Equality

Alex Callinicos

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Callinicos' aim in this informative and interesting book is to consider the best contemporary philosophical discussions on equality, and show how their enactment would involve a major transformation of existing social and economic arrangements. The Marxist aspect of the book is in exposing the contradictions between the normative claims of egalitarian liberalism and the continued existence of capitalist institutions.

Chapter 1 catalogues the appalling levels of inequality present in the world today. Drawing on the standard statistical indicators, Callinicos shows how the gap between rich and poor has widened dramatically within individual countries and on a world scale during an era of neo-liberal dominance. Callinicos takes particular issue with New Labour who did develop a number of strategies for reducing inequality, only to result in a further widening of the gap between rich and poor in their first term of office. Indeed, the failure of New Labour and the architects of the Third Way to reduce inequality is a persistent theme throughout the book.

Chapter 2 offers a brief history of the notion of equality as a social and political demand which emanated from the English, French and American revolutions. It is here that Callinicos utilises the notion of '*égalité*' from the work of Etienne Balibar which emphasises, against the liberal tradition, that equality and liberty go hand in hand and must be realised jointly. As Callinicos notes, earlier struggles which resulted in the great revolutions achieved political rights and citizenship for people by virtue of their own humanity. Thus began a process in which previously excluded political subjects — workers, women, blacks — now asserted their demand for liberty and equality. The notion of '*égalité*' is subversive, therefore, because there is always a tension between the ideals of equality and freedom and their practical manifestation. For Callinicos, modern liberal societies in which the aspiration to '*égalité*' is present have not and cannot overcome this dichotomy. Capitalist societies treat their members as legally free and equal only in the formal sense. In reality, they are exploited through the appropriation of their surplus labour and by being deprived of ownership of the means of production. For Callinicos, it is the failure to grapple with the need for a redistribution in productive assets that weakens even reformist socialist arguments for reducing inequality.

In Chapter 3, Callinicos explores the notion of equality in contemporary liberal and analytical Marxist theory. Callinicos begins his discussion by considering the work of John Rawls and argues that the proposition of '*égalité*' confronts Rawls' liberalism causing a conflict between individual liberty and social equality. Rawls overcomes this tension by opting for the priority of individual freedom, but in doing so he breaks the link between these two notions. In Rawls' more recent writings, however, his uneasiness at the high levels of inequality in society has revealed how the priority of liberty depends greatly on ensuring a higher incidence of social equality. As Callinicos argues, the proposition of '*égalité*' therefore reveals how Rawls' own principles would radically challenge existing arrangements despite his reluctance to acknowledge such an outcome.

Callinicos then considers what he suggests is the main question in contemporary debates: 'equality of what?' The 'what' ranges across equality of welfare (utilitarianism), equality of resources (Dworkin), equality of opportunity (Cohen, Roemer) and equality of capabilities (Sen). Callinicos considers these different forms of equality to unearth the normative reasons for trying to achieve equality and for clarifying the basis of redistribution in society. He rejects equality of welfare because: first, it treats all preferences as worthy of satisfaction irrespective of their content (ie the preference to cause pain is as much to be satisfied as the preference for food for someone who is starving); second, the satisfaction of some preferences can cost more than satisfying others (ie the deliberate cultivation of expensive tastes against those whose tastes are more modest); and third, it ignores how preferences can adapt to circumstances, especially in the case of those whose deprivation makes them accept their situation as unalterable.

Equality of resources, which attempts to lessen the input of 'luck' on distribution, can also lead to problems in that it cannot be considered fair to distribute resources equally to, say, an invalid and to a healthy person. Equality of opportunity is meant to offer one solution to this problem by offering a level playing field in the competition for positions in society. Another response is equality of capabilities where individuals' ability to engage in activities in society ('functioning's' in Sen's words) are equalised. Callinicos praises Sen's emphasis on equality of capabilities especially for showing that at the basis of egalitarianism is the aim of ensuring equal access to well-being for all, and not reducing well-being to the satisfaction of individual preferences which are often not freely made.

Ultimately, however, Callinicos parts company with all egalitarian liberals because they mistakenly believe that greater equality can be achieved within a capitalist market economy. Throughout the final chapter, Callinicos shows why this is a forlorn quest and details how New Labour's fusion of neo-liberalism and egalitarianism resulted in blaming individuals themselves for

being unemployed and coercing them into poorly paid and insecure jobs. Instead, Callinicos argues that we need a greater emphasis on securing equal access to advantage and makes the radical claim that to 'demand equality is to propose revolution' (p. 128). The market, then, must be abolished. He realises that saying this in the current climate of neo-liberal orthodoxy will inevitably attract derision. Even so, he still challenges us to a 'revival in Utopian imagination' where we can anticipate and formulate, if only in outline, the possibility of a democratic non-market form of economic co-ordination. We need to believe in the possibility of a different form of society and put that belief into action if equality and liberty are to be fully achieved. To do anything less, Callinicos warns us, is to 'acquiesce in evil'.

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