

FABIAN

S O C I E T Y

YOUNG FABIAN PAMPHLET 52

Is Equality Dead?



*by Michael Newton and
Sean Hall*

*with an
introduction by Bernard Crick*

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This pamphlet, like all publications of the Fabian Society, represents not the collective views of the Society but only the views of the authors. The responsibility of the Society is limited to approving its publications as worthy of consideration within the Labour movement.

Design: Tony Garrett
November 1992

ISBN 0 7163 2052 5
ISSN 0307 7523

Printed by The College Hill Press Limited (TU), London and Worthing

Published by the Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth St, London SW1H 9BN

Well, is equality dead?

Bernard Crick

Of course equality is dead, if by that we mean a campaigning slogan. Indeed to demand, even if one could define, equality would not win votes.

But was it ever used that way? Did it ever win a single vote? I doubt. Certainly not on its own. I heard Aneurin Bevan in full cry on public platforms several times. Words like 'welfare', 'common citizenship', 'fair shares' and, indeed, 'classless society'; but I can't remember 'equality' as such, either naked or clothed. I suspect that it was part of the basic language that socialists used among themselves, whether or not under the old delusion that we were also speaking to the public. And as a goal it is fiendishly difficult to define, whether philosophically, sociologically or in terms of popularisable policy. But as an animating value, I believe it is far from dead. Despite all the difficulties of the concept, people have only to deny its relevance vehemently (especially in an upper class accent) to reanimate me to its defence. If we accepted it as a moral value, it would have, all economic arguments aside, revolutionary consequences for social order. If it has been buried, it has been buried alive and should be disinterred without delay.

As in after the revolution, however, the judge now ends up in the dock. Asked to be one of four judges in the Young Fabian Essay competition, I was told (after a few un-Shavian drinks at the award ceremony) that I had agreed to write not merely an introduction to the two winning essays but an essay on what I think about it all. I have always hated examining, someone always gets hurt; so now the examiner. Certainly examining has nothing to do with equality; on the contrary, it seeks for the best or to create a full-blown hierarchy according to the conventional rules of a competition.

Orwell once remarked, a propos Professor Hayek, that the trouble with competitions is that someone has to win them. Fortunately social life is not just one big competition. I am sure that Professor Hayek or even Professor Scruton have enjoyed some domestic tranquility or non-competitive relationships; at least I hope they have, for I bear them no ill-will as human beings entitled to an equality of respect simply because they are human, though not to an equality of praise unless what they have said merits it.

Let me stress that these are essays not monographs or blue-prints for

policy. Michael Newton puts this very well:

‘An essay bears the same relationship to ‘Truth’ as our unequal personalities bear to our equal natures. An essay survives in a world of appearances, and it is not Holy Writ. An essay describes and enacts the process of our thoughts. It is a trial of our intellect, a casual reaching towards an idea, and never the expression of the idea itself.’

I only quibble that ‘casual’ is too casual a word, or if an irony against all those who have the answer to the social question, then the irony may be lost on Fabian folk more serious than myself. ‘Speculative’ is the better word. Essays raise possibilities and try to force us or entice us to open-up and think openly. Sean Hall begins with the proper complaint that:

‘The Labour Party in Britain has traditionally placed action above contemplation, practice above theory... (This) has led to a neglect of the theoretical support without which political practice is either muddled or confined to pragmatic drift... It has meant that socialist values have been either ill-defined or not defined at all. What is required, then, is an awakening of our curiosity in theory. For a better theory can make a better practice.’

That is a fine statement, and speaks for most of the essays the four judges read; the short-list seemed to enjoy thinking it out for themselves, apart from a few heavies who regurgitated the academic literature on equality. Somehow the question as set incited a revolt of the young, theorising furiously against the old Fabian tradition of empiricism; but again I would quibble mildly and wish that Sean Hall had written the plural ‘theories’ rather than singular ‘theory’.

Marxism became too rigid by believing either that there had been one true theory, that popularisation and compromise had withered away, or that ‘the method’ if pursued resolutely with blinkered intelligence would on some great day yield a definitive ‘Marxism for our times’. It became very introverted, narcissistic indeed. Ernest Gellner some years ago mocked those who solemnly said, for instance, that ‘nationalism poses a problem for Marxist theory’. It happens to pose a problem for the world.

What about socialism?

Before we can get near a theory of democratic socialism, we need to recover the habit of thinking deeply, which actually means thinking simply; not making or accepting complicated or conventional assumptions, but asking what the very preconception of an activity is. Anyone trained in a tradition of thought can write, if they care, a Ph.D.; but few have the Rousseauistic innocence or audacity to question and illuminate basic assumptions. That is why I find Michael Newton’s essay so unusual and so impressive, although I fear that some Fabians will ask, ‘what has this got to do with the Labour Party or socialism; what does he stand for?’

Let me try to answer as I see it. He is saying that equality is rooted in

human nature, 'the world of being..., all that is internal, private, and incommunicable' (again I would prefer, I can be a terrible pedant, 'incommensurable' to 'incommunicable'); but the world of human affairs is very different, it is inherently unequal. We see ourselves as equal but all practical activities as rooted in or resulting in inequality. If anyone doubts this bleak assumption just suppose, imaginatively, that a benign iron regime imposed an exactly equal distribution of property and income; to keep it that way, it would then have to legislate against any scope for the exercise of talent, greed or covetousness - trading of any kind, buying or selling personal possessions, allotments, swapping even; and luck as well as lotteries would have to be abolished. Well, what is all this abstract nonsense? Whoever believed in equality of result anyway, or even (the more awkward consideration for the Fabian tradition) that equality of opportunity would not soon create a new class system? So it is as well to throw the chimera of literal equality out of the window before, as I think we should, we try to reinstate equality as dominant value.

Equal worth

For equality must be rooted in how we treat each other as persons, in whether we genuinely see all others as equals, as of equal worth. Common humanity is not so much what we have in common with each other in some physical, anthropological or sociological sense, but how we recognise morally others, strangers especially, to be equally human. What creates social bonding at all among totally unique individuals is precisely a mutual recognition of common humanity. I do not believe that market liberals and old Tories find it at all easy to recognise others as truly equal (except occasionally as Anglican souls); they see the exercise of individual talents as creating differential worth; and material or social success is good evidence of worth. It is so easy to fall into that trap. Some democratic socialists fell into it: the good old doing good for others, the less worthy. 'We are all here on earth to help each other', said Auden, 'but what the others are here for, god only knows'. We can only diminish unjustifiable inequalities in the real world if (a) we stop pursuing chimeras and (b) are as solid as a rock about human equality. If equality as a goal is unreachable, a receding horizon at best, equality as a value or a standard of conduct could and should govern most aspects of our lives.

Thinking about human nature in a manner that might be familiar to any who have read, easily enough, Michael Ignatieff's *The Needs of Strangers*, or wrestled manfully with Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, Michael Newton helps finally to settle my conviction that any democratic socialism must be built on a moral perception of human equality, rather than on economic arguments. Both are needed but the horse must go in front of the cart. Arendt had argued that *laissez faire* liberalism and Marxism grew up together, like quarreling siblings, sharing a gross exaggeration of the degree to which economic structures necessarily shape and dominate human

behaviour. Human actions are not economically determined; we can exercise more freedom than we have often supposed. The economy limits, conditions or enables but it does not determine our actions. As Karl Popper argued, social laws are conditional not causal; generalisations about society have different degrees of probability, none are necessarily and universally true.

An important conclusion must follow from this: that if there is the care and the will, markets can be civilised by the culture in which they operate, by laws, even by the care and compassion that individuals have for each other. Orwell was mocked by Marxists for drawing commonsense distinctions between 'the decent employer' and 'the remote and uncaring boss'; even for using terms like 'decency' and 'fairness' so often (so casually?). But they are the popular moral perceptions to which, I think, Mr Newton wants us to stay close.

The foundation cannot be neglected. Everything we might wish to achieve must be built on the moral conviction that all men and women are equally worthy. There is no incompatibility between liberty and equality here, indeed they are simply the two dimensions of basic humanity: the liberty that follows from the uniqueness of individuals but also the equality of recognition and respect that creates sociability. Arendt put it this way: there is nothing in the world more like one human being than another, but also nothing more different. But when we move into the world of institutions and interests, away from the individual to social questions, then obviously equality and liberty are in perpetual tension and can find a temporary equilibrium at many different levels; but they can never extinguish the other utterly without destroying our basic humanity as well. Complete equality of result would need complete coercion and unrestrained market liberty (the fantasy that 'there is no society') destroys other human beings. But we need to build beyond this, obviously; some criteria for social policy are needed.

Justifiable inequalities

Sean Hall sees that 'the ancient issue of justice is at the heart of the whole debate' and he seizes on the relevance of John Rawls' monumental *A Theory of Justice* (1970). Literal equality is not to be had and neither would it be prudent nor just to attempt such an enterprise; but it is quite clear that some forms of inequality are unjustifiable. Rawls concludes that all inequalities must be held up to be justified, or not. In principle it can be shown that the unequal treatment of some people (say surgeons' salaries) are likely to benefit the poorest. But such positive inequalities of wealth or status can only be justified by showing that they benefit the worst off. 'Fewer unjustifiable inequalities' is not a slogan that 'warms the blood like wine', as the Latin poet said; but then never was 'Equality!' except to a few activists. Contextually it ever sounded threatening more than persuasive. But the demand that all inequalities must justify themselves is a formidable prescription. If a society pursued such demands and questionings generally, there would be radically

less inequality. Quite apart from equality as a value, the greater pursuit of participative citizenship and of openness at every level would create a more democratic and hence a more egalitarian society.

Perhaps it is 'democracy' that has been the missing card in the hand of democratic socialist rhetoric. For a democratic society is, if sometimes far from equal in economic terms and always imperfect (say Australia or New Zealand), for that reason noticeably more egalitarian. With huge exceptions, who does not find American society to be more democratic, hence relatively more egalitarian, than the United Kingdom? I would happily shift from the difficult concept of equality as a goal for social policy to egalitarianism as a value that can be exemplified by individuals in their behaviour as well as forming the object of public policies. Sean Hall sees that we do not dwell in a one-crop moral economy. Once it was always the triad, 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity', whether or not the rhetorician thought that all three could be somehow achieved as goals, rather than being values to govern behaviour and values moreover that could often conflict or cut across each other. 'Community' is another such value. Moral and political love consists in the conciliation of differing values not in the wild hunt for one great overarching synthesis.

Well, is 'equality dead'? As a platform slogan, yes; as a moral principle not at all. The public was never to be persuaded by direct appeals to 'Socialism', whether democratic or not, nor was 'sticking to our principles' a particularly clear or effective criterion for formulating policy. But I do believe that the public had a perception that the Labour Party stood for a moral critique of unrestrained capitalism; but it was less sure that it stood for a moral critique of unrestrained state power, especially when in their own hands. It was this disjunction that was Thatcher's opportunity. For perhaps a decade she moralised a purely competitive individualism. I am still in a job not because I am lucky or favoured but because of my virtues and talents. Even if I am in a lousy, boring, poorly paid job, he is unemployed because he doesn't try hard enough to find a job, probably doesn't want one anyway, prefers to live on my taxes.

We should not de-moralise individualism by turning purely pragmatic, reading the polls for what people want and responding (a democratic version of economic short-termism); but we need to remoralise individualism. The shock of the public through all regions, classes and parties at the attempted treatment of the miners in October 1992 was a topical reminder that a sense of decency, fairness, concern for others is still widespread; but it needs arousing. The creed of 'I'm alright Jack' has its limits when so many people feel their own self-respect is touched by the plight of others, especially by the suggestion that any action beyond a sentimental concern is hopeless. This should be our opportunity - not to preach equality theoretically, but from our egalitarian hearts to use the language of care, conscience, concern, welfare, human rights, decency, fairness, community, sociability, sticking-up for one-

self and standing-up for others, while advocating policies to match. The ordinary self is not all selfish.

Neil Kinnock in the first three years of his leadership had this sense of trying to give a popular meaning to an egalitarian and social account of individualism (as in his Fabian Autumn Lecture for 1985, *The Future of Socialism*), in order not to surrender the high ground and refortify the myth that all socialists believed in nothing but class-consciousness, collective action and solidarity (and hence by implication uniformity). But somehow he, or his colleagues or advisers, took the denunciations of editors and columnists that all this was waffle as well-meant advice, rather than as persuading them to suppress or deny their own best interests and natures. The moral high ground was surrendered as if the very language of morality was at fault rather than that the wrong moral language being used.

We must give a clear account of what we really stand for, not so much in terms of goals and contingent manifesto commitments but in terms of basic values; and a more egalitarian society is the central part of that. It is the essential precondition for greater freedom for all. There is no contradiction between equality and freedom as values; but whereas freedom only has to be defended against its enemies and otherwise, some say, nothing needs to be done about it except 'let it rip' (rip indeed), equality demands that something has to be done in social policy, in taxation policy above all, to build the basis for a more democratic and egalitarian society.

'Only 'more egalitarian'? Of course I want, like most of the other essayists, an egalitarian society. But an enterprise so great, considering where we start from, is not a mere matter of a 'hundred days'. 'Patience and time', said 'Papa' Kutuzov to his impatient, quarreling officers in *War and Peace*; but he was deadly serious about winning.

People want a moral voice and we should engage and utter it and not be frightened by the parody argument that egalitarianism means literal equality, 'a herd of tame, well-nourished animals, with wisekeepers in command', as RH Tawney sarcastically fed words to the critics of all he stood for:

'To criticise inequality and to desire equality is not, as is sometimes suggested, to cherish the romantic illusion that men are equal in character and intelligence. It is to hold that, while their natural endowments differ profoundly, it is the mark of a civilized society to aim at eliminating such inequalities as have their source, not in individual differences, but in its own organization; and that individual differences which are a source of social energy, are more likely to ripen and find expression if social inequalities are, as far as practicable, diminished. And the [main] obstacle to the progress of equality ... is the habit of mind which thinks it, not regrettable, but natural and desirable, that different sections of a community should be distinguished from each other by sharp differences of economic status, of environment, of education and culture and habit of life.'

Human equality, social inequalities

1

Michael Newton

Equality is not dead; it is still waiting to be born. Only it never can be born. There is a human equality that is real, that exists in our natures, but its life is such that it can never be properly manifested in the world of human affairs.

Yet it is the political duty of each individual to imagine that this miraculous birth has in fact taken place, to squint our eyes so as to close them to superficial superiorities, or rather to open them so wide that we can see equality living among us, as a child lives with an imaginary friend. When you stroll along an ordinary city street you pass old and young, men and women, the shabby and the smart. You glance momentarily into each others' faces. Some arouse a transient curiosity, as you receive for a moment an impression of them, make a casual judgement of what sort of person they might be, and you pass on. By the turning of the street you will have forgotten all about them. In the street human beings are just social creatures. Their natures are hidden from view, contained within themselves. It may appear that there is no equality or inequality here, only interest or disinterest, neither signifying greatly.

Yet though their natures are hidden, their person is in plain view, and we form judgements of them based entirely on this appearance. We can 'place', by their speech, dress, or manner, any figure that appears before us, if our interest is sufficiently aroused: but few people would argue this placing will reveal anything of them as human beings. It depends upon everything that is extrinsic about us.

What I intend to argue is that human equality belongs to the world of being, to all that is internal, private, and incommunicable, while inequality belongs to the world of appearances, to ourselves in so far as we are external, social, and manifest. This hidden, unauthorised equality is recognised only in love

and friendship - the political task is to imagine this equality existing in relationships that are removed from our lives as individuals. It is not enough to say that the personal is political; the political must be perceived as personal.

It seems impossible fully to express our inner nature, or even to comprehend what our nature really is. All that an individual can do is to represent their self in the world of appearances, unconsciously to make an image more or less related to their nature, an image which can make a mark in what Wordsworth named 'the strife of singularity'. Our sense of other people is first and primarily of this representation of the self.

This representation is a curious amalgam. It is built up of what we have consciously desired, and of what we have desired unknowingly; of images derived from others, and from books or films; of that which the world has enforced upon us, and even of those things which we believe least like us. If it seems that I am saying we play our lives to an audience, then most often that audience will be ourselves. In these representations we may sometimes feel that we detect something of the inexpressible nature, perhaps only its shadow, much as we feel that we sense the nature of an artist in their paintings, or poems.

Surfeit of self

If our natures do express themselves in the world, it can only be as a momentary surfeit of self; sudden, explosive, unexpected, and apparently irrational. The most obvious quality of these moments is that they should surprise others and catch out the self, but that later, on reflection, they should appear intrinsic and absolutely authentic. These moments act the same part in the life of an individual as inspiration plays in the making of a work of art. Art requires patience and 'sedentary toil'. Inspiration is momentary, yet its action marks the character of the whole, like Joe Gargery 'hammering out a horseshoe complete'. Without that moment the work cannot live. It is not accidental that poets have conventionally ascribed the source of this fleeting happening to an impersonal force, or some external nature, such as a god, or a muse, so little does it seem to have to do with the conscious personality of the artist.

Human life takes place in a realm of inequality because it takes place in society. In a world defined by relationships the absolute truth of our nature will become, by definition, relative. We are all equal, but this fact cannot appear in the world. This can be shown by an analogy with the form of the essay. An essay bears the same relation to 'Truth' as our unequal personalities bear to our equal natures. An essay survives in a world of appearances, and is not Holy Writ. An essay describes and enacts the process of our thoughts. It is a trial of our intellect, a casual reaching towards an idea, and never the expression of the idea itself. Its words are not absolute. It cannot rest on finality, but only represent the vague shape of some inexpressible idea, as a

sighted man feels his way in a strange and darkened house. It must be an expression only, and not the thing that it sought to express. Moreover, as a result, all essays are not equal. This competition operates on that principle.

If our nature corresponds to the work of being, our personality belongs in the world of becoming. It is personality that produces inequality, because it is within personality that everything temporary and worldly resides. It is in our inexpressible selves that we are equal: no-one is more of a human being than another. Only torturers and killers deny this.

All of us have probably experienced someone who has dominated us with the force of their personality, so that we felt lessened. Yet the inequality which has so impressed us is purely impressive. As Edwin Muir has written, it is the action of a will. This personality was constructed consciously and with the design of impressing a public. It works. We pay its meaninglessness the meaningless tribute of our awe. For the personality is a mask, an appearance, and to construct too perfect a mask is defeat, a mark of the failure to live in our equality, to struggle to express our nature.

I am not denying the interest of the social world, or its real fascination. What interests us is difference, and, as our unique individual natures are generally inexpressible, this will be the superficial difference of appearances. Experience of these differences and inequalities forms our judgement and tact. It is for the representation of this never-ending human variety that we read Dickens, or indeed anybody.

If in our deepest selves we are all equal, why should inequality exist in society? Our sense of inferiority or superiority begins when we are engaged in some mutual activity, or if we glimpse someone busy with the operation of their skill. We will judge if we could perform that task with equal aptitude, and generally, if we are honest, we will conclude that we could not. This sense may stem from our greater or lesser experience of this task, but nonetheless it will exist.

Inequality begins with activity because action belongs to the world of appearance. When we act we translate our selves into a visible and objective event. Our spiritual and inner equality is passive, and to act upon it is to distort its nature. Motivation is only of secondary importance in the court of law. What really matter is what we have done.

Modern psychology has shown that though our performance is unequal, our underlying competence is the same. This suggests that we are born equal, and only appear to become unequal by developing in accord with social forms and limitations. In a society that allowed the talents of an individual to develop as he or she desires, performance would be equal. There are two problems with this idea. First, it ignores the fact that choice constricts all development. Secondly, the concept of 'competence' is too generalised. Competent at what? Inequality occurs in specifics, because appearances and activities are specific.

Our natures are equal; whether or not our talents are equal can never be

decided due to the nature of human life. We are born in a 'state of nature', and we can imagine how individuals might develop where everybody enjoyed equal access to leisure, to open spaces, to works of art, to educational opportunity and encouragement, to the inheritance of wealth, to interest and capital, to books, and to knowledge. Of course, this 'state of nature' is a fiction, and we are born into circumstances that will mould us, for these things I have listed are distributed unequally, and their unequal distribution creates inequality.

Yet, even in an ideal state, we should still live in a world of inequality. We are born equal, but we must develop unequally. We live according to the logic of our choices, our talents, and our limitations. We cannot live all possible lives, but must develop some part of ourselves at the expense of another. Even if our choices were not limited by social conditions, we would still live under this limitation, and, as worldly talents and choices are valued unequally, there would be inequality. (The capitalist system over-values and rewards the development of our jackdaw instincts, our desire for the acquisition of wealth).

Everything is equal at its beginning. Inequalities emerge with development, and our lives are nothing if they are not a development. At the foundation of any enterprise, or life, or state, all things are equal, as runners are when lined up at the start of a race. Sometimes people desire to return to this origin, as if the state of nature were humanly attainable. We can only found a thing once, and revolutionaries who hope to begin an old society over again, to start the calendar from zero, can only hope to wipe out the past by the murder of the 'reactionary elements' in the present. It will not work even then. Their state of nature bears as close a relation to the real thing as Raquel Welsh did to a cave-woman.

Inequality of talent

All societies produce inequality, depending upon some form of hierarchical structure. Plato affirms this in the *Republic*, where Socrates declares that society is founded on the basis of our inequality of talent. It might be argued that all societies depend upon the subjection of someone: that anarchy requires the subjection of everyone, tyranny the subjection of everyone but one, oligarchy the subjection of most, and democracy the subjection of some. It is possible to believe that human beings are social animals and yet most, if not all, societies are more or less iniquitous, leading to the waste of human talent and potential. Yet some have believed that hierarchy is the fairest possible system, that human happiness consists in submitting to inequality and accepting our 'place'. This is an idea that can only be accepted if we also believe that society is 'natural' and that its apparent imperfections and inequalities express an objective rightness. If we believe that society is an artificial form based on representations of our selves, a form moulded by the powerful for their own benefit, and that social inequality is maintained, through education and snobbery, only to keep things that way, then all ideas of hierarchy on the

social level are repulsive.

As we understand it, equality is an invention of the Enlightenment, and since the Enlightenment the imagination has longed for a place where equality can exist between individuals. It is not coincidental that the supreme expression of this myth is American. Living on the river, Huck Finn and Jim exist in an absolute equality. Yet this equality can only be achieved by the rejection of society and social values. It can only take place in hiding, unofficially, in intimate privacy.

Yet even on the raft Huck and Jim must live in relation to the social hierarchy that has formed them. Their free choice and way of escape is to place themselves at the bottom of social structures, to defer to authority as well as to run from it, to embrace humility. For the most revealing aspect of these imaginary free places is that they are based on the idea of service. Robinson Crusoe has his Man Friday. There are masters and servants even in our refuges. It is noteworthy that the 'English' version of the Huck Finn story, Kipling's *Kim*, is hierarchical; *Kim*'s freedom springs from his service to the lama. Modern tourism is founded on this double vision. We go to desert islands and 'exotic' places to escape our work and hence our place in society. For a fortnight or so, we imagine a freedom for ourselves, much as medieval and Renaissance societies used to have their allowed Festivals of Misrule. These holidays are sold on the basis of our mastery, on the idea of service, (though without humility), with smiling Oriental women or deferential dinner-jacketed men treating us as the aristocracy of the place. Once a year the subservient are allowed the experience of rule.

It seems that social life inescapably produces inequality. However, our sense of fairness and justice demands that we should aim to live and organise our political systems as if this were not in fact the case. I do not mean that we should ignore injustice in order to perpetuate it, but rather that we should accommodate our selves to inequality in order to end it, in so far as it can be ended.

It may seem unlikely that human beings will be able to live and act in a conscious turning away from the fact of inequality, but life depends upon the ignoring and accommodation of unpleasant realities. This can be seen in our present attitude to the certainty of death. Everyone is fully conscious that we will achieve equality again at the moment of death, as we once possessed it at the second of our birth. Yet, apart from occasional lapses of despair, the majority of our lives are spent in mental deliverance from this fact. Rather than imagining ourselves as belonging to the 'brotherhood of death', as Nietzsche called it, we all behave, quite rightly, as if we were more or less immortal; making plans, saving money, cluttering our houses with possessions, as if we could own anything rather than merely borrowing it.

As we ignore death when we make plans for our future, so we should ignore inequalities in our social lives. This means living in constant awareness of the

fact, while living as if it were not a fact at all, but only a delusion or prejudice. In this way, politicians would be the only people consciously engaged with the fact of inequality, just as priests are kept to consciously attend to the idea of death. The business of politicians would be to engage in social planning and legislation that should level out the grosser and most repulsive inequalities, thereby reducing life's essential unfairness to the inevitable minimum. As blacksuited priests remind us of the last things, the function of politicians would be, by their very existence, to remind us of the fact that society is unjust and unequal, and requires a measure of imposed fairness.

Our own biographies

I am not suggesting that we should ignore obvious inequalities in each other, so as to pretend that someone is not beautiful, or slow, or rich, or mad. That would mean denying to each other the right to possess our own biographies. What I am suggesting would not require tact or stupidity but a willingness to be open and courteous, the desire to value an individual to the measure at which they would value themselves. In personal terms it would need our humility, just as Huck and Jim humbled themselves. It would require the acknowledgment that in our essential selves we are equal, for all that society has distorted us into inequality. This would apply to the rich and privileged in the same way as to the poor and disadvantaged.

The difficulty of conscious forgetting can be seen at work in the law. A court of law should be ideally a free place. The law must treat all people as equal, ignoring the impress of our unequal development. In reality this is a conscious falsity. Our life in society will be more or less likely to force us into criminal circumstances. The law exists fully in the world of appearances. It is not at all concerned with what we are, only with what we have done. In so far as law reflects the absolute quality of justice it passes over our nature in silence, assuming our essential equality without comment: but the law does not really deal with absolutes. It belongs with the world of our social relationships, and our guilt or innocence is really hidden in a court of law, this being, with Parliament, the last great public place in British society. The court's reliance on eloquence reveals its public nature. It is the place of persuasion, and that part of ourselves which cannot be spoken is naturally silent here. Its image is that of Billy Budd before his shipmates, or Jesus before Pilate.

As it imitates justice, the law treats us as equal. We are equal, but our equality is hidden, and never more so than when in court. Humans are incapable of speaking, or even knowing, the whole truth. The law punishes us as social and unequal creatures, for our crimes against society. The law is then far better at judging guilt than innocence, for our guilt appears in our actions and can be proved, whereas our innocence is internal, hidden, and has to be assumed. The forgetting of inequality would be like the legal assumption of innocence; we would address ourselves to that which is hidden in each person.

The collapse of communism and over a decade of right-wing rule in Britain and America seems to represent the triumph of 'the free market', with its ideology of inequality. This had produced a despair, a sense that social equality cannot be created through political means. Perhaps this despair is behind the setting of this essay question?

Mandelstam wrote of the artist's sense of worthlessness. It is this sense of our worthlessness which links art to love, the only part of life where equality is both essential and attainable. In its origin human love requires an act of discrimination. So far it accepts inequality, affirming that as an individual you can only love this person. We are limited creatures, and as we are limited we cannot love everyone equally. We choose, or something chooses for us, some one person to love.

Love, like friendship, creates for us a free place in the social world. Like Huck and Jim on the raft, we are equal together. Love begins in inequality, a choice of one person above all others, but between lovers there can be no inequality, for love depends upon the exchange of freedom. If love is unequal then our need for the other exceeds our desire for them to be free, and there is only mutual bondage. Each must be equally free to leave, and still equally desire to stay. No-one can be coerced into loving.

Few people imagine themselves as deserving love, and part of us feels our inferiority, and desires only to humble the self and to serve the other, as Huck humbles himself from Jim. Each exchanges their reciprocal unworthiness, and in humility each is equal to the other.

I began by saying that equality was not dead, but was waiting to be born. That in society human beings are unequal is not just imagined by our arrogance. It is also apparent to our modesty, and it is through modesty that we might achieve equality.

2

The commonsense of equality

Sean Hall

The Labour Party in Britain has traditionally placed action above contemplation, practice above theory. This, in part, reflects a wider political and philosophical temperament.

The British have always preferred the comparative safety of an understanding grounded in what is empirical and commonsensical, rather than the seeming uncertainty of what is speculative and abstract. But while the down-to-earth approach to policy that is the concomitant of this temperament has been of use to the Labour Party in government, it has led to a neglect of the theoretical support without which political practice is either muddled or confined to pragmatic drift. In particular, it has meant that socialist values have been either ill-defined, or not defined at all.

If that argument is correct, what is required is an awakening of our curiosity in theory. For a better theory can make for a better practice. This, in turn, though, must involve refreshing our interest in the timeless and pivotal socialist value of equality, showing how it is to be defined, noting its scope and limits, and describing its relationship to other values such as liberty and community.

Various types of equality have traditionally been distinguished: legal, political, social and economic. Yet a mere inventory of the various types of equality will not in itself tell us which, if any, might be congenial to the socialist. We have to look deeper.

Equality before the law is concerned with an individual's rights as regards the body of social rules that are prescriptive of external conduct and that are considered justiciable. Equality before the law is, indeed, an ancient ideal. But equality before the law is not a simple matter, as there is a vital distinction to be made between equality *de jure* and equality *de facto*. To have certain rights in law is not the same as having the power to exercise them. For instance, wealthy newspaper proprietors have much more power to use the law to their

advantage than do ordinary citizens. They can employ better lawyers, exploit legal loopholes, bring private prosecutions. Ordinary people, on the other hand, while having some access to direct and inexpensive legal advice through the Citizens Advice Bureau, do not generally have the same power or opportunity to exercise their legal rights.

The same constraints on ordinary citizens apply in the political sphere. Political equality in respect of the right to vote and hold public office was one of the main aims of the French Revolution. Though whilst there are now no impediments to participation in the political process by anyone in theory, there continue to be certain sections of society that are inadequately represented in practice. Women and ethnic minorities are the obvious examples. Both groups suffer from overt and covert forms of discrimination, low self esteem and low confidence, all of which prevent them from taking a full role in the political process. And even when they do not suffer in this way, their participation is hampered by certain structural features of political parties. For example, although parties of all hues know that many women are not able to attend political meetings at certain times because of family responsibilities, they do little to remedy the situation.

The importance of blood

In spite of the supposed rise of the meritocracy and talk of the coming 'classless society', social inequalities are still in evidence. These inequalities, often upheld by traditional class distinctions, or enforced by differences in education, power and privilege, tend to result in the brutal exclusion of certain individuals from particular opportunities or advantages. Moreover, even the few individuals that transcend their inherited condition of class inequality in economic terms are left socially blighted by feelings of inferiority on the grounds of accent, manners or title. Blood remains the most important medium for the transfer of wealth and power.

While there are various features of society that give rise to these legal, political and social inequalities, the socialist will tend to argue that many of them are at base due to economic factors. For this reason it will be maintained that a measure of material equality will enable all sections of society to have a greater opportunity to purchase legal protection, to hold public office and to achieve certain forms of social advancement. Greater material equality will help secure a fairer distribution of the legal, political and social advantages that are the due of every citizen.

Greater material equality can be defended on grounds other than the instrumental one of ensuring a better distribution of legal, political and social advantages, however. Material equality can be defended as intrinsically valuable for communitarian or individualistic reasons. Communitarians believe that material equality is of intrinsic value because it advances fraternity and community. While individualists argue that material equality is of intrinsic

sis value because it results in a fairer distribution of human goods and services.

According to the communitarian, material equality is good for society because it helps bring about relations among its members. Material equality helps us to flourish by promoting fraternal attitudes, desires and sympathies, thus creating the sort of bonds between human beings that go beyond those that are inherently personal and irredeemably limited.

A society that is more equal materially, the communitarian argues, is for that reason more likely to reject the destructive pursuit of unembellished self-interest, replacing it with a sense of solidarity and co-operation. This is a point of cardinal importance. Being more equal materially will encourage us to work together rather than alone, to act collectively rather than individually. It will help us acknowledge, develop and nourish our common concerns.

Through greater material equality the communitarian hopes that a new solidarity will be forged, that certain sectional interests will wither away and that the excesses of class distinctions will be extinguished.

Furthermore, the communitarian thinks that there will not then be such a disparity in the opportunities and living conditions of the rich and the poor, which will reduce the most damaging forms of hostility and antagonism within society. A sense of common ends and common tasks will in this way be achieved for the benefit of all.

Such solidarity and fellowship as might be created by greater material equality would not be unproblematic though. And here a caveat should be entered. It must be recognised that even with a gentle tolerance of the diversity of character and ways of life that may exist in some given society, conflicts could occur. However, with a true sense of solidarity and fellowship that a measure of material equality would help bring about, there is more likely to be the sort of respect for the interests of others that would allow the development of more effective ways of arbitrating between disputants, whether they are individuals, communities, towns, cities or nations. To reduce material inequality to is encourage, but not nessitate, social unity.

Socialist individualism

While recognising the worth of this communitarian argument, socialists must still look to the individualist argument I mentioned earlier in validating their deepest concerns. The individualist idea is that material equality is valuable because it involves a fair and just apportionment of goods and services like food, clothing, shelter, land, education, transport, housing and medical treatment, but also certain holdings such money. This argument is important, not just because it has been pervasive in the history of socialist thought, but because it has attracted many objectors and detractors. Thus, before going on to enlarge on this individualist notion of equality, the socialist would do well to pause to meet some of the arguments, both conservative and liberal, that have been deployed against it.

One of the distinguishing features of the New Right is its antipathy towards equality as a principle of distribution. Yet the term 'New Right' can be misleading, as it does not describe a cohesive political force but, rather, a peculiar intellectual alliance composed, on the one hand, of English High Toryism and, on the other, of Market Liberalism. So while both camps broadly concur in the belief that we should arrive at a condition of society where material inequality is the norm, the reasons that each tendency offers for this conclusion are quite different.

The Cambridge High Toryism of Roger Scruton focuses primarily on arguments about human nature. Scruton draws on a distinction first made by Rousseau in his *Discourse on Inequality* between those inequalities that are natural and those that are socially engendered. He is concerned to show that the natural inequalities of strength, intelligence, beauty, energy, and attachment to life, give rise to certain social inequalities. More specifically, he maintains that people who are stronger, more intelligent, beautiful and energetic are for that reason more likely to attract the gifts of help and affection that will make them socially, and also materially, unequal. So, he points out, unless we are committed to accepting a brave new world in which there is some sort of genetic engineering to remedy the natural disposition of people to give to those whom they like, rather than to those whom they do not like, social and material inequalities are inevitable. To promote or enforce social and material equality, he thinks, would mean either having to find some political means of restricting or redistributing the free play of human affection, or of changing the natural attributes we are assigned in the cosmic lottery.

What is interesting in this argument is the move from the relatively weak premise concerning facts about what nature gives us in terms of our individuality and character, towards the strong conclusion about what sorts of social and material inequalities must flow from these facts. Several preliminary points could be made against Scruton. First, certain 'natural' features like intelligence are as much due to environmental factors as genetic ones. Second, people do want to be equal as regards certain of their natural attributes if this will enable them to compete on a more level playing field in the market place of human help and affection. Third, the gifts of help and affection that are made by one individual to another due to these 'natural' attributes are often materially, if not socially, insignificant; for the most part they are only tokens of affection. And those that are not mere tokens are subject to inheritance tax anyway.

So is there a deeper reason for Scruton's hostility towards equality in its various forms? It appears there is. And it can be seen in his attitude to charity. It is the true function of charity, Scruton claims, to provide for the poor. As far as he is concerned, the charitable motive consists in rejoicing in the power conferred by property and wealth through the very act of giving it away - the recipients in such cases being grateful for what they perceive as the transfer

of property rightfully acquired by the wealthy. Through this gratitude, the poor come to have respect for their social and intellectual betters. Thus, in describing the Church as one of the principle historical agents of charity, Scruton argues that:

‘The general supervision of the exercise of charity naturally sustained the institutions of private property and legitimised inequalities of wealth.’

But as the welfare state is now the most significant agent of distribution for the poor and needy, the problem for Scruton is how this function can be transferred from Church to State. He says:

‘The important thing has been to maintain, through all this compulsory charity (through the welfare state), the professional self-respect which makes true charity possible.’

The welfare state is therefore to be viewed by the impoverished lower classes as a form of charity which gives legitimacy and credence to the upper (professional and intellectual) classes, and in so doing brings about a state of affairs in which respect is engendered for the people who belong to that (upper) class. Scruton’s attack on social and material equality, as one might expect, is in actuality nothing more than an argument for the upholding of class distinctions and privilege.

Hayek’s inequality

Rather than wanting to shore up social hierarchies or uphold the power and authority of vested interests as Scruton does, Hayek believes in curbing the powers of the state and letting the market have free reign. While those such as Scruton claim that some semblance of social and material equality will conflict with human nature, those like Hayek reject it on the grounds of economic inefficiency and because of its supposed interference with individual liberty. In particular, Hayek is keen to attack social justice. For him, social justice is nothing more than a euphemism which gives a false legitimacy to the authorisation of one class to ‘help itself from the pockets of another’. Hayek’s attack on social justice is not new, though. First, it appeals to the old liberal idea that the worker owes his employment to the opportunities created for him by the ingenuity of certain individuals (usually entrepreneurs), and by those individuals shouldering the risk of enterprise. Second, it makes much of the familiar argument that the prevalence of projects for redistribution and social welfare pose a threat to personal freedom.

The innovative role of the individual is probably not as important as Hayek thinks. What he fails to take into account is that the reduction of material inequality can be useful in promoting co-operation within and between firms and social groups, thus leading to greater productive potential. Moreover, Hayek cannot simply wish away the issue of social justice by replacing it with an argument based on the contingencies of individual good fortune. To adopt a fatalistic creed, which says that inequalities are unalterable and cannot be

changed by political will, is to neglect the pull towards certain concrete local practices and shared understandings that provide the weight of our ethical life and give rise to the claims on each other that result in appeals to universality and justice. Indeed, it is the ancient issue of justice that is at the heart of the whole debate, and it is to this that we must now turn.

Modern political theories of the just society have tended to concentrate on two texts from the 1970's: John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* and Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. It is through these works that the modern intellectual battle over equality has largely been fought.

Rawls' equality

Rawls' seminal work has often been taken by certain sections of the Left as the best contemporary defence of equality, even though it attempts to combine a socialist redistributive conception of justice with a liberal theory of political obligation. His theory of justice is derived from a hypothetical social contract based on what the outcome would be if individuals were made to make their choice of society without knowing which position they would occupy (ie without knowing whether they will be black or white, rich or poor, well or ill.) By adopting the 'maximin' strategy of choosing from the best of the worst possible outcomes, Rawls maintains that the following two principles would be agreed on:

1 each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others;

2 social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage and attached to positions and offices open to all.

What is of interest to the socialist is that if society is to be ordered on these principles (2 it should be noted is not to apply before 1 is satisfied) each person will know that inequalities can only be justified in so far as they benefit the worst off. So, for example, the better off must justify themselves to the worse off by showing that the advantages they enjoy yield, say, higher productivity and employment. There would be several other positive aspects to such a society too. First, if those at top must benefit those at the bottom there would be a reduction in the level of envy and resentment: the poorer members of society would know that any inequalities ultimately would be to their advantage. Second, the level of inequality would not be so great as to stifle social cohesion, yet not be so extreme as to restrict individual liberty.

Rawls' theory has been criticized, most notably by Nozick, for its concentration on the end state of transactions rather than on rights that are upheld in transactions. Nozick argues that justice is to be defined as follows: first, when property is acquired without denying anyone else any right or promoting any injustice; and second, when property passes from one person to another in a transaction that is entered into voluntarily and knowingly.

The problem with Nozick's account is that it is unable to show how property is to be justly acquired ab initio, how resources come to be taken from a state of nature. To argue for the theoretical view that initial endowments of property can be justly acquired, is to ignore the factual point that assets are often gained in ways that are wholly arbitrary or evil from a moral point of view. As Marx observes, 'Capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt.' Furthermore, if Nozickian rights are an integral part of a theory of justice we should ask, what right those who enforced the Enclosure Acts had to take away common land. Or alternatively, what right the American settlers had to take land from the Indians. To this Nozick will no doubt appeal to his principle of rectification, which states that we must remedy unjust acts from the past. But this will not suffice. To fully rectify past injustices may require a more extreme form of redistribution than even Rawls envisages.

The advantage of Rawls' theory over its recent competitors, including Nozick's theory, is that it recognises the importance of patterns of distribution while seeing that such patterns are best justified by demonstrating that our natural talents are a common asset to be shared. By rejecting the view that the natural talents that we possess are no more constitutive of our identity than are our socially-conditioned attributes, Rawls has room to argue that people's abilities are for certain purposes to be regarded as a resource that the community as a whole may draw on. In making this argument Rawls sees that when state intervention is called on to help the less well off, what is being demanded is that the better off lend them assistance. In short, he is maintaining that those who are ill-equipped to fend for themselves under market conditions, because they are not as mentally or physically able as others, should be able to expect help as of right - this claim-right to assistance being provided in spite of the fact that the market may in other respects be a fair and efficient form of allocating goods and services. It is in this way Rawls' theory offers a complex and radical argument for equality that the socialist would do well to adopt and refine.

To create a creed that carries conviction, and to build a dynamic Labour movement, we need a foundation of clearly stated and shared values rather than a mere melding of sectional interests. For without clear convictions about which values should guide us, our actions will be blind, our intuitions empty. But in looking towards the value of equality to solve this problem, we must realise that it is not a single principle; notions of equality arise at different levels and in different ways in the political process. Indeed, some notions of equality may not be socialist at all. In view of this, what we need to do is to plot the relationships between the different conceptions of equality that we adhere to, while showing at the same time how they relate to the other distinctive socialist values that we seek to advance such as liberty and community.

For example, we have to demonstrate that equality need not conflict with

individual liberty. This is because while many individuals can easily enjoy the negative liberty of non-interference, this will not be enough to secure the advantages to which they are entitled as citizens. It is only some measure of legal, political, social and economic equality that will provide the life chances that are the due of every individual no matter what they are born to. A measure of equality can extinguish the tragedy of those who are destined to be born unseen and who, in consequence, waste their 'sweetness on the desert air', to use Thomas Gray's memorable phrase.

More than this, we need to show how community and equality have a two way relationship. A measure of equality will make for the sort of provision without which many communities may not easily survive, yet, at the same time, many communities can, in their turn, facilitate the sort of shared understandings that make for equal provision. Mutual provision yields mutual understanding, and mutual understanding yields mutual provision.

In rethinking, restating and reworking what we mean by equality we need to evoke a response from those who are sceptical about the socialist record and programme. We need to demonstrate that we want to create a society where the degree of material wealth one can obtain is not the sole criterion of human excellence. We need to show how the reduction of inequality will lead to greater social cohesion and community by reducing some of the worst forms of the egotism, vanity and ambition, while allowing for a level of individual liberty that will enable everyone to exploit their abilities to the full. And, above all, we need to explain those things in a way that will appeal to common understanding and common sense. If we can do that, reports of the death of equality will have been greatly exaggerated.

Is equality dead?

The winning essays from the 1992 Webb Essay Competition, sponsored by the Webb Trust.

Introduction by Professor Bernard Crick:

'People want a moral voice and we should engage and utter it and not be frightened by the parody argument that egalitarianism means literal equality'

Michael Newton - Human equality, social inequalities:

'Human equality belongs to the world of being, to all that is internal, private and incommunicable, while inequality belongs to the world of appearances, to ourselves in so far as we are external, social and manifest'

Sean Hall - The commonsense of equality

'Equality need not conflict with individual liberty. This is because while many individuals can easily enjoy the negative liberty of non-interference, this will not be enough to secure the advantages to which they are entitled as citizens'

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