

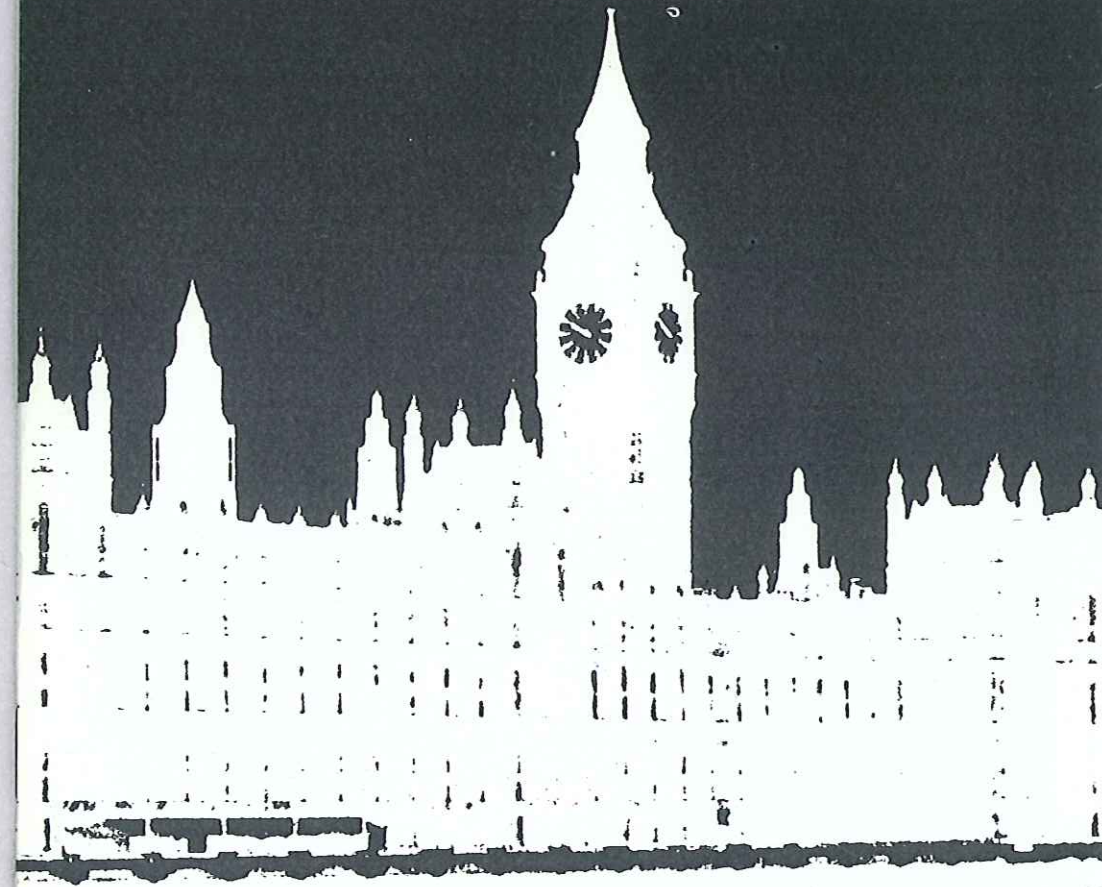


Spring Address

# The egalitarian conceit

False and true equalities

Kenneth Minogue



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES



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## Introduction

FOR TWO CENTURIES, EVER SINCE THE REVOLUTION OF 1789, EUROPE has been haunted by the spectre of egalitarianism. Yet the pursuit of equality has benefited precious few. The belief that disparities, especially in wealth, are responsible for the major imperfections of the world has left a sour legacy. Inequalities being infinitely various, such a belief is the source of a stream of regulations which never dries up. It was the pursuit of equality which animated the totalitarian governments of the twentieth century; or animated them, at least, until the evident consequences of egalitarianism – despotism and poverty – led to a little recent *perestroika*. The liberal democracies are much less advanced down this road, and have merely suffered impaired vitality. Nowhere have the most heroic efforts created what any egalitarian would seriously regard as an equal society. What egalitarianism does achieve, however, is resentment in the poor, and guilt in the rich. For logical reasons equality, in an infinitely complex world, is a mirage, yet one which affects us all. Recent political developments – stagnation in Communist countries, problems with the Welfare State in the West – have led to clarification of many issues, previously obscured by defects of vision inherited from the ideological enthusiasms of the past two centuries. But the unrealities of egalitarianism – which may be defined as the idea that law and the power of the state should be used to create an equal society – have so far survived this process. This argument is an attempt to force them into the light of public discussion.

## The egalitarian sensibility

Aristotle recognised that the rousing of the poor against the rich was a prime means of revolution in city states. Of course, in many small ancient states, great wealth was a legitimate source of concern, partly because luxury was thought to corrode patriotism, and partly because the rich could buy popular support. Machiavelli records it as a sign of active republican vigilance that the Romans executed a merchant merely because he gave corn to the poor in time of famine. Such conduct raised suspicions of dangerous ambition. And it was this kind of demagogic move which statesmen also feared in nineteenth century Europe, as the franchise was extended to embrace the entire population. Would voters be roused by demagogues to plunder the rich? Broadly speaking, we may say that modern liberal democracies have been remarkably resistant to this danger.

Yet the growth of democracy has had one pernicious consequence. It has encouraged its citizens to imagine themselves as statesmen, disposing of vast quantities of public money. Everyone has his own opinion on how to spend money. We commonly disapprove of what other individuals buy, especially if they are richer than us. Democracy encourages the fantasy despot in us all. Had we but cash enough, and power, what wrongs would we not put right! Generally, little harm is done, because professional politicians introduce a little realism, and the fantasies cancel out. But fantasy does corrupt, and this particular one has eroded the basic assumption that a man's property is his own business. We look upon the rich with the taxman's expectant gleam. This is one of the reasons why there's a little of the egalitarian in all of us. It is Robin Hood, not the Sheriff of Nottingham, we cheer for.

Before long, however, we cannot help but turn these thoughts against ourselves. Do we really have the right to dispose of our own income? It is hard to say just what a 'surplus' is, but whatever it may be, ought we not to give it to the poor? Nothing wrong with that, of course; no reason whatever why we should not do so. In this way some money does indeed go

into charitable enterprises, but most people are more concerned with their own projects, so that the effect of egalitarian sensibilities is that they keep the money, but suffer a bad conscience about it. To some extent, this problem can be solved by adopting egalitarian political opinions. That neatly transfers a basically bogus problem to the external world, onto agencies which can be relied upon to take no very dramatic steps to damage private expectations. Those who follow this course can allow themselves to talk in grandiose terms about the greed and selfishness of our society (as if they were, like Lot and his family, a righteous few in the cities of the plain); yet they still find themselves experiencing not merely compassion but guilt when faced with the unfortunates of the world. The roots of this mechanism are extremely complex, but the result is as if an eleventh commandment has been insinuated into the consciences of the West: *Thou shalt not be in more fortunate circumstances than another*. It is clear that there would have to be something mad, and certainly irreligious, about such a commandment, because it assumes that we are omnipotent, and that the power to determine the circumstances of others lies in our own mortal hands. The only thing one can do with this bizarre moral pathology is bring it to the test of rationality.

Under what conditions, we should have to ask, would it be rational for me to feel guilty (not compassionate, or desirous to help, but *guilty*) about the miseries of others? One vital condition would be if it had been my good fortune which had caused their misery. This is so obvious and attractive a solution to the whole problem that many theorists of the grievances of minorities (in the technical sense, which makes minorities about 90% of the world's population) have constructed grandiose theories to suggest that it is indeed the appropriation of the rich which causes poverty. Marxism, especially in its vulgar forms, does just this, and so do a great variety of theories about why the West is rich and 'the Third World' poor. Such theories reinforce the egalitarian sensibility, which in turn encourages further refinements of those theories. Against such ideas, we may briskly retort that they assume, falsely, that economic exchange is a zero-sum game in which a benefit to any one person must bring a corresponding disadvantage to someone else. The continuous rise of living standards from generation to



generation, not merely in the West but throughout the world, is enough to refute the assumption in practice. No doubt many qualifications must be made at the margins of this judgement: some benefit more than others, material resources are not evenly distributed, the cultures facilitating the kind of conduct which makes people rich are not necessarily more valuable than those which do not, etc. The basic point remains: it is simply not true that the wealthy have acquired their advantages at the expense of the poor.

The case for egalitarianism thus rests not upon any serious causal argument to the effect that the wealthy are responsible for the plight of the poor, but upon little more than a suggestive image. The first thing that strikes any journalist on visiting the countries of Asia, Africa and South America is the contrast between the rich beside their pools and the poor in the shanty towns. You do not even have to visit Rio de Janeiro to entertain the contrasting images of the beach at Copacabana and the *favelas* above Ipanema. It is a favourite media principle that the visual is the causal: so basic as to do away with any need for argument. Who listens to the words when the (selection of) pictures makes the point? This is why no television programme concerned with the homeless in London can resist the temptation of invoking a contrast with the circumstances of the rich. The current formula for arousing egalitarian sensibilities is to ask whether such contrasts are 'acceptable'. If not, then we must do something about it.

No good deed, it is sometimes said, goes unpunished. The same is true of idealistic sentiments. They constitute a resource available to politicians, agitators and lobbyists. It is these people who have articulated modern societies as a collection of suffering classes, technically called 'minorities'. The political consequences of this status are such that minorities now constitute the vast majority of our population: women, racial groups, the handicapped, the inhabitants of the Third World, the aged, the mentally handicapped and many others are exploiters of egalitarian sentiments and claimants of advantages to be supplied by the government and enshrined in law. In this way, egalitarianism entrenches a form of mean-spirited competitiveness about grievances at the heart of the political process. Claims to legislative privilege, or to some special slice

of the national income, are regularly lodged in the name of justice. Yet this is a kind of justice undreamt-of in earlier centuries, or in other civilisations. Today's egalitarianism is clearly sired by opportunity out of contemporary sensibility. It is a parasite upon the prosperous body of the modern West. But how and why does it thrive? The answer is that egalitarianism could not have taken such hold on our civilisation unless equality had itself been genuinely central in our culture. And this we must clarify.



## The heart of equality

It is Colonel Rainborough, at the Putney debates in 1647, who is often quoted to make the point: 'The poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he'. These days radicals might want to fuss about the terms. They might want to make it 'gender non-specific', for example, but Rainborough was no mean radical himself, and he put his finger upon a moral assumption whose roots go back almost as far as European records. Part of what he meant has to do with the principle of equality before the law. Amongst the ancient Greeks, this was called *isonomia*, and sometimes used as a synonym for democracy. *Isegoria* was the equal right to speak in the assembly. No doubt this was unlikely to be exercised by some olive-grower in the Athenian hinterland, but the possession of rights accords a dignity which is unaffected by the frequency of their exercise. The same pride in equality of rights is found among the barbarian tribes who overran the Roman Empire, some of whose attitudes were later codified in such medieval documents as Magna Carta.

Equality among the Greeks was, of course, compatible with the exclusion from its operation of women and slaves: excluded because they did not participate in politics or war, to which the highest value was attached. Hence the urge to recognise a basic worth in every individual found a deeper expression in the Christian doctrine that all the descendants of Adam and Eve possessed an immortal soul for the destiny of which each was individually responsible – a piece of theological fundamentalism which was compatible, even if uneasily so, with the forms of natural precedence by which order was preserved from time to time. It is from this doctrine that our high estimation of private and personal experience derives. The modern idea of human rights, for example, depends upon it, and would have been found very curious by the philosophers of Greece and Rome.

These familiar considerations help us to understand one feature of Western egalitarianism which plays little or no part in the arguments of egalitarianism. Our manners and practices are saturated with notions of equality; and we regard it as in the

highest degree ill-mannered to parade superiorities before others, however puffed up about them we may in fact be. Our usages of respect consist of formulae of humility in relation to those we talk to. It was not servants, nor usually the obedient, who signed themselves 'your obedient servant'. Within a basic equality of law and morals, politeness often suggested an honorable insistence on one's own unworthiness. Our manners vary according to the interplay of equal rights on the one hand, and chivalric ideas of service and honour on the other. It is not the least of the objections to egalitarianism that it entirely omits this balancing element of chivalric self-abasement, a form of social lubrication without which the insistence on equality and rights would merely make us all prickly and quarrelsome.

Manners are, of course, artificial in that they consist in abiding by rules and conventions we have learned, but these conventions rest upon something deeper: our taste for dealing with free and independent equals, a taste which makes us find servility repulsive. The ancient Greeks had similarly found the oriental practice of prostration repugnant. Most civilisations have been viable only by conforming to some order believed to be natural – as in the Hindu caste system or the ethics of Confucianism. It has very commonly been found a convenient rule of priority, for example, that women should defer to men, the young to the old. In Europe, ideas of this kind were always qualified, and have grown weaker over the centuries. Europe has abolished the systematic power of any class of person over any other class, and what is left is the circumscribed authority of political office on the one hand, and functional hierarchy on the other. No doubt it is true that if we are snobbish, or greedy, or sexually infatuated, or deeply in need of approval, we shall fall under the power of those who can satisfy our desires. But none of this qualifies a basic sense of equality between strangers when they meet, irrespective of wealth, honours, celebrity and so on.

The only significant qualification of this equality used to be in the status accorded to women. That women and children should be the first to be saved in any catastrophe was until recently an unquestioned axiom of manners. No gentleman on the deck of the Titanic would have dreamed of demanding 'equality of sacrifice' from the women and children. Indeed, one



women divorced her husband simply because he had survived that tragic event.

The roots of egalitarianism are thus deeply entrenched in our civilisation, and it is part of our politics that interested parties should attempt to exploit such feelings. The moral principle of liberty and the constitutional principle of democracy, being universally supported, have been pleaded in support of the most remarkable innovations. It would be foolish to expect our real attachment to equality to be immune from similar corruption. But it is important to distinguish between true and false equality for another reason.

I refer to the doctrinal swagger sometimes affected by egalitarians. The suggestion is that anyone who does not support equality must be a supporter of inequality: perhaps someone toadying to the rich and powerful. Egalitarianism in this light is not just a doctrine, but a self-flattering posture exploiting our justifiable admiration for those who are independent enough to come to their own conclusions. Those who do not agree, it is sometimes delicately hinted, have been brainwashed by a hierarchical society, and are too busy pulling a forelock to be able to understand the simple rationality of egalitarianism. This may seem a peripheral point, but in fact its ramifications run all through the social sciences. The idea of an 'authoritarian personality' as a peculiar form of psychology found in some political movements rather than others relies upon a contrast with a corrupt sense of egalitarianism, as does the idea of a 'deference vote' in political science, where the investigating empiricist feels deeply superior to the people he is studying, and builds this sense of superiority into the very concepts he is employing. Here we meet, for the first but not the last time, the paradox that egalitarianism is a deeply elitist doctrine.

To reject egalitarianism, then, is not at all to believe in any special virtues of the rich and powerful, or in the wisdom of how they dispose of their wealth and influence. It rests rather upon certain negative considerations to which we shall now turn.

## The equalisation game

The project of egalitarianism oscillates between focusing on the needs of the poor and the luxury of the rich. One aspect of its instability as an idea emerges in the contrast between levelling down and levelling up. Many egalitarians, like their seventeenth century ancestors, are puritans with a taste for austerity. This seems to have been the dominant mood of the egalitarian strain in the Attlee government. Others see no point in levelling if we do not level up. Nothing is too good for the working man, Aneurin Bevan used to remark over the port and cigars – though many of his successors might be loth to encourage the poor in smoking and boozing. The Rawlsian principle\* that inequalities can be justified only if they bring benefits to the least advantaged is slippery, if not totally impossible of application. Scarcity on the one hand, and positionality on the other, throw up problems in the project of the equal distribution of goods which even the theorists, let alone the practitioners, of equality find hard to handle; and if theory can't manage, we can expect even less of practice. All that we may be sure of is that the egalitarian project is fuelled by a deep underlying drive to level out whatever differences come to the attention of its supporters, and that the world will never run out of such visible differences.

The project is thus fuzzy, and we shall have to mention several of its indeterminacies as we proceed; but there is no doubt that it requires the poor to be provided with compensating advantages. What are these advantages? The answer given in earlier times provided a misleading model. What the poor needed, it was said, was an adequate diet, reasonable housing, medical care, education and similar things which could plausibly be described as 'basic needs.' A programme of this sort lay at the heart of communist modernisation wherever communists got their hands on the levers of power. An equal society was thus one in which the poor were supplied with things that others already had.

The assumption that equalisation is the supply of a set of

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\*See John Rawles, *A Theory of Justice*, esp. Ch.2, sec.12.



objects to be given to people conceived as needing or wanting them dominates the technical vocabulary of egalitarianism. The poor are described as *disadvantaged*, or *underprivileged*, or *deprived*, the suggestion being that there is at any one time a fixed set of such objects to which everyone is entitled. Clearly the vocabulary is rough and opportunistic. One cannot equalise a privilege without its ceasing to be that necessarily limited thing called a 'privilege.' But for all its crudity, this vocabulary does reveal the egalitarian assumption that the human person is an inert organism. The assumption of passivity also emerges in the propensity to see the poor in terms of victimhood, a metaphor suggesting that being poor was no less the result of human agency than being mugged. This locution illustrates once again the egalitarian tendency to describe inequality in ways which hint at the idea that poverty is externally caused, without actually quite committing the egalitarian to that indefensible doctrine.

Egalitarianism as a redistributive project implies that the salvation of the beneficiaries must come from the outside. It is thus a kind of vicarious cargo cult, in which the benefits come floating ashore from a mysterious somewhere, rather than from the sweat and enterprise of actual producers. More commonly, the benefits are conceived as to be taken directly from the rich. This is exemplified in the popular egalitarian slogan which claims that X percent of the people of the country own Y percent of the wealth, where X and Y are any figures you care to choose, so long as X is very small and Y correspondingly large. Here again we have the cowardly causal that does not quite dare to reveal itself: in this instance it is fallaciously inferred from the project of redistribution itself. For if the solution to inequality consists in redistributing the wealth of the community, then it must have been some earlier failure of giving which required the proposed redistribution. It is thus not perhaps the actual acquiring of wealth by the rich, but their continuing to enjoy it, which, in a peculiar sense of the term, *causes* poverty – a proposition impossible to refute, since if the rich did actually give their riches to the poor, the poor would indeed no longer *be* the poor. Thus does, in some political theory, the tail of aspiration wag the dog of reality.

The basic issue raised by projects of this kind is nothing less than how we should conceive the human condition. Ought

we to think of human beings as organisms seeking satisfactions? Or ought we to see life in other terms – perhaps as a challenge, or a kind of game, as did Thomas Hobbes, who took life to be a race, in which the point consists of being in it, and foremost? In such a ludic conception, failure is as necessary as success, for failure is not just a painful non-satisfaction in a sequence of organismic equilibria, but a reality principle by which individuals learn about their characters and their capacities – learning, in the process, the starting line from which their real aspirations may develop. Failure is, in a sense, good for you; and, in a deeper sense, as Kipling reminds us, it is no more and no less an impostor than success. No doubt one can have too much of it, for we do not these days take the muscular view of human life expressed in John Donne's remark that "affliction is a treasure and scarce any man hath *enough* of it\*." But in this conception of human life, by contrast with the idea of human life as a set of socially engineered satisfactions, the whole idea of 'disadvantage' begins to crumble.

For in everyday human life, there is no such thing as an absolute advantage or disadvantage, and every worldly circumstance is double edged. People born into poverty develop their wills and capacities in remarkable ways, while some born into supposedly advantageous wealth end up leading miserable lives. We may even suggest that some people suffer from deprivation deprivation. No doubt it is true that, at an elementary organic level, certain basic needs for food, warmth, shelter and health may attain a single overriding value, but this model of human life as a repetition of elementary needs and satisfactions bears no relation to the actual game of human life. By trading on the plausible abstractions of needing and wanting, egalitarianism fails to account for the complexities of human happiness. And among those complexities, one of the most obvious is that those who acquire benefits as a result of government intervention cannot construe them as the same kinds of 'advantage' as those who acquire them by their own efforts.\*\* The social engineer changes the game, just as observers

\* John Donne, *Devotions*, XVII.

\*\* For an exploration of this point in empirical terms, see Charles Murray, *In pursuit of happiness*, Simon and Schuster, 1988, esp. Part III.



affect the object of their observation.

What should we call someone who rejects the egalitarian project? Not an 'inegalitarian', certainly. My own preference is for the term 'pluralist', but some egalitarians would object on the ground that what they themselves seek is to bring all possible variations of life within the reach of all. We shall come back to this point. We may however harvest the present stage of our argument by saying that the egalitarian project affirms a view of human beings as organisms with needs, and of objects as single-valued; while the pluralist conception – if we can later justify that term – affirms a games-playing, risk-taking view of human life. People in general swing back and forth between these two views of existence – between the comforts of security and the risks of fulfilment; but the very fact that freedom has survived in liberal democratic societies suggests that our deeper attitudes are 'ludic'.

## A solution in search of a problem

Egalitarians, then, make the assumption that human beings are passive, needing creatures rather than active shapers of their own lives – as spelt out, for example, in the ideological conception of the proletariat as pure matter, suitable merely for the impress of the ideas of vanguard intellectuals. But in examining this assumption, we left unchallenged the idea that wealth and poverty are, if not causally related, at least connected in some way. But are they?

Some societies contain great wealth, and few are seriously poor; in others most are poor. Wealth and poverty might both be regarded as problems, but if so, they are problems of distinctly different kinds. Certainly the solutions would differ. If our concern is with poverty, then philanthropy or a variety of welfare programmes would be appropriate, but they need have no real effect upon disparities of wealth. Alternatively, if wealth, taken as luxury, were the target of egalitarianism, then one possible solution would be to revive the sumptuary laws of ancient republican cities. When people say, as they often do, that anything that makes society more equal is to be preferred, they do not commonly distinguish these two problems. It is possible, of course, to deny that *either* of these conditions does constitute a problem. There is no need to worry about the rich, and God has ordained the poor. The important point, however, is that egalitarianism is a project which takes both these conditions as problems. It may be animated by compassion for the poor, or hatred of the rich, or perhaps both together. And it will be obvious that the temper and reality of the egalitarian project will be very different according to which of these passions is in the ascendant.

What is evident is that compassion for the poor is, in our civilisation, the strongest persuasive card an egalitarian can play. It is compassion for the poor, rather than a possible hatred of the rich, which must be worn on the sleeve. But as Western societies have advanced in wealth, and welfare measures increasingly mitigated real poverty, the rhetorically convenient linkage between these two passions has come under threat.



Absolute poverty has been abolished. The link has, however, been ingeniously restored\* by the invention of 'relative' deprivation. This means that the rich and resourceful can make no real improvement in their circumstances without, by that improvement, casting everybody else back into poverty; and thus making imperative further legislative corrections in social life. The rich are, as it were, hobbled; the poor are always tagging along behind them, fully equipped with deprivation, underprivilege, disadvantage. The only solution to this problem would be to stop the rich in their tracks and stabilise society at some given level of technological provision. This was the Communist solution in the twentieth century. It has turned out to be a solution which could only work – if it could work at all – on condition that the rest of the world became equally static.

We may thus conclude that the incoherence of egalitarianism arises, at one level, from the fact that it has tried to yoke together two problems as if they were one single problem causally or morally connected. This linkage seemed plausible in the eighteenth and nineteenth century when the luxury of the few contrasted vividly with absolute poverty. But the increasing wealth of modern societies has made this linkage implausible. Even the development of the idea of relative deprivation as a way of keeping the two problems in harness seriously weakens the project. Absolute poverty makes an absolute claim upon us, relative poverty is much less pressing. Some people, for religious or ethical reasons, actively *choose* an austere life which rejects many of the common luxuries of modern life. The relatively deprived (but adequately fed and clothed) are creatures conceived of as even more emphatically passive and resourceless than the inert creatures assumed by the general theory of egalitarianism.

What is needed to keep egalitarianism in business, then, is some more general problem whose solution must be the mitigation of inequalities. A typical such *ad hoc* device is the view that inequalities (for example, of educational provision) are 'socially divisive'. The idea is that an Etonian and a graduate of some inner city comprehensive cannot really talk to each other,

\* See, most notably, W G Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: a Study of Attitudes to social inequality in twentieth century England*, Routledge, 1966.

get on, co-operate or jointly produce wealth. It is certainly true that most people prefer those from their own milieu, but when strangers are thrown together, their social relations depend upon a great variety of contingencies. Many people from the same educational milieu don't in fact get on with each other. Others – among Etonians, George Orwell and Harold Macmillan are obvious examples – make an appeal far beyond their own circle. The idea that an equalised system of institutions will bring about social harmony is a project typical of the social engineer, ever on the alert for some social mechanism which will transform our moral condition. The record of such projects is deeply uninspiring.

Yet though such projects must fail, the very attempt to engineer social institutions so as to create a social harmony tells us much. The educational egalitarian seeks to replace the present human variety, nurtured in part by the variety of types of school, by a non-divided society which would require from its members an easy, all-purpose sociability. The assumption that a single system of education creates harmony must rest upon the belief that different experience divides, similar experience unites. The moment one begins to think of the realities involved, the self-contradictory character of these egalitarian admirations becomes clear: on the one hand, the egalitarian claim to admire pluralism, with the argument that only equal wealth will bring all possibilities within the reach of all; on the other hand, real differences in ways of thought and life treated as undesirably 'divisive'. Henry Ford told his early customers they could have any colour motor car they liked, so long as it was black. Perhaps we should describe as 'Fordian pluralism' the rather similar egalitarian message: you can be as varied and pluralistic as you like, so long as you don't rock the egalitarian boat. At the heart of this project lies an ideal which could hardly be made explicit, because it is so remote from the desires of most people, and indeed from the awareness of many egalitarians themselves: a natural harmony of homogenised humans.

We are thus led towards the following conclusion: that inequality is a false problem which conceals shadowy aspirations riding piggyback upon the real problem of poverty. But in modern conditions, even that problem loses its capitivating moral simplicity, and becomes revealed as a spectrum of different



conditions, different forms of poverty. In the most obvious sense, poverty is the immemorial inheritance of mankind. Any attempt to explain 'the problem of poverty' thus starts out, doubly, on the wrong foot. The real problem is that of prosperity. And any concern with poverty itself turns into a collection of questions: how are *poverties* generated?

## The makings of poverty

The traditional answer to the question of poverty is that it was inherited from past inequalities, an answer which fitted well with the overarching narrative of modern Western politics as a march from the imperfections of the past towards the better society we are engaged in building. Sometimes this answer was made a little more sophisticated by the view that the transmission of poverties from one generation to the next was facilitated by certain systematic features. The poor were the victims of such things as the famous 'cycle of deprivation.' The view that the roots of inequality lay in the past made inherited wealth one of the major scandals of egalitarian argument. The lords of great historic estates were clearly the beneficiaries both of long forgotten circumstances and of a legal system of private property. As against this, however, the history of modern societies resembles snakes and ladders, with people rising and falling over the generations. The idea that unjust inheritance was the root cause of inequality, and that the problem could be solved by the expedient of expropriation is now, I think, universally recognised as one of the errors of egalitarianism. No one doubts that if we were (*per impossibile*) to redistribute the entire wealth of the kingdom on 1 January of some future year, everyone being given identical resources, the same pattern of inequality would soon reappear.

It is clear that the real answer to the question *how are poverties generated?* lies in what Adam Smith called the human propensity for truck, barter and exchange.\* Some, by work, prudence and luck, prosper; others fail. Even success and failure are, as we have already seen, unsatisfactory terms, for people are changing their options (e.g. varying choice between work and leisure). The character of modern society cannot be represented in the statistically melodramatic polarities of the egalitarian, but in a complex patchwork of ways of life which respond to the infinite variety of temperaments and circumstance found in the modern world. This produces a dynamic order;

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\* *The Wealth of Nations*, 1, 2.



new evaluations are always in play. It is the aim of the egalitarian to replace this dynamism with a fixed order, reminiscent in its static character of a traditional society, in which each person is guaranteed an immutable place. It is fair to say that people today are both attracted and repelled by the practicalities of this proposal. All of them have now left the tutelage of clientship and domestic life; virtually everybody has as it were 'joined' the economy, and offers services in the market. But to be an independent actor in the economy is for some people, and for many people in some respects, a burden. Some would exchange independence for security, and many have accepted the desirability of transferring (at a cost) the responsibility for old age, or medical exigency, to an administered system.

The inequalities of the past, then, were traditional; those of the present result from the economy, in which some grow rich, while others fail to prosper. It follows from this that the simple way to solve the problem of inequality is to abolish the economy, and replace it by a system of administration in which workers are directed to produce whatever the society is thought to need, with material goods and even perhaps spiritual goods such as esteem, distributed according to some criterion of need. This is what is proposed in communism and the more thoroughgoing forms of socialism. It is sometimes called a 'command economy' – but that is a misnomer. A social system which organised its material life in this way would hardly be an economy at all – except in the sense that the problem of scarcity would have to be faced at any level above the most primitive. Such a system might work with people of a certain character, but certainly not with the populations of the modern Western world. They would find it an intolerable tutelage.

In this sense, the problem of inequality is generated by human nature, and since human nature is against egalitarianism, egalitarians have turned against human nature. They stigmatise it as greedy, selfish and irrational. They dream of an ideal humanity which would be spontaneously communal, and attribute the deplorable behaviour of *homo twentiethcenturiensis* to the capitalist system, or the media, or the attitudes promoted by governments such as those of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. In taking this position, they illustrate once again a point we have already encountered: they assume that most human

beings are inert and characterless, easily led by the nose.

A modern economy, and a modern society, are thus distinguished by a competitiveness which leads to inequalities. What then must the egalitarian propose? How is an equal society to be created? The standard answer is that the State is to be brought in to redress the defects of society and the economy. Egalitarianism is, in practice, a continuous stream of proposals for legislative or administrative action which invoke the State's powers of compulsion in order to bring about some specific equalities. But this conception of social amelioration raises philosophical difficulties: a kind of virtue is being claimed for the government which is supposedly not found in the society over which it rules. How did these rulers come to be so virtuous?

One evasive response to this question will immediately suggest itself to the reader; it is that what we have to deal with is not a special kind of virtue, but a changing of the conditions such that a potential virtue of altruism can become actual. It is along these lines that Thomas Hobbes deals with the move from the state of nature into civil society; rational choice theorists explain in a similar way the escape from the prisoner's dilemma, in which it would be irrational for any single individual to make an altruistic move. But modern societies cannot usefully be compared to any such models. Philanthropic and charitable endeavours in fact exist in all modern societies, and the psychology of those who help their neighbours is affected only marginally by resentment of free riders. (In some moods, the selfish free rider merely makes the altruist feel the more virtuous.) Charitable endeavours seem in fact to be negatively related to the degree of governmental provision of welfare. It is less that governments are a special source of virtue than that they replaced what had previously been done privately, as the National Health Service in the 1980s is still using hospitals originally built through the charitable endeavours of earlier centuries.

The egalitarian argument, then, reverses the thesis of a famous book by the German theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Niebuhr meant that human beings are individually peaceful and orderly, but that as instruments of the policies of states, they fight wars and behave inhumanely. The egalitarian considers that in a modern society most people



are selfish and greedy, but that governments can act morally on their behalf by providing an equalising welfare. The question remains: from what marvellous spring does this unexpected source of virtue come? It is a question which brings us to the nub of the matter.

It is not government, but rather a collection of functionaries using the power of government which will move us towards a more equal society. These people include administrators, inspectors, social workers, teachers and all other people whose authority gives them an opportunity to engineer the attitudes and practices of their fellow citizens. It has also, perhaps most importantly of all in recent decades, included an activist judiciary extending social and economic rights in ways that impose heavy burdens on the public purse without the difficulty of having to justify the new measures to an electorate. And the significant thing is that these people will not at all be the equals of those whose attitudes and practices they are engineering. They will be employing the superiorities of pedagogy, or of the authority conferred upon them by sovereign legislation. In the broadest sense, egalitarianism may be seen as a doctrine which serves to advance the interests of a specific class of modern intellectual functionary. It is but one of the paradoxes of the situation of such people that egalitarianism is a doctrine by which members of élite groups may be enabled to conceive of themselves as morally superior to the capitalist society in which they find themselves embedded, the character of which they, *qua* egalitarians, seek to transform out of recognition.

It isn't true, of course, that all social administrators wish to be involved in the egalitarian project. The social worker dealing with child abuse, the social security officer concerned with the unemployed, and their like, deal with specific problems which, from time to time, governments have decided to address. These measures must be judged on their own terms. But they may also be seen, and are seen by many such people, as part of the egalitarian project. Indeed, the welfare state as a whole may be seen either as part of that project, or in a non-egalitarian fashion as a way of dealing with specific needs. There may be many reasons why the rich should pay disproportionately for public services, but it is dangerously plausible to interpret progressive taxation as a first step on the road to equal

distribution of wealth. Once such an idea becomes current, further egalitarian measures begin to have the attraction of merely extending an existing policy. It is in the reasons accepted for policies that we shall find their inner tendency of development.

What is certainly true is that measures which might be construed as egalitarian are part of the air we breathe. The state is forever legislating to impose on individuals and institutions requirements to employ, remunerate or admit people according to some principle thought to mitigate one disadvantage or another. Yet legislation cannot be a satisfactory instrument of this purpose because it must be couched in abstract terms. As it operates in the world, it generates anomalies which themselves require further adjustment. There is only, in fact, one ultimate solution to the problem of inequality as egalitarians conceive of it: this would be to empower a set of expert equalisers to make whatever adjustments may be required from time to time, if necessary, even on an individual basis. Such an élite would need to be liberated from the anomaly-creating limitations of the law. Marxist theory is, of course, an exploration of this radical, and logical, outcome of egalitarianism. In the Western political tradition, it is more commonly called despotism.



## The costs of equality

When proposals are made in any committee, the proposer is required to itemise their 'resource implications'. What are the costs of the proposal? In liberal democratic politics, there are usually opposition parties only too eager to spell these out. In less fortunate parts of the world, whole populations have become bewitched by ideals – that of liberation, for example – and found themselves paying the costs without enjoying the benefits. Ideals do have costs, and in politics it's often the idealist who gets the pleasure, and the people at large who get the pain.

It is thus not the least of the objections to be brought against egalitarianism that the ideal of equality has been almost exclusively discussed as an ideal, with no price ticket in sight. This gleaming thing is commended by contrast with the shabby interests and confused aspirations of the real world. An equal society is, for many, a heart warming thing, and no less heart warming as a rule, is the egalitarian contemplating his own virtue as the vehicle of such a moral universal. It is thus considered argumentative bad form of the worst sort when discussing equality to invoke communism, and above all the totalitarian horrors which have resulted when enthusiastic egalitarians have taken the ideal with full seriousness. It would be absurd, of course, to suggest that contemporary egalitarians in Europe or America would dramatically sacrifice liberty and human life in so reckless a way. Nevertheless, given the paucity of experimentation in the social world, it does seem reckless to avert our eyes from experiences from which we might learn much, even if what we learn might seem negative and unpalatable. It simply will not do to retreat into the psychological bastion of the idealist – the realm of good intentions. It will not do to say: *That is not what I meant. That is not it at all.* And then to return, somewhat peevishly, to the minutiae of the ideal.

The point of my whole argument is, then, to issue a challenge, and to propose a rule. The challenge to egalitarians is to spell out, in any proposal toward their ends, the costs and benefits it would involve. And the rule is that egalitarianism should cease to be the amiable, self-congratulatory posture it

often is at present, and become a set of specific proposals, costs attached, for specific forms of action. My guess is that good reasons for any serious political proposal will always be found in quite other considerations – the straightforward relief of poverty, for example – and that egalitarianism will wither on the vine. But what may not wither so quickly is the egalitarian sensibility, for reasons we shall come to.

This is clearly not a proposal which could be directed at political philosophers, for some of whom a principle of equality as an outcome is the core of justice. Philosophers of this kind, however, are in an equivocal position. As philosophical inquirers, they must clarify the principles which our current practices presuppose. They are concerned simply with a moral principle, and a moral principle is in practical affairs merely one reason for action, and not necessarily the decisive one. On the other hand, the pronouncements of philosophers as various as Aristotle and John Rawls are at times invoked in support of one egalitarian policy or another. No such philosophical authority should be allowed to exempt an egalitarian proposer from specifying what would be the costs of a proposal, and, no less significant, who would benefit in terms of funds, career opportunities and so on. And here I am not of course referring to the poor who most explicitly benefit from any such proposal. As the justificatory core of the proposal they will have been prominently specified from the beginning. My concern is rather with the opportunities opening up for members of commissions, inspectors, the personnel of tribunals, administrators and other such operators of an egalitarian system. Encouraged by such an attention to costs, we shall further be able to estimate for ourselves the moral costs in terms of, for example, freedom lost; for egalitarian proposals necessarily subject this or that part of the community to new regulatory powers, or extend powers already exercised. And it is important that this should be done objectively, without assuming, for example, the benevolence of experts or the disinterested efficiency of professionals. When people start talking of professions as 'caring', it is time to count the spoons.

There is a further kind of cost which ought not to be ignored. It is that of moral atrophy. In the middle ages, some theologians took the view that God had ordained the poor in



## The real meaning of egalitarianism

Complete equality is impossible even to conceive, but we can specify its cost without hesitation: despotism. And since the equalisers would have to constitute a ruling class with total power over its citizens, egalitarianism as a universal principle is self-refuting. It brings about something worse than what it notionally proposes to abolish: a caste-divided society.

But any such complete equality, it will be said, is a preposterous straw man which nobody proposes. Nobody – except of course the Bolsheviks and their imitators. But we may conclude by making certain comments about the content of egalitarianism which will lay its meaning bare.

It is well known that there are two forms of equality: that of process and that of outcome. The French revolutionaries who first put equality on the map as a viable political ideal believed in the career open to talent. Opportunities were not to be impeded by irrational rules about birth or status. The removal of these inequalities, however, simply opened the door to inequalities of achievement. This kind of equality turned into that unequal thing, a meritocracy. Equality of outcome on the other hand could be guaranteed (if at all) only by unequal treatment at an earlier stage. Inequalities between different races, or between men and women, could be remedied only by 'affirmative' action, which is a euphemism for unequal treatment. The paradox is that egalitarianism must involve unequal treatment of some citizens, whichever option we choose. Either the race starts from an equal point and ends with some winners and some losers; or everyone will end at the same point, but only by way of handicapping some and helping others.

This is not the only way in which the ideal of equality is actually incoherent. It also sets no limits to the respects in which people might be equalised. In the past, it was enough to concentrate on food and material conditions, but why stop there? People differ in innumerable ways on which their happiness may depend. Some get more attention than others, for example. The common egalitarian response to this point is the familiar retreat of the idealist to the bastion of his own intentions. Surely,

order to give us the opportunity of exercising the virtue of charity. This is hardly a view which in its full amplitude would commend itself to us today. Nonetheless, the British are particularly notable among European nations in having inherited a tradition of mutual neighbourly response to the troubles of others. It has during the twentieth century been eroded by governmental provision. The professionalisation of these services, and their financing by taxation rather than voluntary contribution, has encouraged an indifference among people only recently showing signs of reversing itself. It is a clear sign of the present bureaucratic provision of welfare as if it were just as valuable spiritually as a voluntary concern with the poor\*.

\* The really spectacular theological corruption happens when clergymen begin diagnosing something called 'ego' as the vice peculiar to chosen charitable activity.



he replies, this is a straw man, an attempt to rule equality out of court by choosing absurd and unrealistic examples. But there are many formulae – such as Ronald Dworkin's equality of concern and respect\* – which open the way to unlimited attempts to equalise the human condition. Those who think this point overdrawn might consider, for example, the sinister feminist concern with statistics purporting to show that in the workplace, men spend more time talking and less time listening than women, and that teachers in mixed classes give more attention to boys than girls. It would recklessly underestimate the lunacy of the world lightly to discard the possibility that no one will think of establishing a conversational inspectorate for the workplace to even things up. Doubters might further consider Mr Tony Benn's complaint, made to a constituency organisation, that although we have the right to free speech, we do not have the right to be listened to. A charter for bores is clearly on the cards? \*\*

Equality is thus an absurd ideal. Its only real place is in mathematics. In the human world, nothing is equal to anything else. The equal shares given to two children always mean something different to each. In this sense, egalitarianism is a misunderstanding of the character of human life itself. But the misunderstandings of entrenched and sophisticated political doctrines are never mere mistakes; they reveal that something more is at stake. And it seems clear that egalitarianism does not aim at equalising winners and losers in the race of life so much as protest against the very idea that life can be construed as a race. Its concern is with the abolition of that self-conscious individuality whose natural movement of attention is

comparison, advantageous and otherwise, with others. The real egalitarian dream is not to equalise, but to create a world in which there will be no individuals who might even concern themselves with equality. In such a society, human beings would be genuinely social, and find their true fulfilment in being indistinguishable parts of the one homogeneous society. Just such a vision as this agitated the young Marx and many others in his and later generations. But it could hardly be a political programme because it frustrates some of the deepest aspirations of the only people – Europeans – among whom this remarkable project has ever surfaced. The vision has found its outlet, then, in the nearest plausible rhetoric, which is the slogan of equality in relation to the social question. The mismatch between the available rhetoric and the deeper vision is, then, the reason why the ideal of equality can thrive only in the abstractions of philosophy, and why it begins to generate paradox and absurdity, if not worse, the moment it comes into contact with any sort of reality.

\* Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*, Duckworth, 1984, p. 180 ff.

\*\* History is a fully ingenious proposal for equalisation: Thus Antony Flew (*The Politics of Procrustes*, M T Smith, 1981, p.102.) cites the satirical proposal of Aristophanes, after a sexual revolution, that the handsome will have to give sexual satisfaction to the ugly before being allowed the favours of the beautiful who attract them. He also cites Nozick's alarming suggestion of what must happen in an egalitarian society in which half the population has two normal eyes, half have empty eye sockets, and the technology of eye transplants has been mastered. These examples no doubt exemplify the fanciful, but our century has taught us to take the fanciful very seriously. The fanciful of one generation may become the radicalism of the next.

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