



WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE?

JONAH GOLDBERG

Try this at your next party. Ask your guests to define the term Social Justice.

Okay, it's not Charades or Twister, but it should generate some interesting conversation, especially if your guests are on the political Left.

Since everyone on that side of the spectrum talks incessantly about social justice, they should be able to provide a good definition, right? But ask ten liberals to tell you what they mean by social justice and you'll get ten different answers. That's because Social Justice means anything its champions want it to mean.

Almost without exception, labor unions, universities and colleges, private foundations and public charities claim at least part of their mission to be the spreading of Social Justice far and wide.

Here's the Mission Statement of the AFL-CIO, but it could be the mission statement for a thousand such organizations: "The mission of the AFL-CIO is to improve the lives of working families – to bring economic justice to the workplace, and social justice to our nation." In short, "social justice" is code for good things no one needs to argue for – and no one dare be against.

This very much troubled the great economist Friedrich Hayek. This is what he wrote in 1976, two years after winning the Nobel Prize in Economics. "I have come to feel strongly that the greatest service I can still render to my fellow men would be that I could make the speakers and writers among them thoroughly ashamed ever again to employ the term 'social justice'."

Why was Hayek so upset by what seems like such a positive, and certainly unobjectionable, term? Because Hayek, as he so often did, saw right to the core of the issue. And what he saw frightened him.

Hayek understood that beneath the political opportunism and intellectual laziness of the term "social justice" was a pernicious philosophical claim, namely that freedom must be sacrificed in order to redistribute income.

Ultimately, "social justice" is about the state amassing ever increasing power in order to, do "good things." What are good things? Well whatever the champions of social justice decide this week. But first, last and always it is the cause of economic redistribution.

According to the doctrine of Social Justice, the haves always have too much, the have nots,

never have enough. You don't have to take my word for it. That is precisely how a UN report on Social Justice defines the term: "Social justice may be broadly understood as the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth. Social justice is not possible without strong and coherent redistributive policies conceived and implemented by public agencies." Let me repeat that: "Strong and coherent redistributive policies conceived and implemented by public agencies."

And it gets worse.

The UN report goes on to insist that: "Present-day believers in an absolute truth identified with virtue and justice are neither willing nor desirable companions for the defenders of social justice." Translation: if you believe truth and justice are concepts independent of the agenda of the forces of progress as defined by the left, you are an enemy of social justice.

Compassion – or social justice – is when government takes your money and gives it to someone else. Greed is when you want to keep it.

The underlying point of social justice, then, amounts to a sweeping indictment of a free society. It suggests that any perceived unfairness, or sorrow, or economic want must be addressed by yet another government effort to remedy that unfairness, that sorrow, or that economic want. All we need to do is invoke the abracadabra phrase "social justice" and we're on our way.

The invocation of social justice always works from the assumption that the right people – the anointed few – can simply impose fairness, prosperity and any other good thing you can think of. And the only institution capable of imposing social justice is the state.

And keep in mind, the conventional wisdom among liberal elites is that conservatives are the ones who want to impose their values on everyone else.

The self-declared champions of social justice believe the state must remedy and can remedy all perceived wrongs. Anyone who disagrees is an enemy of what is good and right. And the state must therefore coerce them to do what is socially just. And that, as Hayek prophesied, is no longer a free society.

Is that the kind of society you want to live in? If it isn't, beware of what will be done in the name of social justice.

I'm Jonah Goldberg of the American Enterprise Institute and National Review for Prager University.