

Relational Egalitarianism

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Egalitarian Self-Destructiveness

Elizabeth Anderson in “What is the Point of Equality?” (1999) asks: “If much recent academic work defending equality had been secretly penned by conservatives could the results be any more embarrassing for egalitarians?...Ronald Dworkin defines equality as an “envy-free” distribution of resources. This feeds the suspicion that the motive behind egalitarian policies is mere envy. Philippe Van Parijs argues that equality in conjunction with liberal neutrality among conceptions of the good requires the state to support lazy, able-bodied surfers who are unwilling to work. This invites the charge that egalitarians support irresponsibility and encourage the slothful to be parasitic on the productive. Richard Arneson claims that equality requires that, under certain conditions, the state subsidize extremely costly religious ceremonies that its citizens feel bound to perform. G. A. Cohen tells us that equality requires that we compensate people for being temperamentally gloomy...”

Against Luck Egalitarianism

In particular she offers a comprehensive critique of luck egalitarianism (her expression), the idea that people must be compensated for undeserved disadvantages and that the welfare state is an insurance system to protect from brute luck. First of all she notices that imposing mandatory insurance is paternalistic. But if to avoid paternalism insurance is not mandatory, what shall we do with the uninsured, shall we let them die? This is her "harshness objection".

She argues that non only moving resources from the "lucky" to the "unlucky" is a weird and nebulous endeavor but that categorizing people in this way would just create a self sustaining hierarchy. This is the "condescendence objection"

A Letter from The State

She imagined some citizens getting a state check and letter:

"To the disabled: Your defective native endowments or current disabilities, alas, make your life less worth living than the lives of normal people. . . .
To the stupid and untalented: Unfortunately, other people don't value what little you have to offer in the system of production. . . . Because of the misfortune that you were born so poorly endowed with talents, we productive ones will make it up to you: we'll let you share in the bounty of what we have produced with our vastly superior and highly valued abilities. . . .
To the ugly and socially awkward: . . . Maybe you won't be such a loser in love once potential dates see how rich you are."

Relational Equality I

She argues that so asking people to concede inferior status in order to receive a redistributive aid entrenches people's status as subordinate. In this way luck egalitarian thinking fails one fundamental test: its principles do not express equal concern and respect for all citizens.

In Anderson's view, the way forward is to shift from distributive equality to relational equality, i.e. to aspire to a society in which persons relate to one another as having the status of equals. Against the project of compensating people for natural disadvantages she claims:

“People, not nature, are responsible for turning the natural diversity of human beings into oppressive hierarchies”

Relational Equality II

As we have seen, one central problem for distributive justice thinking is to identify the thing that justice requires us to equalize, i.e. to decide what is the right currency of equality. Relational equality, on the other hand focuses on how people regard one another and how they conduct their social relations.

'Egalitarians seek a social order in which persons stand in relations of equality. They seek to live together in a democratic community, as opposed to a hierarchical one'

An egalitarian distribution can be necessary for realizing this relational ideal, but must be justified as a means for this realization rather than via an appeal to an egalitarian distributive principle with any independent normative authority.

Private Governments

In her (2017) book *Private Governments* A. stresses that while we normally identify government and state (i.e political authority) many workplaces are 'governments' i.e. environments where some have sanction-backed authority over others. State governments became public – instead of private – through gradual democratic reforms. This has not happened for most workplaces where, in the United States at least, employers have unaccountable authority over the workers they govern. These 'governments' are 'private' because their exercise is understood as a concern only for those involved. In this way they are not subject to public scrutiny and need not worry about their legitimacy: management can give commands to workers without justification.

The Market as an Egalitarian Utopia

The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century egalitarian defenders of markets (John Locke, Adam Smith, Thomas Paine, Abraham Lincoln etc.) shared a vision of a market economy populated by small proprietors and Independent artisans exchanging goods on an equal footing as an alternative to feudal and monarchical power. They then saw private property rights and markets as tools to realise a 'free society of equals'. But the industrial revolution saw instead the rise of firms as large authoritarian organisations, only able to exploit increasing returns to scale in production. Capitalist firms have never ceased from then to be arbitrary governments, antithetical to our moral commitments to freedom and equality.

Private Governments II

She argues that by still taking for granted that we live in a free market society, our current public discourse absconds the actual nature of work, leaving us without a language to articulate the problems it presents. Focussing on the US (where unions' power is particularly weak), she reports that in many workplaces, employers regulate workers' speech, clothing, and manners and that workers can be fired for their political speech or recreational activities.

Capitalist Acts between Consenting Adults,

Economists at least since Ronald Coase have acknowledged that most economic activity does take place inside firms as hierarchy is often comparatively more efficient at coordination than price-mediated transactions. However, the twentieth-century Chicago School law and economics movement reimagined the firm as a nexus of free contracts between individuals signing them according to their own desires. In this view, because workers enter the firm voluntarily and are free to exit as they please, there is no reason to think that authority exists therein: a boss's order is like the price for a good, which a customer is always free to refuse. There is no authority, no domination, no indignity here: work takes place following voluntarily-chosen contracts amongst equal and autonomous agents.

Three Freedoms

For Anderson, this is pure fiction: the language of markets, developed for pre-industrial societies in the name of egalitarian goals, in its current use obscures the power dynamics in the work-place. "Here most of us are, toiling under the authority of communist dictators, and we don't see the reality for what it is."

A. argues that both states and firms can threaten individuals' overall freedom in its three forms: 1) negative freedom from legal constraints 2) positive freedom to pursue their projects, and 3) republican freedom from the political domination of others.

Four Remedies

A. proposes four main remedies for de-privatising private governments i.e. for subjecting them to safeguards analogous to those in place for democratic states.

1) Improving workers' freedom of exit by enriching their outside options (e.g. universal basic income).

2) Asking employers to respect due process before firing or sanctioning workers.

3) Protecting workers from infringements on their political rights such as privacy and speech, from sanctions for off-duty behaviour, and from discrimination on grounds irrelevant to the performance of their job. Similar rights are protected in many countries.

4) Creating forms of workers' representation in the workplace.

Objections I

A. convincingly demonstrates that authoritarian hierarchies in workplaces cannot be justified merely arguing that they result from free contracts on the market. However there are important objections to her project to eliminate "private governments":

Objections II

A system tolerating firms' private governments may be more efficient and therefore improve states' capacity to maximise the overall freedom of the least advantaged, e.g through redistributive tax-and-transfer schemes, investments in education, strengthened social security and social services. If state governments representing all citizens judge that tolerating firms' private government is acceptable, this could legitimise unaccountable authority within firms.

Objections III

A.'s stance on firms as 'private governments' in need of democratization is inspired by her concept of relational equality, the view that 'the point of equality' is not merely that resources should be fairly distributed but that persons should stand as equals. However it could be argued that, in a pluralistic society, public authorities should refrain from making "perfectionistic" judgments about people's relations. Accordingly, they should not prohibit all forms of unaccountable authority on the mere ground that they create unequal relations. In fact some people may reasonably prefer to work in authoritarian structures in exchange for other benefits such as higher wages, shorter or more flexible working hours etc.

Objections IV

Finally one could observe that over the past four decades, the command chain inside many big firms has generally been reduced by domestic outsourcing, but this has definitely not been a gain for many workers. In fact, the transaction-cost-reducing nature of digital technology has made possible what David Weil, at Brandeis University, has called “The Fissured Workplace.” (2017 Harvard University Press). He describes the changing nature of the relationship between employers and employees, with firms no longer hiring employees directly but relying on contractors, temp agencies, and franchises, which offer lower pays and worse labour conditions than the lead employers do. Opportunities for “climbing the ladder”, for “on the job training” and for access to valuable social networks also fade. Health and safety risk may also escalate as lines of responsibility become murkier.

See also: D.Goldschmidt, J. Schmieder, The Rise of Domestic Outsourcing and the Evolution of the German Wage Structure, The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 2017

Final Remarks

Anderson holds that we don't have to give up on market society as it's friendlier to pluralism than most alternatives. But we must recognize and correct for its limitations, And we shouldn't commit ourselves to an ideal system of any sort, whether socialist or libertarian, because a model set in motion like a Swiss watch will become a trap as soon as circumstances change. Instead, we must solve problems collaboratively, in the moment, using society's ears and eyes and the best tools that we can find.

Summing up, A. has no end vision of society. Her approach recalls E. L. Doctorow's description of driving at night: "You can see only as far as the headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."