

## IV. IMPEDIMENTS TO RADICAL EGALITARIANISM

KAI NIELSEN

### I

I have elsewhere explicated and defended a radical egalitarian conception of justice.<sup>1</sup> In deliberate contrast with Rawls' account, I have argued for two radical egalitarian principles of social justice and a conception of social justice I call *justice as equality*. I have attempted, against conventional wisdom and the mainstream of philosophical opinion, to argue that a radical egalitarianism is not only coherent it is also reasonable. It is not the case, I have argued, that Rawls' account of justice is the most egalitarian account that can reasonably be defended. Justice in society as a whole ought to be understood as a complete equality of the overall level of benefits and burdens of each member of that society. What we should aim at is a structuring of the institutions of society so that each person can, to the fullest extent compatible with all other people doing likewise, satisfy his/her needs. We should seek a "republic of equals" where there will be a fundamental equality of social condition for everyone. The two principles which should govern that conception of justice as equality are the following:

1. Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties and opportunities (including equal opportunities for meaningful work, for self-determination and political participation) compatible with a similar treatment of all. (This principle gives expression to a commitment to attain and/or sustain equal moral autonomy and equal self-respect.)
2. After provisions are made for common social (community) values, for capital overhead to preserve the society's productive capacity and allowances are made for differing unmanipulated needs and preferences, the income and wealth (the common stock of means) is to be so divided that each person will have a right to an equal share. The necessary burdens requisite to enhance well being are also to be equally shared,

subject, of course, to limitations by differing abilities and differing situations (natural environment, not class position).

In asking about justice as equality three questions readily spring to mind: (1) Why is a greater equality in the conditions of life desirable? (2) Is anything like my radical egalitarianism something that could actually be achieved or even be reasonably approximated? (3) Given the steep inequalities we actually have, if they (or at least most of them) are eradicable, are they only so at an unacceptable cost? In short is the cost of equality too high?

There is no complete answer to (1), (2) and (3) which is entirely independent. There is, that is to say, reason for not considering them in utter isolation. In the essays mentioned above, I try to give an extended answer to (1). But the short answer to (1)—an answer I would be prepared to defend—is that a greater equality is desirable because it brings with it greater moral autonomy and greater self-respect for more people. It isn't, as some conservative critics assume, equality *per se* which is so desirable but what it brings in the way of human flourishing, though there is in such egalitarian thinking the assumption that the most extensive equal realization of that is an end devoutly to be desired. What I argued for in the essays previously mentioned, I shall assume here, namely that equality, if its costs are not too high, is desirable. That is (1), I shall assume, has a positive answer at least when it is not considered in relation to (2) and (3). But, as (3) asks, are the costs of this equality, after all, just too high? Many a conservative critic claims that they are.<sup>2</sup> I shall, before I turn to (2), consider (3), as it is more closely linked to (1).

It is pointed out by conservative critics that we cannot in our assessments of what is just and what is unjust start from scratch. Goods to be distributed do not come down, like manna from heaven, they come

<sup>1</sup> Kai Nielsen, "Class and Justice" in *Justice and Economic Distribution*, J. Arthur and W. Shaw (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: 1979), pp. 225–245, Kai Nielsen, "On the Very Possibility of a Classless Society", *Political Theory*, vol. 6, no. 2 (May, 1978), pp. 191–207, Kai Nielsen, "Radical Egalitarian Justice: Justice as Equality", *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1979).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Nozick's Anarchy, *State and Utopia* is the best known current example of such a conservative critique. But it has also been developed by Robert Nisbet in his "The Pursuit of Equality", *The Public Interest*, vol. 35 (Spring, 1974), pp. 103–120 and in his "The Costs of Equality" in *Small Comforts for Hard Times* in M. Mooney and F. Stuber (eds.), pp. 3–47, and by Irving Kristol, "About Equality" *Commentary* (November, 1972).

with entitlements. Certain people have produced them, bought them, been given them, inherited them, found them, struggled to make them and to preserve them. To think that we can override their entitlements in setting our ideal distributive patterns is to fail to respect people. It is to be willing to run over their rights in redistributing goods, but this is to treat some people as means only. A society in which a state or a class can take from people what is rightfully theirs cannot be a just society. The ideals of equality and the ideals of justice are different ideals. Equality is a forward-looking virtue concerned with making and keeping everyone's condition, in some appropriate sense, equal. Justice, by contrast, is a backward-looking virtue, concerned, some conservative theorists claim, with seeing that it is the case that people have their various and not infrequently unequal entitlements.<sup>3</sup> Justice will be done in a society when people have what they are entitled to. The idea isn't to establish a certain distributive pattern, but to protect people's entitlements. Because this is what justice really is, rather than anything about equality, it will sometimes be the case that an individual, a family or even a class will quite justly achieve certain advantages on which the rest of the society can have no proper claim. Our maxim for justice should *not* be "Holdings ought to be equal unless there is a weighty moral reason they ought to be unequal," where the burden of proof is always to justify unequal treatment. Rather our maxim should be "People are entitled to keep whatever they happen to have unless there is a weighty moral reason why they ought to give it up." The burden of proof has now shifted to the redistributivist to justify a redistribution.<sup>4</sup> The normal situation will be that people will be entitled to what they have properly acquired. These entitlements are rooted in the particular situations and activities of people. They cannot in the typical situation be equal. Fairness doesn't come to distributing things equally, even with allowance for differing needs, but to *not* taking from people what they are entitled to. Particular entitlements can be challenged, but if any one with a passion for justice sets out "systematically and at a stroke to devalue the lot, in the interests of a new strictly forward-looking distribution, he is by this move abandoning the whole notion of justice in favour of another alternative ideal".<sup>5</sup>

I shall return to this objection in a moment.

However, even if it is the case, that some distinction between social justice and individual justice or justice in acquisition and justice in distribution should show this criticism to be mistaken, there are still two related objections that remain in place and again have to do with the value of individual autonomy. (It is the three together which seem to me to constitute a formidable cluster of objections.) Firstly, it is claimed that if we treat social justice as equality, we will repeatedly have to use state intervention to keep the pattern of distribution at the requisite level of equality, for people in their ordinary transactions will continually upset the pattern. But such continual intervention constitutes an intolerable interference in the lives of people. No one who cares about individual liberty and moral autonomy could support that. Secondly, in a democratic society, people would not support with their votes a redistributive policy that was egalitarian, let alone the radical egalitarianism that I propose. It would have to be imposed from above by some dictatorial elite. It will not be accepted in a democratic society. Again its costs would be too high because it could only be achieved by abandoning democracy.

I shall start with the last objection for that one seems to me the weakest. It seems to me that it is not at all a question of imposing or trying to impose egalitarianism on anyone. In the first place, it is unrealistic because it cannot be done, but, even if it could and such a procedure were not self-undermining, it still would be undesirable. Justice as equality is set out as an ideal of social justice which, radical egalitarians argue, best captures what is fundamental to the very idea of justice. The thing is, by moral argumentation in "the public sphere," to use Habermas' conception, to convince people of it. There is no question at all of imposing it or of an "Egalitarian clerisy" indoctrinating people. Whatever the morality of it, it is impractical to try in such circumstances to impose equality or such an understanding of justice. The only road here is through patient and careful social argumentation to make the case for egalitarianism.

Socialists are well aware that the consciousness industry will be turned against radical egalitarianism and that there will be a barrage of propaganda directed against it, some (depending on the audience) subtle and some unsubtle. It will not get a fair hearing, but there is nothing else to be expected from

<sup>3</sup> Nozick, of course, argues this, but it has most intransigently been argued by Antony Flew in two straightforwardly argued articles: "Equality or Justice", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. III (1978), pp. 176-194 and "A Theory of Social Justice" in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, H. D. Lewis (ed.) (New York, 1976), pp. 69-85.

<sup>4</sup> Flew, "Equality or Justice?", p. 183.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

a class society in the hands of a class who must be deeply opposed to egalitarianism. But this is just a specific application of the general political problem of how social change can be achieved in an increasingly managed class society. This is one of the deep and intractable social problems of our time—one of the problems Horkheimer and Adorno anguished over—and, particularly for those of us in developed capitalist societies, it is a very puzzling and intractable problem indeed. But whatever we should say and do here, it will not be the case, that we intelligentsia should try to impose egalitarian ideals on an unwilling working class. Until the working class—the vast majority of people—sees fit to set about the construction of a genuinely egalitarian society, the role of the intellectual can, and should be, that of, through argumentation, to engage in critical analysis in an attempt at consciousness raising. (This is also perfectly compatible with an unflinching search for truth.)

## II

I want now to consider the second objection, namely the claim that any patterned distribution, and most particularly the patterned distributions of radical egalitarianism, would require such continuous and massive state intervention that it would undermine individual liberty and the moral autonomy essential for the good of self-respect.

This objection uncritically makes all the background assumptions of *laissez-faire* capitalism—a social order which has not existed for a long time and probably could not exist in our contemporary world. But, a society committed to radical egalitarianism would also be a genuinely socialist society and would have very different background conditions. The objection just unrealistically assumes a genuinely free market society where people are busy possessive individualists devoted to accumulating and bargaining and are concerned very centrally with protecting their private property. It simply assumes that human beings, independently of the particular type of socialization they have been subject to, have very little sense of or feeling for community or cooperativeness, except in the form of bargaining (again the free market being the model). But a society in which radical egalitarianism could flourish would be an advanced socialist society under conditions of moderate abundance. People would not have a market orientation. They would not be accumulators or possessive individualists and the aim of their economic organization would not be profit maximization but the satisfaction of the human needs of everyone. The

more pressing problems of scarcity would have been overcome. Everyone would have a secure life, their basic needs would be met and their level of education, and hence their critical consciousness, would be much higher than it is now, such that, in their situation, they would not be committed to Gomper's dictum of "more." Furthermore, the society would be thoroughly democratic and this would mean industrial democracy as well as political democracy. That would mean that working people, where every able bodied adult would be a worker, would control—collectively control in a fair democratic manner—their own work: that is the production relations would be in their hands as well as the governmental functions of the society, which in this changed environment would have become essentially administrative functions. In fine the institutions of the society and the psychological motivations of people would be very different than those implicitly appealed to in the objection. Under these conditions, the state, if that is the best thing still to call it, would not be the instrument of class oppression and management that it now is. People would democratically manage their own lives and the design of their society in a genuine *gemeinschaft* so that there would not be the question of an instrument of class domination interfering with people's liberties. People would be their own masters with a psychology that thinks in terms of "we" and not just, and most fundamentally, in terms of 'I', where the protection of my rights is the crucial thing. Moreover, now the society would be so organized that cooperation made sense and was not just to avoid the "state of nature." The society would be a secure society of relative abundance. (Communism and radical egalitarianism are unthinkable in any other situation.) It would be a society in which their needs were met. Since the society would be geared, within the limits of reasonable growth, to maximize for everyone, and as equally as possible, the satisfaction of their needs, a roughly egalitarian pattern would be in a steady state. It would not have to be constantly tinkered with to maintain the pattern. People would not, in such a secure situation have such a possessive hankering to acquire things or to pass them on. Such acquisitiveness would no longer be such a major feature of our psychologies. Moreover, given the productive wealth of the society, there would be no need to worry, if in practice distributions sometimes swayed a little from the norm of equality. Everyone would have plenty and have security; people would not be possessive individualists bent on accumulating and obsessively concerned with mine and thine. There would, moreover, be no way for anyone to

become a capitalist and exploit others and indeed there would be precious little motivation to do so.

If in spite of this an elite did show signs of forming, there would be, firmly in place, democratic institutions sufficient to bring about the demise of such deviations from the norm. This should not be pictured as an impersonal dictatorial state interfering with people's liberties, but as the people, acting collectively, to protect their liberties against practices which would undermine them. Yet that things like this would actually happen—that such elitist practices would evolve—in such a situation of abundance and cooperation is rather unlikely. In such circumstances the pattern of distribution of justice as equality would be stable and, when it did require adjustment, it would be done by a democratic government functioning to protect and further the interests of everyone. This patterning would not upset liberty and undermine moral autonomy and self-respect.

### III

I will now turn to the first objection—the objection that justice is entitlement and not anything even like equality. It may be that justice as entitlement is that part of justice which is concerned with justice in initial acquisition and in transfer of what is initially justly acquired and is not distributive justice at all, the justice in social schemes of cooperation. It may be that these are two different species of justice that need capturing in some larger overall theory, but, be that as it may, the challenge of justice as entitlement seems, at least on the surface, to be a very real one. Entitlement theorists certainly have a hold of something that is an essential part of justice.<sup>6</sup>

On some other occasion, I hope to be able to sort these issues out, but here I believe, I can give a “practical answer” which will show that such a challenge is not a threat to justice as equality. In doing this I want to show how such a conception of justice can do justice to the rights of entitlement. Recall that a radical egalitarian will also be a socialist. He will be concerned with justice in the distribution of products but he will be centrally concerned as well with justice in production.<sup>7</sup> His concern with the justice to be obtained in production will come, most

essentially, to a concern with transforming society from a society of private ownership and control of the means of production to one of a social ownership and control of the means of production, such that each worker—in a world of workers—will have an equal say in the disposition and rationale of work. (Control here seems to me the key notion. In such new production relations, the very idea of ownership may not have any unproblematic meaning.) It will, that is, be work which is democratically controlled. The aim will be to end class society and a society with an elite managerial stratum which runs society. Justice as equality most essentially requires a society with no bosses. The demand for equality is most fundamentally a demand to end that state of affairs and to attain a situation of equal moral autonomy and equal self-respect.

These considerations are directly relevant when we consider that entitlement conceptions of justice are most at home in situations where a person has mixed his labor and care with something, say built and lovingly cared for a house or built up a family farm. It would, *ceteris paribus*, be wrong, plainly unjust, to take those possessions away from that person and give them to someone else. But a radical egalitarian is not challenging entitlements of this type. Socialists do not want to take people's houses or family farms from them. In a Communist society there are consumer durables. The private property socialists seek to eliminate is private ownership and control of the major means of production. This is the private property that is the source and sustainer of class divisions, not private ownership of things like cars, houses, family farms, a fishing boat and the like. It is ownership and control over the major means of production that is the source of the great power of one person over another and the great advantages of one group over another. This is most crucially true of the great industries controlling vast resources and employing wage labor. Family farms and family fishing boats, as long as they do not sprout into empires employing many wage-laborers, are not the problem. It is the ownership and control of the major industries that is crucial. Such private ownership of the means of production is the source of—or at least a central source of—what I have just referred to as

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Nagel in his *Mortal Questions* and in his discussion of Nozick indicates how entitlement conceptions and distributive conceptions may in reality mesh as complementary parts of a coherent conception of justice. See Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, (Cambridge, England, 1979), pp. 106–127 and in his “Libertarianism Without Foundations”, *The Yale Law Journal*, vol. 85, no. 1 (November, 1975), pp. 136–149.

<sup>7</sup> Ziyad I. Husami, “Marx on Distributive Justice”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Fall, 1978), pp. 27–64, Gary Young, “Justice And Capitalist Production: Marx and Bourgeois Ideology”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. VIII, no. 3 (September, 1978), pp. 421–455 and Allen Buchanan, “The Marxian Critique of Justice and Rights”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, forthcoming.

the great power of one person over another and the great advantages of one group over another. It is that private ownership and control that is at the root of so much exploitation and injustice, not the private ownership of houses or small family farms and the like.<sup>8</sup> The equality aimed at by radical egalitarians is that of a classless, statusless society. But in such a society such personal entitlements can perfectly well remain intact. But it is over entitlements of this last sort where our moral convictions remain firmest.

The entitlement theorist will surely respond by saying ‘If the person who builds a house or works a farm up out of a wilderness is entitled to it, why isn’t a capitalist who, through his own initiative, creativeness and dogged determination, creates an industrial empire entitled to keep his property as well?’ They both are the effect of something we prize in human nature, namely we see here human beings not merely as satisfiers of desires but as exercisers of opportunities. At least in some cases, though less and less typically now, they can be his hard-earned and creatively-struggled-for holdings.

This creates a presumption of entitlement, but only a presumption. (Alternatively, we can say it creates an entitlement but a defeasible one that is rightly overridden.) We, as we do not in the case of the house or the family farm, have very good grounds indeed for overriding this presumption and requiring a redistribution. Remember the conservative principle was “People are entitled to keep whatever they happen to have, unless there is a weighty moral reason why they should relinquish it.” Well, in this situation, there are weighty moral reasons, entirely absent in cases like that of the fishing boat, family farm or house. First, in our historical circumstances such capitalist ownership and control of the means of production causes extensive misery and impoverishment that could otherwise be avoided. Secondly, it gives capitalists and a small managerial elite (who are also often capitalists themselves) control over people’s lives in such a way as to lessen their effective equal citizenship and undermine their self-respect and moral autonomy. Moreover, these are not inevitabilities of human life but the special and inescapable features of a class society, where there must be a dominant capitalist class who owns and controls the means of production. But they are not inescapable features of the human condition and they have not been shown simply to be something that must come with industrial society.

Someone determined to defend *laissez-faire* capitalism and an entitlement theory of justice might tough it out and claim that the error in the above entitlement theorist’s conduct of his case is in stating his account in such a conditional way, namely that “people are entitled to keep whatever they happen to have, unless there is a (weighty) moral reason why they ought to relinquish it.” It should instead be stated as “People are entitled to their holdings if the initial acquisition was just and any transfer from it just; the initial acquisition, in turn, was just if it accords with the Lockean proviso that it was taken from unclaimed land and if the initial appropriation left enough in kind for everyone else.” This principle of justice is designed, in the way the first entitlement account was not, to normatively block any attempt, by the state or any group of people, to justifiably compel any transfer, under any circumstances, not specified in the above formulation, of any holdings to satisfy any redistributive scheme. Any person, quite categorically, may justifiably and justly hold on to whatever he initially justly acquired, not matter what the consequences. There is the obvious point that we do not know how to go about ascertaining whether in fact the patterns of holdings now in effect result from just acquisitions via just transfers. But this obvious point aside, such a categorical entitlement account has plain defects. To take such a right of property to be a moral absolute is to unduly narrow even a rights-based moral theory. A society organized with that as its fundamental moral principle—a principle of justice which could never rightly be overridden—would lead to the degradation of large numbers of people. They would, in circumstances such as our own, have the *formal* right to acquire property but in actuality they would have little or no property and their impoverishment and loss of autonomy and self-respect would be very great indeed. To hold on to an unqualified right to property in those circumstances would be not only arbitrary and morally one-sided, it would be morally callous as well. Moreover, it is not a commitment that clearheadedness and a devotion to rationality dictates. What such a one-valued absolutism neglects is that we are morally obliged to respond to suffering. On such an entitlement theory we would not be obliged to relieve the suffering of another even when we could do so without serious loss to ourselves. What it gains here in categoricalness, it *loses* in moral coherence. To have an understanding of the moral language-game, to

<sup>8</sup> Nancy Holmstrom, “Exploitation”, *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 7 (1977), pp. 353–369, and Allen Buchanan, “Exploitation, Alienation and Injustice”, *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 9 (1979), pp. 121–139.

have an understanding of what morality requires, we need to understand that we cannot be indifferent to the sufferings of others such that we would be prepared to hold on to even a *miniscule* bit of our property, say to be quite unprepared to share any of our food with a starving person, when sharing it could be done without any serious inconvenience to ourselves. To think that, morally speaking, our options are open in such a situation is not only to exhibit moral callousness, it is also to reveal a failure even to understand what it is to take a moral point of view. To avoid harming others and violating their rights is, of course, as this entitlement account stresses, central to morality, but morality requires—taking a moral point of view requires—that, under certain circumstances, preventing or alleviating or remedying the misery of others is also part of our duty. The recognition of such duties undermines such a categorical commitment to entitlements. Sometimes we are morally compelled to redistribute. Anything else would be grossly unjust and immoral. Whether we feel compassion or not, the relief of human misery, where this is reasonably within our capacities, is something that is morally required of us. What we otherwise would be entitled to, we can hardly be entitled to when we could, by sharing it, save the life of another and (to put it concessively and minimally) not cause any great distress to ourselves. My last remark can easily be misunderstood. It is not so much demands placed on individuals within an unjust social system that are crucial but a commitment on the part of individuals to alter the social system. In a period of political stagnation, to demand of a tolerably well off suburbanite that he greatly diminish his holdings and send a not inconsiderable sum of money to India comes too close to requiring him to be a Don Quixote. What needs to be altered is the social system. To maintain that severe sacrifices are required of individuals when there is little prospect of turning the society around is to ask them to be martyrs if, by so acting, there is not a chance for significant social change. Still, morally speaking, there has to be redistribution and where we genuinely could relieve misery to not acknowledge that such a *sharing* is required of us is to fail to grasp something very essential to morality. Failure here is as much a moral failing as an intellectual one and no amount of cleverness can get around that.

#### IV

I want now to turn to the second general problem

about radical egalitarianism, I mentioned at the beginning of this article. Some critics of egalitarianism maintain that however abstractly desirable egalitarianism may be it still is an impossible ideal for it is impossible to achieve or even reasonably to approximate.<sup>9</sup> Such a criticism would apply doubly to my radical form of egalitarianism. We must just come to recognize, so the criticism goes, that inequality is inevitable and erect our account of justice in the light of this inevitability.

Are there any basic features or functional prerequisites of society or human nature that make inequality inevitable in all societies or at least in all industrial societies? I shall limit my answer to remarks about industrial societies and consider the claims that classes, bureaucracies (with their hierarchical social relations) and social stratification are inevitable. The inevitability of any of them would ensure that any future industrial society would also be to some degree a status society with a ranking of people, and not just a society with differentiations, according to social roles. With these inequalities in status there would be the differences in power and authority that have plagued societies in the past and continue to plague our societies.

It has been claimed that inequalities are functionally necessary to any industrial society. There will be a division of labour and a differentiation of social roles in those societies. Since certain social roles are functionally more important than others—being a doctor at the Crisis Centre is functionally more important than being a ski instructor—and since suitable performance in these more important roles requires, in a world where such talent is scarce, suitable training and discipline, it is necessary to induce with adequate rewards those with the appropriate talents to delay gratification and take on the required training—the long years of struggle in medical school, graduate school or law school. This is done by assuring them that at the end of their training they will be rewarded more highly for their sacrifice in taking on that training. This requires the inequalities of differential incentives. People, the argument goes, simply will not make the sacrifice of going to medical school or going to law school unless they have very good reason to believe that they will make much more money than they would by selling cars or running a little shop. To stream people into these functionally necessary occupations, there must be differential rewards and with those rewards social stratification with its concomitant inequalities in

<sup>9</sup> Ralf Dahrendorf, "On the Origin of Social Inequality" in P. Laslett and W. G. Runciman (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society: Second Series*, (Oxford, 1962), pp. 83–109.

prestige, power and authority. Moreover, we must do this to make sure that the most talented people will continue to occupy the most functionally important positions and to work at their maximal capacity. The very good of the society requires it.

The first thing to note is that all this, even if sound, does not add up to an inevitability. Still, some might say that it is all the same a 'rational inevitability', given that it is a functional prerequisite for the proper functioning of an industrial society. But is it actually a functional prerequisite? Again, like some of the previous criticisms of egalitarianism we have examined, it simply uncritically assumes something like contemporary capitalism as being the norm for how any industrial society must operate, but there is no reason why the additional training should be a form of sacrifice or even be regarded as a sacrifice. It too much takes the ideology of the present as an accurate depiction of social reality. In an egalitarian society, by contrast, everyone would be materially secure and there would be no material loss in remaining in medical school, law school, or graduate school. Once that becomes so and once the pace is slowed down, as it really could be, so that students are not rushed through at great stress and strain, it would be, for many people at least, far less of a sacrifice to go through medical school than to be a bank-teller, rug salesman or assembly line workman all day. For many people, perhaps for most people of normal intelligence, the work both during their school years and afterwards would be more rewarding and challenging than the routine jobs. There is no need to provide special incentives, given other suitable changes in society, changes which are quite feasible if we do not continue to take a capitalist organization of society as normative. The years of training need not be anything remotely like a sacrifice. It is a particular social structure with its distinctive value scheme (scheduling of values) that requires such incentives and such attitudes toward incentives. It is not anything in the nature of industrial society itself which requires these things. (I leave aside whether we can, for a whole range of cases, and not just in some obvious cases, identify, in a non-ethnocentric manner, what the functionally important positions are. Are ministers more important than garage mechanics? Are lawyers more important than dental technicians? Are marriage counsellors more important than airline stewardesses?)

A more interesting argument for the inevitability of inequality is Ralf Dahrendorf's claim that the very concept of a society is such that, when we think of its implications, we realize that there could not—logically could not—be a society without inequalities.<sup>10</sup> A society by definition is a moral, as distinct from an amoral, community. We might say of a way of life of a society, that we deeply disapprove of, that it is an immoral society. It makes sense to say (that is, it is not a deviation from a linguistic regularity to say) "Swedish sexual morality is immoral," but it makes no sense to speak of an amoral society. In that sense every society is a moral community. It will have a cluster of norms, tolerably intergrated, which regulate the conduct of its members. Moreover, these norms carry one or another kind of sanction which ensure their obligatory character by providing rewards for conforming to them and penalties for deviation from them. Dahrendorf concludes from that "the sanctioning of human behaviour in terms of social norms necessarily creates a system of inequality of rank and that social stratification is therefore an immediate result of the control of social behaviour by positive and negative sanctions".<sup>11</sup> But, given the very idea of what it is for a mass of people to be a society, there could not be a society without such norms; but, if there are such norms, then there must also be a schedule of inequalities.

Steven Lukes, quite succinctly, exposes the crucial mistakes in Dahrendorf's influential argument.<sup>12</sup> "It does not follow", Lukes argues, "from the mere existence of social norms and the fact that their enforcement discriminates against those who do not or cannot (because of their social position) conform to them that a society-wide system of inequality and 'rank order of social status' are 'bound to emerge'".<sup>13</sup> From the fact that a society, actually to be a society at all, must have norms, spelling out what it is right and wrong to do, and that it must apply sanctions to assure general compliance, it does not follow that these norms are the sort of norms that would provide a social stratification with a hierarchy of power, status and authority. An egalitarian society would have norms and the associated sanctions too, only they would be far less oppressive and pervasive. As Lukes nicely puts it, "Dahrendorf slides unaccountably from the undoubted truth that within groups norms are enforced which discriminate against certain persons and positions . . . to the unsupported claim that,

<sup>10</sup> Dahrendorf, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Lukes, "Socialism and Equality" in *The Socialist Idea*, L. Kolakowski and S. Hampshire (eds.) pp. 74–95.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

within society as a whole, a system of inequality between groups and positions is inevitable".<sup>14</sup> Dahrendorf gives us no grounds for believing that all societies must, because they have various norms carrying sanctions, be organizations which have a system of stratification, either implicit or explicit, in which their various norms and behaviour are ranked within a single system of stratification.

## V

I now turn to what I, at least, take to be the most troubling arguments about the inevitability of inequality in industrial societies. They turn on the claim that the empirical evidence, when linked to reasonable theories and arguments, shows that a status society is inevitable under the conditions of modern life. There is no way of making industrial societies free of bureaucracy with the cluster of privileges and differential power and authority which go with such inegalitarian structures.

It is reasonable to argue that there are, when we look at the various modern societies (including Russia, China, Cuba and Yugoslavia), no classless societies or, what is more relevant, no societies which are clearly tending in the direction of classless societies. Given this, isn't radical egalitarianism implausible? Would it not be better, given these empirical facts, to opt for a more modest egalitarianism with principles something like Rawls'? We must not tell ourselves Marxist fairy tales!

The above argument rests on reasonable empirical data and, unlike Dahrendorf's, does not involve a transcendental argument. It is certainly anything but clear that there are any complex societies which are moving in the direction of classlessness. Occasionally, we do see some hopeful indicators, Mozambique, the Chile of Allende, some developments in France and Italy, but they are but fitful and very uncertain indicators and it is anything but evident what will develop in those atmospheres, though we can be cautiously hopeful here. Rather than put all, or even most, of one's eggs in that historical basket, it is theoretically more useful, I believe, to note certain general facts, and on the basis of them to develop a theoretical argument.

First the facts. We have not had any proletarian revolutions yet, though we have had revolutions made in the name of a very small and undeveloped proletariat.<sup>15</sup> We have yet to have a dictatorship of

the proletariat—a society controlled by the proletariat and run principally in its own interests. The state socialist societies that exist are not socialist societies that developed in the conditions that Marx said were propitious for the development of socialism but (East Germany and Czechoslovakia aside as isolated exceptions) in economically backward societies that had yet to experience a bourgeois revolution. It is also a fact that these socialist societies are surrounded by strong Capitalist societies which are, naturally enough, implacably hostile to socialism.

If these are the facts, as I believe they are, then it is very unlikely that a classless society will begin to emerge out of these societies until those empirical situations radically change. There is a further fact that should be noted. In the bourgeois democracies there is not yet good evidence of a rising class consciousness. In North America it is almost non-existent. It is slightly stronger in Europe, though Europe's industrial giant (West Germany) shows very little of it and in Japan it is, as well, very weak. Again, in these circumstances, a movement in the direction of classlessness is hardly evident.

Yet all of these countries have troubled economies. If the instability of monopoly capitalism increases and if the third world remains unpacified, conditions in the industrially developed capitalist countries may change. A militancy and a sense of class may arise and class conflict may no longer be merely a muted and disguised reality. That could lead to the first social transformation by an actual proletarian class, a class developed enough, educated enough, numerous enough and strong enough to democratically run things in its own interests and to pave the way for a society organized in the interests of everyone, namely a classless society. I do not maintain that we have good grounds for saying that it will happen. I say only that that scenario is a coherent possibility. Minimally I do not believe that anyone has shown this to be a mere dream, a fantastic bit of utopianism. If it is also, as I believe it to be, everything considered a desirable possibility it is something to be struggled for with all the class conflict that that will involve.

## VI

However, even, if all this is so, there remains another worrying objection which tends to engender the anxiety that a statusless radically egalitarian society may still be secular pie in the sky by and by. Suppose we can achieve a strictly classless society,

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> Erwin Fetscher, "Karl Marx und die 'Marxistischen' Revolutionen", *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, September 30, 1977, pp. 35–36.



that is, a society in which there is no structural means by which a historically extendable (intra-generational) group, by means of its social role, can extract surplus value from another group because all remuneration is according to work and there is no land-rent, or profits from shares and the like. However, even in such a society, as Mihailo Marković observes, there still could be political elites or at least bureaucratic elites.<sup>16</sup> These elites could come to exert considerable domination over other people and, even if there was only a bureaucratic elite and the bureaucratic elite had little political power, something which is actually not very likely while it remained an elite, still their high status would make for considerable social inequality and would plainly be harmful to the egalitarian commitment to equal self-respect and to equal moral autonomy. Thus, even though in a strict sense classes were no more, it could be the case that a status society of rank and privilege could still exist with a rather sharp social stratification which would still contain considerable differences in whole life prospects. Differences which are clearly incompatible with a radical egalitarianism.

Marković is no doubt right in saying that it is “theoretically conceivable how the emergence of a hierarchy of power may be prevented”.<sup>17</sup> Marković’s prescription is like Marx’s and Mao’s. There is “democratic election, replacability and vertical rotation for all functions of social management”.<sup>18</sup> While there will continue to be a division of labor, the persistent aim is to prevent the formation of a group of professional managers and to break down the class impregnated and status engendering traditional distinction between mental and manual labor. This will also cut down at least the extent of the bureaucracy. There will be no persistent and stable group of people who alone will know how to manage the society and who can claim a kind of technical expertise in management that must simply be

accepted and taken as authoritative and which will lead to a high status and, very likely, again to political power. The power of occupational roles and particularly of bureaucratic occupational roles is both understandable in an industrial society and threatening to egalitarianism and moral autonomy.

It surely is not known that status society can be overcome. It is simplistic wishful thinking to say that we know that it will be overcome. But it is also a too easy *Realpolitik* to claim that we know that conditions cannot arise in which a society other than a hunting and gathering or a simple agricultural society could come into being and flourish which had no such elites. Whether it is probable that such a society is on the historical agenda is hard to say. Indeed it is not evident what, if anything, is on the historical agenda, but again, as far as I can see, it has not been shown not to be a reasonable historical possibility. Similar considerations obtain to those we noted in discussing class. The facts about the conditions under which state socialist societies emerged make the existence of status distinctions under such conditions practically speaking unavoidable. That they emerged is surely hardly surprising. It is those factors that can, when we reflect on them, make us prematurely pessimistic. But what would emerge out of a socialist revolution in an advanced industrial society, with an established bourgeois democratic tradition, is another thing again. Surely the bourgeoisie, and particularly the haute bourgeoisie who run our societies, would like us to be cultural pessimists, would like us not to believe in the possibility of “the art of the impossible.” But what is reasonable to hope for, and to struggle for, should not be so culturally defined, defeating our hopes for a more human future. Given a humanistic conception of what sort of society is worth bringing into being, such a hope, given the stark alternatives, is not an unreasonable hope of human beings blind to social reality.

*The University of Calgary*

*Received September 13, 1979*

<sup>16</sup> Mihailo Marković, *The Contemporary Marx*, (Nottingham, England, 1974), pp. 128–139.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*