

# Western Philosophy of Social Science

## Lecture 14. Distributive features of economic development

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# What is distributive justice?

- Social institutions invariably create and distribute benefits of various kinds.
- Those benefits are usually distributed unequally across members of society.
- Are there moral principles that would define the circumstances of justice and injustice of the basic institutions of society?

# What is global distributive justice?

- What about inequalities in income, wealth, health status, or wellbeing between populations in separate countries?
- Consider the enormous inequalities of all these features between Caribbean nations and Canada.
- Is the modern global economy a system of exploitation of poor countries?

# Theories of justice

- Social contract theory
- “Justice as fairness”
  - A framework for analyzing just institutions as those that would be chosen unanimously by citizens if they did not know what specific positions in society they would occupy.
- Procedural justice
  - Outcomes that result from uncoerced activities of fair institutions are just.

# Alternative interpretations

- Market justice
  - Market institutions are fair; so the resulting income inequalities are just.
- Social democracy
  - All citizens should have equal access to the basic goods of citizenship: job, health care, nutrition, civil rights, education
- Socialist justice
  - Equality of material wellbeing?
  - “From each according to ..., to each according to ...”

# Types of social inequality

- Inequality of wealth and property
- Inequality of income and wage
- Inequality of access to basic goods: nutrition, healthcare, education, clean water
- Inequality of outcomes: health status, longevity, literacy, nutrition
- Inequality of access to positions in society: jobs, positions of authority
- Inequality of basic civil and political rights

# The value of equality

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- Legal equality
- Equality of opportunity
- Material equality
- Equality of citizenship
- Equal access to basic goods in society

# The moral status of inequality

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- What kinds of inequalities are morally offensive?
- Extreme inequalities with a low minimum
- Inequalities that flow from biased institutions



# Basic institutions of society

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- The economic structure—employment, positions in government, farmers, owners of property
- The legal and political freedoms assigned to citizens
  - Freedom of expression
  - Freedom of association
- Democratic rights of participation in government

# Fair institutions

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- What do we mean by “fairness”?
- Neutrality across persons
- Designed without regard for specific interests

# Possible principles of distributive justice

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- “To each according to his/her contribution”
- “To each according to contribution and a share of productive assets”

# Equality of opportunity

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- Access to positions without regard to personal characteristics
- No discrimination on the basis of gender, race, national origins, ...
- “Positions open to talent”

# Obstacles to equality of opportunity

- If educational institutions and family circumstances are discriminatory, then open and fair access to employment won't result in "fair" outcomes.
- Opportunities are limited by factors such as neighborhood, economic wellbeing of the region, family history, ...

# Procedural justice: political / legal

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- Procedures and institutions should be neutral across persons, position, and status
- Outcomes should be decided on the basis of law, procedure, and evidence

# Procedural justice: economic

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- Institutions should be open to all according to talent
- “level playing field”
- Accidents of birth and status should not have effect on outcomes

# The importance of property and assets

- The property system determines much of the flow of society's wealth.
- What are the factors that determine the justice of the property system?
- When is property reform required by justice? (e.g. land reform)
- Can we give a convincing interpretation to the idea:
  - Everyone should have fair access to society's resources (land, capital, education, ...).



# Affirmative action?

- Are there historical circumstances where justice requires that society make special efforts to redress past inequalities?
- Such circumstances might arise when we judge that past inequalities make it impossible for members of disadvantaged groups to gain a more equal position without affirmative steps by social institutions.

# Redistributive policies by the state

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- The use of state resources to improve the condition of the least well off
- Redistributive taxation
- Redesign of the property system

# Compensatory justice

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- Are there historical circumstances where society has an obligation to compensate persons or groups who were previously the subject to unjust circumstances?
  - Slavery in the U.S.
  - Native American land claims.

# The disabled and disadvantaged

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- Are there moral reasons why society has an obligation to distribute resources in order to improve the life circumstances of persons with physical or mental disabilities?
- Is this a requirement of justice or of benevolence?

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