

# Why “Social Justice” Triggers Conservatives

newrepublic.com/article/162264/social-justice-triggers-conservatives

John Patrick Leary

May 21, 2021



“Social justice” might seem, at first, like a perfectly innocuous phrase, safe enough for brands like Aflac, Mountain Dew, Disney, and Pizza Hut to use in their public statements about racism and diversity. After George Floyd’s death, the pizza chain announced that it would “stand against oppression” and donate \$3 million to “social justice efforts.” But even before Mitch McConnell soberly advised corporate America to “stay out of politics,” the right was crusading against the very notion of social justice.

In December, the Idaho Freedom Foundation, a conservative think tank, released a report accusing colleges of indoctrinating students in “social justice ideology” and training them to “identify, shame, and destroy oppressors,” who are, the report underscored, typically Christian, white, and male. The Idaho GOP was listening. The Republican state legislature slashed \$409,000 from the budget of Boise State University and banned it from using state funds to support “social justice ideology student activities, clubs, events, and organizations.”

What these groups actually are remains unclear, but the think tank collected a list of sinister examples, including the campus writing center, the social work department, and even the dorms: The university had had the gall to start calling them “inclusive, safe, and caring communities” in 2011. That’s the year the phrase “social justice warrior” first appeared on Twitter, offering reactionaries a new name for the “P.C.” killjoys and feminazi bogeywomen of decades past.

“Social justice,” though, is a much older idea. In 1861, John Stuart Mill described it as the principle that “society should treat all equally well who have deserved equally well of it.” A century later, Friedrich Hayek, the conservative economist, took a different view, calling social justice “the gravest threat” to the “values of a free civilization.” Capitalism, he argued, was never meant to distribute its rewards “equally well.” The free market is infinitely complex and frequently irrational. Who, he asked, are we supposed to demand justice *from*? Asking markets to deliver it is at best impossible, and, more darkly, an invitation for Soviet central planning.

It’s not such a slippery slope, then, from the Nobel laureate Hayek to the legislative censors and Twitter trolls ginning up outrage about the words “inclusive” and “caring.” This is a movement so disgusted at the suggestion of social obligation that it can imagine no meaningful principle of community to rival what’s currently on offer from Pizza Hut.