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1996 Annual Meeting Highlights

Equality versus Inequality[1]

Robert A. Dahl, *Yale University*

Human beings are fundamentally equal from a moral point of view. They are not, and never have been, fully equal from a descriptive, factual, or empirical point of view. For some of us equality in its moral meaning is a goal, an aim, an ideal, a hope, an aspiration, an obligation. The goal is never fully attained nor is it likely to be. Egalitarian goals and aspirations confront stubborn human limitations.

Yet in a few times and places in recorded history, conditions have ennabled certain groups of human beings to move closer to some egalitarian goals. History also records that these rare, though limited, triumphs were succeeded by epochs of dreadful and pervasive inequalities. The conditions that made the Athenian democracy and the Roman Republic possible were superseded by conditions that instead fostered hierarchy and despotism.

In the opening pages of *Democracy in America* (1961), Tocqueville described the gradual and inexorable advance of equality of conditions "throughout the whole of Christendom" as "a providential fact . . . [that] . . . possesses all the characteristics of a Divine decree: it is universal, it is durable, it constantly eludes all human interference, and all events as well as all men contribute to its progress." Were he to look back today over the intervening period he would conclude that his youthful vision was not far off the mark. Whether or not the trajectory Tocqueville envisioned will continue through the next century, I cannot say. My aim instead is to describe in very general terms some of the dynamics of equality and inequality, and to assess briefly the play of forces pushing in the two opposing directions in our own time, particularly the forces of democracy and capitalism.

Some Assumptions

As Douglas Rae (1981) and his associates have shown, equalities and inequalities come in almost uncountable varieties. Though I shall not employ the rigorous grammar Rae proposes, I am going to restrict the subject considerably by focusing exclusively on *political* equality. Let me explain why. The moral perspective on equality has several components. One is a belief that all human beings are of equal intrinsic worth; that no person is intrinsically superior to another; and that in making collective decisions, the good or interests of each person should be given equal consideration. Insuring that the interests of each are given equal consideration in turn requires that every adult member of an association be entitled to participate in making collective and binding decisions affecting that person's good or interests. This principle in its turn requires political equality, which can be achieved only in a fully democratic political system.[2]

Although others might not describe their own beliefs about equality in just these ways, I imagine that many of you hold beliefs at least roughly akin to mine. If so, like me you are constantly reminded of the profound conflict between your goals and ideals and the facts of human experience. Intrinsic equality, strong equality, political equality, democracy: these are tough standards to live by. It is no wonder that they are never fully attained.

Even if it is impossible to achieve complete political equality or a fully democratic system, these goals can be approached to a lesser or greater extent. An enduring question is, therefore, whether greater political equality and a more fully democratic system might be attained, and if so, how.

The extent to which political equality and democracy are attainable depends, among other things, on the *distribution of access to political resources* and the willingness to employ them to achieve one's goals. Whatever can be used among a specific collection of people to influence the decisions of a government, particularly the government of a state, is a political resource. Almost anything that possesses value in a given society can sometimes be used as a political resource: money, wealth, social standing, honor, reputation, legal status, knowledge, cognitive abilities, information, coercive capacities, organizations, means of communication, "connections" (the famous "guanxi" in China), the capability of withholding valuable goods or services, and more.

In any given society, access to political resources by an individual or a group appears to be dependent on at least five major factors. These factors provide the possibilities and lay down the limits for attaining political equality in that society.

Limits and Possibilities

1. Luck

An obvious and yet too often overlooked factor of great importance is sheer luck. To take just one example, luck is a notorious factor in that ancient scourge of humankind, war and battle. Luck plays a part in determining which side wins and loses, which side writes history, and even more in determining who survives and who does not. In the ancient world and in medieval Europe if you were lucky enough to emerge from battle with your life, you could still lose your freedom. A captured enemy frequently became the captor's slave—though it might just as well have come out the other way around.

Extreme cases, you will say. But consider: The life chances of every human being are enormously dependent on the contingencies of birth. Who among us chose the circumstances, time, place, parents, genetic endowment, class or caste, ethnic group or race, country, or world region into which to be born? Over much of human history for most human beings birth was destiny. You may readily imagine the reversal of fate that would have resulted if the infant of an American slave (who, let us suppose for the sake of plausibility, had a great deal of white ancestry) could have been exchanged at birth with the master's own legitimate child. This was precisely the theme of Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Though the novel lacks the literary qualities that might have conveyed Twain's moral outrage more effectively, I recommend it to anyone who resists the mental experiment I just suggested.

If birth is destiny in some societies, in others life-chances are less fully determined at birth. Fortunately, life-chances need not be decisively set by the luck of the draw. As we know, all democratic countries take steps to insure a less unequal distribution of access to certain political resources. Yet even in modern democratic countries, birth generally confers initial advantages and disadvantages that often tend to become cumulative. I'll come back to this point shortly.

2. Human Propensities

Although modern democratic countries make some efforts to equalize life chances—some countries, it should be said, make a great deal more effort than others—even they necessarily operate within a range of limits and possibilities, some of which are set at any given moment by prior history and institutions and others by certain human propensities.

In earlier times it was commonplace to express confident judgments about essential human nature; and in many quarters it still is. But today we know both too little and too much about human beings to speak confidently about human nature. I would hazard the guess that in the next half century more will be learned about certain bedrock aspects of human nature than several thousand years of speculation and assumption have provided up to now. For better or for worse, genetics, chemistry, neurology, neurobiology, and other sciences are unlocking certain secrets of human beings at such breath-taking speed that it is impossible to foresee just how human nature will be understood a few generations down the road.

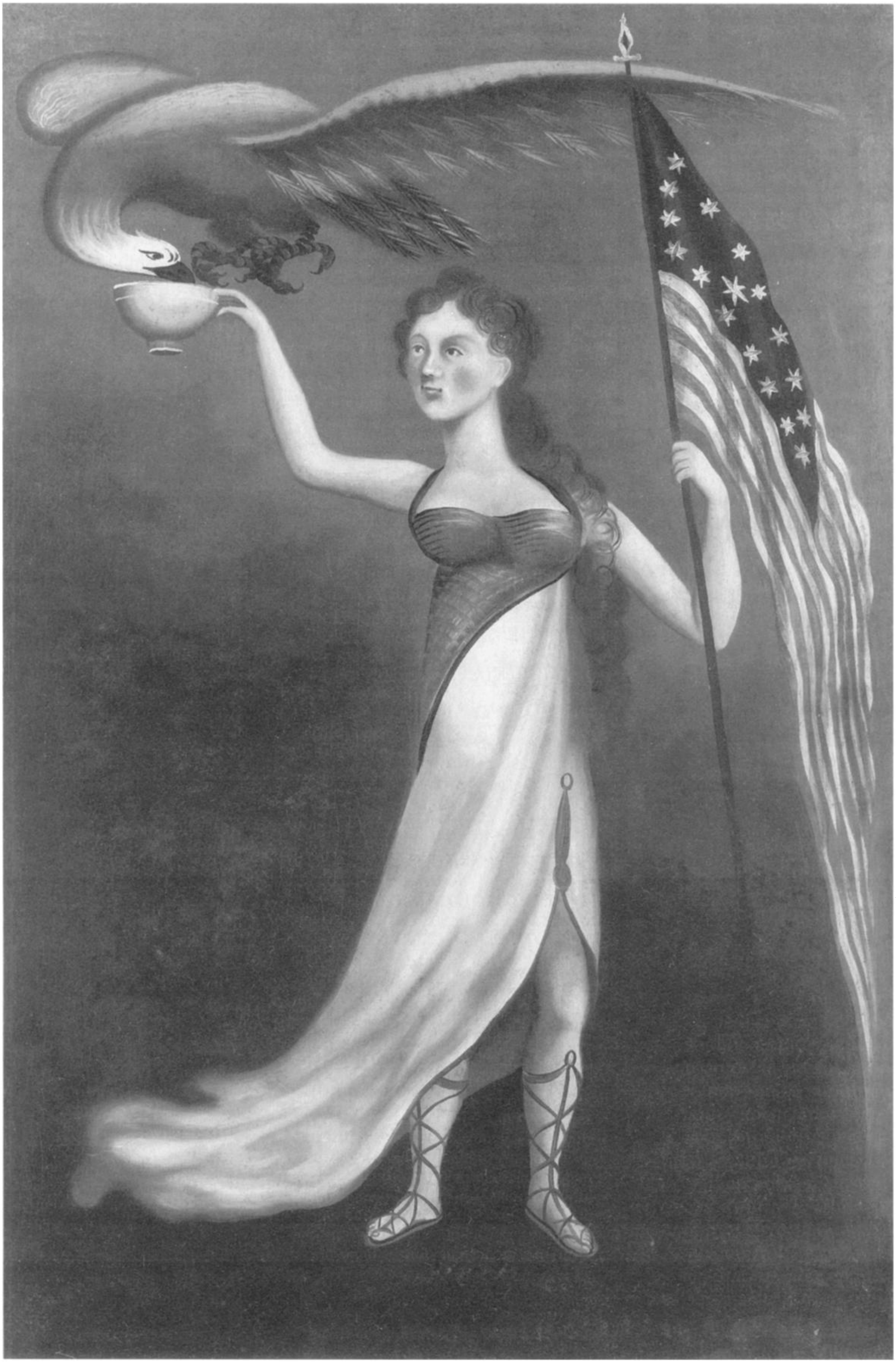
The extent to which political equality and democracy are attainable depends, among other things, on the distribution of access to political resources *and the willingness to employ them to achieve one's goals.*

That said, let me suggest two general human propensities that bear on the possibilities of political equality, one positive, the other negative. It seems to me a reasonable conjecture that both are byproducts of the long early history of humankind. Judged on an evolutionary scale, human beings and their ancestors have lived together in very tiny groups almost until yesterday. Current scholarly estimates allow us to assume that our ancestral hominids have been around for not less than about four million years, give or take several hundred thousand. *Homo sapiens* showed up around half a million years ago and evolved about two hundred thousand years ago into modern *homo sapiens* (sometimes extravagantly called *homo sapiens sapiens*), or, in short, us. If you want to know what *homo sapiens sapiens* looked like in basic essentials a hundred thousand years ago, just look at yourself in a mirror.

If we think of the span of hominid existence as a day, then we, *homo sapiens sapiens*, have been around for a little more than an hour of that day. Until the last several minutes, the members of our species spent the whole of their lives in extremely tiny groups united by kinship. This practice, which evidently was very effective for survival over virtually the entire history of humankind, left us with two legacies that are highly relevant to the theme of political equality, one advantageous, the other mainly deleterious.

2.1. Moral and Social Capacities

To survive in small groups human beings had to be endowed with capacities for sympathy, empathy, trust, reciprocity, and making judgments about whether and how much to adhere to the rules and norms regulating the behavior of members of a group. To survive, human beings had to possess capacities for developing and pretty much adhering to rules or norms governing the ways they behaved toward one another within the group, norms prescribing what was permissible and what impermissible, what was proper behavior that would be reinforced and what was improper and would be punished. These social and moral capacities are as much a part of ordinary human "nature" as our capacity for speech or, at the more primitive level of the autonomic nervous system, for breathing.[3] Like speech or breathing, their development may be impaired by an unfavorable environment or even physically damaged or destroyed. In fact, it is the physical destruction of certain areas of the human brain that provides the most dramatic evidence that a person's social and moral capacities are a part of the normal endowment of human beings. When these pre-frontal areas of the brain are destroyed, no amount of reward, punishment,



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Liberty

inducement, kindness, affection, approval, disapproval, sanction, training, or instruction, can fully restore the lost capacities.[4]

Just as our inborn capacity for speech enables human beings to develop different languages with different phonetics and grammatical structures, so our social and moral capacities can develop within many different, even antagonistic, social and moral systems. The point is that the *capacities* themselves appear to be innate. They are part of our normal human endowment. Thus we are capable of developing and pretty much adhering to systems of reciprocity that take our fellow human beings into account as very much like ourselves in important ways. What is more, with extremely rare exceptions we are almost certain to do so.[5] Just as we all, again with rare exceptions, are endowed as members of the human species with capacities for breathing, eating, walking upright, and speaking, so too we are endowed by nature with capacities for acting as social and moral beings, for sympathy, empathy, and trust, for creating and adopting norms and rules to guide our behavior toward others.[6]

But alas, that human characteristic is checked by another. If human evolution has not exclusively fostered the narrow egoism of the logic machine so loved, professionally at least, by many economists and theorists of rational choice, neither has it fostered universally altruistic behavior. It is one thing for members of a group consisting of a relatively small number of persons to apply certain norms of equality among themselves; it is quite another for them to extend those norms more broadly, much less universally, to distant and unknown others.

Universal moral principles that purport to be based only on reason are singularly weak. Lacking emotional strength, they resemble a splendid nineteenth century schooner becalmed in the doldrums; however elegant and elaborate its construction, the ship still cannot move.[7] If this is so, the problem our human heritage presents us is that universal norms generally diminish in emotional strength with the size and diversity of the group included within their scope.[8] You might interpret this generalization as a melancholy analogue to the economists' idea of increasing returns from scale, except that with universal norms the returns decrease with scale.

If this generalization roughly holds, an explanation might be as follows. The greater the number and diversity of persons in a group, the more that universalistic norms require altruism, and yet the weaker the force of altruism. Here again you can blame our evolutionary history. As a member of a small group of people knit together by strong bonds formed from family ties, kinship, friendship, shared experiences, history, and myth, you may feel that the interests of others are your own as well. Egoism merges indistinguishably with altruism. Even on occasions when some of your interests diverge from those of others, you may sacrifice your own interests for the good of all: in short, you behave altruistically. Altruistic behavior among human beings is far more common in the world than cynics assume. But most altruism occurs in small, usually very small, groups. The prototypical example is the family.

Just as we all, again with rare exceptions, are endowed as members of the human species with capacities for breathing, eating, walking upright, and speaking, so too we are endowed by nature with capacities for acting as social and moral beings, for sympathy, empathy, and trust, for creating and adopting norms and rules to guide our behavior toward others.

As the group expands in numbers, as homogeneity declines, and as conflicting interests increase, for you to sacrifice your own interests to a universal moral principle requires an ever increasing scope for your altruism. Yet as your group grows in numbers, the bonds of love, affection, and solidarity weaken: more and more of the others are strangers, unknown to you, distant from you physically, psychologically, socially. Our grief over the death of one person we deeply love is immeasureable. Yet the emotion created by a three inch news item reporting the death of thousands in a flood in Bangladesh, another mass killing in Rwanda, yet another mass grave discovered in Bosnia, will be negligible if all the victims are no more than remote strangers with whom we have no emotional ties.

These human limitations on our willingness to regard and treat others as equally entitled to the rights and privileges we ourselves enjoy, limitations lodged not necessarily in our reason but in the emotions that empower action in accordance with our reason, are not easily removeable. They are of a piece with what Erik Erikson (1984) called *pseudospeciation*, by which he meant

> to refer to the fact that mankind, while one species, has divided itself throughout its history—territorially, culturally, politically—into various groupings that permit their members, at decisive times, to consider themselves, more or less consciously and explicitly, the only truly human species, and *all* others (and especially *some* others) as less than human.

Is it to be wondered at that members of a species shaped by survival in small groups come out of the process a bit short on universal altruism? That we are not endowed by nature with a powerful drive to treat distant others as having claims on us as strong as those of persons much closer to us? That we deny not only equality to distant others but sometimes even humanity? And that we habitually honor our universal moral principles by breaching them?

In addition to the effects of luck and human propensities, the distribution of access to political resources is influenced by two other general tendencies that also operate in opposite directions.

3. Endowments and Acquired Advantages: Cumulative, Stable Inequalities

One is a tendency for initial endowments and advantages to accumulate and then become stabilized in an ongoing system of inequalities. Although initial advantages of one kind may sometimes be checked by disadvantages of another sort, often they are multiplied into cumulative advantages, or what Robert Merton (1973), referring to the reward system in science, called, with a touch of irony, the Matthew effect.

> For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have in abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. (Matthew 25:29)

When this happens in social systems, initial advantages are sometimes magnified into comprehensive and highly stable systems of inequality, control, and domination that employ the mighty forces of custom, language, law, social structure, economic order, the state, religion, and prevailing technology to uphold inequalities. The cumulative process is analogous in a very rough way to the famous butterfly effect of chaos theory, according to which very small initial differences generate enormously different and, in the real world, potentially catastrophic results.

We can readily point to examples of inequalities that cumulate into stable systems. Perhaps the most familiar are slavery and the subordination of women, systems of dominance and severe inequality that were institutionalized and enforced by an overwhelming array of the most powerful forces available. These include individual and collective terror and violence, official and unofficial; law, custom, and convention; and social and economic structures. Ministers, theologians, and religious organizations provided members of the dominant group, whether males or slave-holders, with the satisfaction of knowing that in subordinating others they were doing no more than obeying God's will. Finally, these formidable forces were backed up by the state itself.

An example less familiar to most of us but equally relevant is the Indian caste system. Although caste is by no means unique to India, the durability, profundity, and pervasiveness of caste hierarchies in Hindu society illustrate vividly how enormous differences in the life chances of hundreds of millions of people have been, and for many millions still are, determined at birth, with no hope, in this life at least, of escape. The origins of the initial hierarchical divisions among the Aryan peoples who migrated to the Indian subcontinent and of the hapless beings, the outcastes who were excluded by birth from the four basic social classes (*varnas*), are uncertain.[9] But the fundamental divisions were already prescribed more than three thousand years ago in the Rig-Veda Samhita, "the oldest and most important text of Vedic literature."[10]

Whatever its origins, among a people where religion pervaded almost every aspect of daily life and strictly governed human relationships of all kinds, the caste divisions came to be sanctified by the authority of religion, custom, practise, law, and coercive power, not only official but more commonly perhaps unofficial and informal yet no less violent. Though the system grew in complexity as subcastes increased, it endured more or less intact for several thousand years until its injustice was attacked by that twentieth century politician, statesman, and saint, Mahatma Gandhi, and by India's democratic constitution and its laws. Yet even today no one can say how long it will take to eradicate the effects of caste from the lives of the people of India.

Although one could add further examples, these should suffice to illustrate how initial advantages may cumulate into further advantages, may indeed multiply into entire systems of domination that remain fairly stable over centuries and even eons.

4. Opportunities for Opposition and Resistance

If domination were the whole story then any commitment to equality, particularly in such demanding forms as intrinsic equality, political equality, and democracy, would be futile and irrelevant to human possibilities. But obviously, and fortunately, the human story is not so bleak. If inegalitarian systems, once developed, could never be modified, how could we explain the ending of slavery throughout most of the world? The slow weakening of caste in India since 1950? The dismantling in this century, in some advanced countries, of a significant part of the structure of male dominance and female subordination?

To provide a general theory that would account for increases and reductions in human inequality is an impossible task. I want only to emphasize that all inegalitarian systems harbor a fundamental problem. Resistance is, of course, costly to the disadvantaged, sometimes too costly and perilous to undertake. Yet enforcing inequality is also costly to the advantaged. To the extent that inequalities are perceived by subordinates to be unjustified, then they must be persuaded, induced, compelled, or coerced to comply. But persuasion, inducements, compulsion, coercion all require some outlay of resources.

That is to say, inegalitarian systems are costly to the rulers as well as to the ruled. The more the advantages of the privileged are believed by the less advantaged to be unjustified, the more difficult and costly it becomes to insure adherence to the system of inequalities. In some cases, the costs are for all practical purposes astronomical, even infinite. The limitless repression described in Orwell's *1984* proved to be impossible to achieve even in one of the most repressive regimes in human history. With all their capacities Soviet rulers did not stamp out *samizdat*. American slaves, forbidden to use the drums that in Africa had served as means of communication, created music and language with concealed meanings. Opportunities for resistance in some form exist even under conditions of extreme domination.

Moreover, elites do not always manage to maintain perfect solidarity. Competition, rivalry, envy, conflict, an eye out for the main chance, fears that opposition may turn dangerously violent, concerns for the legitimacy of the regime—any or all of these may persuade some members of the dominant group to look for support among their subordinates.

When they do look for support, it is usually not hard to find. James Scott (1990) has argued eloquently and convincingly that resistance is present in virtually all severely inegalitarian systems. Sometimes subordinates openly rebel, perhaps unsuccessfully; more often their resistance takes less public forms that are still costly yet more difficult to control: slow-downs, slackness, inefficient work practices, disobedience, sabotage, theft, property damage, disloyalty, refusal to pay taxes, reluctance to support war, desertion on the battlefield, mutiny—the list goes on.

Prevailing beliefs are rarely if ever as uniform as they might seem. The uniformity of the "ideological hegemony" and "false consciousness" advanced by Antonio Gramsci and his followers is, Scott contends, highly exaggerated.[11] In Scott's view a dominant belief system conceals a "hidden transcript": the views of subordinate groups repudiating existing forms of domination. To take one example,

> Among untouchables in India there is persuasive evidence that the Hindu doctrines that would legitimize caste-domination are negated, reinterpreted, or ignored. Scheduled castes are much less likely than Brahmins to believe that the doctrine of karma explains their present condition; instead they attribute their status to their poverty and to an original, mythical act of injustice. (Scott 1990, 117)

In addition, ideology and religion are double-edged swords. Although some Christian ministers justified slavery, others dedicated their energies to abolition because of their Christian beliefs. The obvious conflict between communist ideology and Stalinist practice in the Soviet Union generated widespread cynicism.

In an extremely hierarchical system, one way of reducing resistance and lowering the costs of enforcing inequalities is to win the consent of subordinates by inviting their participation in certain decisions. In this

Photo Credit: Smithsonian Institution

way practices based on equality in certain respects among the most privileged and powerful strata may be extended to outsiders demanding inclusion. A highly exclusive elite becomes more inclusive. But the more inclusive elite may also encounter resistance and discover, in turn, that enforcing its domination is costly. Under some conditions, these costs become excessive, perhaps downright impossible to bear. So more outsiders are included and become insiders. In some such fashion a system of domination is transformed in due course; new, more inclusive institutions and practices develop; certain inequalities are reduced, certain spheres of equality are more inclusive.

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The history of parliamentary government in Britain might be read in these terms. So, too, could the expansion of the suffrage in many now democratic countries, as could the growth of trade unions and the weakening of class and caste restrictions. Although my brief summary makes the process seem far more schematic, orderly, nonviolent, and inevitable than it really is, it helps to see why the costs of imposing inegalitarian systems may make them vulnerable and subject to change.

5. Technology and Institutions

The limits and possibilities of change at any given moment are always set, however, by historical developments prior to that time. How fast and how far a reduction of inequalities may go, and what forms it may take, depend heavily on what previous developments have led to in the way of existing technology and existing institutions: social, economic, political. Existing technologies for warfare, for economic production and exchange, and for communication can fortify inegalitarian arrangements or weaken, even destroy, them. The long-bow helped to do in feudalism. Dish antennae, fax machines, modems, and the Internet make the costs of imposing a Stalinist or Maoist totalitarian regime astronomical.

Existing institutions matter enormously, too. A parliament of knights and burgesses could develop in Britain during the time of Edward I; a republic, much less a democratic republic, was virtually inconceivable. The limits and possibilities present in the American colonies in 1700 were not those of 1776, or 1787 or 1996.

In our own time, the perennial contest of equality versus inequality, and more specifically the contest between political equality and political inequality, is profoundly influenced by two major sets of institutions. Both have been crowding other alternatives off the stage of history. These are democracy and market capitalism.

Democracy, Polyarchy, and Market Capitalism

To avoid misunderstanding, let me say that neither democracy nor market capitalism should be understood as "pure" systems. By market capitalism I mean an economic order in which goods and services are predominantly produced and allocated by more or less competitive firms that are predominantly "privately" owned and strongly influenced by market prices and by the goal of profitability. This loose definition is meant to fit the economic order of most advanced industrial and post-industrial countries in this century.[12]

By a democratic country, I mean one that possesses all the political institutions characteristic of a modern representative government with universal or nearly universal suffrage—what I call polyarchy, or if you like polyarchal democracy. Despite its name, polyarchal democracy is not fully democratic. Just as we would surely agree that polyarchy meets democratic criteria more fully than nineteenth century representative governments based on a restricted suffrage, so we could probably agree that a political system is imaginable that would satisfy ideal democratic criteria better than polyarchal democracy.

Many resources that flow directly or indirectly from one's position in the economic order can be converted into political resources. Consequently, the initial distribution of political resources is highly, though not exclusively, dependent on the economic order. In our time the economic order prevailing in all democratic countries is market capitalism.

Polyarchal democracy and market-oriented capitalism are closely intertwined. Polyarchal democracy exists only in countries that also possess a market-oriented capitalist economy. If the two systems, political and economic, are in that sense obviously compatible, in another sense they are profoundly incompatible.[13] They exist in a kind of antagonistic symbiosis. Their incompatibilities are revealed at two levels, one the level of theoretical interpretation and justification, the other at the empirical level of historical experience.

1. Theoretical Incompatibilities[14]

The theoretical vision of democracy focusses on persons as citizens. The standard theoretical interpretation of market capitalism focusses on persons as consumers of goods and services.[15] The citizen exists within a definitely and often narrowly bounded political system—a city-state or in modern times the national-state or country. The state is, or at least once was thought to be, a hard-edged system: your specific liberties, equalities, and obligations depend on your being inside or outside the system. Producers and consumers exist in an almost unbounded economic system that may in principle cover the globe. The citizen is expected to feel and generally does feel attached to others living within a particular state, to a historically specific, unique aggregation of human beings. The producer/consumer is—in the theoretical imagination, if not in actuality—a supremely rational computer, forever calculating and comparing precise increments of gain and loss at the margin and acting always to maximize net utilities. Loyalty may be an aspect of human beings everywhere but in the standard theoretical perspective of market capitalism it is not characteristic of rational economic actors.

In the democratic vision, opportunities to exercise power over the government of the state ought to be distributed equally among all citizens. In the standard economic interpretation of capitalism, relations of power and authority do not exist. Their place is entirely taken by exchanges and contracts freely entered into by rational actors. An equality of economic resources, which might help to facilitate political equality, is not necessarily a desirable goal, much less a likely outcome of market decisions.

In the democratic vision, political equality must be maintained by a definite set of legal and constitutional arrangements. In the theoretical vision of economics, a state somehow lays down and enforces rules governing contracts, property, and competition that are necessary to the functioning of markets. But why and whether political leaders will undertake the tasks assigned to them, and whether and how much they will or should alter the distribution of wealth and income resulting from market forces, are questions that, strictly speaking, the standard economic theory is not expected to answer, or can.

In the democratic vision, the freedom achieved by a democratic order is above all the freedom of self-determination in making collective decisions: that is, the self-determination of citizens entitled to participate as political equals in making the laws and rules under which they will live together as citizens. A democratic society would therefore manage to allocate its resources so as to insure political equality and the rights and liberties necessary to the democratic process.

In the standard economic view of a market economy, the freedom achieved by a privately owned, competitive economic order is the primary freedom in the market place—of consumers to choose among goods and services, businessmen to compete in offering commodities and services and acquiring the necessary resources to produce them, of workers to contract with employers in exchange for wages.

In practice, market capitalism makes political equality all but impossible to achieve.

Thus are the seeds of discord between democracy and market capitalism scattered by the winds of doctrine. If income and wealth are political resources, and if they are distributed unequally, then how can citizens be political equals? Conversely, if citizens are to be political equals, then will not democracy require something other than a market capitalist economic order—or at the very least a pretty drastic modification of capitalism?

2. Incompatibilities in Practice.

If the differing theoretical visions of market-capitalism and political equality reveal incompatibilities, so too does historical experience. In practice, market capitalism makes political equality all but impossible to achieve. At the same time, however, polyarchal democracy makes a strictly free-market economy all but impossible to achieve. As a consequence of its link with market-oriented capitalism, polyarchal democracy is less democratic than the democratic vision would prescribe; but as a consequence of its link with polyarchal democracy, modern capitalism is less market-oriented than the theoretical vision would prescribe. The causal arrow runs both ways.

The consequences of market capitalism for democracy might be summarized in a broad generalization: In the twentieth century, the existence of a market-oriented capitalist economy in a country has been favorable to democratization up to the level of polyarchy; but it is unfavorable to democratization beyond the level of polyarchy. Many systemic features of an advanced market economy and society support the development and maintenance of democratic beliefs and practices.[16] These include a stable legal system, considerable decentralization of economic decisions, wide use of information, persuasion, inducements and rewards rather than open coercion to influence the behavior of economic actors, the creation of a middle class, access to fairly reliable information, and so on. In addition, by stimulating economic growth, market capitalism has produced a high level of average personal income in many democratic countries, and as Adam Przeworski (1996) and others have shown high levels of income (GDP per capita) are strongly associated with the stability of democratic systems.

At the same time, however, market-oriented capitalism generates initial inequalities in access to potential political resources, including money, wealth, social standing, status, information, coercive capacities, organizations, means of communication, "connections," and others. Initial inequalities like these are inherent in an economic order based on markets.

Within some limits that are not at all well understood and are subject to intense political controversy, the initial inequalities generated by markets can be modified by government intervention. Economics matters, but politics also matters. And it is a fact that in every democratic country the distribution that would otherwise result from the market is modified to some extent by government intervention.[17] However, the extent of the alteration varies greatly among democratic countries. They differ greatly, for example, in levels of taxation, transfers, and the percentage of GDP going to the government. Here again, politics matters. The extent and direction of the alteration appear to depend, for example, on the relative strength of social democratic parties in government[18] and on public attitudes toward the role of government, which vary significantly among democratic countries.[19]

Public attitudes[20] and the absence of a strong social democratic party and tradition may help to explain why disposable income is distributed more unequally in the United States than in all other economically advanced democratic countries; why, despite widespread resentment of "high" taxes, citizens are least taxed in the United States; why the American government transfers less income to the bottom fifth of its people than almost all the other advanced democratic countries; and in part, perhaps, why inequality in the distribution of both incomes and wealth has been on the increase in this country.[21]

The Prospects for Political Equality in Countries with Market Economies

Let me now put all the other factors bearing on political inequality to one side in order to pose an old problem that remains of cardinal importance. How, if at all, can we reduce the obstacles to greater political equality, and thus to the further democratization of polyarchy, that are presented by market-oriented capitalism?

I can pose the question but I cannot hope to answer it here. I can, however, sketch some limits and possibilities in very broad strokes.

One possbility that trails a long lineage behind it is to replace market-oriented capitalism with an economic order that would be more favorable, because of its inherent effects on the distribution of wealth, income, and power, to political equality and democracy. This was the essence of the Jeffersonian ideal of an agrarian democratic republic based on an economy and society of free farmers. Yet that alternative is surely irrelevant to our present condition.

For well over a century, many socialists believed that a nonmarket economy based on some form of collective ownership would provide a solution. The alternative structures that socialists had in mind, however, were often vague at best and, if more fully specified, were highly contested not only by nonsocialists but by other socialists as well. The system that was often proposed was a centrally directed nonmarket economy based on state owned enterprises. The defects of that solution have become so evident, however, that in all democratic countries today its supporters are scarce on the ground. What is more, its advocates are not all that common, it seems, even in an officially socialist country like China.

. . . income is distributed more unequally in the United States than in all other economically advanced democratic countries . . .

No feasible and attractive alternative to a predominantly market economy, whether capitalist or socialist, seems to loom on the horizon. If we take some kind of market economy as pretty much given, what can we say about the prospects for a socialist or collectively owned market economy? In all democratic countries today the advocates of a socialist market economy, in whatever form they conceive it, are a tiny minority of persons who have no significant influence on public policy, or for that matter even on public discussion. If not a dead issue, a socialist market economy can hardly be said to have much visible life.

It is possible, of course, that in the coming century a solution that would unite a market economy with some form of ownership and control more conducive to political equality will be advanced, and will attract sufficient support to bring it about. Although some of us might hope for such a development, it is not, at present, even a speck on the distant horizon.

Finally, we dare not assume that a market economy, no matter what general form it takes, would *by itself* eliminate inequalities in economic resources and thereby eliminate political inequalities deriving primarily from such resources. For any market economy would surely produce significant differences in workers' incomes and wealth arising in different firms and regions; just as in a market-capitalist economic order so in a socialist market economy, or any other market economy, these could be converted into inequalities in political resources.

If that is so, the only feasible alternative, economically and politically, is to make it impossible, or at least far more difficult, for citizens to convert unequal economic resources and positions into unequal political resources. That would require sweeping government policies and actions far more extensive than now exist or are now on the political agenda in any democratic country.

Among the most unlikely candidates for such extensive reforms is the United States. Here, widespread beliefs about capitalism have always collided with widespread beliefs about democracy. The antagonistic symbiosis between market capitalism and polyarchy will surely remain in this country as elsewhere. The American system of market capitalism will continue to be regulated in some significant respects and some not altogether trivial redistributions will take place. As for the American polyarchal democracy, the substantial political inequalities that originate in economic inequalities will without doubt also persist.

If we assume that a predominantly market economy is more desirable than any feasible alternative, then we are obliged to confront a number of hard questions, or perhaps different versions of the same question:

- Can polyarchy be made more democratic? If so, how?
- How *could* we reduce the political inequalities in existing polyarchies that result directly and indirectly from the unequal distribution of resources inevitably created by market economies?
- Even if we could do so, *should* we? Taking various consequences and trade-offs into account can we find solutions that are both feasible and desirable?
- If polyarchy is destined to co-exist with a market economy, how can

we best attain both the efficiencies of markets and democratic goals?

- Will the political institutions of polyarchy, which have served democratic ends fairly well in the century now passing, serve equally well in the coming century? Could we not reasonably hope to do much better? Under twenty-first century conditions would democracy be better served by some new institutions, that would complement or perhaps even replace those of polyarchy?

These are formidably difficult questions. Perhaps they deserve a better formulation. Nonetheless, they present a challenge to which political scientists in the twenty first century will, I hope, respond.

Notes

1. I have benefitted from comments on an earlier draft from Robert E. Lane, Charles E. lindblom, Douglas Rae, James C. Scott, Rogers M. Smith, Steven B. Smith, and Norma Thompson.

2. For more on this, see my *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), Chs. 6–7: 83–105.

3. In this respect human beings are not unique. Other primates, notably apes, also appear to possess and exercise capacities for sympathy and empathy and for adhering to group practices or "rules" involving reciprocity, rank, order, managing conflict, and so on. The animal biologist Franz de Waal provides observations, descriptions, and interpretations along these lines in *Good Natured, The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

4. The neurologist Antonio Damasio has described a classic case. In 1848 at a blast site in Vermont, Phineas Gage, a twenty-five year old construction foreman suffered severe brain damage when an iron bar propelled by an accidental explosion

> enters Gage's left cheek, pierces the base of the skull, traverses the front of his brain, and exits . . . through the top of the head. The rod has landed more than a hundred feet away, covered in blood and brains.

Incredibly, Gage survived. Except for losing vision in his right eye, his physical recovery was complete: he

> could touch, hear, and see, and was not paralyzed of limb or tongue. . . . He walked firmly, used his hands with dexterity, and had no noticeable difficulty with speech or language. (8)

But he never recovered his previous character. His physician, for whom this case became a "life-consuming interest," noted that a man of temperate habits and a well balanced mind was now

> fitful, irreverent, indulging at times in the grossest profanity which was not previously his custom, manifesting but little deference for his fellows, impatient of restraint or advice when it conflicts with his desires, at time pertinaciously obstinate, yet capricious and vacillating, devising many plans of future operation, which are no sooner arranged than they are abandoned. (8)

Damasio describes analogous cases of others whose capacities for speech, memory, abstract reasoning, and even intelligence as measured by standard IQ tests, were intact but who were profoundly impaired in their emotional, social, and moral capacities by severe brain damage. Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error. Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. (New York: Avon Books, 1994)

5. Such as the East African mountain tribe, the Ik, who in Colin Turnbull's account were dehumanized by protracted starvation. *The Mountain People* (New York: Touchstone, 1972).

6. Similar arguments have recently been advanced by James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993) and Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal, Why We Are The Way We Are, The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). However, I should emphasize that I refer only to *capacities* for *creating* and *adopting* norms, not to the content or specific nature of the norms created and adopted. This claim is, I think, significantly more cautious (and perhaps less interesting) than the claims, as I understand them, that Wilson and Wright put forward. See Peter Singer, "Is there a Universal Moral Sense?" *Critical Review* (IX, No. 3 (Summer 1995): 325–340.

7. Reason may be a powerful force for solving abstract problems, though even then, Damasio argues, the discovery of solutions may require more than reason. *Descarte's Error.*: 188 and *passim*. In any event, pure reason is a weak force for propelling human action. Kant's reliance on pure reason to persuade us to obey the categorical imperative is, as I interpret it, evidence that he was surprisingly insensitive to the role of emotions in human action. A physician who has carefully studied accounts of Kant's life and behavior argues that Kant displayed many symptoms indicating the presence of a frontal brain tumor that severely and increasingly impaired his emotional capacities. Jean-Christophe Marchand, "The New Conflict of the Faculties," presented at the Political Theory Workshop, Yale University, May 7, 1996.

8. The following is a modified version of a similar argument about civic virtue in "Is Civic Virtue a Relevant Ideal in a Pluralistic Society?", in Gary Jeffrey Jacobsohn and Susan Dunn, eds., *Diversity and Citizenship* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996): 1–16, p. 6.

9. See Adrian C. Mayer, "The Indian Caste System," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, David Sills, ed., (The MacMillan Co. & The Free Press, 1968) 2: 339–344.

10. See Barbara A. Holdrege,: *Veda and Torah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996): 32, 38.

11. His specific critique of Gramsci and false consciousness is in ch. 4, pp. 70–107.

12. Thus a more fitting label might be Charles E. Lindblom's "market-oriented private enterprise system." *Politics and Markets, The World's Political-Economic Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1977): 107ff

13. Lindblom makes a similar point in his description of "The close but uneasy relation between private enterprise and democracy" in *ibid*., Part V: 161–233.

14. This section is adapted from the introduction to my *Democracy, Liberty, and Equality* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986): 8–11.

15. For a powerful critique of the psychological inadequacies and errors of the focus on human beings as consumers in economic theory, see Robert E. Lane, *The Market Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

16. For a fuller account see my "Political Culture and Economic Development," in Ragnvald Kalleberg and Frederick Engelstad, eds., *Social Time and Social Change, Historical aspects in social science* (forthcoming).

17. See "Why All Democratic Countries Have Mixed Economies," in John W. Chapman and Ian Shapiro, eds., *NOMOS XXXV, Democratic Community* (New York: New York University Press, 1993): 259–282.

18. See David Cameron, "Politics, Public Policy, and Distributive Inequality: A Comparative Analysis," in Ian Shapiro and Grant Reeher, *Power, Inequality, and Democratic Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), Ch. 12: 219–259.

19. See Ole Borre and Elinor Scarbrough, *The Scope of Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

20. See Jennifer Hochschild, *What's Fair? American Beliefs About Distributive Justice*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

21. See Anthony B. Atkinson, Lee Rainwater, and Timothy M. Smeeding, *Income Distribution in OECD Countries* (Paris: OECD, 1995).

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