Social Justice, Postmodernism and the City*

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The title of this essay is a collage of two book titles of mine written nearly 20 years apart, Social justice and the city and The condition of postmodernity. I here want to consider the relations between them, in part as a way to reflect on the intellectual and political journey many have travelled these last two decades in their attempts to grapple with urban issues, but also to examine how we now might think about urban problems and how by virtue of such thinking we can better position ourselves with respect to solutions. The question of positionality is, I shall argue, fundamental to all debates about how to create infrastructures and urban environments for living and working in the twenty-first century.

Justice and the postmodern condition

I begin with a report by John Kifner in the International Herald Tribune (1 August 1989) concerning the hotly contested space of Tompkins Square Park in New York City — a space which has been repeatedly fought over, often violently, since the ‘police riot’ of August 1988. The neighbourhood mix around the park was the primary focus of Kifner’s attention. Not only were there nearly 300 homeless people, but there were also:

Skateboarders, basketball players, mothers with small children, radicals looking like 1960s retreads, spikey-haired punk rockers in torn black, skinheads in heavy working boots looking to beat up the radicals and punks, dreadlocked Rasta-farins, heavy-metal bands, chess players, dog walkers — all occupy their spaces in the park, along with professionals carrying their dry-cleaned suits to the renovated ‘gentrified’ buildings that are changing the character of the neighbourhood.

By night, Kifner notes, the contrasts in the park become even more bizarre:

The Newcomers Motorcycle Club was having its annual block party at its clubhouse at 12th Street and Avenue B and the street was lined with chromed Harley Davidsons with raised ‘ape-hanger’ handlebars and beefy men and hefty women in black leather. A block north a rock concert had spilled out of a ‘squat’ — an abandoned city-owned building taken over by outlaw renovators, mostly young artists — and the street was filled with young people whose purple hair stood straight up in spikes. At the World Club just off Houston Street near Avenue C, black youths pulled up in the Jeep-type vehicles favored by cash-heavy teen-age crack moguls, high powered speakers blaring. At the corner of Avenue B and Third, considered one of the worst heroin blocks in New York, another concert was going on at an artists’ space called The Garage, set in a former gas station walled off by plastic bottles and other found objects. The wall formed an enclosed garden looking up at burned-out, abandoned buildings: there was an eerie resemblance to Beirut. The crowd was white and fashionably dressed, and a police sergeant sent to check on the noise shook his head, bemused. ‘It’s all yuppies’.

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This is, of course, the kind of scene that makes New York such a fascinating place, that makes any great city into a stimulating and exciting maelstrom of cultural conflict and change. It is the kind of scene that many a student of urban subcultures would revel in, even seeing in it, as someone like Iain Chambers (1987) does, the origins of that distinctive perspective we now call 'the postmodern':

Postmodernism, whatever form its intellectualizing might take, has been fundamentally anticipated in the metropolitan cultures of the last twenty years: among the electronic signifiers of cinema, television and video, in recording studios and record players, in fashion and youth styles, in all those sounds, images and diverse histories that are daily mixed, recycled and 'scratched' together on that giant screen that is the contemporary city.

Armed with that insight, we could take the whole paraphernalia of postmodern argumentation and technique and try to 'deconstruct' the seemingly disparate images on that giant screen which is the city. We could dissect and celebrate the fragmentation, the co-presence of multiple discourses — of music, street and body language, dress and technological accoutrements (such as the Harley Davidsons) — and, perhaps, develop sophisticated empatheies with the multiple and contradictory codings with which highly differentiated social beings both present themselves to each other and to the world and live out their daily lives. We could affirm or even celebrate the bifurcations in cultural trajectory, the preservation of pre-existing and the creation of entirely new but distinctive 'othernesses' within an otherwise homogenizing world.

On a good day, we could celebrate the scene within the park as a superb example of urban tolerance for difference, an exemplar of what Iris Marion Young calls 'openness to unassimilated otherness'. In a just and civilized society, she argues, the normative ideal of city life:

instantiates social relations of difference without exclusion. Different groups dwell in the city alongside one another, of necessity interacting in city spaces. If city politics is to be democratic and not dominated by the point of view of one group, it must be a politics that takes account of and provides voice for the different groups that dwell together in the city without forming a community. (Young, 1990: 227)

To the degree that the freedom of city life 'leads to group differentiation, to the formation of affinity groups' (ibid.: 238) of the sort which Kifner identifies in Tompkins Square, so our conception of social justice 'requires not the melting away of differences, but institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression' (p. 47). We must reject 'the concept of universality as embodied in republican versions of Enlightenment reason' precisely because it sought to 'suppress the popular and linguistic heterogeneity of the urban public' (p. 108). 'In open and accessible public spaces and forums, one should expect to encounter and hear from those who are different, whose social perspectives, experience and affiliations are different.' It then follows, Young argues, that a politics of inclusion 'must promote the ideal of a heterogeneous public, in which persons stand forth with their differences acknowledged and respected, though perhaps not completely understood, by others' (p. 119).

In similar vein, Roberto Unger, the philosophical guru of the critical legal studies movement in the United States, might view the park as a manifestation of a new ideal of community understood as a 'zone of heightened mutual vulnerability, within which people gain a chance to resolve more fully the conflict between the enabling conditions of self-assertion; between their need for attachment and for participation in group life and their fear of subjugation and depersonalization with which such engagement may threaten them' (Unger, 1987: 562). Tompkins Square seems a place where the 'contrast between structure-preserving routine and structure transforming conflict' softens in such a way as to 'free sociability from its script and to make us available to one another more as the originals we know ourselves to be and less as the placeholders in a system of group
contrasts’. The square might even be interpreted as a site of that ‘microlevel of cultural-revolutionary defiance and incongruity’ which periodically wells upwards into ‘the macrolevel of institutional innovation’ (ibid: 564). Unger is acutely aware, however, that the temptation to ‘treat each aspect of cultural revolution as a pretext for endless self-gratification and self-concern’ can lead to a failure to ‘connect the revolutionary reform of institutional arrangements with the cultural-revolutionary remaking of personal relations’.

So what should the urban policy-maker do in the face of these strictures? The best path is to pull out that well-thumbed copy of Jane Jacobs (1961) and insist that we should both respect and provide for ‘spontaneous self-diversification among urban populations’ in the formulation of our policies and plans. In so doing we can avoid the critical wrath she directs at city designers, who ‘seem neither to recognize this force for self-diversification nor to be attracted by the esthetic problems of expressing it’. Such a strategy can help us live up to expectations of the sort which Young and Unger lay down. We should not, in short, aim to obliterate differences within the park, homogenize it according to some conception of, say, bourgeois taste or social order. We should engage, rather, with an aesthetics which embraces or stimulates that ‘spontaneous self-diversification’ of which Jacobs speaks. Yet there is an immediate question mark over that suggestion: in what ways, for example, can homelessness be understood as spontaneous self-diversification, and does this mean that we should respond to that problem with designer-style cardboard boxes to make for more jolly and sightly shelters for the homeless? While Jane Jacobs has a point, and one which many urbanists have absorbed these last few years, there is, evidently, much more to the problem than her arguments encompass.

That difficulty is highlighted on a bad day in the park. So-called forces of law and order battle to evict the homeless, erect barriers between violently clashing factions. The park then becomes a locus of exploitation and oppression, an open wound from which bleed the five faces of oppression which Young defines as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. The potentiality for ‘openness to unassimilated otherness’ breaks apart and, in much the same way that the cosmopolitan and eminently civilized Beirut of the 1950s suddenly collapsed into an urban maelstrom of warring factions and violent confrontation, so we find sociality collapsing into violence (see Smith, 1989; 1992). This is not unique to New York City but is a condition of urban life in many of our large metropolitan areas — witness events in the banlieues of Paris and Lyons, in Brussels, in Liverpool, London and even Oxford in recent times.

In such circumstances Young’s pursuit of a vision of justice that is assertive as to difference without reinforcing the forms of oppression gets torn to tatters and Unger’s dreams of micro-revolutions in cultural practices which stimulate progressive rather than repressive institutional innovation become just that — dreams. The very best face that we can put upon the whole scene is to recognize that this is how class, ethnic, racial and gender struggle is, as Lefebvre (1991) would put it, being ‘inscribed in space’. And what should the planner do? Here is how a subsequent article in the New York Times reflected on that dilemma:

There are neighborhood associations clamoring for the city to close the park and others just as insistent that it remain a refuge for the city’s downtrodden. The local Assemblyman, Steven Sanders, yesterday called for a ‘curfew that would effectively evict more than a hundred homeless people camped out in the park. Councilwoman Miriam Friedlander instead recommended that Social Services, like healthcare and drug treatment, be brought directly to the people living in the tent city. ‘We do not find the park is being used appropriately’, said Deputy Mayor Barbara J. Fife, ‘but we recognise there are various interests’. There is, they go on to say, only one thing that is a consensus, first that there isn’t a consensus over what should be done, except that any new plan is likely to provoke more disturbances, more violence.

On 8 June 1991, the question was resolved by evicting everyone from the park and closing it entirely ‘for rehabilitation’ under a permanent guard of at least 20 police officers. The
New York authorities, situated on what Davis (1990: 224) calls ‘the bad edge of postmodernity’, militarize rather than liberate its public space. In so doing, power is deployed in support of a middle-class quest for ‘personal insulation, in residential work, consumption and travel environments, from “unsavory” groups and individuals, even crowds in general’. Genuinely public space is extinguished, militarized or semi-privatized. The heterogeneity of open democracy, the mixing of classes, ethnicities, religions and divergent taste cultures within a common frame of public space is lost along with the capacity to celebrate unity and community in the midst of diversity. The ultimate irony, as Davis points out, is that ‘as the walls have come down in Eastern Europe, they are being erected all over [our cities]’.

And what should the policy-maker and planner do in the face of these conditions? Give up planning and join one of those burgeoning cultural studies programmes which revel in chaotic scenes of the Tompkins Square sort while simultaneously disengaging from any commitment to do something about them? Deploy all the critical powers of deconstruction and semiotics to seek new and engaging interpretations of graffiti which say ‘Die, Yuppies Scum’? Should we join revolutionary and anarchist groups and fight for the rights of the poor and the culturally marginalized to express their rights and if necessary make a home for themselves in the park? Or should we throw away that dog-eared copy of Jane Jacobs and join with the forces of law and order and help impose some authoritarian solution on the problem?

Decisions of some sort have to be made and actions taken, as about any other facet of urban infrastructure. And while we might all agree that an urban park is a good thing in principle, what are we to make of the fact that the uses turn out to be so conflictual, and that even conceptions as to what the space is for and how it is to be managed diverge radically among competing factions? To hold all the divergent politics of need and desire together within some coherent frame may be a laudable aim, but in practice far too many of the interests are mutually exclusive to allow their mutual accommodation. Even the best shaped compromise (let alone the savagely imposed authoritarian solution) favours one or other factional interest. And that provokes the biggest question of all — what is the conception of ‘the public’ incorporated into the construction of public space?

To answer these questions requires some deeper understanding of the forces at work shaping conflict in the park. Kifner identified drugs and real estate — ‘the two most powerful forces in [New York City] today’. Both of them are linked to organized crime and are major pillars of the political economy of contemporary capitalism. We cannot understand events within and around the park or strategize as to its future uses without contextualizing it against a background of the political-economic transformations now occurring in urban life. The problems of Tompkins Square Park have, in short, to be seen in terms of social processes which create homelessness, promote criminal activities of many sorts (from real estate swindles and the crack trade to street muggings), generate hierarchies of power between gentrifiers and the homeless, and facilitate the emergence of deep tensions along the major social fault-lines of class, gender, ethnicity, race and religion, lifestyle and place-bound preferences (see Smith, 1992).

Social justice and modernity

I now leave this very contemporary situation and its associated conundrums and turn to an older story. It turned up when I unearthed from my files a yellowing manuscript, written sometime in the early 1970s, shortly after I finished Social justice and the city. I there examined the case of a proposal to put a segment of the Interstate Highway System on an east–west trajectory right through the heart of Baltimore — a proposal first set out in the early 1940s and which has still not been fully resolved. I resurrect this case here in part to show that what we would now often depict as a quintessentially modernist
problem was even at that time argued about in ways which contained the seeds, if not the essence, of much of what many now view as a distinctively postmodernist form of argumentation.

My interest in the case at that time, having looked at a lot of the discussion, attended hearings and read a lot of documentation, lay initially in the highly differentiated arguments, articulated by all kinds of different groups, concerning the rights and wrongs of the whole project. There were, I found, seven kinds of arguments being put forward:

1. An efficiency argument which concentrated on the relief of traffic congestion and facilitating the easier flow of goods and people throughout the region as well as within the city;
2. An economic growth argument which looked to a projected increase (or prevention of loss) in investment and employment opportunities in the city consequent upon improvements in the transport system;
3. An aesthetic and historical heritage argument which objected to the way sections of the proposed highway would either destroy or diminish urban environments deemed both attractive and of historical value;
4. A social and moral order argument which held that prioritizing highway investment and subsidizing car owners rather than, for example, investing in housing and health care was quite wrong;
5. An environmentalist/ecological argument which considered the impacts of the proposed highway on air quality, noise pollution and the destruction of certain valued environments (such as a river valley park);
6. A distributive justice argument which dwelt mainly on the benefits to business and predominantly white middle-class suburban commuters to the detriment of low-income and predominantly African-American inner-city residents;
7. A neighbourhood and communitarian argument which considered the way in which close-knit but otherwise fragile and vulnerable communities might be destroyed, divided or disrupted by highway construction.

The arguments were not mutually exclusive, of course, and several of them were merged by proponents of the highway into a common thread — for example, the efficiency of the transport system would stimulate growth and reduce pollution from congestion so as to advantage otherwise disadvantaged inner-city residents. It was also possible to break up each argument into quite distinct parts — the distributive impacts on women with children would be very different from those on male workers.

We would, in these heady postmodern times, be prone to describe these separate arguments as ‘discourses’, each with its own logic and imperatives. And we would not have to look too closely to see particular ‘communities of interest’ which articulated a particular discourse as if it was the only one that mattered. The particularistic arguments advanced by such groups proved effective in altering the alignment of the highway but did not stop the highway as a whole. The one group which tried to forge a coalition out of these disparate elements (the Movement Against Destruction, otherwise known as MAD) and to provide an umbrella for opposition to the highway as a whole turned out to be the least effective in mobilizing people and constituencies even though it was very articulate in its arguments.

The purpose of my own particular enquiry was to see how the arguments (or discourses) for and against the highway worked and if coalitions could be built in principle between seemingly disparate and often highly antagonistic interest groups via the construction of higher order arguments (discourses) which could provide the basis for consensus. The multiplicity of views and forces has to be set against the fact that either the highway is built or it is not, although in Baltimore, with its wonderful way of doing things, we ended up with a portion of the highway that is called a boulevard (to make us understand that this six-lane two-mile segment of a monster cut through the heart of low-income and
predominantly African-American West Baltimore is not what it really is) and another route on a completely different alignment, looping around the city core in such a way as to allay some of the worst political fears of influential communities.

Might there be, then, some higher-order discourse to which everyone could appeal in working out whether or not it made sense to build the highway? A dominant theme in the literature of the 1960s was that it was possible to identify some such higher-order arguments. The phrase that was most frequently used to describe it was social rationality. The idea of that did not seem implausible, because each of the seven seemingly distinctive arguments advanced a rational position of some sort and not infrequently appealed to some higher-order rationale to bolster its case. Those arguing on efficiency and growth grounds, those arguing on utilitarian grounds, the idea of ‘public good’ and the greatest benefit to the greatest number. While recognizing (at their best) that individual sacrifices were inevitable and that it was right and proper to offer appropriate compensation for those who would be displaced. Ecologists or communitarians likewise appealed to higher-order arguments — the former to the values inherent in nature and the latter to some higher sense of communitarian values. For all of these reasons, consideration of higher-order arguments over social rationality did not seem unreasonable.

Dahl and Lindblom’s Politics, economics and welfare, published in 1953, provides a classic statement along these lines. They argue that not only is socialism dead (a conclusion that many would certainly share these days) but also that capitalism is equally dead. What they signal by this is an intellectual tradition which arose out of the experience of the vast market and capitalistic failure of the Great Depression and the second world war and which concluded that some kind of middle ground had to be found between the extremism of a pure and unfettered market economy and the communist vision of an organized and highly centralized economy. They concentrated their theory on the question of rational social action and argued that this required ‘processes for both rational calculation and effective control’ (p. 21). Rational calculation and control, as far as they were concerned, depended upon the exercise of rational calculation through price-fixing markets, hierarchy (top-down decision-making), polyarchy (democratic control of leadership) and bargaining (negotiation), and such means should be deployed to achieve the goals of ‘freedom, rationality, democracy, subjective equality, security, progress, and appropriate inclusion’ (p. 28). There is much that is interesting about Dahl and Lindblom’s analysis and it is not too hard to imagine that after the recent highly problematic phase of market triumphalism, particularly in Britain and the United States, there will be some sort of search to resurrect the formulations they proposed. But in so doing it is also useful to remind ourselves of the intense criticism that was levelled during the 1960s and 1970s against their search for some universal prospectus on the socially rational society of the future.

Godelier, for example, in his book on Rationality and irrationality in economics, savagely attacked the socialist thinking of Oscar Lange for its teleological view of rationality and its presumption that socialism should or could ever be the ultimate achievement of the rational life. Godelier did not attack this notion from the right but from a marxist and historical materialist perspective. His point was that there are different definitions of rationality depending upon the form of social organization and that the rationality embedded in feudalism is different from that of capitalism, which should, presumably, be different again under socialism. Rationality defined from the standpoint of corporate capital is quite different from rationality defined from the standpoint of the working classes. Work of this type helped to fuel the growing radical critique of even the non-teleological and incrementalist thinking of the Dahl and Lindblom sort. This critique suggested that their definition of social rationality was connected to the perpetuation and rational management of a capitalist economic system rather than with the exploration of alternatives. To attack (or deconstruct, as we now would put it) their conception of social rationality was seen by the left at the time as a means to challenge the ideological hegemony of a dominant corporate capitalism. Feminists, those marginalized by racial characteristics,
colonized peoples, ethnic and religious minorities echoed that refrain in their work, while adding their own conception of who was the enemy to be challenged and what were the dominant forms of rationality to be contested. The result was to show emphatically that there is no overwhelming and universally acceptable definition of social rationality to which we might appeal, but innumerable different rationalities depending upon social and material circumstances, group identities, and social objectives. Rationality is defined by the nature of the social group and its project rather than the project being dictated by social rationality. The deconstruction of universal claims of social rationality was one of the major achievements and continues to be one of the major legacies of the radical critique of the 1960s and 1970s.

Such a conclusion is, however, more than a little discomforting. It would suggest, to go back to the highway example, that there was no point whatsoever in searching for any higher-order arguments because such arguments simply could not have any purchase upon the political process of decision-making. And it is indeed striking that the one group that tried to build such overall arguments, MAD, was the group that was least successful in actually mobilizing opposition. The fragmented discourses of those who sought to change the alignment of the highway had more effect than the more unified discourse precisely because the former were grounded in the specific and particular local circumstances in which individuals found themselves. Yet the fragmented discourses could never go beyond challenging the alignment of the highway. It did indeed need a more unified discourse, of the sort which MAD sought to articulate, to challenge the concept of the highway in general.

This poses a direct dilemma. If we accept that fragmented discourses are the only authentic discourses and that no unified discourse is possible, then there is no way to challenge the overall qualities of a social system. To mount that more general challenge we need some kind of unified or unifying set of arguments. For this reason, I chose, in this ageing and yellowing manuscript, to take a closer look at the particular question of social justice as a basic ideal that might have more universal appeal.

**Social justice**

Social justice is but one of the seven criteria I worked with and I evidently hoped that careful investigation of it might rescue the argument from the abyss of formless relativism and infinitely variable discourses and interest grouping. But here too the enquiry proved frustrating. It revealed that there are as many competing theories of social justice as there are competing ideals of social rationality. Each ideal has its flaws and strengths. Egalitarian views, for example, immediately run into the problem that ‘there is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals’ (the modification of doctrines of equality of opportunity in the United States by requirements for affirmative action, for example, recognizes what a significant problem that is). By the time I had thoroughly reviewed positive law theories of justice, utilitarian views (the greatest good of the greatest number), social contract views historically attributed to Rousseau and powerfully revived by John Rawls in his *Theory of justice* in the early 1970s, the various: intutionist, relative deprivation and other interpretations of justice, I found myself in a quandary as to precisely which theory of justice is the most just. The theories can, to some degree, be arranged in a hierarchy with respect to each other. The positive law view that justice is a matter of law can be challenged by a utilitarian view which allows us to discriminate between good and bad law on the basis of some greater good, while the social contract and natural rights views suggest that no amount of greater good for a greater number can justify the violation of certain inalienable rights. On the other hand, intuitionist and relative deprivation theories exist in an entirely different dimension.

Yet the basic problem remained. To argue for social justice meant the deployment
of some initial criteria to define which theory of social justice was appropriate or more just than another. The infinite regress of higher-order criteria immediately looms, as does, in the other direction, the relative ease of total deconstruction of the notion of justice to the point where it means nothing whatsoever, except whatever people at some particular moment decide they want it to mean. Competing discourses about justice could not be disassociated from competing discourses about positionality in society.

There seemed two ways to go with that argument. The first was to look at how concepts of justice are embedded in language, and that led me to theories of meaning of the sort which Wittgenstein advanced:

How many kinds of sentence are there? . . . There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use to what we call 'symbols', 'words', 'sentences'. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all: but new types of language, new language games, as we may say, come into existence and others become obsolete and get forgotten . . . Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life . . . How did we learn the meaning of this word ('good' for instance)? From what sort of examples? in what language games? Then it will be easier for us to see that the word must have a family of meanings. (Wittgenstein, 1967)

From this perspective the concept of justice has to be understood in the way it is embedded in a particular language game. Each language game attaches to the particular social, experiential and perceptual world of the speaker. Justice has no universal meaning, but a whole 'family' of meanings. This finding is completely consistent, of course, with anthropological studies which show that justice among, say, the Nuer, means something completely different from the capitalistic conception of justice. We are back to the point of cultural, linguistic or discourse relativism.

The second path is to admit the relativism of discourses about justice, but to insist that discourses are expressions of social power. In this case the idea of justice has to be set against the formation of certain hegemonic discourses which derive from the power exercised by any ruling class. This is an idea which goes back to Plato, who in the Republic has Thrasy machus argue that:

Each ruling class makes laws that are in its own interest, a democracy democratic laws, a tyranny tyrannical ones and so on; and in making these laws they define as 'right' for their subjects what is in the interest of themselves, the rulers, and if anyone breaks their laws he is punished as a 'wrong-doer'. That is what I mean when I say that 'right' is the same in all states. namely the interest of the established ruling class (Plato, 1965)

Consideration of these two paths brought me to accept a position which is most clearly articulated by Engels in the following terms:

The stick used to measure what is right and what is not is the most abstract expression of right itself, namely justice . . . The development of right for the jurists . . . is nothing more than a striving to bring human conditions, so far as they are expressed in legal terms, ever closer to the ideal of justice, eternal justice. And always this justice is but the ideologized, glorified expression of the existing economic relations, now from their conservative and now from their revolutionary angle. The justice of the Greeks and Romans held slavery to be just, the justice of the bourgeois of 1789 demanded the abolition of feudalism on the ground it was unjust. The conception of eternal justice, therefore, varies not only with time and place, but also with the persons concerned . . . While in everyday life . . . expressions like right, wrong, justice. and sense of right are accepted without misunderstanding even with reference to social matters, they create . . . the same hopeless confusion in any scientific investigation of economic relations as would be created, for instance, in modern chemistry if the terminology of the phlogiston theory were to be retained. (Marx and Engels, 1951: 562–4)

It is a short step from this conception to Marx’s critique of Proudhon, who, Marx (1967: 88–9) claimed, took his ideal of justice ‘from the juridical relations that correspond to the production of commodities’ and in so doing was able to present commodity production
as ‘a form of production as everlasting as justice’. The parallel with Godelier’s rebuttal of Lange’s (and by extension Dahl and Lindblom’s) views on rationality is exact. Taking capitalistic notions of social rationality or of justice, and treating them as universal values to be deployed under socialism, would merely mean the deeper instanciation of capitalist values by way of the socialist project.

The transition from modernist to postmodernist discourses

There are two general points I wish to draw out of the argument so far. First, the critique of social rationality and of conceptions such as social justice as policy tools was something that was originated and so ruthlessly pursued by the ‘left’ (including Marxists) in the 1960s that it began to generate radical doubt throughout civil society as to the veracity of all universal claims. From this it was a short, though as I shall shortly argue, unwarranted, step to conclude, as many postmodernists now do, that all forms of metatheory are either misplaced or illegitimate. Both steps in this process were further reinforced by the emergence of the so-called ‘new’ social movements — the peace and women’s movements, the ecologists, the movements against colonization and racism — each of which came to articulate its own definitions of social justice and rationality. There then seemed to be, as Engels had argued, no philosophical, linguistic or logical way to resolve the resulting divergencies in conceptions of rationality and justice, and thereby to find a way to reconcile competing claims or arbitrate between radically different discourses. The effect was to undermine the legitimacy of state policy, attack all conceptions of bureaucratic rationality and at best place social policy formulation in a quandary and at worst render it powerless except to articulate the ideological and value precepts of those in power. Some of those who participated in the revolutionary movements of the 1970s and 1980s considered that rendering transparent the power and class basis of supposedly universal claims was a necessary prelude to mass revolutionary action.

But there is a second and, I think, more subtle point to be made. If Engels is indeed right to insist that the conception of justice ‘varies not only with time and place, but also with the persons concerned’, then it seems important to look at the ways in which a particular society produces such variation in concepts. In so doing it seems important, following writers as diverse as Wittgenstein and Marx, to look at the material basis for the production of difference, in particular at the production of those radically different experiential worlds out of which divergent language games about social rationality and social justice could arise. This entails the application of historical-geographical materialist methods and principles to understand the production of those power differentials which in turn produce different conceptions of justice and embed them in a struggle over ideological hegemony between classes, races, ethnic and political groupings as well as across the gender divide. The philosophical, linguistic and logical critique of universal propositions such as justice and of social rationality can be upheld as perfectly correct without necessarily endangering the ontological or epistemological status of a metatheory which confronts the ideological and material functioning and bases of particular discourses. Only in this way can we begin to understand why it is that concepts such as justice which appear as ‘hopelessly confused’ when examined in abstraction can become such a powerful mobilizing force in everyday life, where, again to quote Engels, ‘expressions like right, wrong, justice, and sense of right are accepted without misunderstanding even with reference to social matters’.

From this standpoint we can clearly see that concepts of justice and of rationality have not disappeared from our social and political world these last few years. But their definition and use has changed. The collapse of class compromise in the struggles of the late 1960s and the emergence of the socialist, communist and radical left movements, coinciding as it did with an acute crisis of overaccumulation of capital, posed a serious
threat to the stability of the capitalist political-economic system. At the ideological level, the emergence of alternative definitions of both justice and rationality was part of that attack, and it was to this question that my earlier book, *Social justice and the city*, was addressed. But the recession/depression of 1973–5 signalled not only the savage devaluation of capital stock (through the first wave of deindustrialization visited upon the weaker sectors and regions of a world capitalist economy) but the beginning of an attack upon the power of organized labour via widespread unemployment, austerity programmes, restructuring and, eventually, in some instances (such as Britain) institutional reforms.

It was under such conditions that the left penchant for attacking what was interpreted as a capitalist power basis within the welfare state (with its dominant notions of social rationality and just redistributions) connected to an emerging right-wing agenda to defang the power of welfare state capitalism, to get away from any notion whatsoever of a social contract between capital and labour and to abandon political notions of social rationality in favour of market rationality. The important point about this transition, which was phased in over a number of years, though at a quite different pace from country to country (it is only now seriously occurring in Sweden, for example), was that the state was no longer obliged to define rationality and justice, since it was presumed that the market could best do it for us. The idea that just deserts are best arrived at through market behaviours, that a just distribution is whatever the market dictates and that a just organization of social life, of urban investments and of resource allocations (including those usually referred to as environmental) is best arrived at through the market is, of course, relatively old and well-tried. It implies conceptions of justice and rationality of a certain sort, rather than their total abandonment. Indeed, the idea that the market is the best way to achieve the most just and the most rational forms of social organization has become a powerful feature of the hegemonic discourses these last 20 years in both the United States and Britain. The collapse of centrally planned economies throughout much of the world has further boosted a market triumphalism which presumes that the rough justice administered through the market in the course of this transition is not only socially just but also deeply rational. The advantage of this solution, of course, is that there is no need for explicit theoretical, political and social argument over what is or is not socially rational just because it can be presumed that, provided the market functions properly, the outcome is nearly always just and rational. Universal claims about rationality and justice have in no way diminished. They are just as frequently asserted in justification of privatization and of market action as they ever were in support of welfare state capitalism.

The dilemmas inherent in reliance on the market are well known and no one holds to it without some qualification. Problems of market breakdown, of externality effects, the provision of public goods and infrastructures, the clear need for some coordination of disparate investment decisions, all of these require some level of government interventionism. Margaret Thatcher may thus have abolished Greater London government, but the business community wants some kind of replacement (though preferably non-elected), because without it city services are disintegrating and London is losing its competitive edge. But there are many voices that go beyond that minimal requirement since free-market capitalism has produced widespread unemployment, radical restructurings and devaluations of capital, slow growth, environmental degradation and a whole host of financial scandals and competitive difficulties, to say nothing of the widening disparities in income distributions in many countries and the social stresses that attach thereto. It is under such conditions that the never quite stilled voice of state regulation, welfare state capitalism, of state management of industrial development, of state planning of environmental quality, land use, transportation systems and physical and social infrastructures, of state incomes and taxation policies which achieve a modicum of redistribution either in kind (via housing, health care, educational services and the like) or through income transfers, is being reasserted. The political questions of social rationality and of social justice over and above that administered through the market are being taken off the back burner and moved to
the forefront of the political agenda in many of the advanced capitalist countries. It was exactly in this mode, of course, that Dahl and Lindblom came in back in 1953.

It is here that we have to face up to what Unger calls the ‘ideological embarrassment’ of the history of politics these last hundred years: its tendency to move merely in repetitive cycles, swinging back and forth between laissez-faire and state interventionism without, it seems, finding any way to break out of this binary opposition to turn a spinning wheel of stasis into a spiral of human development. The breakdown of organized communism in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union here provides a major opportunity precisely because of the radical qualities of the break. Yet there are few signs of any similar penchant for ideological and institutional renovation in the advanced capitalist countries, which at best seem to be steering towards another bout of bureaucratic management of capitalism embedded in a general politics of the Dahl and Lindblom sort and at worst to be continuing down the blind ideological track which says that the market always knows best. It is precisely at this political conjuncture that we should remind ourselves of what the radical critique of universal claims of justice and rationality has been all about, without falling into the postmodernist trap of denying the validity of any appeal to justice or to rationality as a war cry for political mobilization (even Lyotard, that father figure of postmodern philosophy, hopes for the reassertion of some ‘pristine and non-consensual conception of justice’ as a means to find a new kind of politics).

For my own part, I think Engels had it right. Justice and rationality take on different meanings across space and time and persons, yet the existence of everyday meanings to which people do attach importance and which to them appear unproblematic, gives the terms a political and mobilizing power that can never be neglected. Right and wrong are words that power revolutionary changes and no amount of negative deconstruction of such terms can deny that. So where, then, have the new social movements and the radical left in general got with their own conception, and how does it challenge both market and corporate welfare capitalism?

Young in her Justice and the politics of difference (1990) provides one of the best recent statements. She redefines the question of justice away from the purely redistributive mode of welfare state capitalism and focuses on what she calls the ‘five faces’ of oppression, and I think each of them is worth thinking about as we consider the struggle to create liveable cities and workable environments for the twenty-first century.

The first face of oppression conjoins the classic notion of exploitation in the workplace with the more recent focus on exploitation of labour in the living place (primarily, of course, that of women working in the domestic sphere). The classic forms of exploitation which Marx described are still omnipresent, though there have been many mutations such that, for example, control over the length of the working day may have been offset by increasing intensity of labour or exposure to more hazardous health conditions not only in blue-collar but also in white-collar occupations. The mitigation of the worst aspects of exploitation has been, to some degree, absorbed into the logic of welfare state capitalism in part through the sheer exercise of class power and trade union muscle. Yet there are still many terrains upon which chronic exploitation can be identified and which will only be addressed to the degree that active struggle raises issues. The conditions of the unemployed, the homeless, the lack of purchasing power for basic needs and services for substantial portions of the population (immigrants, women, children) absolutely have to be addressed. All of which leads to my first proposition: that just planning and policy practices must confront directly the problem of creating forms of social and political organization and systems of production and consumption which minimize the exploitation of labour power both in the workplace and the living place.

The second face of oppression arises out of what Young calls marginalization. ‘Marginals’, she writes, ‘are people the system of labour cannot or will not use.’ This is most typically the case with individuals marked by race, ethnicity, region, gender, immigration status, age, and the like. The consequence is that ‘a whole category of people
is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination'. The characteristic response of welfare state capitalism has been either to place such marginal groups under tight surveillance or, at best, to induce a condition of dependency in which state support provides a justification to 'suspend all basic rights to privacy, respect, and individual choice'. The responses among the marginalized have sometimes been both violent and vociferous, in some instances turning their marginalization into a heroic stand against the state and against any form of inclusion into what has for long only ever offered them oppressive surveillance and demeaning subservience. Marginality is one of the crucial problems facing urban life in the twenty-first century and consideration of it leads to the second principle: that just planning and policy practices must confront the phenomenon of marginalization in a non-paternalistic mode and find ways to organize and militate within the politics of marginalization in such a way as to liberate captive groups from this distinctive form of oppression.

Powerlessness is, in certain ways, an even more widespread problem than marginality. We are here talking of the ability to express political power as well as to engage in the particular politics of self-expression which we encountered in Tompkins Square Park. The ability to be listened to with respect is strictly circumscribed within welfare state capitalism and failure on this score has played a key role in the collapse of state communism. Professional groups have advantages in this regard which place them in a different category to most others and the temptation always stands. For even the most politicized of us, to speak for others without listening to them. Political inclusion is, if anything, diminished by the decline of trade unionism, of political parties, and of traditional institutions, yet it is at the same time revived by the organization of new social movements. But the increasing scale of international dependency and interdependency makes it harder and harder to offset powerlessness in general. Like the struggle against the Baltimore expressway, the mobilization of political power among the oppressed in society is increasingly a local affair, unable to address the structural characteristics of either market or welfare state capitalism as a whole. This leads to my third proposition: just planning and policy practices must empower rather than deprive the oppressed of access to political power and the ability to engage in self-expression.

What Young calls cultural imperialism relates to the ways in which 'the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other'. Arguments of this sort have been most clearly articulated by feminists and black liberation theorists, but they are also implicit in liberation theology as well as in many domains of cultural theory. This is, in some respects, the most difficult form of oppression to identify clearly, yet there can surely be no doubt that there are many social groups in our societies who find or feel themselves 'defined from the outside, positioned, placed, by a network of dominant meanings they experience as arising from elsewhere, from those with whom they do not identify and who do not identify with them'. The alienation and social unrest to be found in many western European and North American cities (to say nothing of its re-emergence throughout much of eastern Europe) bears all the marks of a reaction to cultural imperialism, and here too, welfare state capitalism has in the past proved both unsympathetic and unmoved. From this comes a fourth proposition: that just planning and policy practices must be particularly sensitive to issues of cultural imperialism and seek, by a variety of means, to eliminate the imperialist attitude both in the design of urban projects and modes of popular consultation.

Fifth, there is the issue of violence. It is hard to consider urban futures and living environments into the twenty-first century without confronting the problem of burgeoning levels of physical violence. The fear of violence against persons and property, though often exaggerated, has a material grounding in the social conditions of market capitalism and calls for some kind of organized response. There is, furthermore, the intricate problem of the violence of organized crime and its interdigation with capitalist enterprise and
state activities. The problem at the first level is, as Davis points out in his consideration of Los Angeles, that the most characteristic response is to search for defensible urban spaces, to militarize urban space and to create living environments which are more rather than less exclusionary. The difficulty with the second level is that the equivalent of the mafiosi in many cities (an emergent problem in the contemporary Soviet Union, for example) has become so powerful in urban governance that it is they, rather than elected officials and state bureaucrats, who hold the true reins of power. No society can function without certain forms of social control and we have to consider what that might be in the face of a Foucauldian insistence that all forms of social control are oppressive, no matter what the level of violence to which they are addressed. Here too there are innumerable dilemmas to be solved, but we surely know enough to advance a fifth proposition: a just planning and policy practice must seek out non-exclusionary and non-militarized forms of social control to contain the increasing levels of both personal and institutionalized violence without destroying capacities for empowerment and self-expression.

Finally, I want to add a sixth principle to those which Young advances. This derives from the fact that all social projects are ecological projects and vice versa. While I resist the view that 'nature has rights' or that nature can be 'oppressed', the justice due to future generations and to other inhabitants of the globe requires intense scrutiny of all social projects for assessment of their ecological consequences. Human beings necessarily appropriate and transform the world around them in the course of making their own history, but they do not have to do so with such reckless abandon as to jeopardize the fate of peoples separated from us in either space or time. The final proposition is, then: that just planning and policy practices will clearly recognize that the necessary ecological consequences of all social projects have impacts on future generations as well as upon distant peoples and take steps to ensure a reasonable mitigation of negative impacts.

I do not argue that these six principles can or even should be unified, let alone turned into some convenient and formulaic composite strategy. Indeed, the six dimensions of justice here outlined are frequently in conflict with each other as far as their application to individual persons — the exploited male worker may be a cultural imperialist on matters of race and gender while the thoroughly oppressed person may be the bearer of social injustice as violence. On the other hand, I do not believe the principles can be applied in isolation from each other either. Simply to leave matters at the level of a 'non-consensual' conception of justice, as someone like Lyotard (1984) would do, is not to confront some central issues of the social processes which produce such a differentiated conception of justice in the first place. This then suggests that social policy and planning has to work at two levels. The different faces of oppression have to be confronted for what they are and as they are manifest in daily life, but in the longer term and at the same time the underlying sources of the different forms of oppression in the heart of the political economy of capitalism must also be confronted, not as the fount of all evil but in terms of capitalism's revolutionary dynamic which transforms, disrupts, deconstructs and reconstructs ways of living, working, relating to each other and to the environment. From such a standpoint the issue is never about whether or not there shall be change, but what sort of change we can anticipate, plan for, and proactively shape in the years to come.

I would hope that consideration of the varieties of justice as well as of this deeper problematic might set the tone for present deliberations. By appeal to them, we might see ways to break with the political, imaginative and institutional constraints which have for too long inhibited the advanced capitalist societies in their developmental path. The critique of universal notions of justice and rationality, no matter whether embedded in the market or in state welfare capitalism, still stands. But it is both valuable and potentially liberating to look at alternative conceptions of both justice and rationality as these have emerged within the new social movements these last two decades. And while it will in the end ever be true, as Marx and Plato observed, that 'between equal rights force decides', the authoritarian imposition of solutions to many of our urban ills these past few years
and the inability to listen to alternative conceptions of both justice and rationality is very much a part of the problem. The conceptions I have outlined speak to many of the marginalized, the oppressed and the exploited in this time and place. For many of us, and for many of them, the formulations may well appear obvious, unproblematic and just plain common sense. And it is precisely because of such widely held conceptions that so much welfare-state paternalism and market rhetoric fails. It is, by the same token, precisely out of such conceptions that a genuinely liberatory and transformative politics can be made. ‘Seize the time and the place’, they would say around Tompkins Square Park, and this does indeed appear an appropriate time and place to do so. If some of the walls are coming down all over eastern Europe, then surely we can set about bringing them down in our own cities as well.

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