues for acceptable or unacceptable public policy, but they are not rights because they do not derive from nature. Rather, they derive from human use of ingenuity and technology.

It can be argued that contemporary American society is not in a virtuous state. Public political discourse reflects a discontent traceable to a creeping shift in what are perceived as rights. The rise of progressivism since the early twentieth century has consciously been accompanied by an expanding demand for material-oriented "rights." As a consequence, the current government-sponsored economic redistribution and assistance would have been unimaginable to the Founders.

E. F. Schumacher characterizes some of the challenges that modern economies present to societies. He writes that

we can say today that man is far too clever to be able to survive without wisdom. . . . [T]he hope that the pursuit of goodness and virtue can be postponed until we have attained universal prosperity and that by the single-minded pursuit of wealth, without bothering our heads about spiritual and moral questions, we could establish peace on earth, is an unrealistic, unscientific and irrational hope. . . . [N]ow that we have become very successful, the problem of spiritual and moral truth moves into the central position. (1975, 28–29)

Schumacher concludes that "[t]he cultivation and expansion of needs is the antithesis of wisdom. It is also the antithesis of freedom and peace. Every increase of needs tends to increase one's dependence on outside forces over which one cannot have control, and

therefore increases existential fear. Only by a reduction of needs can one promote a genuine reduction in those tensions which are the ultimate causes of strife and war” (29).

From a political perspective, social justice in the United States today is concerned primarily with economic distribution. This preoccupation with material matters strays away from the prevailing sentiment at the founding, that personal virtue is a key element to a sound nation. Schumacher’s comments identify the fact that technology and consumerism are factors that need to be tamed by a renewed focus on wisdom and virtue in our present times.

Capitalism

Capitalism has greatly benefitted humankind. The impact of capitalism on global economic prosperity since the publication of Adam Smith’s work *Wealth of Nations* in 1776 has been transformative. In the middle of the eighteenth century, all parts of the world had to worry to some degree about the three essential needs—food, clothing, and shelter, with the greatest of them being food. Famine was a risk even in the leading world economies into the late eighteenth century and persists within certain regions of the world today.

Capitalism, as Joseph Schumpeter (1942) points out, is inherently disruptive because it encourages innovation and facilitates change. Entrepreneurs constantly seek out better and more efficient economic activities that consumers find beneficial. This characteristic creates winners and losers on a daily basis. It is more egalitarian in terms of providing opportunity than it is toward the output of economic activity. Nonetheless, its chaotic nature has produced incredible leaps in the material well-being of the world over the past two and a half centuries.

Deirdre McCloskey (2006) has pointed out that in the aggregate the spread of capitalism and the technological gains accompanying it have improved global economic well-being. She notes that since 1800 freedom has spread, the world population has grown sixfold, and per capita consumption has increased about eight and a half times. The vast majority of Americans in the twenty-first century possess more material comfort than anyone in the world just a few centuries earlier.

Israel Kirzner notes that “[t]he question of social justice under capitalism is seen as the question of its distributive justice. [However,] in reality the entire notion of distribution is a flawed one, and the identification of the question of justice as being one of distributive justice is, consequently, equally flawed and quite misleading.” He adds that “[g]oods are not first produced and then distributed, as would be the case in a socialist state. Individual incomes are earned *simultaneously* with the process through which the size and composition of the supposed ‘pie’ are determined” (2016, 11–12, emphasis in the original).

Gordon Tullock provides a sharp critique of the American state regarding income redistribution. He states that it is “an area where government does not perform

well. . . . [T]he voters' desire to abdicate active or even visible decision-making is not necessarily irrational from the standpoint of maximizing their utility. The result, however, is that rational thought is almost of necessity banned" (2005, 351).

Tullock suggests practical alternatives. He opines, "It seems to me that the object of aid to the poor should be a high level of minimum income together with no leisure for the people who are on whatever subsidy we give. In other words, relief clients should continue working even if they do not produce very much." He further adds, "It would seem to be highly desirable to try to experiment with the use of private rather than governmental bodies here. Traditionally, there was a great deal of aid to the poor given through private charity" (2005, 357).

Capitalism, despite some volatile characteristics, has clearly benefitted humankind. It has produced growing material abundance almost everywhere around the world. This abundance creates the potential for significant examples of voluntary acts of social justice in the United States and other advanced nations. Yet current American policy focuses instead on material redistribution.

Intersection: A Better Approach to Social Justice

In considering Catholicism, citizenship, and capitalism, we can logically create a set of principles that will lead to a better and improved approach to genuine social justice in the United States. The views of Leo XIII, John Paul II, the Founding Fathers, Adam Smith, and contemporary free-market thinkers create a degree of linkage between these three traditions. For one thing, they all convey an optimistic view of the potential of human nature. Humankind is capable of personal virtue and of valuing the human experience beyond materialism.

The very best of what true social justice can involve involves a dual relationship between the individuals who provide justice and those who benefit from it. The closer these activities can entail involvement on a personal level, the greater the "good" that all parties take away. A great number of "microjustice" events, when added together, is the best conduit to achieving substantive "macrojustice" change.

In this context, the common linkages between Catholicism, citizenship, and capitalism are best exemplified in the concepts of "agency," "virtue," and "subsidiarity." These concepts speak to human activity at a "ground" level and seek to elevate individual human experience through self-development and specific actions.

Agency speaks to human individuals voluntarily taking part in actions with intentional consequences. As an example, the Catholic tradition has a long-standing tradition of "alms," whereby individual acts of charity are praised. The papal encyclicals, specifically *Rerum novarum*, call for such charitable activities. The American social contract deriving from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution affirms the dignity of citizens. Individuals within this framework are free to act by their own choice to assist and benefit fellow citizens. Consistent with this principle, the concepts of

“utility” and “subjective value” found in classical economic theory acknowledge that doing “good” for others can represent a rational economic choice.

The papal encyclicals, the Founding Fathers, and liberal economic thought extol individual *virtue*. In the Christian example, individual virtue represents the opportunity to self-actualize on a spiritual level. In the case of politics, it creates the pathway to a well-informed and well-acting citizenry. In the world of economic activity, virtuous behavior leads to well-functioning markets.

A crucial consideration is the Catholic concept of “subsidiarity,” which advocates that actions, activities, decisions, and a host of other possibilities should occur at the lowest possible level. For example, subsidiarity suggests that school governance decisions are likely to be better if made at a school district level than at the national level. The acts of charity praised in *Rerum novarum* are based on the principle of subsidiarity. The U.S. Constitution was ratified only after several states conditioned their approval with a commitment to passing the Bill of Rights, which sought to limit the federal government’s ability to intrude into the activities of individual citizens. Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” is premised on the belief that proper economic activity is grounded in the individual, at a microlevel rather than a macrolevel.

It is time to return to the original contrast between Novak’s and Gutierrez’s views of social justice. Novak’s interpretation is broader, encompassing both material and nonmaterial elements into his understanding of what social justice entails. He suggests that social justice is an egalitarian experience that encompasses an individual’s legal and social status in a society of individual citizens, all of whom possess both rights and responsibilities, and where work is recognized as beneficial and dignified. These views fully embrace agency, virtue, and subsidiarity.

In sharp contrast, Gutierrez views social justice as properly accomplished at a macrolevel. The state rather than the individual should take responsibility for dispensing social justice. The objective is to involuntarily redistribute material wealth. There is an absence of agency, virtue, and subsidiarity in Gutierrez’s social justice. In short, it can be argued that this form of social justice lacks a soul!

Unfortunately, the ideal of social justice through public-sector policy is problematic. The existing system partially achieves the breadth and depth that certain liberation theologians such as Gutierrez prefer, but through totally unacceptable means. First, the American system of assistance to citizens in need is based on economic redistribution of wealth that is not voluntary. Second, the process is directed largely at the federal and state levels, a faceless process that contradicts the principle of subsidiarity. Third, the economic redistributions often occur with little or no consideration to the dignity of work.

Given the caveat in the previous paragraph, the most effective way for the United States to achieve social justice that will fully actualize both the individual providers and the recipients of social justice initiatives is to incorporate the guiding principles from the Christian tradition, develop the sense of proper citizenship, and harness the beneficial attributes of free markets. Social justice must embrace the concept of subsidiarity. The

American tradition is replete with many examples of effective and successful examples of charity and assistance at the individual and local levels prior to the Progressive Era. Social justice must prioritize agency, which suggests that there ought to be a much greater voluntary element within the process on the part of providers and a great level of respect toward encouraging work as a dignified outcome for recipients. These principles, appropriately executed, will promote virtue throughout American society, with resulting civic and cultural benefits.

Ultimately, social justice must be premised upon facilitating opportunities for human happiness, which is best achieved through each citizen's self-actualization to the best of his or her potential. This will always be an aspirational goal because individuals in a free society are certainly free to elect not to achieve either fulfillment or happiness. That reality, however, does not negate the fact that a combination of agency, subsidiarity, and virtue—built upon a foundation that incorporates the personal generosity of alms, acknowledges both the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and produces the bountiful economic returns of a capitalist system—is likely to be the best pathway to true social justice.

Social justice involves a just balance in relationships between individuals and societies. A society that celebrates the superior economic gains from capitalism must accept the disruptions that Schumpeter identifies. A society that respects the natural rights espoused in the Declaration of Independence will respect property and accept that the voluntary nature of social justice raises dignity and virtue across all elements of society. A right-ordered sense of how American social justice can change the “isness” that Martin Luther King Jr. observed to a cultural “oughtness” that will deliver “three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits” (1964) to all of those citizens who have such a need.

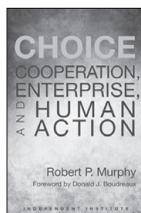
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