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THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF EGALITARIANISM

Lord Acton saw history as the story of liberty. Tocqueville, on the other hand, saw it — though he did not put it that way — as the story of equality. It was the equalisation of conditions which provided the underlying plot of social development. If indeed it does so, the plot is a curious one, as is documented in an admirably thorough historical survey by Gerhard Lenski¹.

The pattern of human history, when plotted against the axis of equality, displays a steady progression towards increasing inequality, up to a certain mysterious point in time, at which the trend goes into reverse, and we then witness that equalisation of conditions which preoccupied Tocqueville. What on earth impelled history to change its direction? Lenski invokes ideology: modern society is egalitarian because it wills itself to be such, because it was somehow converted to the egalitarian ideal.

I find it difficult to accept this theory of collective conversion, and I feel the same about the supposition that ideals are quite so effective socially. At any rate, before we fall back on this kind of intellectualist explanation, with its hint of the *Allmacht des Gedankens*, it may be as well to explore other, more concrete, tangible, visibly constraining factors which may have impelled us all in the direction of equality. The psychological appeals of equality, and of its opposite, are no doubt complex and murky. The appeal of equality, whether as a corollary of fairness, as a manner of avoiding intolerably humiliating inequality, or as a precondition of fraternal affection, seems obvious, at any rate in our age; but there is a danger that we may credit the human heart with a tendency which is merely the pervasive spirit of our age.

The psychic appeal of inequality may be as deep and important, and *not* merely to the beneficiaries of unequal status. Somewhere in the works of the late Cyril Connolly there is a passage in which he observes that it gives him deep satisfaction to remember that there are houses in England whose portals will forever remain closed to him. There is glamour in the existence of socially unclimbed and unclimbable peaks; and a wholly conquered or easily conquerable mountain range, devoid of the inaccessible, loses its appeal. The soul-transforming glamour of great privilege is conveyed in the celebrated exchange between Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Ernest, said Fitzgerald — the rich are different from us. Yes, replied Hemingway — they have more money.

¹ *Power and Privilege*.

Egalitarians react to this story by feeling that Hemingway won, and that he scored off the socially over-awed Fitzgerald. But there are many who feel differently about this, and who value inequality, not simply as an unavoidable means towards other social ends, or as an incentive, or a way of providing the leisure required for progress, or a concession — but as a good and above all a thrill in itself. I remember reading a defence of the snobbery of the superb novelist Evelyn Waugh, by his friend Mr. Christopher Sykes, in which the argument went roughly as follows: Waugh accepted inequality because he was clear-sighted enough to see that modern egalitarian political movements will merely result in new forms of inequality, as harsh eventually and crass and perhaps worse than, those which they replace. In brief Waugh's inegalitarianism is turned into a corollary of his social perceptiveness, a resigned acceptance of a necessary evil. This seems to me a total misrepresentation of the spirit of Waugh's novels, and unfair to their literary merit. He may well of course also have held the belief about the consequences of egalitarian reform with which Sykes credits him: in all probability he did. But to invoke that as the explanation of his inegalitarianism is to imply, absurdly, that he was a *regretful* inegalitarian — that, if only equality were socially feasible, he would have embraced it with alacrity. But in fact one of the merits of his work is the convincing manner in which he captures and portrays the deep positive *passion* for inequality, even, or especially, as felt by the less privileged. Paul Potts does not merely recognise the hard social fact that one law applies to him and quite another to Margot Metroland: he loves her for it. Waugh, like Conolly, conveys that positively sexual frisson, the skin-tingling titivation engendered by radical inequality, by the brazen and confident denial of the equality of man which profoundly excites both the active and the passive partner, the higher and the lower, so to speak, in the ecstatic union of inequality. It is perfectly obvious that either of these authors would have loathed to be deprived of it.

I mention these complications merely in order to stress that the psychic appeal of equality and its absence are complex, probably tortuous, and certainly many-sided. There are men who love inequality, like the admirable Crichton; and though the complications cannot be ignored, they may perhaps usefully be laid aside until after we have explored the historically more specific *social* roots of the manifest current trend towards egalitarianism. I shall offer a list, no doubt incomplete, of the factors which are liable to impel us in this direction.

1. Mobility

Modern industrial society is egalitarian and mobile. But it is egalitarian *because* it is mobile, rather than mobile because egalitarian. We can assume this, because we can see why it is *obliged* to be mobile, and why in turn mobility is bound to engender egalitarianism. If this argument is correct we are spared the double embarrassment of treating conversion to an ideal as a prime social mover, and of assuming it to be socially effective.

Modern society depends for its existence on technological innovation. It is the first society ever to secure, over quite a considerable period, sustained increase in wealth. Notoriously, its political organisation hinges on this: it has relied on this sustained growth of the total cake for buying off the discontent of the less privileged, and the general softening of manners, and the reduction in the severity of social sanctions, is presumably connected with this continuous bribery. The recent crisis in the West is of course connected with the failure, presumed to be temporary, to maintain this growth of wealth at the rate to which we have become accustomed.

What concerns us in connection with equality is certain obvious implications of sustained technical and economic innovation. It means that changes in economic organisation, in the nature and distribution of jobs, are not occasional, but permanent and constant. They do not occur, as they might in some agrarian society, merely as the occasional consequences of a natural disaster, of the introduction of a new crop, or some other relatively extraneous change; they occur perpetually as part of the normal working of the system, and they occur even if the external environment (however defined) is stable, which in any case it is *not*. The instability of economic roles is built into the system, and is self-generated.

A corollary of this inherent and inescapable occupational mobility is what I wish to call Lady Montdore's Principle. Lady Montdore is a character in some of the novels of Nancy Mitford, and she expressed and applied a certain principle of behaviour, which ran as follows: Always be polite to the girls, for you do not know whom they will marry.

Within her social circle, the young marriageable girls formed a fairly undifferentiated pool of potential brides, and some of them — but there was no safe way of telling in advance, *which ones* — would eventually marry men of position, importance and wealth. It was obviously impolitic and unwise to offend and antagonise those particular girls who were going to end up as wives of men of importance. But — there's the rub — there was no way of identifying this sub-class in advance. Were it possible, obviously one could and would adjust one's behaviour to any individual girl in accordance with whether she was a member of this important sub-class, or whether she fell into the residue. But it was *not* possible; and this being so, the only sensible policy, which Lady Montdore duly adopted, was to be polite to them *all*.

It is an occupationally very mobile society, it is not merely the pool of upper-class brides, but virtually the whole population which benefits from Lady Montdore's Principle. (There is one supremely important exception to this. Members of underprivileged subgroups which are easily identifiable — by pigmentational, deeply engrained cultural, or other near-indelible traits — actually suffer *additional* disadvantages in this situation. The statistical improbability of social ascension which attaches to such a group as a whole, is more or less forcibly applied, by a kind of social anticipation, even to individuals who would otherwise rise to more attractive positions. The bitterness of "racial" tensions in otherwise mobile societies is of course connected with this.)

But leaving aside identifiable and systematically disadvantaged groups, and concentrating on the relatively homogenous majority, the Principle militates powerfully against the attribution of permanent, profound, deeply engrained status distinction. In a relatively stable society, it is possible — and very common — to establish legally, ritually or otherwise enforced and highlighted status distinctions, which turn people into basically different *kinds of men*. Radical, conceptually internalised inequality is feasible, and is frequently practiced.² But even such traditional, relatively stable societies are frequently obliged to “cheat”. Roles ascribed by heredity and those actually available to be filled do not converge. Demographic accidents, or other causes, lead to the overproduction of hereditary occupants of one kind of socio-economic role, and the underproduction of the occupants of others; and, so as to keep going, the society fills its roles, and has its essential tasks carried out in a manner which, more or less covertly, violates its own principles of the hereditary or otherwise rigid ascription of status. But, given the relative economic stability or stagnation of such societies, this kind of cheating is nevertheless kept within bounds.

But in the occupationally highly mobile industrial society, the cheating would have to be on such a scale as to become intolerable and absurd. The most eloquent testimony to mobility is precisely the fact that when it fails to occur — because of ineradicable “racial” or otherwise engrained traits — such a society experiences its most intolerable tensions. In fact, of course, modern industrial society cheats in the opposite direction. As egalitarian left-wing critics frequently point out, the mobility and equality of opportunity which is credited to liberal society is not quite as great as it is painted. This is indeed so: life-chances are unequal, and the extent to which this is so varies in diverse occupations, countries etc. But at the same time, mobility is real and frequent enough to impose formal equality as a kind of external norm. Hereditary rank and status, so common and widely acceptable elsewhere, would be in collision with actual role so very frequently as to lead to intolerable friction. Formal equality — the intolerable nature, in modern conditions, of dividing men into different *kinds of being* — however much sinned against by substantive inequalities, is not merely the compliment of vice to virtue, it is also the recognition of the genuine reality of occupational mobility, and

² Louis Dumont has consciously attempted to perpetuate the Tocquevillian tradition and to analyse both egalitarian and inegalitarian societies, and to separate the issues of hierarchy and holism. Cf. his *Homo Hierarchicus* and his *Homo Aequalis* (translated into English as *From Mandeville to Marx*). Both his account of Indian and of Western societies — treated as paradigms of hierarchical and non-hierarchical organisation — are open to the suspicion that he over-stresses the role of ideology, and does not sufficiently explore non-ideological factors.

Dumont's insistence on separating the issue of egalitarianism and holism (Indian society being for him the paradigm of a society both hierarchical and holistic) receives a kind of confirmation from Alan Macfarlane's recent *Origins of English Individualism*, with its striking and powerfully argued claim that English society was individualistic since at least the later Middle Ages. It would be hard to claim that it was also egalitarian.

hence of the non-viability of any serious system of rank which would prejudge status independently of occupational position. Where occupational position is both crucial and unpredictable, the only workable system of hereditary rank is one which confers the same rank on all — in other words, egalitarianism.

Note that a complex division of labour joined to occupational mobility is imposed internationally. There are no autarchic economies, and all national economies are obliged to run if they are even to stay in the same place. If they lag behind relatively, they eventually suffer absolutely. Thus innovation and its corollary, occupational mobility, is imposed on all cultures.

2. The Nature of Our Work Life

J.-P. Sartre observed somewhere that the working class were predisposed towards materialism because its work experience brought home to it the constraints imposed on us by *things*, whereas the middle class tended towards idealism because its work situation consists largely of the manipulation of words, ideas and people. If this so to speak materialist, or at any rate sociological, explanation of why people embrace materialism or idealism is correct, then the future prospects for materialism would seem distinctly poor: the proportion of jobs at the coal face, so to speak, involving the direct handling of extra-human, extra-social, physical reality by human hand, is rapidly diminishing. On the whole, we deal with *choses* only, as you might say, *par personnes interposées*, and these *personnes* diminish in number. The tools by means of which brute things are handled are themselves sophisticated, and their controls require the recognition of conventional meanings, in other words of ideas, rather than the application of brute force.

A very large part of the working life of a very large, growing and probably majoritarian proportion of men, consists of encounters and interaction with a large number of other men, in varied, unpredictable and anonymous contexts. If this is so, this underscores once again the impracticality of rigid and visible social ranking. Inequality is viable when the ranking is agreed, more or less, by both parties: if superior A and inferior B both accept their relative ranking, they can co-operate peacefully. B may or may not resent the situation, and he may or may not look forward to its modification; but for the time being, they can communicate. Not every ranker respects every officer, but for the time being, the clearly defined and identified difference in their respective ranks enables them to communicate in their work situation without constant and immediate friction. But if people are constantly encountering, communicating with and temporarily cooperating with men of unidentified rank, in a multiplicity of different organisations whose respective rankings may not be easily inter-translatable, then to insist on the recognition of rank is to ask for constant trouble. It would be an encouragement to both

parties to impose their own vision of their own standing, on each occasion³.

Complex, intricate social organisation, with all the consequences this has for the nature of human encounters, does not *on its own* generate egalitarianism. There are ample historical examples which prove this. But in conjunction with occupational mobility, the complexity, anonymity, brevity of human encounters all provide a powerful impulsion towards egalitarianism. A society which was simply occupationally mobile, but in which each person carried out his work without numerous and unpredictable contacts with many other people, would find it easier to combine its mobility with *inegalitarianism*. The so to speak gregarious-mercurial nature of our professional life, jointly with mobility, makes egalitarianism hard to escape — because ranking would be endlessly friction-engendering. Where ranking is superimposed on such a society, by the symbiosis of "racially", religiously, culturally distinguishable sub-communities with differing prestige, it does notoriously lead to intolerable friction.

3. Our Home Life

For the great majority of members of advanced industrial society, work life on the one hand, and home or community life (or lives) on the other, are clearly and distinctly separate. There are exceptions to

³ It is arguable that this in fact does happen; that the high valuation of a kind of aggressive "personality" in middle America is connected with an egalitarianism which denies that a man can bring previous rank to a new encounter. He is expected to establish his standing by his manner, but not allowed to appeal to his previous history and position. If so the cult of restraint which is so characteristic of much of English culture (and which Weber considered to be one of the consequences of protestantism) could be attributed to a valuation of rank and status, which frees its carrier from a vulgar need to insist loudly on his standing. He *is*, he doesn't need to *do*. This provides a useful and discouraging hurdle for the would-be climber, who is faced with a fork: if he conducts himself with restraint, he will remain unnoticed and outside, for as yet he *is* not, but if he makes a noise, he will display his vulgarity and damn himself. (In practice, many have however surmounted this fork.) Tocqueville attributed English reserve not to rank as such, but to the fluidity and ambiguity of ranking, which makes it dangerous to establish a connection with a stranger whose standing is as yet necessarily obscure.

If my argument about the connection between egalitarianism and the multiplicity of organisations is correct, one might expect to be less marked in Socialist industrial countries, given the fact that socialist economic organisation approaches more closely the unification of production in one single organisation, whose sub-parts employ the same idiom and can have mutually translatable, equivalent rank-systems. This tendency, if it obtains, may perhaps be compensated by the greater overt commitment of socialist societies to egalitarianism.

It is also possible that the whole argument is empirically contradicted by the case of Japan, which combines a notoriously successful industrial society with, apparently, great rigidity of and sensitivity to rank, at least within any single one organisation. One would like to know whether ranking is ignored with a polite egalitarianism, in encounters between men of different organisations. Cf. R. P. Dore, *Japanese Factory — British Factory*.

this, but they are relatively rare. For an Israeli kibbutznik, the work, social, and military unit are all identical and overlapping; a Head of an Oxford College is performing one of his duties when he dines; and there are still, here and there, servants who are also full-time retainers. But all this is manifestly exceptional and atypical. A normal existence, or *existenz*, notoriously involves travel from home to place of work. (Living over the shop is a privilege or burden given to few). This means more than a merely physical move: it means a shift from one set of persons to another, from one authority and hierarchy to another, from one idiom and moral climate to another. This separation is, notoriously, one part of what Marx meant by "alienation", and which constituted a part of the indictment of capitalism.

No doubt this separation had an inhuman aspect. It enabled men to purchase the labour of another, and treat it, as Marxism stressed, as a mere commodity, without assuming any of the other responsibilities (however inequalitarian) which had been characteristic of more *personal*, pre-capitalist forms of domination. It was this aspect of the impersonality of labour relations which first struck observers of industrial society.

But, interestingly, the separation of home life and work life also has other implications, relevant to egalitarianism and favourable to it. The relative amount of "labour as a commodity" has diminished, though it still exists: the condition of foreign labour migrants, providing brawn, and morally non-incorporated in the society in which they work, approximates to that of the "classical" working class observed by Engels. But a large part of the skilled working class is in quite a different condition. But at this point, I am not concerned with the transformation (by skills, etc.) of their working situation, but rather with the long-term implications of the *continuing* separation of work and life.

This means that work relations are not carried over into home life, and there are no radical obstacles in the way of a homogeneous, or at least continuous, home and leisure culture. The authority structure of work is in no way transferred into the home. A serf was a full time serf; even a servant, for the duration of his service, was full time. He did not escape from his condition into a private world. In the modern world, the inequality of the working condition is restricted to working hours. The inequality between those who give orders and those who execute them, where it obtains, does *not* carry over into the (ever lengthening) leisure periods, and is not deeply internalised, or perhaps not internalised at all.

There is an enormous difference between a full-time and a part-time servile role. Service roles which are circumscribed in time and specific in function, such as waiting in a restaurant, are not felt to be demeaning, and professions of that kind do not seem to have any difficulty in recruiting personnel. By contrast, so to speak "real" servants, living-in as unequal members of a household are notoriously difficult to obtain. *Au pair* girls in the West, though performing some of the functions of a maid — easing the wife's work load, baby-minding, providing sexual temptation for male members of the household — have to be treated as equals, and this is of the essence of the situation. Gracious living, which is conditional on personal service and depend-

ence, survives only in a very restricted and make-believe measure, and is available to ordinary members of even the prosperous middle and professional classes only if they succeed in joining certain Consumer Co-operatives for Gracious Living, such as Oxbridge Colleges or West End Clubs. Here, by sharing the expense involved, it is possible to recreate the illusion of hierarchy and dependence. It is, however, largely an illusion: just as the consumers in these places do not generally enjoy the services full time but only intermittently (returning for the rest of the time to their suburban houses and helping the wife with the washing-up), so similarly the "servants" *take turns* in assuming this servile status, and shed it when off duty, to adopt in their leisure time a life style not differing from non-servile members of the working class or indeed differing all that much from those of their "masters". Certain ritual symbolisms are still observed: West End Clubs are one of the few places left where it is still possible to have one's status confirmed by having one's shoes polished by human labour. Elsewhere it has become impossible, as I realised when I left my shoes outside the door of a New York hotel in the 1960s, and the hotel staff, quite misinterpreting my intention, simply threw the shoes away. Hotels nowadays provide shoe-polishing machines as their own distinctive contribution to the equalisation of conditions.

4. The New Cultural Division of Labours and the Mass Media

Whether the human heart as such is egalitarian, or only the human heart as formed by our kind of society, is an open question; but it is a fact that "real" (full-time retainer) servants are very difficult to obtain. This has certain consequences for the possibilities of creating differential life styles. You can live your leisure in any style you wish — if your environment is liberal and allows you to do so — but, on the whole, only within the limits of your own labour resources and those of your household who are your equals. In other words for all but a very small minority, activities dependent on a tail of retainers and dependents are *out*. This fact contributes more powerfully to the relative homogenisation of life styles than anything else, whether one calls it the embourgeoisement of the working class (which seems to be a fact, notwithstanding its contestation by some sociologists) or the impoverishment of the middle classes.

If leisure activities are, on the whole, restricted to such as do not presuppose retainers, the options available to affluent industrial man are — either to join leisure consumer co-operatives, clubs of diverse kind, or to accept the highly specialised and profession entertainment services provided by the mass media. By and large, it would seem that these services, enjoying as they do the advantages of selection, professionalism, and resources, prevail, and constitute the main and inevitably rather standardised culture-forming influence.

No doubt there are great differences in the manner of consuming these available services, and cultural differentiation persists, and may even have great prestige and overrule economic differentiation; this seems liable to happen, for instance, in socialist societies⁴. Nevertheless,

⁴ Cf. Pavel Machonín a kolektiv, *Československá Společnost*, Bratislava 1969.

and notwithstanding this qualification, it is reasonable to suppose that the restriction of the availability of human resources in leisure time, and the cheap availability of television, music, paperbacks, etc., must militate against culturally enforced inequality. If money can no longer buy you *people*, and a basic minimum of living standard is widely assured, can it still buy you culturally diacritical marks? The answer is that it can, but not nearly as much or as convincingly as it could in the past. We shall return to this topic in connection with the meaning of wealth under conditions of industrial affluence.

5. Diminished Vulnerability

Inequality (like equality, and perhaps like most things) depends for its systematic implementation on enforcement. The coming of industrial affluence has significantly diminished the vulnerability of men to some forms of pressure and intimidation at least. It has certainly not freed all men from such pressure, even in the privileged set of developed industrial societies: there are notorious and important exceptions. There are those who combine poverty with isolation and some kind of personal (e.g. medical) disablement or inadequacy; and there are ethnic or religious or other minorities which are not properly incorporated in the moral community and do not effectively share in the citizenship of the society. But for the big bulk of the population, benefiting from the welfare infra-structure which is now common to developed societies, and from the benefits of the right of association and so forth, vulnerability at any rate to economic pressure had decreased very significantly. The sexual revolution has also contributed to this trend, but greatly diminishing one important motive for seeking control over people. Sex is now more easily available even to those not occupying positions of power or influence.

Inequality has thus lost one at least of its important sanctions. It is presumably this diminished vulnerability which at least helps to account for the marked decrease in willingness to occupy servile positions. It seems that this diminished willingness to be servile is not accompanied by a strong need for independence: insecurely remunerated work (notably independent peasant agriculture) has also lost appeal, and people leave it when they can. The dominant ideal seems to be employment which is secure (wage or salary arriving, independent of vagaries of weather), but where the work is clearly circumscribed in time and the work-time authority relations in no way extend into home and private time.

This ideal is widely attained in the developed societies, and the welfare provisions and governmental assumption of responsibility for full or high employment (and tolerable conditions for the unemployed), all of which has become part of the shared political norms, jointly ensures that almost no one need cringe and kiss feet so as to avoid destitution. This was not always so, but it is so now. Servility amongst the lower orders is only encountered as an occasional survival. I remember reading a novel in which a character used to take visitors by a roundabout way through a village because this increased the chance of meeting an old man who sometimes called him *sir*. This entirely catches the spirit of our present situation.

6. Uniform Training and Socialisation

Private control over quite extensive leisure time, plus the mass media, facilitate a common culture, not markedly diversified over social strata. But in all probability, the most powerful factor contributing towards this end is uniformity of training and socialisation. Once again, this is not (as is often supposed) a consequence of egalitarian ideology; it is rooted in general features of our social organisation, and egalitarianism reflects rather than causes it.

It is the most strikingly paradoxical feature of advanced industrialism that this society, the most highly specialised society *ever*, should have (at least when compared with other complex societies) the *least* specialised educational or training system. Is this a paradox? Does our education system go against the grain of our form of economic organisation, is it a strange, ideologically inspired defiance of it? Should a society which has pushed the division of labour to a length and refinement never previously dreamt of, similarly refine and differentiate the educational experiences to which it subjects its young, instead of imposing on them, as in fact it does, a strikingly similar pattern?

No. There is no paradox. On the contrary, the diversification of socio-economic roles, and the simultaneous standardisation of educational experience, far from being in disharmony, dovetail with each other perfectly. As stressed, the diversity of occupational roles is not static but *mobile*. People must be re-trainable. It simply isn't feasible for them to attain their professional skills in a seven years' apprenticeship with a Master and then, when they change jobs, to go for another seven years to a new one. Instead, they spend seven or more years at the start in *generic* training, which provides them (ideally) with enough literacy, numeracy, and technical and social sophistication to make them retrainable fairly quickly. Moreover, the division of labour is not merely mobile, but also presupposes frequent interaction and effective communication between members of diverse professions.

The high prestige of unspecialised education (even if the centre of gravity of prestige has shifted from literature to numeracy) is not (or only in very small measure) some kind of Veblenesque survival of a high valuation of uselessness of futility as an index of high status. (Specialised schooling, such as is offered by medical or law schools, only has prestige when following on to a good dose of generic training.) On the contrary, it reflects and reinforces our egalitarianism. If training must needs be similar — and indeed it must — then a deep sense of inequality cannot easily be inculcated in the young, in those undergoing the process of education. Education standardises and unifies — not because this aim is part of public policy, which is also often the case, as in the United States as part of assimilation of immigrants, or in Britain as consequence of Labour Party egalitarianism — but, more significantly and reliably, as a consequence of the kind of education which needs to be imposed. This educational aim, the establishment of a shared and broad basis for quick specific retraining, is imposed on the educational system by deep requirements of the wider economy, and thus is not at the mercy of minor ideological fads.

7. The Nature of Wealth in Affluent Industrial Society

The very meaning of wealth and ownership has changed under modern conditions — though this fact has not been widely recognised. In agrarian society (or early industrial society, of course), the difference between wealth and its absence is, above all, the difference between having and not having enough to eat. The poor are periodically hungry, and some starve when periodic famine hits the land. Quite late in the history of industrial society, the poor ate more bread during lean years than during prosperous ones, because they were obliged to shift expenditure towards the cheapest nourishment so as to avoid actual hunger. Notoriously, they did not eat enough for full physical development: in various near-affluent societies, the older generations are still markedly smaller than the present younger generations.

But in the highly developed societies, literal hunger is fast receding beyond the historical horizon. And if we exclude the “submerged minority”, the handicapped, isolated, or members of groups subject to racial or political discrimination, a certain significant minimum is also coming to be taken for granted by very wide strata (though not by all). This wider minimum includes not merely freedom from hunger, but also access to currently accepted standards of medical attention, housing, and access to culture (education, literacy, a degree of leisure).

What are the implications of this situation, in which very broad strata are approaching a *confident* possession of this minimum? One must add, of course, that access to *more* than this minimum is very unevenly, very unequally spread out. A big majority is in seemingly possession of this minimum, but within this majority, the *extra* is distributed unevenly.

How we assess the consequences of this situation depends very much on our philosophical anthropology, our general vision of man. If we suppose that man's needs are boundless or open-ended, we shall conclude that the inequality of extras is very important. If, on the other hand, we believe that above a certain minimum, man's material needs are definitely limited, we shall assess the importance of inequality-in-extras differently, and treat it as much less important. May I say right away that I belong to the second school. In other words, the difference between a man who is in secure and assured possession of access to adequate nourishment, medical care, shelter and leisure, and a man whose “means” enable him to purchase this minimum many times over, is not very great. The difference is simply not comparable to the difference which once existed between having access to these goods, and not having it or only having it intermittently and precariously.

But of course, there still is a difference. But it consists not in genuine additional consumption, but in prestige, power and influence. A man cannot sit in more than one car at once, and leaving out relatively marginal considerations (there may be some benefit in owning different kinds of car), the only thing he attains by owning $n+1$ cars is an unofficial status of superiority over an unfortunate possessor of merely n cars. In capitalist societies, he can of course also put his wealth, not into symbolic prestige possessions, but into

ownership or, much more commonly, part-share ownership of the means of production, which gives him a voice in economic decisions. These two options open to him — prestige and economic power — need to be considered separately.

The very fact that extra wealth can only go into prestige, the minimum being so widely satisfied, also means that relatively little can in turn be attained through prestige. Servility simply does not seem easily attainable, at least by economic as opposed to political means. As indicated, vulnerability has declined, and people are no longer willing to crawl, or not much, or only when scared politically. Moreover, prestige is also attainable by means other than wealth, and these means seem to be preferred. This will be discussed under the very next heading, and the use of economic power, in section 9.

8. The Work Ethic

Most forms of prestige attainable by wealth are now also attainable by occupancy of appropriate positions, usually bureaucratic ranks within organisations. Interesting travel, good hotels, encounters with interesting people under agreeable and *soignée* circumstances with attentive service — these can of course still be purchased by money, but they are also the natural and recognised perks of professional success. Though a rich man can buy these things, it is my impression that he will often do so apologetically; but those who are granted them on merit and on expense account, as inherent in their *position*, enjoy them with *pride*. Has the work ethic become so pervasive that people enjoy the perks of their professional position more than they do the fruits of mere wealth? — or is it rather that the work ethic has become so pervasive in the middle and upper strata of industrial society, because it reflects a kind of universal *mamluk*-isation, a form of organisation and ethos in which privilege honourably attaches only to achieved status? I think the latter.

9. The Nature of Power

In agrarian society, power is visible, concrete and immediate in its effects. The major form of wealth is agricultural produce. Power consists of the possession of the means of physical constraint, by means of which a significant part of the produce is channelled towards those who wield power in the society in question. Power is manifested in the capacity to compel people to work, and to determine the distribution of the fruit of labour. Neither the coercion and its agents, nor the labour and its fruits, are so to speak distant: they can be *perceived*, they need not be *conceived*.

Developed industrial society, with its enormously complex division of labour, is quite different. Visible physical constraint, known as terror, is not part of its normal working order, and only occurs in atypical situations (civil war, coup d'état) when a new political authority imposes itself, or even imposes a new social order, by killing or threatening to kill those who oppose it. It may be said that this violence is ever-latent and inhibits those who would change the

social order as such. This may well be so; but the fact remains that within its normal working, power and physical coercion are not normally conspicuous.

The division of labour is intricate and social machine exceedingly complex. The power of a feudal lord of the manor is continuous and simple, and manifests itself in similar and repetitive situations: he makes sure that the peasants work, and that in due course they deliver the required proportion of produce. But "power" in a complex industrial society is not visible in this kind of monotone manner. Power consists in having one's hand on the crucial lever of the total machine at a moment when an option arises for the system which will be decided primarily by the position of that very lever. Crucial decisions occur here and there at diverse and irregular times. Power is not continuous but intermittent.

If this fact is taken in conjunction with the previously stressed point about the inherent and inevitable occupational mobility of advanced industrial society, we end once again with a powerful factor favouring equality. Power being volatile, intermittent and tied to special positions, or rather the combination of a position and an alternative-generating crisis, it follows that there is no clear and demarcated class of power-holders, and that it is necessary to treat a wide class of persons with respect and as equals, because they may on occasion find themselves at an important lever.

As against, it can of course be argued that, notoriously, that industrial society possesses vastly superior means of centralisation and communication, and if it is organised in an authoritarian manner, can control all appointments and most decisions from one single centre — so that, despite the complexity and mobility inherent in its economic organisation, a systematic inequality of power can be imposed. It can be ensured that all decisions are referred upwards, and it can be ensured that all occupants of intermittently crucial and hence powerful posts, are only recruited from a special sub-class of people. This argument is also weighty, and militates against the egalitarian one which was cited first.

10. Deliberate Equalisation from Above

The anti-egalitarian tendency in authoritarianism (which is made possible, though not necessarily engendered by, industrial organisation), can however be countered by another consideration.

The mamluk-isation of men seems to me inherent in our condition: it is natural that we should derive our standing from our achieved position rather than from inherited wealth or kin connection. But over and above this (and irrespective of whether in fact it is natural under industrial conditions), it may also be the consequence of deliberate policy on the part of authoritarian government. The essence of a mamluk is that he is powerful, but at the same time he is legally a slave: his property, his life, can be revoked arbitrarily from above. As we say in the university, he has no tenure. Now the vesting of status and power in revocable, non-tenure positions only, the preventing of wealth- or kin-based power bases, makes everyone dependent on the single centre of authority. As Marx pointed out, Bonapartism rested on the

equality of small landholders. So authoritarian centralism, whilst capable of generating inequality in one way, does further equality in another.

11. The above is a well-known right wing argument, purporting to show that the equalisation of conditions leads to tyranny, and that tyranny can only be avoided by allowing or encouraging state-independent power bases, of wealth or of association, and hence inequality

In the interests of symmetry and of the semblance of impartiality it is also well worth citing a left-wing argument, which also has some substance behind it. The argument is very simple: modern society is egalitarian in ethos because it is unequal in fact. Ideology inverts and hides reality. The superficial egalitarianism, the myth of mobility, the apparent diminution of social distance, simply serve to hide the astonishing and often unperceived inequalities in wealth, power and life-chances which persist or even increase⁵.

I do not myself believe mobility to be a myth, nor do I hold the diminution of social distance to be something merely superficial. It is important in itself. At the same time, the persistence or augmentation of material inequality, and the camouflage of this inequality by a relative congruence of life styles, are also facts.

12. Talent-specificity of Many Posts

Imagine a society (there must have been many such) in which no senior position really requires exceptional inborn talents. One suspects that any fool could be a feudal lord, or even a mediaeval bishop. The lord had to be taught to ride and fight from an early age, and the bishop had to learn to read; but, given training, these accomplishments seem to be within the reach of most men. Hence the society could fill these positions by any random method if it chose, as long as it picked the incumbents young enough to ensure that they be duly trained. The Athenians recognised this by drawing lots for the selection of occupants of some public offices. A society could, as the Tibetans have done until recently, select appointees by the *time* of their birth; or it could, as is more common, select them by their paternity. (This of course has the advantage that the domestic unit can also provide initial training and familiarity with the job).

Modern society is interesting in that it contains high proportion of posts in which the standard expected is so high that the posts simply cannot be filled at random. The level expected of concert pianists is so high that it simply would not be feasible to recruit such pianists from a pianist clan, in the way in which musicians often are recruited in tribal societies. They now need not merely training but also genuine inborn talent, which is beyond the reach of social manipulation or ascription. The same is true of professors of physics. It is not quite so obviously true of professors of philosophy, and it is possible that

⁵ Cf. John Westergaard and H. Resler, *Class in Capitalist Society*, Penguins 1977, or P. Bourdieu, *Les Héritiers*.

the standard in this would not be very different if they were selected, say, by horoscope. It is said that when the University of Durham was founded early in the 19th century, the Bishop simply instructed the personnel at his disposal to mug up various subjects and thereafter to become professors in it.

The precise limits of talent-specificity in modern society are obscure, but it does seem obvious that it obtains in some measure, and in far greater measure than in earlier societies. A society bound by occupational mobility to provide roughly the same generic training for all, and at the same time bound by the fact of talent-specificity to seek out and to reward independently existing and unpredictable talent which is not under its own control, is thereby certainly impelled in the direction of egalitarianism.

13. Ideological Impoverishment

Developed industrial society tends to lack firmness and vigour of conviction (perhaps for good cause — possibly no convictions deserve firm adherence, and the merits of scepticism should not be ruled out). Whether this lack of conviction is well-based does not concern us here. What does concern us is certain of the implications of this state of affairs, if indeed it obtains.

Agrarian societies by contrast tended to be both hierarchical and dogmatic. The dogmas which they upheld with firmness and sanctioned with severity, at the same time provided warrants and legitimation for the inequalities which prevailed within them. But what happens when this dogmatic underpinning for a system of ranks and inequalities is withdrawn?

As far as I can see, egalitarianism then inherits the earth as a kind of residual legatee, for lack of any others. If there are no good reasons for assigning men to ranks (because there are no good, independent, transcendent reasons for *anything*), then we might as well all be equal. It seems that equality requires fewer reasons than inequality, and as reasons or premisses for specific vision of a social order are now in short supply, well that makes us into egalitarians by default. This is certainly not a formally cogent argument, but it has a certain plausibility and may well play a part, though probably a minor part, in helping to explain the modern trend towards equality.

The complex interdependence of a modern economy means that there are many areas within which are crucial for all the rest and which, if not physically or otherwise restrained, can blackmail the rest of society to accept its terms. This of course became specially conspicuous during the troubles connected with the attempts to fight inflation and the consequences of the energy crisis. When it is impossible to defy segments of the work force occupying strategic positions — e.g. the miners — one can only appeal to their restraint, which the authorities did, somewhat pathetically. What moral principle, however, can the authorities invoke? In practice, it tends to be, inevitably, an egalitarianism mitigated by some reward for extra discomfort, risk and so on.

Liberal societies refrain from using force against the occupants of strategic heights in the economy. But when they use persuasion

instead, there appears to be very little in the ideological armoury other than egalitarianism which could be invoked, even if there were the will to do so.

The consequence, in liberal and advanced societies, tends to be the following: an egalitarian trend towards the convergence of middle class and working class remuneration, with extra privileges then attaching to posts rather than to persons (the mamluk has perks not wealth, and perks escape tax), whilst surviving personal-wealth-based advantage tends to be discreet and somewhat shamefaced. The major difference between contemporary and Edwardian England seems to me to be that the gentlemanly proscription of ostentation now really is enforced. The rich are always with us, but are now seldom conspicuous. Conspicuous display is practiced mainly by pop stars, footballers, pools winners — but the point about *them* is that they show it could happen to *anyone*. They are not different. Hemingway clearly would be right about them. They only have more money. They illustrate rather than defy egalitarianism.

14. Positive Philosophical Endorsement of Equality

A modern economy does not depend only on an intricate division of labour and occupational mobility; it notoriously also depends on a powerful technology, which in turn depends on science.

But it is plausible to hold that science in turn can only function on the basis of certain background assumptions about the nature of things, assumptions which are not self-evident and which, in fact, are very difficult to establish without circularity of reasoning. Perhaps the most important amongst these background assumptions are what might be called the Symmetry Assumption, the supposition that the world is an orderly system which does not allow of exceptions, which ignores the sacred or the privileged, so to speak. This assumption is of course intimately connected with the philosophical issues involving ideas such as the Regularity of Nature, the Principle of Causation (or of Sufficient Reason), and so on.

The philosophic merit or even the precise formulation of the symmetry assumption do not here directly concern us. What does concern us, once again, are its implications for equality. It confers a certain equality on facts, and it confers a similar obligatory equality on knowers. It requires explanation which do not respect status, and this lack of deference is infectious. Theories, ontologies, cannot be defended, with the terms of reference imposed by the Symmetry Assumption, by claims such as that certain facts or certain occasions or certain ideas or personal sources of ideas are exempt from scrutiny or contradiction by their extreme holiness. Belief systems of agrarian societies frequently contained symmetry-defying elements of this very kind, but science and the Symmetry Assumption tend to erode them.

This in itself is a kind of encouragement to egalitarianism, a kind of Demonstration Effect. But there is more to come. The Symmetry Assumption tends to engender a certain philosophical anthropology, most significantly exemplified by Kantianism. The central notion in Kantian ethics is symmetry or parity of treatment. But joined to this is a vision of man in which our real identity is tied to something

identical in all of us — our rationality — whereas the great empirical and social differentiae between us are relegated to a morally inferior realm. What makes us men is the same in all of us and real; what differentiates us lies in the realm of appearance.

A human ontology which strips us of our rank (along with many other things) may reflect protestant equality of believers, it may also reflect an emerging society in which professional status is supremely important and not hereditary, and it dovetails with a symmetrical vision of nature. In turn, it makes its contribution — perhaps just a rather minor one — to our pervasive egalitarianism.

Those who are imbued with the egalitarian ideal are naturally and properly preoccupied with the failures to implement it (which do occur in the various forms of industrial society). Yet in a broader context, what seems to me most striking is not these failures, but the seriousness and pervasiveness of the egalitarian ideal, and its partial implementation, which make industrial society so very eccentric amongst complex and literate societies. It seems to me important to try to understand why we have this passion and tendency (to the extent we do indeed have it, and it is not my view that there are no other and contrary trends). Arguments about equality, fairness, and justice, which tend to take egalitarianism for granted and make few attempts to seek its social roots, seem to me doomed to a certain superficiality. Hence I have attempted to see where its roots are to be sought.

Fontanill, August 1979

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