



International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change. [www.ijicc.net](http://www.ijicc.net)  
Volume 1, Issue 1, May 2013

# Social Innovation without Social Justice: Disbanding the Victim Market

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## Abstract

*This paper argues that social innovation requires dispensing with social justice as a goal. Why? Despite the best of intentions of advocates of social justice, the outcomes of social justice initiatives are axiomatically perverse. I argue that advocates of social justice, rather than the ostensible target populations they champion, are the primary beneficiaries of social justice initiatives (Sinclair, 2000; Sinclair, 2002). This seemingly counter-intuitive effect is caused by the field of social justice activity itself, which has become a market in victim circumstances.*



This paper argues that social innovation requires dispensing with social justice as a goal. Why? Despite the best of intentions of advocates of social justice, the outcomes of social justice initiatives are axiomatically perverse. I argue that advocates of social justice, rather than the ostensible target populations they champion, are the primary beneficiaries of social justice initiatives (Sinclair, 2000; Sinclair, 2002). This seemingly counter-intuitive effect is caused by the field of social justice activity itself, which has become a market in victim circumstances.

In order to elaborate this tragedy in what follows, I turn first to the concept of 'victim'. This concept is central to a perceived dysfunction in social justice initiatives. I then discuss social justice target populations. A key aspect of the discussion is recognising that the concept of social justice is bereft of any ultimate meaning and instead serves as a rhetorical device for prosecuting a case for state beneficence in the name of particular target populations. The role of advocates of social justice as protectors of victims is then explained. The elision of the interests of the intended beneficiaries of social justice initiatives with those of advocates of social justice is the focal point here. I move on to examine the practices of the social justice market, which leads in turn to a discussion of the state and capitalism. I conclude with some implications of my analysis for social innovation.

## **Victims**

In my thinking a version of a victim concept first arose pre-theoretically during my experience of running a one-teacher school in a remote Aboriginal community 20 years ago. I then formalised it by writing about that experience in theoretical terms (Sinclair, 1995). This period of practical and theoretical work led me to conclude that, "... in the field of education, Aborigines are not entirely victims in matters of self-determination" (Sinclair, 1995, p. 82). The key phrase here is 'not entirely victims', a semantic best understood in contradistinction to a person or group of persons who is/are 'entirely a victim'.

A person or group of persons that is entirely a victim is/are in no way responsible for the conditions of misery or suffering characterising their lived experience. Althusser's (1984) view of the working class as 'always already' oppressed illustrates the point. Althusser argued that the working class always falls victim either to explicit, deliberate oppression on the part of the ruling class via Repressive State Apparatuses, or, to its own false consciousness which is itself a product of ruling class manipulation of Ideological State Apparatuses such as education. In this scenario the working class is doomed to be always already oppressed and in this sense is always already a 'victim'.

This victim construct is germane to the situation of the Aboriginal people who were my focus in the period 1992-1995 and to the circumstances of Aboriginal people generally which until recently have been interpreted very similarly. That is, conventional wisdom has been, and is mostly still, that Aboriginal people and culture are in no way responsible for the misery and suffering that afflict their lives. Instead these circumstances are assumed to have their origins in some form or other of white/Western oppression/racism, be it explicit or subliminal, intentional or not. In particular, Aboriginal culture is almost never conceived of as a significant, causative



factor of Aboriginal misery and suffering. Rather, Aboriginal people are conventionally construed as victims of forces outside their own cultural practice and agency. Consequently, to the extent that Aboriginal culture is in fact a cause of misery and suffering but is not deemed so, Aboriginal people become trapped in their circumstances. Worse, well-meaning advocates of the Aboriginal cause inadvertently ensure this entrapment by bestowing sacred status on Aboriginal culture and interpreting any criticism of Aboriginal culture as *prima facie* racist.

While undertaking doctoral studies in 1996-2000, I operationalised this victim construct to encompass all target groups purported to benefit from social justice initiatives, not just Aborigines. The construct is central to understanding how theories of social justice are inherently incoherent in relation to any meaningful sense of agency and especially agency that pertains to weaknesses and failings inherent in and characteristic of target identity groups.

### **Social Justice and its Target Populations**

My doctoral research (Sinclair, 2000) led me to conclude that there was no plausible or credible evidence anywhere that social justice initiatives generate outcomes for ostensible target populations remotely consistent with outcomes prophesied by the initiative. On the contrary, the overwhelming weight of research evidence about the outcomes of social justice initiatives suggested the history of social justice endeavour could plausibly be described as a succession of debacles. This is still so today insofar as I am unaware of any research proclaiming “social justice will be achieved in the foreseeable future”. Indeed in Australia in 2013 the present federal government’s impassioned defence of its flagship policy imperatives in the areas of school education and disability services proves this point precisely.

Further, in the present, as in the past, the failure of social justice initiatives to realise outcomes consistent with rhetoric invariably is taken by advocates of social justice as evidence for efforts to be redoubled! This call for greater efforts in the face of perpetual failure to my mind constitutes a fundamental flaw in the logic of social justice theorising, namely, that to advocates of social justice, it is unthinkable and impossible that the theory and practice of social justice are the cause of failure in social justice initiatives. This blindness of dogma is the key to being able to comprehend why social justice initiatives fail for reasons other than poor execution of policy in practice, or the evil hand of economic rationalism, neo-liberalism or some similarly malevolent force.

More specifically, to advocates of social justice the concept of social justice can mean anything. It can translate as equity, equality, equality of opportunity, recognition and celebration of diversity and difference, as well as blends thereof, to name just a few substitutes. Ultimately, however, social justice is bereft of any universal meaning and instead means whatever is expedient for prosecuting a case for initiatives favourable to whichever target group a particular advocate is championing. Indeed advocates of social justice are expert at championing the causes of special categories or target groups of victims. Women, non-Western cultural groups, people of non-English speaking background, gays, lesbians, people with disabilities are but a few of the more common victim categories of which there can be a potentially limitless array championed. Indeed



in the theoretical schemata of postmodernisms, poststructuralisms, feminisms, cultural studies, postcolonialisms, gender studies, queer theory and so on, the concept of victim can apply to almost any person or group of persons who is not an oppressor. Again, part of the contemporary Australian political debate revolves around the issue of whether the highest democratically elected office-bearer in the nation, the Prime Minister, can be a victim of a force such as misogyny. Recall that the key criterion for discerning who is a victim is that the person or group of persons is conceived of as living in circumstances of misery and suffering not of their own making. Rather, these circumstances are made by oppressors, conventionally represented by alterity, an 'other' that has power relative to and over the victim. White Australia/Western culture illustrates this point with reference to my earlier discussion of Aboriginal people. Similarly, patriarchal society, Western civilisation and thought and traditional marriage conventions can be construed as forces oppressing women, people of non-English speaking background and gays and lesbians. It is a matter of some interest that Australia's Prime Minister can be on the one hand a victim of misogyny yet on the other an oppressor of gays and lesbians insofar as she opposes so-called 'marriage equality'.

Nonetheless, in the logic of social justice there are victims and there are their oppressors. However, there is a third actor in this equation, namely, 'the protector of victims', the advocate of social justice who is almost never discussed in any causal analyses of social justice initiatives and their failures.

### **Protectors of Victims**

Advocates of social justice are usually left out of analyses into the causes of failure of social justice initiatives because advocates are effectively beyond reproach. As champions of the causes of victims, advocates protect victims and their interests. In performing this 'protector of victims' function advocates become sanctified and are erased from the causes of the subsequent failure of social justice initiatives, because it is always the oppressive actions of some 'other' that is the cause of failure of social justice initiatives. Protectors of victims cannot be 'others' unless they are explicitly theorised as such.

This is a problem because protectors are invariably associated in more or less direct ways with the state, which in turn is assumed in social justice logic to be the mechanism for bringing about social justice for victims. There is a plethora of government, semi-government, state-associated, quasi non-government and non-government organisations peopled by protectors who advocate and act on behalf of victims in a multitude of ways. The conundrum of the state already being peopled by advocates of social justice highlights the primary albeit unspoken purpose of social justice advocacy. Ultimately, despite rhetoric aimed at drawing attention to the worthiness of their causes and the dire situation of the victims they protect, protector efforts are first and foremost aimed at gaining power and influence over the machinery of the state as the means for achieving their particular ends.

In addition to identifying who is a victim and advocating for them protectors develop remedies that purport to redress the victim's suffering and misery using the state as the mechanism. In so



doing, protectors compete with each other for control of the state or state largesse as the means for enabling their victim-saving remedies to come to the fore. This competition is market-like in practice as people compete for advantage, reputation and spoils in grant and other reward structures.

### **The Practices of the Social Justice Market**

I use the word practice in two senses. First, it refers to the internal logic and order of the plethora of theories of social justice that serve to champion the causes of particular victim identities. Second, it refers to the day-to-day activities and initiatives that are brought to life in the name of social justice and its correlative victims. Competition between protectors characterises practice in both senses.

More specifically, in the first instance protectors compete when developing theories of social justice that contain within them remedies to be enacted in practice. In addition to a concept of being a social justice protector, theories of social justice contain a conceptual blueprint for their activation. This blueprint entails a concept of the state (which is the mechanism by which the theory is enacted in practice), a concept of the field of application (Education for example), a concept of the social injustice to be remedied (addressing racism in schools for example) and a concept of the particular victim who is the sufferer of the injustice (a non-Western pupil attending a state school, for example). While I do not believe that protectors see their particular social justice remedies as self-interested, they arguably are insofar as the causes of special victims are championed. In the contest the circumstances of one sort of victim are then elevated over other victims' circumstances thereby illustrating the competition between protectors in their efforts to have their theories of social justice succeed in practice.

Put in economic terms the theoretical field of social justice is therefore characterised by competition between self-interested advocates of social justice championing the causes of special victims. Akin to conventional markets the various theories of social justice advocated function as production designs aka prototypes. In this sense the social justice market is characterised by competition between producers (aka protectors), as is the case in all markets.

Moreover, returning to social justice theory's inbuilt concepts of activation in practice, the state as *the* activating mechanism for social justice initiatives functions to distribute socially just goods, services and opportunities in much the same way as market channels and supply chains do in conventional markets. That is, the state distributes and redistributes the various goods, services and opportunities which are the remedies proscribed by successful advocates of social justice toward some but not other categories or target markets of victims. The field of application of these goods, services and opportunities (Education for example) marks out the marketplace. In the marketplace the remedies are then applied in order to address the perceived social injustice afflicting the victim (the racism experienced by a non-Western child in a school for example). For their part, victims in this scenario are remarkably like consumers in conventional markets.



Existing on the end of socially just supply chains of tailored goods, services and opportunities, victims consume these remedies fashioned for and distributed specifically to them. It is unfortunate that no enduring or widespread benefit in the form of improved circumstances for victims seems to follow.

Worse still, protectors of victims do not see their world in this way. Perhaps if they recognised themselves as producers competing for advantage in a victim market that produces none of its prophesied benefits they would be less inclined to continue their contest. After all, markets are about efficiency not equality and in every market including the social justice market, there are winners and losers. This explains why the goals of social justice *a priori* can never be realised in any universal sense. Some victims always gain at the expense of others. However, if advocates of social justice better conceptualised the state and the limits of its capacities some aspects of their well-intentioned goals may transpire. Of course, a better understanding of capitalism is needed as well.

### **The State and Capitalism**

According to Crouch (1979, p. 20), "...there are good reasons for believing that most actions of the state are taken in the interests of at least certain sections of capital". This is because "...the state is dependent on accumulation and has to *maintain* it, but it cannot itself *do it*" (Offe, 1975, p. 126, emphasis in the original). Accordingly, although as a functional pre-requisite the state must secure the conditions necessary for the perpetuation and expansion of capitalism, at least in advanced capitalist countries the state is relatively autonomous from capital insofar as it is not directly in the hands of capitalists. Nor can the state be turned easily or simply to the dictation of political whim, a point advocates of social justice misunderstand in their seemingly benign contest for control of state machinery.

Put another way, at least in liberal democracies there are pressures which ensure that the state is not responsive to dominant elites alone. While advocates of social justice might agree that capitalists definitely are elites they fail to number themselves among the elite. An insight of this kind might assist in better conceiving the issues protectors rail against. Indeed advocates of social justice would do well to recognise that institutions unique to advanced capitalist societies such as free elections, a wide range of autonomous interest groups and freedom of political debate force the state to attend to non-elites. However, as standards of living in general have improved throughout the capitalist and developing world, the state's capacity to meet the increasing demands of the citizenry has correspondingly diminished. Indeed if the present state of Australian politics, political parties and political debate is anything to go by, many individuals who champion victim categories have few grounds for denying their own privilege relative to that of the victim groups they champion. Yet under some 'victim' auspices or another almost any Australian citizen or self-identified group can lay claim to preferential treatment from the state. Moreover, the historical victims of social injustice at best remain as disengaged and disempowered as ever. This is a central point in understanding what future social innovation entails, namely, disbanding the victim market.



## Implications for Social Innovation: Disbanding the Victim Market

I suggest social innovation and especially social innovation that seeks to alleviate some of society's seemingly more intractable lacunae implies at least two inter-related propositions. First, the goal of social innovation ought to be to enable individuals and social groups to overcome as much as possible their inherent weaknesses and failings. I say as much as possible because some of life's hurdles can be neither wished nor legislated away. This point is especially so for those I argue are characterised as 'victims' in the logic of the social justice market. It is nonsensical to hold society accountable for remediating misfortune not of society's making. It is equally nonsensical to hold society accountable for remediating problems that individuals and groups can attend to themselves.

Second and very clearly related to this enabling function, I suggest that individuals and groups in society ought to turn less to the state and especially to their ostensible 'protectors' as the agents and mechanism for redressing their ills, perceived or otherwise. A good start toward bringing this proposition to fruition would be to finally and categorically dispense with the counter-productive theorising of individuals and groups as victims first and foremost. Social innovation might then proceed from individual and group capacities as a tradition from Thomas Sowell (2004) to Noel Pearson (2010) has so convincingly argued.

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Volume 1, Issue 1, May 2013