

From Equality of Opportunity to the Society of Equals

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Od rovných šancí k společnosti rovných

Abstract: Any attempt to reaffirm equality as a fundamental democratic value faces two tasks: it must respond to social and cultural changes accompanying the most recent phase of capitalist development, and it must reactivate the original context of the democratic transformation that brought equality to prominence, in close conjunction with other aspects of an innovative vision. At the outset, equality was interpreted in terms of “a world of similar human beings, a society of autonomous individuals, and a community of citizens”. In this context, equality was closely linked to liberty, but their interconnections were also open to historical changes. Later developments – including the shift to a more organized kind of capitalism, two world wars and the rise of a temporarily successful rival version of modernity – led to significant upgradings of equality. But during the past half-century, the case for equality has been undermined by historical trends. Mutations of the capitalist economy, on the level of organization as well as production, and the disappearance of a really existing alternative, lent support to a new type of individualism. Drawing on Simmel’s distinction between the individualism of similarity and the individualism of distinction, the present phase can be interpreted as a radicalization and democratization of the individualism of distinction into an individualism of singularity. A social-liberal strategy, aiming at a reconciliation of liberty and equality, must take this new individualism on board and understand it as a social relationship, thus maintaining critical distance from neo-liberal ideology.

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The 20th century way of reducing inequalities

The two principal classical means were: (1) the reduction of social risks (unemployment, disease, disabilities, and the loss of income deriving from such situations); (2) the limitation of income disparities.

The *reduction of social risks* derived from the introduction of the welfare state as a system of social insurance. Ever since the 18th century (and the French revolution), the major problem had been reconciling the *principle of solidarity* (society has a debt towards its members) with the *principle of responsibility* (each individual is master of his own life and must take control of himself), and linking rights with behavior, as it were. The solution was not self-evident. In fact, the limitation of the right to public aid initially presupposed that the sphere of application of individual responsibility could be clearly identified in social life. What happened was quite the opposite: industrial economic development progressively demonstrated the limits of a system of social regulation solely governed by the principles of individual responsibility and contract. In the area of responsibility, it became

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increasingly difficult to discern what could be imputed to the individual and what depended on other factors.

Considering some individual situations (unemployment, disease, disabilities) as *risks* changed the way they were considered. They were transformed into social problems. The mechanisms of the welfare state regarded such risks as statistical facts. As such, they could be calculated and treated through insurance mechanisms. It was included, above all, in a process of socialization of responsibility.

The *reduction of income disparities*, on the other hand, had been related to the characteristics of modern firms after World War II. In such firms, wrote Galbraith in his *Modern Capitalism* [1965], “power had passed ineluctably and irrevocably from the individual to the group”. This observation was crucial to his description of what might be called the “de-individualization” of power and the socialization of responsibility. For the author of *The New Industrial State*, this transfer of power to the organization had a number of implications. First, it reflected the disappearance of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur: “The entrepreneur no longer exists as an individual person in the mature industrial enterprise.” The technostructure, a veritable collective mind, had replaced him. The advent of this impersonal power also reflected the fact that the success of the firm depended more on the quality of its organization and the pertinence of its management procedures than on the exceptional talents of this or that individual. It could therefore perform quite well even though staffed by perfectly ordinary people. The point is important enough to warrant another quote: “The real accomplishment of modern science and technology consists in taking quite ordinary men, informing them narrowly and deeply, and then, through appropriate organization, arranging to have their knowledge combined with that of other specialized but equally ordinary men. This dispenses with the need for genius. The resulting performance, though less inspiring, is far more predictable.” Talent was thus taken down from its pedestal.

For Galbraith, these changes meant that the role of the firm’s CEO was reduced to that of just another cog in the machinery of the organization. The socialization of responsibility and productivity due to this type of organization changed the nature of the social question, in Galbraith’s view. The productive efficiency of the system inevitably redistributed wealth and reduced inequality. The lot of the individual benefited from what were seen as collective achievements. No one could claim these accomplishments as his own. Executives were better paid than workers, of course, but only within the framework of a functional hierarchy of skills (and recall, by way of illustration, that Peter Drucker stated at the time that the pay ratio between the top executive and the humblest worker should be no greater than 20:1). The structure of industrial relations and of collective bargaining also played a major role.

These two factors were consolidated by historical, political and economical elements:

- (1) *The reformism of fear*. After World War I as well as World War II the fear of communism pushed towards social reform and redistribution liberal or conservative governments in Europe. To quote Emile de Girardin: “We must choose between a fiscal revolution and a social revolution.”
- (2) *The implicit reformulation of the social contract following the world wars*. The experience of World War I thus marked a decisive turning point in democratic modernity. It restored the idea of a society of *semblables* in a direct, palpable way. It revived the oldest

meaning of the idea of equality, captured by the Greek word *omoioi*. The first sense of the epithet *omoios* applied to *polemos*, or combat: it characterized a battle “that is equal for all, that spares no one”. The *omoioi* were therefore equals in the sense that they had fought together, had experienced the common lot of the soldier in battle. World War I not only demonstrated this aspect of equality through the fraternal experience of combat but also publicly validated it in all combatant countries through the organization of national funerals to honor the “unknown soldier” fallen on the field of battle. The cult of the unknown soldier was carefully staged to heighten its symbolic significance, attesting to the importance bestowed on the humblest citizen as representative of the entire nation. The anonymity of the unknown soldier expressed in exemplary fashion the idea of radical equality, of strictly equivalent value: the most obscure individual embodied what was best in everyone and became the ultimate measure of the social order. In 1918, *everyman* became the incarnation of the social individual. Fraternity in combat and the commemoration of sacrifice are complex phenomena, but they helped to pave the way to greater social solidarity. The benefits awarded to veterans led to a general reconsideration of social benefits and other redistributive transfers.

- (3) *The pace of economic growth after World War II in Europe*. An annual growth of 5% until the mid 70’s also produced resources for redistribution and reduction of inequalities.

The great reversal

The elements of context (reversed on every point) are: (1) reduced growth: the 30 years boom after World War II belongs to the past; (2) the end of the reformism of fear: the new politics of fear is destructive of solidarity (e.g. immigration ...); (3) absence of strong collective experiences, growing individualism. The result of these elements is *société d'éloignement*, or a distanced society.

The notion of risk no longer has the previous capacity to understand in a single way social problems. For three reasons:

- a) *The nature of social problems*. Phenomena of exclusion, such as long-term unemployment, unfortunately often define *stable conditions*. Thus we move from an unpredictable and circumstantial approach of “social breakdowns” to a more deterministic view, in which situations of breakdown cannot easily be reversed. Because of that, a whole selection of the population is no longer part of the world of insurance and there are new forms of economic insecurity, no longer only the loss of income.
- b) *New types of risk*. The notion of risk is certainly still relevant. But it has changed its scale, as has been correctly emphasized. An increasingly serious problem today is *catastrophic risk*: natural risks (floods, earthquakes), major technological accidents, large-scale damage to the environment. These threats no longer concern individuals, but entire populations, even nations. The distribution of the risks undertaken by insurance can no longer be operative in this case, as was realized clearly when the issue involved finding an adequate framework to compensate victims of natural catastrophes.
- c) *The return of the centrality of the idea of individual responsibility*. The return of the importance of personal behavior in a situation. The veil of ignorance (as John Rawls called it) that accompanied the social contract is now irreparably torn. From now on,

we shall have to rethink solidarity, with clearer knowledge of the situation and chances of each individual. The accepted norms of justice will have to be defined in the direct encounter between groups and individuals. The exercise of solidarity will become more directly political; it will be identified with the formulation of the social contract itself.

Today, a new force of disintegration is invisibly at work in the progress of information and will inevitably affect the universe of social insurance. The acceptance of solidarity is now beginning to be accompanied by a demand for control over personal behavior. The smoker will soon be required to choose between his vice and the right to equal access to care, and the alcoholic will be threatened with payment of social surcharges. As the social cost of individual attitudes appears more distinctly, solidarity and freedom will part company. The decline of the insuring society is also manifested in this way.

For these three reasons the very bases and the scope of the “insurance society” have been very seriously damaged. Solidarity now means more often *assistance* than *insurance*.

The former *capitalism of organization* on the other hand has been profoundly transformed. The capitalism that began to emerge in the 1980s differed from earlier forms of organized capitalism in two ways. First, its relation to the market changed, as did the role assigned to stockholders. Second, labor was organized new way. Fordist organization, based on the mobilization of large masses of workers, gave way to a new emphasis on the creative abilities of individuals. Creativity thus became the principal factor of production. Phrases such as “cognitive capitalism” and “productive subjectivity” were coined to describe this change. *Quality* has thus become a central feature of the new economy, marking a sharp break with the previous economy of quantity. Work routines have consequently become more diverse and product offerings more varied.

In such a context the previous version of a socialized system of production have given way to the vision of an addition of personal contributions. The old idea of the centrality of organization has been replaced by the centrality of individual energies.

On the other hand, the mode of production in the new capitalism of singularity was shaped by the economics of permanent innovation. The Schumpeterian entrepreneurs returned. Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that the list of leading firms in the major industrial countries remained relatively constant from 1950 to 1980. Some firms on this list were decades old. During the 1990s, however, the hierarchy underwent considerable change. In the United States alone, the leading firms in terms of stock-market capitalization were relative newcomers such as Microsoft, Apple, and Oracle, while many once-giant firms had disappeared. The industrial and financial landscape was transformed everywhere, and this further accelerated the shift to new modes of organization and labor mobilization.

These changes, which precipitated a crisis in societies ruled by the spirit of equality as redistribution, also had sociological and ideological dimensions. They justified more individualized salaries and huge differences if considered as grounded on strict individual contribution (e.g. the pay of world-class football players). *Unearned* income has been criticized, but not *earned* income.

The result of such (for a long time) invisible and progressive transformations is now plainly visible with the “results” in terms of inequalities and the fact that the very idea of equality has entered a deep crisis.

That’s where we are at today.

What are the options? Three are on the table

The first is the populist one. It is a return to the evils of the late 19th century, at the time of the first globalization, namely: aggressive nationalism, xenophobia, protectionism, understood as answers to unbridled capitalism. National protectionism was then sustained by a purely negative vision of equality. Barrès put it bluntly: “The idea of ‘fatherland’ implies a kind of inequality, but to the detriment of foreigners.” In other words, the goal was to bring (some) people closer together by exploiting a relationship of inequality. This negative equality in relation to outsiders was reinforced in Barrès’s mind by the desire to organize another community of the rejected, this one internal rather than external: namely, “the crowd of little people”, humble capitalists and workers united in opposition to the “big barons” and “feudal lords”.

National protectionism reduced the idea of equality to the single dimension of community membership, which was itself reduced to a negative definition (“not foreign”). Indeed, the constitution of an identity always needs a demarcation, a separation, a mirroring effect of some sort. But identity must be linked to a properly positive idea of shared existence to produce a democratic sentiment of membership. This is what distinguished the revolutionary nation of 1789 from the nationalist nation of the late nineteenth century. The former was associated with the formation of a society of equals, but the latter conceived of integration solely in the non-political mode of fusion of individuals to form an homogeneous bloc.

The second option is nostalgic politics, asking for a revival of civic republicanism and/or of the past values and institutions of former social-democracies. The late Tony Judt recently pleaded for such a reaction in his book-testimony *Ill Fares the Land*. Although there is a great nobility in such a vision, it unfortunately doesn’t take seriously enough the irreversible character of the individualism of singularity, not to be confused with individualism as selfishness and atomism. The crucial point is that the great reversal is not the consequence of a *broken contract* or of *moral depravity*. It derives from historical and political factors as well as structured transformations affecting the mode of production and the nature of the social bond. Neo-liberalism has, at present, been the main active *interpretation* of such changes. To neo-liberalism, market society and the perspective of generalized competition as accomplishment of modernity is considered as the desirable form of humanity and of personal achievement. But neo-liberalism should not be mis-interpreted. It is not only a victorious and negative ideology. It is a perverse *instrumentalisation* of singularity. As an example, modern firms use singularity as a means of production without any consideration for the self-realization of workers. Hence new types of social conflicts about respect and moral harassment. The problem is that critiques of neo-liberalism very often neglect the positive aspiration to singularity and that they do not take into account the fact that it profoundly modifies judgments as to the viable forms of equality as well as the tolerable forms of inequality.

Nostalgic politics is in fact not viable for two main reasons: Firstly, there is no return to the preceding capitalism of organization. An economy driven by innovation is now irreversible. This is different from the necessary denunciation of financial capitalism: this one can and should be reversed.

Second, if unbridled individualism, in the moral sense of selfishness and of a decline in civic values, should be criticized and reversed, they are also elements recognized as

positive in the contemporary movement of individualization. We have to consider a striking paradox: the new age of inequality and diminished solidarity has also been a time of heightened awareness of social discrimination and tolerance of many kinds of difference. The picture is contradictory, to say the least, and while some ground has been lost, there have been undeniable advances in regard to the status of women, acceptance of differences of sexual orientation, and individual rights generally. If we want to understand recent changes in our societies, we must take note of all of these divergent tendencies. One way to do this is to look at the *internal* transformation in the “society of individuals”. This did not suddenly appear at the end of the twentieth century. For more than two centuries it has formed the framework within which modern institutions have developed. Succinctly put, what we need to understand is the transition from an individualism of universality to an individualism of singularity.

Revolutionary individualism does not refer to a social state or moral fact. As we saw earlier, the term did not appear in the revolutionary period. It describes the constitution of man as both legal subject – the bearer of rights guaranteeing freedom of thought and action, property, and autonomy – and political subject, sharing in sovereignty through exercise of the right to vote. The term therefore defined a way of making society, a novel approach to creating a social and political order in place of the old corporatist and absolutist order. Revolutionary individualism was therefore intimately related to the idea of equality and recognition of human similarity. It characterized a relational form, a type of social bond, and not the condition of a single social atom taken in isolation. Georg Simmel used the phrase *individualism of similarity* to describe in general terms the tendency of European societies in the eighteenth century. His point was that the aspiration to autonomy and liberty was intimately related to a universalist egalitarian ethos. The individualist perspective, he argued, “rested on the assumption that individuals freed of social and historical fetters would turn out to be essentially similar to one another”. In this context, liberty and equality were overlapping values. Once imposed orders, disciplines, and structures were removed, individuals would be able to assert themselves fully as human beings. Everyone would become “a man *tout court*”.

Besides such a social consideration of individualism, individualism also had a psychological dimension. But it was only most fully and recognizably achieved in the artistic realm. Artists defined their identity in terms of dissidence from the common run of mankind. They turned away from a bourgeois society defined by conformism, that is, by the bourgeois class's inability to exist other than as a prisoner of its own narrow objectives and lack of imagination. Artists also stood apart from the supposedly gregarious masses, which they took to be slaves of immediate self-interest and unreflective passions.

This *individualism of distinction* was the precursor of today's *individualism of singularity*. The present individualism of singularity can be seen as a generalization of the individualism of distinction. Distinction became commonplace and lost its elitist connotations: in short, it was “democratized”. This process inaugurated a new phase in human emancipation, defined by the desire to achieve a fully personalized existence. Its advent was closely related to the growth in the complexity and heterogeneity of social life and therefore to changes in the nature of capitalism. At a deeper level, it was also linked to the fact that the life of each individual is now shaped more by personal history than by personal condition.

It has also provoked a new consideration of the idea of responsibility. The *neo-liberal* mantra and *new managers* have taken into account such transformations but they have *used, turned around, and manipulated* them.

The point is that the progressive stand has to take into account what is positive in this new individualism of singularity, and to denounce the kind of *utilitarian reductionism* that is now at work.

The third option can be labelled as the social-liberal one. It takes into account the transformations I mentioned (this is a positive point) and proposes as a new progressive approach/solution a radicalization of the notion of *equality of opportunity*. In political terms, the so-called third way made of it a political ideology, when the development of the former theories of justice, known as *luck egalitarianism* proposed an intellectual model for it. For a good understanding of such a conception, we have first to consider traditional definitions of equality of opportunity.

The first is the *legal* one, which is also a negative one. During the French revolutionary period, equality of opportunity was understood in such negative terms: it was identified with the elimination of privileges and legal or corporate barriers to social mobility. By incorporating this program, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen gave a minimalist definition of equal opportunity by establishing a legal framework of equal rights. All careers were formally opened to talent and virtue, but the social and cultural inequalities that determine each individual's actual starting point (and which are essentially inherited through the family) were ignored.

The second is the *social* one, with three possible dimensions: institutional, corrective, statistical. With this in mind, the notion of equality of opportunity was expanded to eliminate such distortions. We might then speak of *social* (as opposed to legal) *equality of opportunity*. There are essentially two ways of implementing this. The first is institutional, with the goal being to create an artificial environment from which existing sociocultural differences have been eliminated and in which the ordinary rules of society do not apply.

From the beginning this was the project of the republican schools. These were meant to be open to all and to create the equivalent of an ideal counter-society, a "classless micro-society". The rules under which the schools functioned were intended to arrive at an objective classification of individual students based solely on their personal attributes. The hope was to achieve an *institutional equality of opportunity*.

A second way of neutralizing sociocultural differences was also envisaged. The intention was to compensate for initial handicaps afflicting certain individuals and groups. We can describe this as *corrective equality of opportunity* – an instrumental approach. There are many ways to design correctives for inherited social and cultural inequalities. All involve selective or adaptive distribution: of human capital endowments (Gösta Esping-Andersen), of cash (asset-based welfare), of primary goods (rights and material goods for John Rawls), of resources (Ronald Dworkin), of capabilities (Amartya Sen), of means of access (to institutions, networks, or help for Gerald Cohen). Recent theories of justice have placed particular emphasis on this point, seeking the best ways to achieve the ideal of equalizing the conditions under which individuals compete in a fair contest for meritocratic rewards.

Equality of opportunity is most commonly related to conditions early in an individual's life. But discrimination also occurs later in life, reducing the likelihood that members of certain groups will arrive at certain desirable positions. "Glass ceilings" of one sort or

another exist owing to a variety of handicaps that distort social relations. The result is not institutional discrimination but discrimination as a social fact, reflected in statistical measurements, such as career disparities between men and women, denial of certain posts to women, or ethnic discrimination in hiring. The law and the courts can help to remedy such discrimination when the facts are clear, but there is also a need for more general social remedies. Efforts in this direction fall under the head of *statistical equality of opportunity*.

The *radical version of equality of opportunity* proposed a unified and global approach to the concept. Two views, in the writings of Ronald Dworkin and Gerald Cohen, paved the way for a new horizon: (1) an active radical version: a true equality of opportunities, a logic of constitution; (2) an indirect radical version: choice/circumstances, a logic of compensation (taking into account the notion of responsibility).

Dworkin pushed the idea of compensated meritocracy quite a long way. He even argued that because “natural” talents are individual resources, those who do not have them should be adequately compensated for their lack. His work was praised by many who believed that both an intellectual and political response had to be found to critiques that accused the redistributive welfare state of encouraging passivity and reliance on welfare assistance.

The Marxist analytical philosopher Gerald Cohen took the argument a step further, however, by treating the distinction between choice and chance as a criterion for distinguishing between acceptable inequalities and differences calling for corrective policy interventions. Following Cohen, a number of authors laid the foundations of what has been called “luck egalitarianism”. This radical version of equality of opportunity insists on neutralizing all consequences that can be ascribed to chance in the broadest sense of the term. Rather than emphasize the positive consequences of individual choices, which are always difficult to establish, they accentuate the negative, arguing that anything that is not clearly attributable to individual effort should be subject to compensatory redistribution.

There are three limits to such a view. The first is a *paradoxical* one. This radical version of equality of opportunity is intellectually appealing but unsustainable in practice, because its conceptual underpinnings are paradoxical. If all consequences of chance and circumstance must be compensated, the range of policies to correct potential handicaps is subject to unlimited expansion. Virtually nothing is the result of a pure choice. Each of our actions and decisions is informed by social factors and therefore subject to a variety of deterministic mechanisms. Luck egalitarianism also relies, paradoxically, on an idealized view of the individual and individual responsibility. On the one hand it advocates extreme “generosity” on the part of the redistributive state, but on the other hand it is strictly unmoved by the consequences of choices deemed to be authentically personal, no matter how devastating. For a luck egalitarian, it can be just for an individual to ruin her life because she makes a tiny error of judgment. One sees this asymmetry clearly in some of the examples proposed by John Roemer, one of the principal proponents of this view. If a person is run over by a truck in a marked crosswalk, he argues, it is just for him to be indemnified, but if the same person is run over after “choosing” to cross the street elsewhere, he must bear the consequences of his decision. Here, then, the choice/chance distinction has resulted in a step backward with respect to the historical trend toward greater socialization of responsibility. What we have here is a combination of “progressive sociology” with “conservative ontology”.

To base a theory of equality of opportunity solely on the distinction between voluntary and involuntary behavior is also likely to generate social distrust. The effect would be to cause people to pay closer attention to the behavior of others, who would then become objects of resentment, stigmatization, or suspicion. Distributive justice would enter into fatal conflict with social ethics. It is in fact inapplicable.

The second limit is a *sociological* one. If we adopt the radical approach, *individuals have to be de-socialized* in order to treat them as true equals. A case in point: the French revolutionary Michel Le Peletier proposed to create schools based on meritocratic ideals. In his 1793 report, he referred to these schools as “houses of equality”. The idea was to take young children between the ages of five and twelve away from their families. This was believed to be the crucial period for shaping young minds. At school, “in accordance with the sacred law of equality”, all would be given “the same clothes, the same food, the same instruction, and the same care”, so that “only talent and virtue” would set them apart, as meritocracy required. The family, which otherwise would shape the destinies of these children, was thus designated as the enemy of equal opportunity. This idea justified the republican goal of creating “schools of opportunity”, but the practice fell far short of this ambitious ideal.

The problem of inheritance in a democratic system was understood in similar terms. Here, too, the initial concern was to enhance equality of opportunity by reducing the material basis for the reproduction of inequality.

In France, the Saint-Simoniens proposed in this direction the suppression of inheritance. In America, Thomas Jefferson favored heavy taxation of bequests in order to prevent the reproduction of inequality and the emergence of a caste of rentiers. In his work, the word “inheritance” was often linked to “feudalism” and “aristocracy”, and he believed that landed property had to be subdivided constantly in order to preserve a government of liberty and equality. In 1778, he sponsored a Virginia law that granted 75 acres of land to all residents of the state. In his eyes, a democratic society belonged to the living; the dead played no role. Inheritance empowered the past, transforming once legitimate differences into unacceptable inequalities.

The only way that an individual could be made fully responsible for his own achievement was thus to eliminate the influence of his family through education and limitation of inheritance. Ultimately he would then become a child of society alone. Ideally, however, he would also have to be divorced from his history, or be allowed to start his history over at any time. This problem stemmed from the idea that initial positions also had to be equalized. Life is such that there is no true initial position, because each individual situation is constrained in various ways by what came before. To envision *permanent equality of opportunity* was therefore a contradiction in terms: there would be no opportunity to seize or effort to make if outcomes were equalized at every turn. Equality of opportunity would then be reduced to simple economic equality. Here is yet another way that equality of opportunity fails to establish a theory of justice. The idea wavers constantly between two extremes: pure social equality and simple equality of rights. It may serve as a guide for specific reforms but cannot point the way to a true social philosophy.

The third limit is a *political* one. A society subject to the meritocratic principle alone would be rigidly hierarchical. This was the society envisioned by the Saint-Simoniens. They went farther than others in making the elimination of inheritance and destruction of the

family central tenets of their doctrine. They never tired of repeating the slogan “Shame on hereditary idleness! Honor merit and work!” Saint-Simonians were committed to a society strictly organized around abilities, which they believed to be objectively and hierarchically ranked. Prosper Enfantin went so far as to say that Saint-Simon’s followers “believe in *natural inequality* among men and regard such inequality as the very basis of association, the indispensable condition of social order”.

A hundred years later, Tawney criticized the Saint-Simonian position for offering “equal opportunities to become unequal”. And Young in his *Rise of Meritocracy* painted a very dark portrait of meritocracy in which the old aristocracy of birth was supplanted by a new aristocracy of talent that was even more oppressive because it believed its ascendancy to be justified on the most impeccable grounds. Indeed, the more fully the program of radical equality of opportunity is achieved, the more strictly hierarchical the result: this is another impasse to which the doctrine leads.

Theories of equality of opportunity can and should serve as a basis for *policies* of reduction of inequalities, they can inspire corrective actions, but are incapable of establishing a general social theory. For the reasons I mentioned, but also because at the end they consider the form and legitimacy of inter-individual differences and have nothing to say about social structure in itself. That is why we need a positive theory of social equality representing a fourth avenue.

The society of equals

What we need is a new model of solidarity and integration in an age of singularity. If more redistribution is clearly needed today, it has to be relegitimated. How? Through a redefinition of equality with a universalist dimension. That is to say a return to the revolutionary vision, in France and in the United States, of equality as a *social relation*, and not as an arithmetic measure. Equality was then understood primarily as a relation, as a way of making a society, of producing and living in common. It was seen as a democratic quality and not only a measure of the distribution of wealth. This relational idea of equality was articulated in connection with three other notions: similarity, independence, and citizenship. Similarity comes under the head of *equality as equivalence*: to be “alike” is to have the same essential properties, such that remaining differences do not affect the character of the relationship. Independence is *equality as autonomy*; it is defined negatively as the absence of subordination and positively as equilibrium in exchange. Citizenship involves *equality as participation*, which is constituted by community membership and civic activity. Consequently, the project of equality as relationship was interpreted in terms of a *world* of like human beings (or *semblables*, as Tocqueville would say), a *society* of autonomous individuals, and a *community* of citizens. Equality was thus conceived in terms of the relative position of individuals, the rules governing their interactions, and the principles on which their life in common was based, and these concepts in turn corresponded to three possible representations of the social bond. The rights of man, the market, and universal suffrage were the underlying institutions. Economic inequalities were seen as acceptable in this framework only if they did not threaten the other modes of relational equality that defined the society of equals. These representations, which were formulated in a precapitalist world, were undermined by the industrial revolution, which initiated the first great

crisis of equality. In order to overcome the second great crisis, we must recapture the original spirit of equality in a form suitable to the present age.

Today the principles of singularity, reciprocity, and commonality can restore the idea of a society of equals and revive the project of creating one. It is these principles that must serve as the basis of legitimacy for new policies of redistribution. Realizing a society of equals in such a direction should be the new name for social progress with a *universalistic dimension*. Today, this is a crucial point, we are in need of a universalistic approach to rebuild solidarity. Because the so-called “social question” is not only about minorities, poverty and exclusion, it is also about the reconstruction of a common world for the whole society.

The society of equals as a society of singularities

The aspiration to singularity can take shape only in the individual’s relation to others. If the meaning of a person’s life lies in his difference from others, then he must coexist with them. It is important, however, to distinguish between singularity and autonomy or identity. Autonomy is defined by a *positional* variable and essentially static. Identity is defined by *constitutional* variables; a composite quality, it is basically given, although it may evolve over time. By contrast, singularity is defined by a *relational* variable; it is not a state. The difference that defines singularity binds a person to others; it does not set him apart. It arouses in others curiosity, interest, and a desire to understand. Equality of singularities does not imply “sameness”. Rather, each individual seeks to stand out by virtue of the unique qualities that he or she alone possesses. The existence of diversity then becomes the standard of equality. Each individual seeks his or her own path and control over his or her history. Everyone is similar by dint of being incomparable.

This form of equality defines a type of society whose mode of composition is neither abstract universalism nor identity-based communitarianism but rather the dynamic construction and recognition of particularity. This shift has significant implications. First, it suggests that individuals now seek to participate in society on the basis of their distinctive rather than common characteristics. The value of singularity is thus directly social. Singularity is not a sign of withdrawal from society (individualism as retreat or separation). Rather, it signals an expectation of reciprocity, of mutual recognition. This marks the advent of a fully democratic age: the basis of society lies not in nature but solely in a shared philosophy of equality. It follows, moreover, that democracy as a type of political regime is no longer distinct from democracy as a form of society.

One central element of such a democratic society of singularities is gender equality. The problem is the fitness of men and women to live together as equals. Men and women do not exist separately at first only to enter into communication later on. Relation is the very condition of their existence. They are “individuals in relation”, whether as cooperators or competitors. Indeed, they constitute the best possible example of an equality of singularities. “In gender difference,” Étienne Balibar suggestively argues, “we are dealing with a supplementary singularity. (...) Equality here is not neutralization of differences (equalization) but a necessary and sufficient condition of the diversification of freedom.” Precisely so. Gender relations are thus the most powerful expression of the individualism of singularity. The question of women’s rights was first of all a question of their *relation* to men and not simply of their possession of certain attributes.

The gender distinction is fundamental to a deeper understanding of the egalitarian ideal and a laboratory for exploring ways to intertwine similarity and singularity ever more closely. Republican abstractions must therefore be viewed with a skeptical eye, as must the idea that gender distinctions will ultimately disappear.

The principle of reciprocity

Tocqueville placed great stress on the idea that selfishness is “to societies what rust is to metal”. Today, one might say that the absence of reciprocity is the most important source of corrosion. Many studies have shown that political commitment is conditional, depending on how individuals perceive the commitment of others. More specifically, people are more likely to contribute to collective projects or expenditures if they believe that other citizens feel the same way. Conversely, any perceived disruption of reciprocity can lead to withdrawal in one form or another. Inequality is most acutely felt when citizens believe that rules apply differently to different people or when they see intolerable differences in the way different individuals are treated by certain institutions. They resent the double standard and the sense that they alone are “playing by the rules” while others find a way to circumvent those same rules for their own advantage. Richard Sennett has noted “modern society’s hatred of parasitism”. Sentiments such as these are a crucial source of social distrust, which in turn undermines the legitimacy of the welfare state and fosters aversion to taxes. Other consequences include the increasing prevalence of insurance fraud and tolerance of petty corruption, as if these transgressions were justifiable compensation for perceived imbalances. Distrust thus leads to generalized resentment and erosion of the public spirit.

If the breakdown of reciprocity is the driving force behind the rise of social distrust and therefore of resistance to greater solidarity, no task is more urgent than to restore reciprocity as a first step toward a society of equals. Two things are needed: a redesign of the mechanisms of solidarity and a return to universalistic policies. In order to separate fantasy from reality when it comes to unequal treatment of individuals and groups, we first need to gain a better understanding of the facts. Equality as reciprocity means above all equality of treatment and involvement. Unless situational inequalities are clearly established, the fantasy machine is free to wreak havoc. Fiscal and social statistics must therefore be made transparent if democratic debate is to be fair and productive. Abuse of the welfare and tax systems must be vigorously opposed in order to maintain confidence in these institutions.

Commonality

Civil citizenship and the notion of human rights that goes along with it have reshaped the very idea of the individual. But citizenship is also a social form. The citizen is not merely an individual endowed with certain rights; he is also defined by his relation to others, his *fellow citizens*. What Émile Benveniste tells us about the etymology of the word *civis* is especially enlightening in this regard. The Latin *civis*, he argues, was originally a term applied to people who shared the same habitat. Implicit in the meaning of the word was a certain idea of reciprocity. It was thus a term of relative order, as can be seen by comparison with the root of the Sanskrit and Germanic words for friend, relative, and ally. The *civis*

was a person who joined with his peers in the construction of a *civitas*, a common society. I propose the term “commonality” as a name for this dimension of citizenship, citizenship as a social form, as distinct from its legal definition.

Commonality is today under serious attack with the development of various forms of social separation, the secession of the rich being the most visible and shameful one. But regional separatisms are also everywhere on the rise in Europe. It could be said in that respect that a process of *denationalization* of democracies is on its way (nation defined as a space of social redistribution in the context of an experience of limited universalism).

What goes with such transformation is the temptation to replace equality with homogeneity. Homogeneity is today the driving force behind populist movements. What democracy needs in the age of denationalization is a more active, creative concept, a more complex understanding of the common, encompassing three primary dimensions: participation, mutual comprehension, and circulation.

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