

## “SOCIAL JUSTICE”

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This module introduces you to the field of Women’s and Gender Studies and its relationship to the concept of social justice. In this lecture, I will provide an in-depth discussion of the concept of ‘social justice’ locating it in historical context. Then, I will explain how the field of Women’s and Gender Studies emerged in the context of a new wave of 1960s social movements, including: the civil rights movement, decolonization and self-determination movements, anti-war movements, student movements, environmental movements, and, of course, the women’s movement. Finally, I will leave you with a few reasons I think it is important to study gender and social justice in the contemporary moment.

But *first*, it is crucial that we think about exactly what it is we mean in this course when we use the term ‘social justice’ because -- like many concepts we will study in this course -- it is a *contested concept*. Contested concepts are not neutral or objective. Defining a contested concept like social justice requires making *normative* judgments. To say that a statement is normative means that it involves saying something about the way the world *should* be. As such, each of us may imagine something completely different when we talk about ‘social justice’. My vision of social justice may be different from yours. In fact, this is a fundamental part of understanding the concept of social justice -- there is not one unified vision of social justice, but multiple -- sometimes competing -- visions of what a socially just society entails. In the introductory chapter to her edited book, *Contemporary Inequalities and Social Justice in Canada*, Dr. Janine Brodie writes that defining a contested concept like social justice involves “reach[ing] deeply into our perceptions of who we are, how we should govern ourselves, and what our obligations are to each other.” (9)

Dr. Brodie locates the concept of social justice in historical context, asking “when did people start talking about social justice?” During the rapid industrialization of the mid-1800s in Western Europe, new forms of economic stratification emerged, producing widespread poverty. By the mid-19th century, amidst growing poverty and inequality, political and economic thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx began talking about “social *problems*”. Brodie points out that the pairing of the word *social* with the word ‘*problem*’ indicates that *social* ways of thinking have -- since at least the mid-19th century - tried to make the world *better* - directed at solving problems of inequality. These early social thinkers like Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill questioned whether the capitalist system could create equitable societies.

The idea of social *justice* emerges following the collapse of capitalism during the Great Depression of the 1930s, which was the result of the failure of laissez-faire or 'invisible hand' capitalism - the idea that there should be no state intervention in the market. The Great Depression of the 1930s gave way to a profound shift in ideas about social relations. After the collapse of the "invisible hand" capitalist system, economists and governments realized that the state had a role to play in providing for citizens. A new consensus emerged in liberal democracies emphasizing the idea that we need a kind of collective insurance against social and economic inequalities. In other words, because we live and work in systems -- in political communities, economies, and societies -- individuals should not be held responsible when the whole *system* fails. This new consensus -- called post-war social liberalism or the post-war welfare state -- acknowledged that the state must provide some protection for citizens against unforeseen hardship such as illness, unemployment, or homelessness. This new consensus meant that citizens could turn to the state for some support. But those who were not considered citizens, or otherwise excluded from the national community, did not receive the same kinds of support.

While post-war social liberalism in Canada did not distribute its entitlements evenly, the idea that the state had a responsibility to provide for citizens did create opportunities for social movements, including the women's movement, to demand rights, equality, and justice. The women's movement, which we will study in the next module, emerged in the 1960s alongside other social movements, including the American civil rights movement, Indigenous decolonization movements, environmentalist movements, and anti-war movements. The women's movement involved a push to create spaces where women could discuss their unique experiences of patriarchy -- the system in which power is consolidated among men. Frustrated by a lack of women's voices and gender analysis in university courses, second-wave feminists asked how university education might change if disciplines had to acknowledge that half of the world's population are women. By the early 1970s, many Canadian universities had women's studies courses, but women's studies departments with fully-fledged programs were rare. In the 1980s and 1990s, many universities in Canada institutionalized WGS programs. Today, there are WGS programs at most universities.

WGS programs have undergone major changes in the last decade or so, including name changes. Today, many programs once called "Women's Studies" now feature words like "gender", "sexuality", and "social justice". Such name changes are important acknowledgments that equality for women cannot happen without ending oppression based on race, class, gender, and disability. Canadian WGS scholars Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice (2011) identify four current trends in the field of WGS: the adoption of intersectional approaches, an emphasis on gender and queer theory, transnational approaches, and the inclusion of Indigenous and anti-colonial perspectives (141). We will learn about what these terms mean in future modules.

By pairing 'gender' with 'social justice', this course participates in the shifts described by Hobbs and Rice towards a more inclusive and robust vision of gender justice. Intersectional feminist,

queer, Indigenous, transnational, Black, and critical disability perspectives on gender and social justice remind us that the definition of social justice might depend on who you ask. Visions of social justice are deeply tied to identity -- people who have been marginalized on the basis of their identities are engaged in struggles for social justice. With this in mind, Brodie offers the following definition of social justice:

*“Social justice is not a stable state to be achieved, but instead is a way of thinking and governing that prioritizes the elusive and shifting goals of fairness, equality, and inclusion” (11)*

This definition captures social justice as an ever-expanding ideal. Canada, for example, may never reach a point at which we declare that we have *achieved* social justice -- rather, the concept grows to encapsulate *more* groups and more goals. The idea of social justice will shift according to the historical and political context. In the aftermath of the Great Depression, visions of social justice were not as inclusive as they are today, for example.

You’ve already enrolled in this course, and you’re listening to this lecture, so chances are you are already somewhat invested in studying gender and social justice. Nonetheless, I want to leave you with three reasons that I think it is important to study gender and social justice. First, the study of gender and social justice blends theory with practice to find and implement solutions to social problems in our communities. This is exciting because studying gender and social justice can help give you the tools for creating effective change from the ground up. Second, a gender and social justice analysis helps cultivate what Janine Brodie calls “social literacy” -- meaning a language and way of thinking that helps us understand and challenge power relationships and inequalities. Social literacy provides the tools to describe your *own* experiences with power and oppression. Third, the study of gender and social justice is particularly important in this contemporary moment of multiple crises -- including a climate crisis, a crisis of structural racism, income inequality, settler-colonialism, and unprecedented global migration. In moments of crisis like this, which intensify inequality, Dr. Brodie argues that it is crucial that all of us as social thinkers -- articulate *visions of more just relationships to one another*.