

Against Progressivism’s “Social Equality”

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Progressives aren’t satisfied with equality before God (in dignity and worth) and equality before the law (legal standing as citizens). They also want “social equality,” the moral ideal that “people should enjoy equal relationships with each other.” Beyond this vague characterization, we get no positive content of that ideal.¹ So their approach is negative, attacking social *inequalities* in the form of what Dustin Crummett calls “oppressive hierarchies,” which exist (in the words of Chomsky) to “preserve certain structures of power and domination.” Familiar examples of allegedly oppressive hierarchies are given: amongst “the rich and the poor, employers and many employees, men and women, whites and non-whites,” and so on. Space precludes discussion of specific examples.² I’ll instead register five objections to the abstract ideal of social equality.

1. The ideal of social equality fosters undue skepticism of all hierarchies, not just oppressive ones. While acknowledging that some hierarchies are benign, such as that between a parent and child or rank in the military, Crummett says nonetheless all hierarchies must be “justified in terms of the general good, and must be *only* that which is necessary to promote that good.” This gets things backwards. We should simply presume hierarchies, ubiquitous as they are, contribute to the common good unless proven to be oppressive. These include hierarchies of competence, ability, responsibility, merit, experience, education, seniority, respect, and more. And our positions within them, bear in mind, are not static but dynamic, ever changing as we work to improve our lot in life. Hierarchies are essential to the development and maintenance of social order and have played a key role in the survival and flourishing of the human species. Evolution, it’s commonly said, is conservative: it builds on what works. What doesn’t gets selected out.³

2. Even some unjust social inequalities may have to be permitted for the sake of the greater good of ordered liberty. For example, taxation, being akin to theft or extortion by a powerful ruling class, requires an oppressive hierarchy.⁴ Yet we permit it, believing that it contributes to the common good. And beware of committing the fallacy of composition here: just because a part of society is unjust, that doesn’t mean society as a whole is unjust. An overall good society—indeed, the best of what’s feasible—may well contain injustices. Just as biologists have discovered that eliminating even a tiny pest from the complex equilibrium of an ecosystem can have devastating unforeseen consequences, a substantial burden of proof is required to show that dismantling an unjust social hierarchy would not cause a ripple effect of greater injustice. Incautiously pulling threads from our

social fabric in the name of “social equality” or “social justice”, as utopian visions tempt us to, can lead to large-scale unraveling, just as it did in the French Revolution.⁵

3. The common presumption that social inequality is evidence of injustice is as unhealthy as it is unwarranted. The fact is, time and again we have seen careful, multivariate analyses disconfirm “oppression” as the chief cause of some instance of social inequality. Clear examples of this are the claims that the gender wage gap is due to sexism⁶ and that black people are victims of systematic racism by law enforcement and/or the criminal justice system.⁷ Encouraging people to believe they are mired in systems of social and legal oppression breeds learned helplessness, resentment, ingratitude, and general social unrest.⁸ Thus, it’s in everyone’s interest to be less rash in inferring injustice from some descriptive fact of inequality.

4. The concern for social equality seems curiously selective. When is the last time we heard progressives decrying university admissions artificially penalizing Asians,⁹ the barbaric treatment of women under Islamic rule, the myriad of social problems disproportionately afflicting men,¹⁰ the massive “overrepresentation” of abortions and single parents in the black community,¹¹ or the “underrepresentation” of conservatives in academia, media, and entertainment?¹² Yet concern for social equality is pushed to the extreme in other contexts, demanding, for instance, that one embrace the claim that biological males can be women. This is why many doubt that progressivism is really about social equality. Beneath the surface rhetoric, it seems more about a certain power and dominance hierarchy of its own, wherein one’s rank is determined by one’s group demographics (race, sex, gender, class, etc.) and conformity to popular moral-emotional sentiment.¹³ It seems the true enemy of progressivism, therefore, is not unjust hierarchies, but traditional norms of individual virtue and vice, especially associated norms of personal responsibility, guilt, and shame.¹⁴

5. Attempting to enforce social equality with the law (i.e., by force) is unjust and self-refuting in practice. It is unjust because it requires somehow imposing handicaps on or stealing from innocents who are better off to benefit those who are worse off. That’s *wrong*. It is self-refuting because it requires instituting an oppressive hierarchy to fight oppressive hierarchies, or social inequality to enforce social equality. Just imagine how much power over people is required to regulate and control their “relationships with each other”! If you need help, read Huxley and Orwell—or better, Marx and Engels. You can’t have both a government powerful enough to enforce social equality *and* a free democracy devoid of the possibility of social inequalities.

In conclusion, I’m happy that Crummett says he distrusts those with institutional power, especially politicians and the government. That’s why calling upon them to enforce social equality is as dubious as it is dangerous. So suppose we agree that wielding the power of government in this way is a bad idea. What’s left?

Crummett himself gives the answer: we are. *But this is the conservative's solution.* We already have the power to fight injustice, most poignantly by loving our neighbor as ourselves. And unlike government power, exercising this power doesn't risk causing equal or worse injustice by violating subsidiarity. We cede that power as individuals—and the responsibility that comes with it—to institutional bureaucrats and “intellectuals” not only to our detriment, but also to our shame.¹⁵

Endnotes

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- ¹ In his review of T. M. Scanlon's *Why Does Inequality Matter?* Jonathan Wolff writes, “As I read Scanlon, the philosophical weight of his project rests on his view that there is no interesting substantive analysis of equality that will advance our understanding. Inequality is what matters, and it comes in a number of forms.” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, August 14, 2018. Is this not a problem? Crummett admits to being less certain of what realizing the ideal of social equality amounts to than he is of what obstacles there are to it. But if you're uncertain of where you're going, how certain can you be of what obstacles there are in the way?
- ² I'll just say that the “oppressive hierarchies” narrative, popularized in part by writers like Howard Zinn, is grossly reductionistic, ignoring innumerable historic, social, and economic complexities. But the benefits that narrative offers—a sense of enlightenment and self-righteousness—are worth the price of being proven wrong in obscure scholarly literature.
- ³ Cf. Jessica Koski, et al., “Understanding Social Hierarchies: The Neural and Psychological Foundations of Status Perception,” *Social Neuroscience* 10, no. 5 (2015): 529-530: “A wealth of evidence indicates social hierarchies are endemic, innate, and most likely, evolved to support survival within a group-living context. ... Despite some cross-species variability, there is strong evidence that hierarchies arise out of necessity and their existence is beneficial to social groups.” For an engaging popular-level discussion of this point, see Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018), ch. 1.
- ⁴ See Murray Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 162ff for the argument that taxation is theft and Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 169ff for an argument that income taxation is akin to slavery. For a tidy summary and defense of both, see Edward Feser, “Taxation, Forced Labor, and Theft,” *The Independent Review* 5, no. 2 (2000), 219-235. Consider a different example: age restrictions. People under the age of 16 cannot drive, under 18 cannot buy a long gun, and under 21 cannot buy alcohol, presumably because it is thought most people below these ages generally do not yet have the requisite competence and responsibility. But surely there are plenty of 15 year olds competent and responsible enough to drive, 17 year olds to buy a long gun, and 20 year olds to buy alcohol. Preventing such people from enjoying these freedoms (i.e., exercising certain natural rights) is an injustice—indeed, a kind of ageism. But we permit these unjust hierarchies of age for the sake of the common good. And lest it be objected that these oppressive hierarchies are artifacts of law and not society, oppressive social hierarchies doubtlessly often spin off of oppressive legal hierarchies.
- ⁵ See Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* for a brilliant and prescient analysis of the French Revolution.
- ⁶ According to research prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor in 2009: “This study leads to the unambiguous conclusion that the differences in the compensation of men and women are the

result of a multitude of factors and that the raw wage gap should not be used as the basis to justify corrective action. Indeed, there may be nothing to correct. The differences in raw wages may be almost entirely the result of the individual choices being made by both male and female workers.” See “An Analysis of Reasons for the Disparity in Wages Between Men and Women,” *CONSAD Research Corp.* (2009), 2. So unambiguous is the literature debunking the gender wage gap that even mainstream progressive venues like CBS and Huffington Post have run headlines such as “The Gender Pay Gap is a Complete Myth” and “Wage Gap Myth Exposed—By Feminists”, respectively: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-gender-pay-gap-is-a-complete-myth/> and https://www.huffingtonpost.com/christina-hoff-sommers/wage-gap_b_2073804.html.

⁷ See Cody T. Ross, “A Multi-Level Bayesian Analysis of Racial Bias in Police Shootings at the County-Level in the United States, 2011–2014,” *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 11 (2015). John Lott and Carlisle Moody, “Do White Police Officers Unfairly Target Black Suspects?” *Social Science Research Network* (2016). For a more general treatment of the issue, See Heather MacDonald, *The War on Cops: How the New Attack on Law and Order Makes Everyone Less Safe* (Washington, DC: Encounter Books, 2016). On mass incarceration of blacks in particular, two book-length treatments much more responsible than Michelle Alexander’s celebrated *The New Jim Crow* are Michael Javen Fortner, *The Black Silent Majority: The Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Politics of Punishment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015) and John Pfaff, *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

⁸ This is only recently being seriously documented and studied. See Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018) and Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁹ As I write, Harvard University is being sued for discriminating against Asian Americans in their admissions process. The lawsuit alleges that the university disproportionately rejects Asian applicants based on personality traits like “likeability.” Cf. Richard Sander and Stuart Taylor, *Mismatch*, 76-77: “At most undergraduate schools for which we have data, students with marginal credentials (by the school’s admissions standard) are significantly less likely to be admitted if they are Asian. When such findings are pointed out, university officials often respond that this occurs because Asian American applicants tend to have weaker ‘soft’ credentials than do similar whites.”

¹⁰ Such as, among other things, being (i) less likely to graduate from high school, (ii) less likely to be accepted into college, (iii) less likely to graduate from college, (iv) more likely to be arrested, (v) more likely to be the victim of a violent crime, (vi) more likely to die by an occupational hazard, (vii) more likely to commit suicide, (viii) more likely to lose custody of their children in court, (ix) more likely to die of cancer, (x) more likely have cardiovascular disease, (xi) more likely to be overlooked and stigmatized as victims of sexual assault, and (xii) more likely to be physically and psychologically abused by intimate partners. (Space restrictions prevent me from including citations for these statistics, but I can happily provide them upon request: mcintosh dot chad at gmail dot com) I would say this amounts to evidence of “the system’s ... not valuing the lives of [men] equally to [women]” in the same way Crummett thinks the mortality rate among black women in childbirth being higher than white women shows “the system’s ... not

valuing the lives of black women equally to white women,” but I’m generally skeptical of systematic oppression narratives as explaining inequalities. On discrimination and harmful trends against men and boys in general, see the eye-opening books: David Benatar, *The Second Sexism: Discrimination Against Men and Boys* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) and Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War on Boys: How Misguided Policies are Harming Our Young Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster, ed. 2015).

- ¹¹ Annual rates vary, but a consistent 30-40% of all abortion patients in the U.S. are black, despite being just 12% of the U.S. population—and about half of blacks are born into single-parent homes. These tragic figures began skyrocketing in the 1960s. On the disintegration of the black family, see Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Race* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 120ff. While the epidemic of single-parenthood among blacks antedates the era of slavery by a century and predates the era of “mass incarceration” by two decades, it coincides perfectly with “a large expansion of the welfare state and its accompanying non-judgmental ideology.” Sowell, *idem*.
- ¹² It is well documented that conservative academics and journalists are an extreme minority in their professions (percentages range from around 2% to 15%). But again, *pace* progressives, I agree with George Yancey that “Merely documenting the level of underrepresentation of some social groups does not illustrate that prejudice against those groups is rampant, and merely because a group is underrepresented does not provide us with assurances that this group experiences prejudice.” See *Compromising Scholarship: Political and Religious Bias in American Higher Education* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 11-12.
- ¹³ Not that this is anything new. See Sowell, *Intellectual and Race*, esp. 50-52.
- ¹⁴ A recent study found that expression of moral outrage reduces feelings of guilt. See Zachary K. Rothschild and Lucas Keefer, “A Cleansing Fire: Moral Outrage Alleviates Guilt and Buffers Threats to One’s Moral Identity,” *Motivation and Emotion* 41, no. 2 (2017): 209-229. Of course sometimes there are legitimate grievances that aren’t masks for hiding guilt. It’s not always easy to tell without further inquiry. Endnote 34 of Crummett’s article presents a fascinating case that could be interpreted either way.
- ¹⁵ Thanks to Elizabeth McIntosh, Benjamin Arbour, Tully Borland, Michael R. Jordan, Dan Martin, and Bob Fischer for helpful discussion and comments.