

**WHANAUNGATANGA (COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY) AND
GLOBAL JUSTICE**

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My research project into incipient (hidden) homelessness in Hamilton New Zealand, a city with a population of 140,000, involved using focus groups with people who had gone to voluntary social service agencies, mainly for food bank access and assistance with accommodation.

One interesting feature highlighted by the focus group process was that although all participants were experiencing the stresses of poverty, some seemed more resilient than others. Those that seemed better able to cope with the strain were people who identified with their Maori heritage and cultural values (Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand and constitute 14% of the population). While there will be a number of causal factors, there is one in particular worth noting by those interested in global justice and building less selfish societies because it is a principle that fosters ontological security and socially and ecologically sustainable communities.

Maori in the focus groups did not seem to experience the withering of the spirit poverty clearly caused for other participants. The resilience of many Maori in coping with poverty is due, in large part, to the fact that they don't experience the same degree of feeling socially excluded and isolated, despite their subaltern status within New Zealand society. I attribute this high degree of ontological security to a core principle of social organization in Maori culture.

This is a principle of ethical duty and moral proximity called whanaungatanga, which engenders a deep sense of connectedness and mutual responsibility. While this principle "deals with the practices that bond and strengthen the kinship ties of a whanau" (Pere 1982, 23) or family, it does not mean that the sense of connection or respect for others is limited to the kinship group. Rather, those that are socialized to live by this principle, construe their relations with other people according to certain ethical precepts:

Whanaungatanga

Principle of reciprocal altruism and collective responsibility underpinning Maori social organisation.

Core values:

Tohatoha – the social responsibility of fair distribution.

Manaaki – caring, support, solidarity, generosity.

Hau – obligatory reciprocal exchange of goods and services.

Mauri – the life force inherent in all living things.

(Williams 2001, Patterson 1992)

Whanaungatanga asserts the interdependent nature of social reality and thus makes the concept of collective moral responsibility meaningful, since it is ‘obvious’ to those socialized into this value system that self-interest and the interests of the group are inextricably linked. *Whanaungatanga* makes reciprocal altruism meaningful; those who are co-operative and generous can expect co-operation and generosity in return.

Binding people together in relations of reciprocity also fosters a sense of connectedness and belonging. While providing ontological security for the individual, it fosters a culture of inclusion and a politics of respect. As a consequence, in Maori society, it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between the individual and the group, between self-interest and altruism.

Whanaungatanga is relevant to those interested in futures studies, social development and global justice issues because it shows that collective responsibility is not an abstract utopian ideal but a viable living construct which remains meaningful even when those that subscribe to it are also living in a culture dominated by individualism, bureaucratic indifference and instrumental rationality.

Since the late 19th, New Zealand has pursued a political and policy agenda which sought to alleviate the suffering caused by poverty and exploitation. The 20th century was one of strengthening political and social controls in which “the power of money was replaced by the power of the state” (Touraine 1998, 169). In New Zealand, particularly after 1938 with the election of the first Labour Government, the political culture became social democratic.

However, by the end of the 20th century, the power of capital had reasserted its dominance through what *Alain Touraine* characterizes as ‘the surge of liberalism’ (ibid) In New Zealand, it wasn’t a surge but a tidal wave which led to what has become known as ‘the New Zealand experiment’ (Kelsey 1995, Jesson 1999, Peters 1997). This experiment in removing the regulatory controls of the

state over the market was driven by a fundamental shift in the ethos of governance, away from the concern to protect citizens from the depredations of unfettered capital to one in which economic development was prioritized over human need.

The fifth Labour Government, elected in 1999 has attempted to re-instill human values back into the policy agenda. This turn-around is exemplified in the recent publication of a Treasury report entitled “*Towards an Inclusive Economy*”. Since 1984, Treasury had driven the neo-liberal restructuring of the New Zealand public sector and economy, leaving a demoralized, insecure and deeply divided society in its wake. The evidence of the human costs of their ‘reforms’ is in our soaring rates of violent crime and youth suicide, and a deep sense of unease and dissatisfaction.

Rebuilding a sense of common ground and moral proximity on which a culture of inclusion and social responsibility can flourish is one of the most important challenges of the 21st century. The need to engage with an ethic of caring was clearly recognized by Vaclav Havel, who, when addressing the US Congress in 1990, argued that “without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in our being as humans...” (1995, 353).

The revolution in consciousness that is required is to re-member ourselves as social beings. We can reject the ideology of individualism and regain our sense of connection with one another through understanding the interdependent nature of reality. As Alain Touraine has noted – the social transformation of the 20th was from collective to individual action, from society to culture. And so if we are to “reclaim, and expand, the social dimension of democracy, currently threatened, but as crucial as ever.” (Fraser 1994, 72), it will require attending to cultural work, which expands our civic conscience and capacity for active engagement with one another and the issues facing us as a community.

The principle of whanaungatanga provides an indigenous model for reinserting an ethical dimension in the culture. It provides a model for decommodifying social relations and resolving the postmodern condition of moral ambivalence (Bauman 1993) that characterizes the individualized political culture of late capitalist democracies (Beck 1995, Bauman 2000).

Whanaungatanga models an ethical system that could inform the project of re-imagining “civil citizenship in a less property-centred, more solidary form” enabling the reclamation of some of the “moral and conceptual ground for social rights” (Fraser 1994) lost since neo-liberalism came to dominate economic and social policy in the 1980s. If used as a foundational principle for social policy, it

indicates a set of values useful to ‘re-embedding’ people in a sense of community. This brings me to the subject of global justice.

Human frailty is at the core of the human condition. It connects us beneath all our myriad differences – for in riding out the joys and agonies of surviving our fragility, we learn, and have learnt, what it is to be human, and inhuman. We realise our autonomy as individuals and at the same time, our precious innate sociality.

So much has been written about the loss of supporting structures and ‘community’ and the hegemony of individualization. (*Beck 1995, Bauman 2000*) If this is the case, one might ask then what hope do the disembedded individuals of late modernity have of securing a utopian ideal such as global justice. But as Gramsci taught us, hegemony is never secured.

The era of globalization demands the development of holistic discourses that privilege the values of a sustainable global justice. Rather than asking can there realistically be such a thing as ‘global justice’, I would rather ask: What are the conditions on which a global justice can be built?

Robert Solomon in his book *A Passion for Justice* (1990) points us in the right direction to begin such an inquiry. He locates our sense of justice in our innate sociality and argues that securing social justice depends on understanding the relations of reciprocity that underpin social life. “Reciprocity already presupposes not just awareness of others but a sense of shared context and consequences. At the most basic level, this natural reciprocity is our mutual recognition of each other as persons and interlocking self-identities.” (*Solomon 1990, 104*)

Securing global justice then depends on our understanding that the origins of justice lie not with institutions but with each of us understanding ourselves as members of a community. Justice is about personal responsibility and individual virtue. It is about us being conscious of our capacity to make choices, about how each of us *chooses* to live, feel, act, and respond in everyday life, the sort of person we decide to be.

Solomon’s thesis is grounded in the proposition that our sense of justice derives from our emotions not our reason. Justice is not an abstract ideal guaranteed by governments and represented by special roles such as judges, commissioners and bureaucrats but an inborn human sentiment derived from our sense of connectedness with others, and an understanding that the problems we face today we face together.

The problem with the modern conception of justice as an abstract set of principles derived by reason is that it misconceives the nature of justice. This misunderstanding has huge implications for how we go about creating less selfish futures for it encourages us to see justice as an institutional rather than a personal concern. The social cost of this perspective is it justifies our seeing justice as the responsibility of someone other than ourselves. But justice is not ‘out of our hands’ – a public rationality to be delivered from ‘on high’ by a distant and anonymous agent but ‘in our hands’. It is a matter of each of us understanding the relationship between our selves, our choices and the part we have to play in creating a less selfish and more just future.

Solomon writes that contemporary theories of justice emphasize the importance of rules and policies but “there is no such grand, coherent scheme, no policy or set of policies that would set everything right, no possible perfect world in which our responsibilities would miraculously be cancelled. The world is imperfect, of necessity, and injustice is inevitable. That means that the abstract concern for justice – the search for a single blueprint that will (or should) satisfy everyone – is misplaced, and that the real concern should be to rectify particular injustices” (*ibid.* 17).

He is not asserting that social structures do not matter for clearly individuals are born into an institutional matrix that shapes and constrains the possibilities of their being to a large degree. Nevertheless, as autonomous persons with a conscience and capacity to exercise moral judgment, it is for each and every one of us to decide, on the basis of feelings that we have cultivated or quashed, what the society and the world we live in is going to be like.

“Justice claims are always contextual and presuppose a local set of conditions and considerations. Justice is not the attempt to match reality with some abstract ideal but rather the struggle within ourselves to come to terms with the way the world is and persuade ourselves, and others, to attack this particular injustice and adopt that specific course of action. Our sense of justice is our persuasion to do what we can” (*ibid.* 19).

A common saying is that familiarity breeds contempt. I would argue to the contrary, that familiarity fosters understanding, tolerance, and respect. Through increased knowledge and understanding, our awareness of the circumstances and plight of other beings and systems is expanded. This heightened awareness enlarges the parameters of ‘our’ world and embraces new populations within it. It is the emotion of compassion, not reason that expands the community about which we feel concern. Reason, on the other hand, leads to rationalizations that are used to resist our initial impulses to act empathically towards others.

Solomon argues that while reason may enable us to develop rules and principles to be applied to secure justice, this is in response to the promptings of our biologically inherited feelings. But reason is not sufficient in itself because we can also use our reason to deny these initial feelings of concern. Philosophers such as Hume and others have argued that “there are limits to how far our concern and benevolence towards others can reach, that the problem with any conception of justice based on personal feelings is the ‘distance’ between us.” But while “it may be a fact that it is more difficult to feel compassion for a person whom we do not know and will never meet than for some-one we know and already care about, this problem of ‘distance’ is much more often a matter of ignorance or hardheartedness than a function of our feelings... our sympathy (and one hopes, the resultant urgency to do something about the problem) is a natural reaction, and that this reaction – not the pursuit of some abstract system or policy (which may and certainly should follow as a means) – constitutes the heart of justice. It is our hardheartedness, not our compassion, that is unnatural” (*ibid.* 49).

Through invoking ideologies that serve to neutralize our compassion, we manage the problem by distancing ourselves from it. “But distance itself is not the problem, nor numbness of feeling. The problem is that we let our beliefs – even our reason – get in the way of our feelings” (*ibid.* 50).

Thus the search for justice, like charity, begins at home. It begins with us. It begins in our hearts as much as in our minds. It begins with our cultivating our connectedness, compassion and whanaungatanga or collective responsibility, and teaching our children about these. When we habitually think of justice as a matter of personal responsibility for one another, then we create the possibility of a less selfish future. From the resulting changes in the cultural ‘imaginary’ will come the materially concrete conditions in which a more sustainable and meaningful future can flourish.

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