

The passion for equality may  
have more to do with envy than  
with justice

# The Paradoxes and Psychology of Egalitarianism

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**T**he force behind the egalitarian impulse to create a society of equals is a basic human desire for justice, "for a temporal order of things that 'makes sense.'" So Irving Kristol said in a recent essay. He is, of course, right. However, this is where the true problem, the puzzle, begins. For our ingrained sense of justice produces identical "gut reactions," such as feelings of indignation, in regard to very different, indeed sometimes even diametrically opposed, alternatives.

For instance, in a discussion with young Germans aspiring to the "Peace Corps"—certainly young people burning with a sense of and for social justice—I have confounded them totally by the following hypothetical case. Imagine a region with only one medical doctor on duty and in residence. His normal annual income from his profession is  $x$  dollars. A disaster or an epidemic strikes the region, maybe an island. That doctor is now working in the following four weeks as much as he normally works in a whole year to save and heal as many as he possibly can. Let us assume that the inhabitants of the region are sufficiently well off to pay for their medical services privately, or that a huge disaster-relief allocation is made either by the national government or a relief organization which could also pay for medical services on a grand scale. Now the question: According to *your* sense of justice, which is fairer or more just, more equitable? To say the doctor fulfilled only his basic human or civic duty and should, because of the disaster, earn no more than he normally does in four weeks? *or* that he should be paid for all services actually rendered, thus increasing his income for that period by ten or twentyfold? To date, all audiences—including mature theologians, students and people from various walks of life—had to admit in the end that their sense of justice reacts with equal force

whether they contemplate compensating the doctor only as usual or at extraordinary rates.

It is easy to see why our sense of justice does not offer certain guidance in that case. We have analogous cases in wartime. Should a scientist who, while the war is on, perfects the invention that literally saves his nation from defeat be treated as any other soldier who did his precise duty, or should he be rewarded royally? It is interesting to note that after World War II it was the Anglo-American democracies, with their already high-pitched egalitarianism, that rewarded a few such inventors handsomely and conspicuously.

This shows, it seems to me, that the New Left and the Old Left are wrong if they think that there is a universal and basic human sense of justice which suggests that each person should contribute to the commonweal, to the public good, what he is best able to contribute and what he knows to be demanded of him in the compelling interest of society and receive exactly the same reward as others.

My hypothetical case, which could have its parallel almost any moment anywhere, also points to a question which is sometimes blurred: Is it mostly the incentive for outstanding contribution that interests us or the question of just rewards for services which would have been rendered in any case without certain knowledge of a commensurate reward?

Neither the medical doctor after the disaster nor the physicist during a war is doing his utmost in the shortest possible time in order to gain a huge reward. Actually, both may be exerting themselves for the reasons the egalitarian (who, in that case, can also be a right-wing patriot) assumes to operate in nearly all humans with sufficient force that we could dispense with unequal rewards. Yet in most cultures at most times in history—ironically even in those which are otherwise dedicated to socialist egalitarianism—the dramatically outstanding, disaster-averting accomplishment is generously and invidiously re-

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warded and, where applicable, the reward is usually tax-exempt.

The same treatment by the tax laws, and presumably by public opinion, is granted to those who do not exert themselves, whose "accomplishments" are exactly opposite, i.e., those who win jackpots in lotteries, football pools and the like. In other words, whether an individual has consciously and diligently exerted himself in an especially meritorious professional feat or has merely scored well in a random occurrence, the institutionalized voices of *vox populi*, i.e., of public envy (as Francis Bacon defined it in distinction from private envy), remain mute. These two extreme cases receive equal treatment. Yet in the cases of individual advantage that lie between those two poles, the so-called sense of justice is allowed, by the same institutions, to swoop down upon the unequal individual and cut him down to size again, usually by tax laws or other devices. However, if the situation prevailing at the two extreme poles is compatible with the sense of justice, logically and evidently that sense of justice cannot be invoked for the punitive treatment of all the cases in between.

Now it is often said that it is not so much the unequal rewards that are odious to contemporary man but the arbitrary judgments on which they rest. In educational policy, for instance, there are those who maintain that the differential schooling according to measured intelligence or academic qualifications might be tolerable if the measuring devices, e.g., school grades, tests and the like, were not so arbitrary. To be subject to human error, to human bias, to poor judgment when it comes to the rewarding of our performance is considered too much of a strain on our sense of justice.

Yet it can easily be demonstrated that many humans are willing, indeed eager, to stake the reward for their one and only and utmost attempt at achievement on arbitrary as well as error-free scientific measurement and to do so in situations where the reward and acclaim are identical, whether they are accorded by scientific measurement or human esthetic judgment. I have in mind events like the Olympic games or similar international or national athletic events. There individuals (or, for that matter, nations) compete for the highest award both in disciplines where the winner can be objectively determined by ever more refined and unassailable measurement of time or distance *and* in disciplines where the award goes to the winner purely on the basis of points obtained by adding and dividing a series of human individual esthetic judgments which have to be arrived at in a snap and usually under circumstances that are likely to arouse all sorts of prejudices. For example, judging the winner of the 100-yard dash or the pole-vaulting event is easier and more objective than judging the winner of the diving events.

The egalitarian scheme is an attempt to solve the dilemma of the unknowable perfect social order. If

## *perhaps the notion of public interest is misleading from the start*

it can be shown that a rational and stable relationship between merit and reward cannot be obtained by any method, the only answer that might be emotionally satisfying and seemingly rational is to insist on equality of conditions. For what that would require seems within reach of our conventional methods of *knowing*.

Thus, some egalitarian conceivably might concede that he would accept unequal rewards if by some method—perhaps a gigantic computer into which data from each individual were fed—it were possible to make a perfect match between the merit of contribution and magnitude of reward. It is only because of the impossibility of obtaining such a match at present or in the near future—so he might allow—that he prefers the simpler way to justice, namely, the equal distribution of rewards regardless of subjectively felt merits. The trouble for egalitarians, however, is that most people do not accept the prescription of the egalitarian. They do not consider it just if all people, regardless of their individual variations, live about equally well or badly. A favorite, and again increasingly used, strategy of the egalitarian is to expose with more or less reliable statistics that only  $x$  per cent of the population owns, say,  $y$  per cent of all stock or real estate. Well, then, since most men would agree that life is a more important and even less reproducible good than financial resources, wouldn't it be an appallingly unjust society in which only a tiny minority of all living individuals reach the age bracket of eighty and up? We might make this case even more invidious by finding out the percentage of a population eighty years or older who *enjoy* their life in reasonable health.

Among many primitive tribal peoples the very old and the very young suspect one another of deep and destructive envies for just that reason. Whoever is old and living well is thought to have stolen life from a younger person, either one who has died mysteriously or one who, though now well, will live a shorter time because the old person has used up a part of his life-span by magic. Aside from complaints about unequal health care for different social strata and its consequences for life-

spans, we seem to have at the moment little public awareness of the injustice involved in different life-spans. Stripped of all emotional evasions and moralizing, whoever finds it intolerable that only 5 per cent of a population inherits 35 per cent, or whatever, of all inheritable real estate in the nation has no valid argument left against another reformer who wants all men put to death humanely who live beyond the statistical life expectancy of the moment. To his admonition "You should not kill," the logical reply is "You should not steal." For stealing is exactly what egalitarians would be doing if they put their fiscal policies into effect.

The absurdity of the egalitarian position is hidden from view because they usually pick as targets values that can be easily redistributed, even though they are much lower on an absolute or conventional rank-order of values.

When pressed for an ethical decision on his own terms, the egalitarian must and usually will admit that any difference ("inequality") independent of financial resources is as unjust, as repugnant to his sense of justice as the difference which can be derived, correctly or incorrectly, from unequal access to monetary resources, either by inheritance or individual productivity and/or creativity. He will admit that some individuals probably gain vastly greater, or at any rate significantly different, satisfactions from their good health than others who are less well endowed by nature or who have willfully ruined by bad habits the good health they once had. And yet the egalitarian, lest he could be dismissed as a utopian, will usually insist that it is not his business to redistribute those attributes or characteristics of men but only those which can be rearranged easily by such administrative measures as progressive taxation or the confiscation of real estate. He should not, however, be permitted to get away with that position so easily. On his own premise—the ideal of equality—he cannot single out for expediency's sake alone those attributes of individuals which can be, or so he thinks, redistributed.

Moreover, the very act of redistribution of tangible values such as financial resources or land will inevitably enhance the intrinsic value of other values not amenable to redistribution. If, to put it bluntly, ugly men can no longer at least get rich, physical appearance will become even more an obsession than it normally is for some men. Thus the hope and promise of the egalitarian, that he has a mandate as well as a realistic chance to diminish the sum of sorrow among men—stemming, as he claims, from the inequitable distribution of goods—are progressively and inevitably eroded as he limits the number of areas and characteristics in which individuals can be different from each other. A number of writers, using fiction or nonfiction to make their point, have called attention to that fact of human existence. And the ordinary person is likely to understand it and more

or less accept it. What is dismaying is the arrogance with which egalitarians continue to dismiss that fact and, worse still, succeed in convincing those in power that social policies and laws are proper and efficient instruments to carry out the egalitarian mandate.

Irving Kristol very astutely suspected that the accelerating pace of the egalitarian passion is also due to the increasing elusiveness of the "common good" in modern society. He recalled Aristotle's definition of a just and legitimate society, namely, one where the citizens perceive the inequalities (or should we not say with Peter T. Bauer, the *differences*?) between them as necessary for the common good. Kristol then goes on to illuminate the elusive nature of the common good. I agree that there is no consensus on this, and the less consensus there is the less it is possible to explain such differences as income in relation to it. Perhaps the notion of public interest or common good is misleading from the start, at any rate in societies with many millions of people.

I think we should try to undercut the impact of the egalitarian impulse by using the very "pathological" features of our age and our societies. Precisely because we live in fragmented, hedonistic, egotistic, sometimes familistic (in the sense of Edward Banfield's concept of immoral familism), individualistic times, we should acknowledge that there is a multitude of partial "common goods" which are shared by citizens in some circumstances but not in others. Let me explain. A few months ago a New Left, somewhat Maoist-inclined German professor of sociology argued in a televised discussion with me for a future just society in which a top surgeon or jet pilot would earn the same wage as a bus driver. He claimed he would feel as secure in the hands of a pilot or surgeon on par with the bus driver as in the hands of one who is highly paid.

I admit that the job of the jet pilot might attract suitable talent even when paid in egalitarian fashion, because the jet pilot can go to bed with pretty girls in good hotels on all continents whereas the bus driver cannot. Still, I think our flying public would not be satisfied with jet pilots at bus drivers' pay even if the pilots were satisfied with the pretty girls.

The average voter might have to put his life or fortune into the hands of a top physician, an appellate judge, a pilot, an architect, a lawyer, an accountant or what have you only rarely or once in a lifetime, but the sum of all users of the services of any one of those professions constitutes a common category of people for whom a common good can be construed. It can be demonstrated that to such partial and potential, essentially "private," publics the size of the reward in those professions does bear on the quality, the self-assurance, the endurance of the service they are likely to get.

Others have probably considered that problem, but it should be pursued: One can observe overall

# ***egalitarian society would require repressive and oppressive forces and structures***

differences in a free society (and in several non-free societies as well). To what extent can they be legitimized by a theory of many partial "common goods" (or public interests), some of which may be mutually exclusive, some of which may allow themselves to be integrated into more comprehensive segments of "common goods"?

Egalitarians everywhere label their critics conservatives. This is misleading because no society would have to rely more on repressive and oppressive "conserving" forces and structures than a society envisioned by the egalitarian. To assure the near equality of conditions would require an enormous and intricate state apparatus, and it would hem in each individual throughout his life. The only societies which have managed reasonably well to remain a society of equals, at least in many respects, are small communities with an agrarian base and an intense social or religiously held social ideology. In every respect they are extremely conservative, anxiously and forever attached to the tenets of their founders.

In any event, no egalitarian could deny that his ideal and final social system must be a thoroughly stable one. Each instability would allow inequality to reemerge. For that reason alone one can validly ask the egalitarian why everything that tends to stabilize a society of reasonably happy unequals should be so reprehensible. The egalitarian derives his mandate from a populist assumption, that one man's knowledge and opinion is as good as the next man's. If he believes this, it follows that he has no right to question how each man got his opinion. Yet egalitarians invariably are unhappy with what they find as the average man's opinion and feelings, and challenge them continuously as being wrong. Thus W. G. Runciman, taught by opinion-research that there simply is not enough cupidity and envy among Britons to fire his extreme egalitarian schemes, deplores that there is not enough envy in the population extant to press toward the kind of equality he wants.

Whoever mentions envy at all from a nonegalitarian position or, worse still, refers to that emotion when questioning the validity of the egalitarian position finds himself reproved, even by basically friendly critics, for obviously wanting some vaguely identified "poor people" to go without their *rightful* share. He may even find himself

accused of denying those underprivileged people a *decent* share.

It has been an illuminating experience for me, the author of a book on envy, to see how uncomfortable some people become when confronted with that book. For instance, Monsieur X, a wealthy French writer, has been giving copies of my book to acquaintances and to the directors and actors who have been putting on his plays. Yet he still thinks, and these are his words, that I should have prefaced the book with an explicit statement that my policy-recommendations do not imply or entail that I condone child labor. Some of his friends to whom he has given my book have said the same thing, so he tells me. Why this reference to child labor? It turns out that Monsieur X had a traumatic childhood experience similar to the one of Woodrow Wyatt described in my book.

As a child, son of a wealthy family, he was led one day by the coachman of his grandparents to a cemetery and there was shown a number of graves of children. The coachman explained to him: "They were in the employ of your ancestors. They died young because of them." To that shock my friend traces the motives which led him into the Communist Party as a young man. But when I started to console him, reporting on some of the doubts that non-left historians have raised about the true nature of child labor in the nineteenth century (for instance, the study by Hutt in *Capitalism and the Historians*, edited by F. A. Hayek) an even more interesting reaction occurred. My friend cried out: "Don't deprive me of the tears of my childhood!"

From numerous letters in response to my book on envy I have gathered that no matter how well disposed rationally and politically a person may be to what I have shown, there must be many people who have had traumatic experiences of shame, remorse, guilt or mortifying feelings because of some, as they thought, *undeserved* advantage, usually at the expense of someone else. Their gain was someone else's loss. But why should those very people react with discomfort at reading a theory that might actually lessen their sense of guilt? Why do they often seem to view it as a threat to their existence? And why, out of that state of feelings, turn in anger against the author of the theory and denounce him as heartless, callous and wicked?

To put it briefly, whatever seems to bolster the

case of the egalitarian (and/or the Marxist theory of exploitation) tends to become, in all its ambivalence, an integral and perhaps even treasured part of personalities who, rationally, should welcome any doubt that can be cast upon the egalitarian case. Why?

Though it is probably involved, to label the phenomenon simply masochism or a longing for self-destruction is not enough. Let me try two hypotheses. (1) To believe that one owes his own good position vis-à-vis another not to chance, luck or random occurrences but to a cunning (even exploitative, reprehensible, conspiratorial) strategy might make that position appear more secure. In other words, the lucky person unconsciously is *less* afraid that his or his family's or his group's luck will ever run out if he can believe a Machiavellian, even brutal, theory of achievement, even if it entails a self-image of unjust exploitativeness.

Somewhat related is the second hypothesis. It takes off from the general phenomenon of superstition as comprehensively reported and analyzed in my book on envy. I would argue like this: If I let myself be tempted to believe a *nonegalitarian* social theory, thus becoming less generous to mankind in the abstract or to vaguely targeted poor people, I *sin* against a religious and/or ethical commandment, and that sin will bring down on me the wrath of a god or demon who avenges all those who are less well off than I. Perhaps the fear of such a god or force is deeply ingrained in us because we all have memories, usually well repressed, of a father reproving one of his children for having inconsiderately disregarded the welfare of one of his sisters or brothers. As far as I can ascertain, there is a universal superstitious, though sometimes probably self-fulfilling, belief in the existence of an omniscient, ubiquitous supernatural tribunal which can instantly (or later on) punish anyone who harbors any sign of the hubris involved in daring to think that one is so remarkable that his luck will hold forever. And this notion, it seems to me, is one reason why holding or accepting a nonegalitarian view of human affairs is so uncomfortable, at least in an age when egalitarian propaganda has forced ever more people into believing that all individuals really are identical at birth.

Nevertheless, a state of affairs, a condition of the world which would render the egalitarian ideology superfluous would never result naturally from either volitional or nonhuman random developments. Both the processes independent of man and the processes willed by man lead constantly to differentiations on numerous ontological levels. This in turn leads to innumerable different chances for countless individuals. What the egalitarian passion would require for its final assuagement is an eventual universal entropy of all processes that can entail or release differential opportunities. The conditions of the real world desired by the egalitarians can be obtained—even in theory, let alone in practice—only by continuous and all-inclusive social engineering. To this end, the egalitarian wants his as yet unconvinced or unagitated audience to become worried, irritated, depressed, guilt-ridden, uneasy at the sight of conditions which he singles out for pity and concern. Why should it therefore be inadmissible to scrutinize and weigh the motives, the emotions, of the egalitarian and his audience?

To be comfortable or to be reconciled with a nonegalitarian theory of human affairs requires, at least under present-day conditions, the inner strength to face the universe throughout as a random process, or, better, as the result of countless random events. For no matter how firmly and skillfully a man knows he can hold the reins to his luck's horses, he has no influence on the state of the road ahead. Risks and hazards remain. The more he counts on his skill and endurance the less he has to fear the uncontrollable factors. But if, for the peace of his mind, he overrates his personal contribution, he will be less inclined to view the fate of his fellowmen as determined by random occurrences. And if many of them seem to be putting in a great effort without much success, he is thrown into doubt about the causes of his own achievements. To regain his sense of security and his confidence in his future, he acquires a paradoxical taste for theories which explain his success neither on the basis of his own performance nor on true random processes but rather on the basis of a Machiavellian system, a strategy of exploitation and handicapping of others. Apparently most men prefer a sense of security to a very favorable self-image, the image of blamelessness.