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## Young Adults' Experience of Social (In)justice

### Doświadczenie (nie)sprawiedliwości społecznej przez młodych dorosłych

**Abstract:** This article attempts to present the ways in which the phenomenon of social (in)justice is experienced by young adults from large urban areas. In the presented study, the category of (in)justice fulfils the function of a criterion for evaluating social relations as actually experienced, thus playing the role of a principle/template of an ethical and moral idea, being at the same time the effect of individual and community action. Based on the assumption that the experience of this phenomenon is continuous and strictly relational, it was assumed that the meanings given to (in)justice as a result of interlocutors' personal experiences, allow an insight into the processes of assimilation of social order, identical to the phenomenon of lifelong learning. Consciously going beyond the methodological framework imposed by phenomenography, the Authors aim at understanding the rationality of participation in the social order, dominant in today's Poland (and social justice is its dominant part), shaped as a result of negotiations between the learning subject and the external world.

**Keywords:** experiencing (in)justice; freedom; equality; social contract.

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**Abstrakt:** W artykule podjęto próbę przedstawienia sposobów doświadczania fenomenu (nie)sprawiedliwości społecznej przez młodych dorosłych z dużych aglomeracji miejskich. W prezentowanym badaniu kategoria (nie)sprawiedliwości spełnia funkcję kryterium oceny relacji społecznych jako faktycznie doświadczanych, odgrywa więc rolę zasady/wzorca etycznej i moralnej idei, będącej zarazem efektem jednostkowego i wspólnotowego działania. Wychodząc z założenia, że doświadczanie tego fenomenu jest ciągle i ściśle relacyjne, przyjęto, że znaczenia, jakie rozmówcy – w efekcie własnych osobistych doświadczeń – nadają (nie)sprawiedliwości, pozwalają na wgląd w procesy przyswajania ładu społecznego, tożsame z fenomenem całonocnego uczenia się. Świadomie wykraczając poza ramy metodologiczne narzucone przez fenomenografię, autorki dążą do poznania dominującej współcześnie w Polsce racjonalności partycypacji w ładzie społecznym (sprawiedliwość społeczna jest jego dominującą częścią), ukształtowanej na skutek negocjacji między uczącym się podmiotem a światem zewnętrznym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** doświadczanie (nie)sprawiedliwości; wolność; równość; umowa społeczna.

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to attempt to reveal the meanings hidden in young adults' experience of social (in)justice between the ages of 23 and 32, in the context of the justifications accompanying the answer to the question 'what is social justice for you.' This cognitively simple question inspired a phenomenographic conversation about the practices of social relations/relationships in both moral and legal terms. The phenomenographic stories of the interviewees, which were the subject of the analyses, led to the reconstruction of the concept of experiencing (in)justice by people who already belong to the generation of stabilisation in Poland, which entered its adulthood in a democratic state after a period of rapid social and political change. In the descriptions of the experience of (in)justice, we were interested in the context of objectivised and equal criteria for young citizens in the assessment of rights and duties, merits and faults, impartiality in functioning in the space of social life, and at the same time also in the organisation of social relations, i.e. ways of treating certain individuals on the basis of their belonging to one or another social stratum, nationality, religious community, race, gender, etc. It was therefore a matter of discovering the meanings given to the equality or inequality of social groups

and their members, assessing the validity and adequacy of the rules and criteria for the distribution of material goods, influence and power, and spiritual values (authority, recognition, prestige).

## **2. Theoretical background of the statement**

Prominent Polish intellectual, philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, argued that 'the concept of social justice presupposes that there is such a thing as a common human destiny in which each of us participates, and that the very idea of humanity makes sense not only as a zoological category but also as a moral one' (Kołakowski, 2011, pp. 216–217). This thought is not just an intuition, for it refers to the key concept of social justice on a background of general justice, which has been present in philosophical and social discourse since the dawn of time. It was initially based on natural law and in modern times on the social contract. Although the category of justice itself has a historically variable content, its dominant formulation is the injunction of Domitius Ulpian to give to everyone what is rightfully due to him (Kolańczyk, 2001). Today, the idea of justice is closely linked to the ideas of equality, human dignity, freedom, and democracy. In Polish social reality, these are rather postulates, that we found particularly interesting, especially in the context of the dominant 'devastation of Polish democracy' committed by successive ruling formations. There is no doubt that Poland today is moving away from politics as a concern for the common good, in the sense given to it by Aristotle (2008). Rather, we are dealing with a game for power and a poignant 'separation from society' (Krzemiński, 2021). In relation to this very general observation, we were particularly intrigued by the question of whether the meanings that young Polish adults give to justice can be relationally linked to human subjectivity and dignified conditions for living in a participatory democracy, in the rule of law. The problematics outlined in this way leads us to look at theories of justice in their philosophical, social, religious, and legal aspects. The theories referred to served us in the final part of our discourse to locate the reconstructed concepts of the meanings of (in)justice in the Polish social space.

The best known and, in a way, still valid today is the Aristotelian concept of justice, which identifies it with ethical virtue, i.e. the permanent disposition of reason to make choices and decisions according to the 'golden mean' (between

excess and deficiency in actions and sensations) (Aristotle, 2008, no. 1106). In a broader sense, it meant compliance with or obedience to the law. Ethical virtue in Aristotle's concept was essentially social in nature because, firstly, it concerned all people and, secondly, it referred to the recognition of justice towards others in three areas: distributive/divisive (allocation of goods in proportion to social conditions, abilities, skills, but also the allocation of burdens, for example, appointments to public office, respect for parents, remuneration for all merits, payment of taxes, imposing punishment in proportion to guilt); compensatory (between persons or institutions, it refers to what one has received in relation to what one should provide to the other person, for example, it is about penal justice, i.e., determining the punishment for the guilty and the compensation for the victim); exchanging (voluntary exchange between persons on the basis of a social contract of individual goods, which should foster symmetrical possession of these goods and also building of a social community). Exchangeable justice is actually close to the theories of justice based on the social contract of modern times, to mention the concepts of contractual justice of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant, who was probably one of the last thinkers to link justice with an ethical-normative system (Lang, 2005, pp. 293–294). Christian thinkers such as St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas have also spoken out about social justice. The former did not specify its principles, claiming that it came from God (Szlachta, 2004, pp. 1343–1382). The latter, drawing on Aristotle's premises, argued that justice is 'the proficiency, based on a constant and lasting will, to give to everyone what is due' (St Thomas, 1970, p. 58).

Modern times place the issue of justice in the context of individual human rights, i.e., equality under and before the law, as well as freedom from external coercion and freedom of contract. In other words, the foundation of justice in modern times remains the social contract, which must be upheld (Porębski, 1999), although some thinkers (e.g. Hobbes, 1954) believed that a higher value than justice based on the social contract is peace or human security, which should be guaranteed by the state. Hobbes argued that in the state of nature it is difficult to identify the notion of justice, since it may appear when some unifying power (e.g. the state) is established over people (Hobbes, 1954, p. 112). We are thus talking about the aforementioned contractual justice, represented in the theories of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant.

Enlightenment and 19<sup>th</sup>-century thought are characterised by criticism of compensatory justice and, within it, contractual justice; they appeal rather to natural law. Hume argued that justice is an 'artificial virtue,' preserved in the convictions of man, who usually was guided by self-interest. Utilitarians in turn (e.g. John Stuart Mill) promoted the principle of utility: 'as much happiness as possible for as many people as possible,' to which justice was also supposed to be subject (Lang, 2005, p. 292).

Justice also became an important element in the thinking of Karl Marx<sup>1</sup> who, like other values, located it ideologically in the social consciousness and considered it a key tool of the class struggle. He was an exponent of the distributive justice variety for, he argued that a radical critique of the exploitation of workers by capitalists could lead to the realisation of the postulates: 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his work' (in socialism) and 'to each according to his needs' (in communism), which would eventually eliminate redistributive problems (*ibidem*, pp. 293–294).

The twentieth century brings a trend for continuation of previous conceptions of justice and new ones, among which the egalitarian and neo-liberal currents predominate. The first refers to distributive justice, which mainly takes into account socialist demands for an active state policy towards reducing both income and status inequalities in society and for providing care to economically disadvantaged groups. It was justice understood in this way that came to be regarded as social justice. At its core is the conviction that everyone has an equal share of universally desirable goods, and that the living conditions of all members of society, in line with the principle of redistribution of national income, should be as similar as possible. This concept, although it enjoyed great social approval, obviously generated serious axiological and ideological doubts. There was a search for solutions as to whether human dignity and the equality of all before the law also imply a legal demand for equal living conditions. What then of those who voluntarily choose a lower level of living conditions?

Does not solid work and effort entitle others to reap as a reward the greater fruits of their hard work? Is it fair that not everyone works for the national

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<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to point to a single work here. Throughout Marx's work there is a key demand for social justice. However, we want to leave Marx's social theory, in the field of violence of class struggle and revolution (even in the name of bringing about social justice), out of the evaluation, discovering an important axiological error.

income and that a large proportion simply avoids this work? Are inequalities between people justified? Will the hypothetical creation of equal opportunities result in an equal standard of living for all? (Wróbel, 2013, p. 140).

It turned out that the egalitarian understanding of justice is not free from many objections.

Neoliberalism, on the other hand, emphasised that equality before the law does not guarantee equality of opportunity, hence they recognised the primacy of freedom over equality. In this current, not only intellectual but also emotionally appealing were Milton Friedman's famous statements (1985, p. 15) that 'The society that puts equality before freedom will end up with neither. The society that puts freedom before equality will end up with a great measure of both.' Civil liberties, in his view, are taken away by state control of market mechanisms, and it was economic freedom that was, in his view, the condition for the political freedom of citizens. He, therefore, advocated a state limited in its competencies, i.e. a minimal state. Similar conclusions were also reached by Robert Nozick's (2010) philosophical argumentation on justice, according to which the state cannot use coercion to induce citizens to help others, but at the same time cannot prohibit citizens from certain actions for reasons of their own good or safety. In other words, he advocated a procedural form of distributive justice, according to which, 'from each as much as he himself decides, to each as much as others decide' (ibidem, p. 27). This account of justice led to the conclusion that property acquired through 'free exchange' was just, even if it led to social inequality.

Nowadays, sources of social injustice in Poland are diagnosed in the perspective of two different theories, i.e. John Rawls's liberal theory and Michael Walzer's communitarian theory. The first refers to the idea of the social contract, i.e. justice as impartiality, with rules as the basic conditions for this justice. Rawls allows for social inequalities only insofar as without them, the situation of the worst off would be even worse, that is, insofar as they serve to improve it (the so-called principle of differentiation). Justice as impartiality is, to put it another way, the need to ensure equality of opportunity for a start in life by reducing, for example, differences in access to education and all offices (Rawls, 2009). Michael Walzer's (2008) theory, on the other hand, alludes to a society free from the domination of each sphere of social life, and therefore to egalitarianism, in which socially defining criteria of what does fair apply.

In other words, there must be no expansion of the metrics of justice from one sphere to another. In the case of education, this would mean that accessing it at the universal level cannot be determined by financial affluence. The only fair rule here is an ability, talent, and diligence. Communitarian thinking about social justice is, in other words, equality of inequality, equality of domination, and equality of being dominated. Communitarian thinking about social justice is, in other words, equality of inequality, equality of domination, and equality of being dominated.

### **3. Methodological note**

The question about experiencing justice seems obvious in the context of lifelong learning processes, for these are recognised as an ordinary, everyday activity of human beings, their way of being in the world that almost defines them as subjects (Usher et al., 1997). In this sense, also methodologically, the knowledge produced by a person is a kind of negotiation between himself and the external world and takes a form, during the interview, of a text that contains ways of knowing the world and participating in it. Linguistic codes, which also include cultural codes, are an instrument for assigning meanings to the surrounding reality and constitute a kind of medium that constitutes the subject. At the level of analysis, therefore, the researcher needs to reconstruct what the interviewees say about their experience of (in)justice and to read the meanings they give to this experience. Reconstructing the ways of experiencing (in)justice as a derivative of biographical experiences, meaning that the question of: 'what (in)justice is for you and how do you experience it' was the starting point in the semi-structured interview, which additionally included, according to the research procedure in phenomenography (Marton, 1988), clarifying questions of this type: 'Have you experienced discrimination in terms of finance, gender, race, views, choices, social background?' 'Does the integration of other people limit your freedom as an individual (all against one, the state against me)?' 'What is the pattern/principle of social justice?' 'What specific practices of social (in)justice have you experienced?' 'What is your experience related to the standards of democracy?'

We have adopted the fundamental epistemological assumption of phenomenography, that there is no other world than the one we experience.

However, we are aware that the treatment of phenomenographic research in methodology is not unambiguous (Malewski, 2010). Here we treat the understanding of experience as a text that has emerged from constructivist practices, meaning that even if our experience is individual and singular, it is still culturally mediated in a particular place, time, and social environment. In this sense, the phenomena of experiencing injustice, although individual and singular, become a collective intellect, defined as a supra-individual system of thought forms, spread through social processes of knowledge distribution, forming part of a social heritage (Marton, 1988). The belief in the collective nature of subject conceptions of phenomena discovered during the research process plays an important role here. The main thesis of phenomenography postulates that people give different meanings to the world around them, but the number of these meanings is limited. The resulting descriptions of the subject conceptions of the phenomena analysed show similarities that take the form of relatively constant and quantitatively limited sets of meanings ascribed by the participants in the study (*ibidem*). The final result of the data analysis constitutes a description of the outcome space, in which the researcher presents the structured results of the research. They concern the methods, mechanisms of formation, ambiguity in the construction of judgements, stages of thinking about (in)justice, and its experience by 20 young Poles from large urban areas (Warsaw, Tricity).

The ultimate result of the phenomenographic study is the categories of description in the resultant space, reflecting the set of different experiences that relate to the phenomenon. Thus, the outcome space represents the phenomenon in the same way as the categories of description represent the concepts (Barnard et al., 1999). Hence, the outcome space is both a representation of the phenomenon and the different ways of experiencing it (Marton, 1994).

#### **4. The ways in which young adults experience social (in)justice**

The analysis of the statements' content, in accordance with the research procedure outlined above, allowed categories to emerge in which (in)justice is described in the consciousness of young adults. It turns out that they create a diverse quality in terms of importance. It is hardly surprising; after all, they are



somewhat inherent in the very nature of the phenomenon of justice escaping all attempts of unequivocal clarification. The specific concepts of meaning given by the young adults and named in the language of the researchers are as follows:

#### 4.1. (In)justice as equality

This understanding of (in)justice can be linked to the demand for equality of measurements, which means that no person in relation to another can be treated better and/or worse, as this leads to discrimination. Below are examples of statements made by young adults:

I experience discrimination because of the way I dress and the colour of my hair. I'm not 'standard,' I want to look different and feel different from others. I've been facing a lot of unpleasant situations, and mockery because of this.

I commit to my work as much or maybe more than my colleague, but my salary is lower because I have a 'junk' contract and she has a permanent one.

But justice as equality, according to the interviewees, also refers to an equal start in life, regardless of starting conditions. The main focus here is on inequality in access to education and educational disparities resulting from the school's failure to fulfil its elementary duties. Interviewees speak directly about the inequality of opportunity in this area:

The rich have more opportunities and can invest a lot, e.g. in various activities, while the poor focus on their paycheque. Mostly they barely have enough to pay their bills.

I come from a small town and I used to commute to secondary school in a big city. I was treated unfairly there, as it was thought that I knew less because I graduated from a 'worse school' than my peers. This is reflected in unfair grading.

This meaning of (in)justice is further linked to what interviewees call inequality of life situation, pointing especially to a worse or better start. Such a situation arises if a given benefit (e.g. money) or cost (e.g. taxes) is shared

unequally: 'We all pay taxes regardless of salary, and the richer ones have regulations that benefit them, while the poorer ones are not protected by anything.' The conceptions of meanings given to injustice in this area of our interviewees' experiences rather involve a longing to think that fair means equally for everyone. Although Janosik justice cannot be taken seriously today, this does not absolve us from being sensitive to unjustified disparities and striving to minimise differences or from our duty to support disadvantaged people right from the start. It is worth pointing out that the above postulate, which even derives from socialist utopias, is a strong argument of political populists in the Polish social space (Kwieciński, 2009).

But the problem of justice as equality can also be viewed through the prism of social policy dilemmas, in which the state can and should provide structural, programmatic, and financial conditions for accessibility to the goods guaranteed by law. Indeed, the individual is not to blame for his or her own environmental, health, enculturation, gene conditions:

The state should support the poorer, the sicker, the weaker, and it does not do this, well, maybe it has improved a little recently due to 500+ and the Large Family Card, but it is still not enough. I am not guilty of coming from a financially inferior family.

Justice in this case, according to the interviewees, is the levelling of opportunities through the fair and sufficient distribution of resources and their proper allocation: 'Tax money from higher earners must be distributed in the form of some assistance to lower earners.' The interlocutors here approximate the arguments of political liberals in their narrative (*ibidem*).

#### 4.2. (In)justice as freedom

This type of experience of our interviewees is linked to their desire for justice as social self-regulation, of which the free market is the guarantor, and any violation of its rights constitutes injustice. What is emphasised here is minimising state intervention in gaining and multiplying benefits through competition and foregoing action on existing and even growing disparities. Interviewees explicitly point out that the interests of the vulnerable and marginalised should

be taken care of by charitable organisations and communities that would lead to their inclusion:

It is fair to pay for the effort you put into your work, your commitment, your skills. The market itself will verify the employee. Competition is the best indicator here. The best will remain.

The state does not have to support poorer people, there are after all NGOs, let the foundations support them.

All public institutions, including the school, in particular, are maintained by taxpayers, hence they should serve the personal and social interests of those who pay their taxes: 'I earn so little either way, why should my taxes be used to support those who don't pay them or don't work.' The interlocutors argue that neither baseline conditions related to the family environment, let alone genetic variation, can be equalised:

The state will not help everyone anyway, and often this help does not go to those it should.

When I was a child, I suffered from joint disease. I was always weaker than my classmates in PE lessons. The teacher didn't take my illness into account in the evaluation, and I always got weaker grades.

The above conceptions of the meanings of justice refer to a procedural understanding of it, a more distributive one, where property is acquired through free exchange regulated by the competitiveness of the market, and inequalities are justified in this thought. It can be inferred that this is a neoliberal argument, which identifies democracy with the free market (*ibidem*).

#### 4.3. (In)justice as the natural formation of elites

This conception of the meaning of justice alludes to the free formation of the elite of the state, by rewarding diligence, personal qualities, as well as family conditions, through which the 'chosen ones' achieve a more important social position, fully exploit their intellectual potential, benefit more effectively from educational offers and the labour market: 'If someone is capable, hard-working

and knows how to use it, why shouldn't they do better. I went to a good school (elite) because, my parents could afford it, but I didn't waste that potential.' Interviewees' statements refer to the role of the state in this matter, as it should make a place in such an elite available to everyone who deserves it, and launch procedures to strengthen such access, with the aim of enabling socio-professional advancement:

In Poland, there is no good scholarship system for the gifted and outstanding, but for poorer ones. Therefore, often these poorer ones 'land' in inferior schools because, they do not have money for commuting, accommodation, etc. They often even drop out of further education because they have to make their own living. This was the case with my sister, who only went to university eight years after her high school graduation.

'Everyone has what he or she deserves' is the guiding idea behind this understanding of justice. In other words, everyone has access to the highest achievements and positions in life, provided that they have worked for them and that there are procedures in the state that protect this access. The above argument is characteristic of neoconservative justice (*ibidem*).

#### 4.4. (In)justice as recognition of the development and a life of dignity

This conception of the meanings given to justice is redistributive. The interlocutors emphasise that everyone, irrespective of their origin, has the right to actively coexist and determine the community. It is about universal accessibility to the acquisition of cultural, civic, civilisational, professional competencies, etc.: 'After all, every man has his dignity. When I worked in England to earn money for my studies, I was treated like a dumb blonde, it's not only in Poland that women are treated worse.' It is the responsibility of the state to ensure that public benefit institutions, including educational institutions, ensure the availability of all goods to social groups and individuals whose marginalisation and exclusion are through no fault of their own: 'Children from alcoholic families often inherit addiction because they do not get the proper support to live a decent life like others from normal families.'

According to the interviewees, equalising the effects of uneven development should be done by redistributing resources from more advantaged groups, especially in terms of income: 'I am a single, studying mother, I made this choice, but I am only supported by my parents. And yet, if I am studying, the state should help me. There is not enough social support.' Social support is needed, including preventive, therapeutic or rescue work: 'Disabled people do not have proper support for their own development in our country. More often than not, they remain excluded from social life unless the family helps.' The permanent policy of the state, local governments, and state administration is the hallmark of democracy in such understood justice. However, the interlocutors are not clear about the extent to which developmental deficiencies, a barrier to access to various goods, should be supported and compensated for. Who would decide about it – the individual himself and his self-respect, as Rawls wanted, or can this decision be objectively located outside the individual, without asking for his opinion:

People in need must be helped, but you also need to know where the end of this help is, because I often experienced situations when I helped someone and it was wasted, literally 'drunk.' I also know that people who are constantly supported learn helplessness. In justice it is more about 'giving the fishing rod' rather than 'fish.'

This moral dilemma was expressed by Lawrence Kohlberg in a blunt question: 'is it better to be a happy pig or unhappy Socrates?' Polish researchers of the problem of justice as redistribution emphasise that the doubts do not only plague the supporters of liberation pedagogy and radical democrats. They are the ones expressing the conviction that good education and solid formation optimally serve the emancipation and inclusion of the excluded and the oppressed. They also enable an individual to acquire at least a minimum of competencies within their development norm, opening up the prospect of participation in culture and civic life. Rawls's postulate analysed here locates the meanings of justice in the area of participatory and ethical democracy, as well as human rights advocates (*ibidem*).

## **5. From experiencing (in)justice to describing social order – an attempt of interpretation sensitive to context and theory**

As early as in antiquity, Plato asked what justice was and whether it was possible at all. This question reemerges up again and again in our analysis of the problem at hand. There is no doubt that although we have extracted the categories of meanings of (in)justice from the interlocutors' statements, they are blurred, and it is difficult to clearly state what their essence is. Sometimes our interlocutors take an activity as the basis, sometimes an individual, and at another time, the existing state of affairs in society. Hence, one can speak of different kinds of justice. We can also continue to ask whether it is anticipatory or retrospective, does it take into account the results of certain actions and their causes, or even the actions themselves. Finally, whether it is procedural or material. In the statements of young people, all these threads appear at once and are clearly confused/mixed with each other. The most adequate referent of (in)justice in the experience of the interlocutors is not clear, and in fact, does not exist.

However, a cautious attempt can be made to interpret the meanings of experiencing (in)justice by young adults, sensitive to the social context and the theories cited, but going beyond the methodological framework of phenomenography. First of all, Rawls's liberal idea of justice – the idea of an equal start and fair reward for results – completely failed in the Polish social system. The statements of the interlocutors indicate, for example, that although education should be the main channel of social advancement, for reasons conditioned by neoliberal educational ideology, most young people do not have a chance for promotion. It seems necessary in this regard to balance freedom and equality. Any freedom, as Rawls pointed out, will result in inequalities, but the point is to alleviate them, primarily through education. Likewise, Walzer's postulate of egalitarian and meritocratic justice remains largely a fiction in Polish reality. The high economic and social status of the family, connections and nepotism are more rewarded than personal achievements, abilities, talent, and skills. It is mainly about the education system, which demands the implementation of completely basic axiological postulates contained in the fundamental works of Rawls and Walzer. A fair social system as understood by liberal democracy should clearly support the removal of all barriers to social advancement, the openness of offices and positions to all who meet the substantive criteria supported by education and skills and demand more intensively from the

state the equalization of educational opportunities. Filling the axiological gap, ensuring the right to development, and respecting dignity constitutes a great challenge not only for the social policy of the state but above all for male and female citizens. Will they claim education that accompanies their process of becoming an autonomous actor of their own development and reaching axiological maturity, contrary to neoliberal ideology? The discourse on adult education is dominated by the empirically grounded belief that 'adult education makes a person healthier, happier, and more self-confident' (Gruber & Lenz, 2016, p. 51).

The statements of the interviewees show yet another theme of justice, characteristic of the contemporary Polish context, but also of the theory of recognition. It deals with the relationship between economics and culture, more specifically between the economic mechanisms of redistribution in society, and the construction of identity with a distinction in mind. Establishing this relationship is based on the resolution of the dispute that took place between liberals and communitarians in the political philosophy of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and concerned with the issues of individual freedom and individualism. Communitarians the liberal concept of the human being understood regardless of the social and cultural context, and the failure of liberals to consider the idea of the common good. They stressed that the construction of identity is a product of the intersubjectivity of the subject, which is the basis of all socialisation that demands recognition. The category of recognition seems central to an ethical and moral understanding of social and political justice mediating with a modern conception of individual freedom (Fraser & Honnet, 2005, p. 8). For it appears, according to our interviewees, that a policy of universalism (aimed at ensuring equal rights for individuals) is not easily reconcilable with a policy of difference. The reason is that the latter seeks to recognise what is peculiar, individual, or authentic in individuals. In order to formulate a definition of equality, we always have to refer to some concept of universality, which often hides any particularism and is sometimes a reflection of the dominant culture, suppressing any differences. This problem in the Polish contemporary socio-political context is all too apparent.

A good illustration of the above problem is the debate on social justice contained in the work of Amartya Sen (2006, 2009) and Michael Sandel (2013, 2020), among others. Sen, as a liberal, demanded a comparativist procedure for the emergence of objective values. The communitarian Sandel, on the

other hand, appealed to the traditions of a given society and the goodness rooted in it. Both agreed that the principles of justice were definable in public discussion and, importantly, they did not reduce the idea of justice solely to a question of the distribution of goods in society, but referred to values, the responsibility of individuals, and community thinking. Researchers of the problem (Miklaszewska, 2016, p. 15) attempt to show ‘that resolution of the dispute is possible by participants’ resignation from extreme individualist assumptions about freedom and taking up the discussion on the grounds of theories of justice.’

## **6. Morality at the barricade. Final conclusions**

It is no coincidence that we have given this subtitle to the final conclusions of our talk because the idea of social justice has mainly ethical undertones in the narratives of our interviewees. They point out that man as a social individual is not and cannot be the sole author of his life. This voluntarist intuition is prompted by the narrowed imagination of neoliberalism. After all, a person’s biography is subject to determinants that are independent of him or her, hence holding him or her entirely responsible for life, personal, educational, and professional failures are fundamentally and profoundly unfair. Social policy should therefore work towards the equalisation of opportunities and the redistribution of state income, which will provide security for each individual. The idea of social solidarity is the duty of any ‘decent society,’ in the sense given to it by Margalit (1996), i.e. a society that eliminates humiliation and values human dignity. It is therefore worth acting on Rawls’ (2009, p. 31) maxim: ‘As truth in systems of knowledge, so justice is the first virtue of social institutions.’ The above observation does not reduce the problem of justice to the sphere of economics as the imperial domain of wealth distribution and social security of society but concerns its ethical sphere, i.e. values, responsibility, and community thinking. However, reaching a consensus on values is not easy in a democratic society. It requires as Martha Nussbaum (2016) wanted, a renewal of humanistic education in which the preparation for living in a community based on a value system takes centre stage. This is why social justice in a democratic state needs humanists, which is a condition for the survival of our civilisation.



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