

In R.A. Segal and K. von Stuckrad, eds, *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*, Leiden: Brill, 2016.

Equality

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Equality typically refers to some universal condition thought to be shared by human beings. For egalitarians, it is self-evident that persons are inherently equal in some important respects even though they may be different in others. Their equality may stem from the biological equality of human nature--for instance, a shared capacity for empathy or reason. Or spiritual equality may come from a God who created all in his likeness. These ideals of equality have been corrupted in practice by a self-interested secular world that disproportionately rewards some individuals and groups at the expense of others.

Classical accounts of equality emphasize the progressive achievement of civil equality (eighteenth century), political equality (nineteenth century), and social equality (twentieth century). 'Moral equality' attributes equal value to all subjects sharing a more or less identical claim on the distribution of preferences. It is unaffected by other considerations like wealth, power, prestige, gender, and ethnicity. 'Political equality' grants citizens the right to participate in the governing processes of a legitimate political apparatus, above all of the nation state. 'Civil equality' places all subjects in an equal relationship under the jurisdiction of a disinterested system of criminal and civil justice by which all are 'equal before the law.' In the twentieth century demands were made increasingly for 'social equality' for all citizens--health care, housing, education, employment, and progressive income redistribution—organized by a national welfare state.

Political, civil, and social equality excited a 'fear of levelling' in philosophers as different as Edmund Burke and Friedrich Nietzsche. Later philosophers like Friedrich von Hayek and Robert Nozick justify inequality because it provides incentives to acquire private property legitimately in conditions of maximal liberty. A philosophical defense of equality as a social contract struck between rationally self-interested individuals was mounted by John Rawls. In his hypothetical experiment, welfare entitlements are distributed equally from behind a 'veil of ignorance', an 'original position' where no individual would know their social position in advance of the social contract. An unequal distribution of welfare is permitted by Rawls' second principle of social justice, 'the difference principle', where is to the advantage of everyone, particularly the least advantaged.

Societies evince different kinds of equality, often depending on whether the mode of welfare redistribution is regulated by the state or the market. At one extreme, states like the former Soviet Union fully centralised welfare and opportunity allocations while states like the US sought to minimise state welfare and maximise market allocations. Many countries, from Scandinavian redistributive welfare states to Japan's social liberal state, attempt to balance market and state control in different mixes to produce greater income equality.

Epidemiological studies demonstrate that where income and wealth are more evenly distributed, there tend to be more personal and social benefits across society: deeper social integration, better physical and mental health, less violent crime, fewer drug problems, fewer teenage births, and fewer persons in prison. Conversely, the negative effects of gross inequality are not confined to the poorest groups but also affect wealthier groups negatively through anomie through excessive consumption and remoteness from the rest of society. Unequal and uncontrolled forms of consumerism jeopardize the viability of human life and environmental sustainability.

Equalization processes

Sociology shifts the focus from static philosophical ideals of 'equality' and the epidemiology of income inequality to wider processes of equalization of social groups. In the twentieth century an egalitarian ethos made increasingly intolerable exclusionary practices based on class, gender, race, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, or disability. The sociologist Norbert Elias described a long-run competitive 'double movement' of weakening distinction and growing diffusion of behavior and institutions between upper classes (downwards) and lower classes (upwards). As a 'working' upper class, the bourgeoisie imposed the universal value of earned income on the nobility and thereby dignified the status of work as a measure of equal worth in society.

Money equalization

Within market economies, money acts as the great equaliser. Only with the advent of capitalism does the exchange of money between equally abstract individuals, nominally free to buy and sell at will, become a general condition. Money exchange abstracts from every concrete difference and specificity and equalizes diverse conditions between buyer and seller.

But even though premised on equal exchange, in practice capitalism perpetuates inequality. Equality takes on an abstract, formal quality amidst substantively unequal social relations. Marx discerned the principles of capitalism as 'freedom' for individuals, 'equality' of exchange, private ownership of property, and the utilitarian calculations of instrumental means over virtuous ends.

Contrary to legend, however, Marx did not advocate unqualified material equality but instead proposed freedom from the distortions that follow from domination by material necessity. Instead of the abstract equality of bourgeois society, Marx proposed unequal rights: 'From each according to ability; to each according to need.' Since individuals are naturally and socially endowed with unequal qualities, experiences, and capacities Marx believed that post-capitalist society would therefore preserve inequalities between people.

National equalization

In the transition from religious dynasties to national modernity a new kind of equality of community emerged- nations- or what Benedict Anderson called a 'deep, horizontal comradeship.' Territorially limited national communities represented a rupture with pre-modern hierarchical forms of sacred community, cosmic order and

dynastic rule. Secular modernity regulates strangers as anonymous equals by clocks, calendars, and mass communications.

National equalization processes secularized Christian equality. Although nationalism absorbed and displaced religion, it itself functions as a 'civil religion'. Most famously, the US Declaration of Independence declared that all 'men are created equal' and the French Revolution was emblazoned with the slogan 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.' An individual may die, but the nation lives on. As the emergence of nationalism furthered equalization, it also furthered the demands of colonized people for equality between nations. As well as the gross inequalities that occur within state-societies, wide inequalities exist between nation-states as measured, for instance, by the UN Human Development Index.

Equalization processes in the balance

Over the long term extreme forms of inequality get moderated. But they do not disappear. A closing of social distance and diffusion of social practices does not eliminate inequalities between social groups. Counter-processes are continually at play. As the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated, dominant groups struggle to retain all their exclusionary privileges of social, cultural and economic distinction by education, professionalization, governance, art, and culture, and by stigmatizing and marginalizing groups deemed inferior, gauche, and vulgar.

Extremes inequalities may even return, as with the polarization of income inequality wrought by neoliberal political economy since the 1970s. During 2000s, OECD trends showed widening income inequalities in some already highly unequal countries like Israel and the US, as well as in traditionally low-inequality countries, such as Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. This stemmed mainly from a sustained squeeze on wages for labour and a rising share of income for the highest earners. On the other hand, grossly unequal countries like Chile, Mexico, Greece, Turkey, and Hungary reduced income inequality. Yet a pronounced swing of the pendulum has further exacerbated the pattern of inequality since the economic crisis began in 2008.

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Equalization processes; Income equality; Moral equality; Civil equality; Political equality; Social equality; Norbert Elias; Karl Marx; Distinction; Diffusion.

This is the author's accepted manuscript of a chapter published in R.A. Segal and K. von Stuckrad (eds). 2016. *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*, Leiden: Brill.