Is Social Cohesion a Prerequisite for Justice?

**Introduction**

The most complex and intriguing intersection unveiled throughout the course of this class for me was that of social pluralism and cohesion with justice. These two broad concepts, the former a presenting challenge of modern civilization and the latter a phenomenon debated since the beginning of civilization, present what I see as one of the most pertinent yet unsolved conflicts evident in today’s society. What does justice mean in a pluralistic versus a socially cohesive society? Can justice even exist in a pluralistic society? And prerequisite for any discussion on the prior two subjects, can a definition of justice be agreed upon in a society that does not exhibit a high degree of homogeneity? In this essay I will not answer any of those questions. I will, however, contend with and debate them from different standpoints and perspectives – in doing so, they may become better defined. If they could be answered, they would not be nearly so profound.

**Theories of Justice**

In Michael Sandel’s *Justice: What’s The Right Thing to Do*, several different perspectives on justice are examined. Libertarians, Kantian theorists, and utilitarian thinkers promote different and often conflicting parameters of justice. Three relevant aspects of justice are most heavily debated between these conflicting circles: individual freedoms, the “greater good” of society, and moral duty. Notably, human rights, which many in modern society would consider a key facet of justice, are not one of the foremost considerations. In libertarianism, individual freedoms are viewed as sacrosanct and all other factors, including moral duty and the benefit of society as a whole, are secondary considerations only to be pursued after individual freedoms have been protected to the furthest extent. If a libertarian were to encounter Sandel’s hypothetical situation of a child imprisoned in a cage for life in order to ensure the wellbeing of the other inhabitants of a city, the libertarian would decry the treatment on the grounds that the child’s individual right to be free and make the choices for their own life that they desired should be prioritized over any consideration of societal wellbeing. In contrast, Kantian justice purports that moral duty is the end-all-be-all, only after performing such should one be concerned with individual freedoms or the greater good of society. A proponent of Emmanuel Kant’s theory, given the scenario of the child in the cage for the betterment of the city, would likely disagree with the child’s treatment as well. Unlike the libertarian, however, the Kantian thinking would do so on the grounds that the child was being treated as means to an end (the protection of the city) rather than as an end themself – a cardinal sin against the directives of Kantian moral duty. Finally, and predictably also in moral contention, utilitarianism asserts the third view of justice. The greater good of society is seen as the foremost consideration desired for individuals and decision-makers and must be prioritized over any individual freedoms or contemplation of moral duty. The libertarian and Kantian proponents would likely arrive at the scene of the caged child to discover, upon further investigation, that the utilitarian was the one who put the child there in the first place. Utilitarianism demands any sacrifice necessary for the greater good of society, and if a child had to be caged to ensure the livelihood of the city, they would ask what one human’s wellbeing was to that of an entire city and proceed to lock the kid away.

**Justice in a Homogeneous Society**

This conflict of opinion – a pluralism of thought, if you will – just emphasizes the reality that justice is a social construct, not some universal divine law commanded by holy sacrament. Most human beings would likely agree on basic, moral grounds that locking a child in a cage despite no misconduct or wrongdoing of the child’s own would be immoral and wrong. Complexify the circumstances, however, and even within very cohesive social groups, there will be disagreement on how the child should be treated if their mistreatment ensures the greater good of the rest of the city and all of the other children in it. Every individual person, based on their personal background, geographic location, and all other demographic factors has a slightly different way of thinking and slightly different opinions and experiences. Therefore, some degree of pluralism of thought is evident in even the most homogeneous communities and societies where all factors of experience are the same except for one or two. Not all libertarian or utilitarian or Kantian thinkers, even from the same schools and backgrounds, agree on their own principles. Even amongst two twin siblings who grew up in the same household, were sheltered in the same geographic and social community, exhibited the same gender and physical characteristics, and had very similar life experiences, they would still not think the same or hold all of the same opinions. Those two children could grow up to hold different views of justice, even – despite the likelihood that they would have more similar than dissimilar values and beliefs. No single definition of justice or set of tenants defining justice could be unanimously agreed on in any society of a considerable size.

**Is There a Negative Correlation Between Justice and Pluralism?**

Despite the fact that a more homologous society may still not be able to agree on what justice is, such a society would inevitably be more likely to be able to find common ground concerning a definition of justice as it pertained to their community. As the society in question became more diversified, more pluralist, and naturally less cohesive as a result, the area of common ground surrounding justice would substantially diminish. Durkheim’s Theory of Solidarity asserts that there is a difference between mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity, and Durkheim argues in his theory that there can be particular societal benefits and elements of cohesion that come from both types identified. Mechanical solidarity means, loosely, the cohesion within a homogeneous society as a result of shared experiences and characteristics. This type of solidarity would be exemplified in a society like that described in the previous section about justice in a homogeneous society. Organic solidarity, on the other hand, refers to the cohesion that results from, among other factors, shared exchange and mutually beneficial interaction in a diverse society. While the tenants of organic solidarity are compelling and seem reminiscent of the most well-known justifications for globalization and trade on a fundamental level, especially within economics, I cannot stretch them to encompass an agreement on justice in a society. No matter how much organic solidarity a pluralistic society exhibits, the same diverse traits that lend themselves to such organic solidarity also seem to inevitably dampen the potential of the society to agree on a concept of justice.

Take the United States for example – a prime example, as it is statistically the most pluralistic and diverse society in the world. Do Americans agree on what justice is? That is a difficult question to answer. On one hand, we have established and fortified a national judicial system that upholds the laws of the country, which at least some members of society agreed on at some point in time. Those laws are theoretically subject to change and adaption, although the difficulty and barriers to that process of change simultaneously protect the beneficial facets of the legal system and prevent the problematic facets from improvement. Overall, though, we have a considerably strong and tested national system of justice that is enforced to some degree of unanimity depending on the situation and location. This is nothing to take for granted, as our judicial system unequivocally promotes a truer form of justice than that of many other countries, especially in conflict zones and under more tumultuous and/or oppressive governing bodies. However, the perception of the American justice system is extremely variable depending on who you ask. There is no denying that what justice means in this country is different to a Black family living under the poverty line in the rural South than it is to a wealthy, white family living in an affluent, suburban gated community. Moreover, the original American justice system was that of our Indigenous populations upheld long before the arrival of genocidal white men. Those original American societies are much better examples of communal justice that was agreed upon by all in society, but still were and are much more cohesive than any broader region of the current American landscape. Overall, the high degree of diversity and low degree of social cohesion evident in the United States appears directly tied to undeniable phenomenon that agreement on our justice system is dependent on who you ask. Durkheim may have been right about the interaction and exchange that created America (for better or worse – ex. slave trade) as both a predictor and result of organic solidarity, but this country is a clear example that organic solidarity does not positively contribute to any agreement on justice in a society.

**Conclusion: Is Social Cohesion A Prerequisite for Justice?**

Is social cohesion a prerequisite for justice, seeing as justice is a social construct and therefore must be agreed upon to exist? That is a query worth pondering but yet unanswerable. Are socially cohesive societies more likely to be just, as a result of agreement on a definition of justice? Perhaps. Evidence from societies like the Indigenous peoples of America and highly homologous regions like Scandinavia would certainly support this theory. Yet it is still true and important to consider that no matter how cohesive or analogous a population is, diversity and pluralism of thought can and will still exist, which will result in disagreement on fundamental moral topics like justice. But is it even healthy for a society to agree on what justice is? I will conclude with that cliffhanger, because I believe that despite all the debate over pluralism in society and its impact on justice and perspectives on justice, this is the most potent argument for such pluralism and diversity regardless of its impact on justice. Perhaps my inclinations are well-based and a society that is more cohesive and homogeneous is likely to be more just, because they agree more on a definition of justice. But does that agreement mean that such a society is actually more just? Diversity breeds innovation and progress, despite the conflict that comes with it. Therefore, I believe that social cohesion does not have to be a prerequisite for justice because diversity and heterogeneity of thought and experience breed a more complete sense of justice.