

Does Social Justice Come from Above or Below?

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An Italian priest, Father Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio, coined the term "social justice" in the mid-1800s. He wrote that "legal justice," as implemented by the State, was different from "social justice" by which people resolve conflicts and injustices without State intrusion.

In the early 1900s, Herbert Croly, considered the father of modern liberalism, and other Progressive Era intellectuals promoted a new paradigm for social well-being in America. Their vision was rooted in what became known as "Christian socialism." This vision said that a strong, central government could be a "great equalizer" by enacting laws and policies that would end the "sinful and cruel" aspects of a free-market economy.

For some, the progressives' emphasis on government control was a noble and necessary step for America to address various inequities. Others saw it as sanctioning government control and/or coercion over citizens with God-given freedoms.

Modern progressives still seek to achieve "social justice" through State legislation and government agency. As before, they still face strong opposition from constitutionalists, libertarians and religious believers who fear the overreach of government into matters of faith and family.

We are left with this question:

Is the authority of the State the best vehicle for addressing social injustice, racial strife, and economic inequality? If the State is ineffective or too authoritarian in addressing social justice, what are the better alternatives? How do you see the cause of social justice (racial, ethnic, economic, etc.) being advanced in our country?