10

Social Equality and Social Inequality

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10.1 Introduction

My task in this essay is to attempt to clarify the theory of social equality. In section 10.2, I show how defenders of social equality distinguish their position from that of distributive equality. However, although defenders of social equality are clear, at least in outline, about what they oppose, it is less clear how the ideal of social equality should be articulated, as I explain in section 10.3. In section 10.4, I introduce an idea from Amartya Sen: that the task for political philosophers is not to articulate an ideal of justice, but rather to identify manifest injustices and, if possible help to derive solutions to remedy such injustices.¹ I attempt to apply this insight to the topic of social inequality, for if Sen is right then what appeared to be a defect turns out to be a strength. Section 10.5 explores whether such an idea can be defended in philosophical terms, presenting the thesis that social equality is variably or multiply realizable, while section 10.6 identifies what I claim to be a manifest injustice, and also a manifest social inequality, in contemporary society: the case of benefit cheats, many of whom, on my account, suffer from severe disadvantage. Section 10.7 concludes.

10.2 Distributive and Social Inequality

In the Critique of the Gotha Programme, Karl Marx sets out a blistering attack on what he believed to be an unacceptable socialist program, which had taken the retrograde and unforgivable step of disregarding many of Marx’s own insights. One aspect of the Gotha Programme that draws incisive criticism

from Marx is that the "proceeds of labour belong undiminished with equal right to all members of society."

After some nitpicking about the word "undiminished" Marx writes,

But one man is superior to another physically, or mentally, and supplies more labour in the same time, or can labour for a longer time; and labour, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its duration or intensity, otherwise it ceases to be a standard of measurement. This equal right is an unequal right for unequal labour... Right, by its very nature, can consist only in the application of an equal standard; but unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable only by an equal standard insofar as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one definite side only... Further, one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, and so on and so forth. Thus, with an equal performance of labour, and hence an equal share in the social consumption fund, one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, and so on. To avoid all these defects, right, instead of being equal, would have to be unequal.²

On the basis of the argument that if we are to make people equal in one respect we are very likely to make them unequal in another Marx apparently concludes that, therefore, it is a mistake to try to build a social program on the notion of equality. Around a hundred years later both Amartya Sen³ and Ronald Dworkin⁴ rediscovered Marx’s central observation. However, rather than taking it as a reason to abandon the idea of equality, they took it as the start of a research program to capture the true nature of egalitarianism. In laying down the challenge of discovering what Cohen was later to call “The Currency of Egalitarian Justice,”⁵ they set the agenda for analytic thinking about equality, following typical patterns of analytical philosophy in which theorists provide counterexamples to alternative theories and defend their own against such examples by introducing distinctions, refinements and complications.

At the heart of this project is a claim formulated by Cohen in the following terms: “I take for granted that there is something which justice requires people to have equal amounts of.” Yet there is a certainly a question to be asked about whether this is the right way to conceive of the idea of an equal society. For in the writings of earlier theorists of equality, such as R.H. Tawney, there is no indication that they see themselves as engaged in the project of discovering that thing of which all must have equal shares. Tawney wanted to understand what it would be to create a society of equals. Questions of distribution, while an important part of the answer, may not be the whole.

Tawney was, of course, greatly interested in poverty, to the point of discussing the deficient diet of working people and their children, and setting out mortality figures that reveal what is now known as “the social gradient in health.” Yet he seems equally interested in the social reproduction of inequality, for example producing accounts of the proportion of high court judges who attended a small number of elite schools such as Eton or Westminster. In another example, Tawney writes, regarding the 69 men who were British Cabinet Ministers between 1885 and 1905: “40 were the sons of nobility, 52 were educated at Oxford or Cambridge, and 46 were educated at public schools [i.e. elite private schools].”

Tawney’s work contains at least two challenges to the distributive approach. One is the claim that what matters most about inequality is not patterns of unequal distribution but the way we react to each other: what he calls “the religion of inequality,” with reinforced patterns of servility and arrogance. Tawney worries about privilege and its reproduction over the generations, drawing particular attention to class division, a topic surprisingly absent from much contemporary analytic work on equality. The second challenge to note is his observation that the most important goods are those where “to divide is not to take away.” From a distributional point of view the theorist is compelled to think about goods where one person’s enjoyment or consumption of that good rules out another person’s: the cake problem. But there are goods that

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6 Ibid., 906.
8 Ibid., 198.
10 Tawney, Equality, 300–301.
11 Ibid., 92
12 Ibid., 24.
13 Ibid., 41.
14 Ibid., 291.
are not like this; where it is possible to increase the stock—or indeed diminish it—simply by the way we act towards each other and the attitudes we take to one another. Friendship is one such example; a feeling of security and belonging is another. Hence, from this point of view, it seems bizarre that we spend so much effort working out how to divide scarce goods when, if we get things right, we can make more for everyone. But how? I’ll come back to this shortly.

Tawney was particularly impressed with and influenced by the work of Matthew Arnold, who, in the late nineteenth century, had written about “the religion of inequality” that Tawney in the 1930s, felt still afflicted British society. Of course maldistribution of resources was a problem, but both Arnold and Tawney felt that class divisions in their contemporary societies (albeit decades apart) were so extreme that one could hardly talk about a single society. The privileged lived apart from the poor, shopped in different streets, sent their children to different schools, and had no leisure interests in common. Even as children the ruling classes did not meet and mix with the people that they would eventually govern. It is this notion of social inequality that they find so offensive, and contrasts, at least in Arnold’s mind, with a rather romanticized view of French society where aristocrat and peasant can converse happily with each other and “make the same sort of demands on life.”

Even those who seek social equality cannot ignore material issues. Tawney, as we have seen, writes extensively about material deprivation. But to a certain socialist tradition the idea of achieving a desirable form of society by insisting on something like equality of resources is deeply mistaken. For there is an egalitarian tradition that questions the value of material resources, and especially the culture of consumption. A good life is one of friendship, creation and appreciation of art and literature, development of creativity, and mutual support. Of course resources are prerequisites of these activities, but those

16 Arnold, *Mixed Essays*, 72. Interestingly, George Orwell wrote in the early 1940s that British life was becoming less class divided:

‘I maintain that the class distinctions in a country like England are now so unreal that they cannot last much longer. Fifty years ago or even twenty years ago, a factory worker and a small professional man, for instance, were very different kinds of creature. Nowadays they are very much alike, though they may not realize it. They see the same films and listen to the same radio programmes, and they wear very similar clothes and live in very similar houses. What used to be called a proletarian – what Marx would have meant by a proletarian – only exists now in the heavy industries and on the land.’ George Orwell, “The Proletarian Writer,” in *Collected Essays Volume 2: My Country Right or Left, 1940–43* (London: Penguin, 1970), 56. See also the very similar remarks in “The Lion and Unicorn”, *Collected Essays Volume 2*, 97.

Note that Orwell was writing during the second world war, at a time when the only domestic radio service available was the BBC Home Service, broadcasting just one channel. There was, therefore, no option but to listen to the same programs.
who think that we must equalize resources is missing the point and falling into a form of fetishism. This view, associated with William Morris\(^\text{17}\) and John Ruskin,\(^\text{18}\) is that material resources are a snare and a distraction; the distributive view, by contrast, seems to be that they are so important that they need to be shared out equally.

### 10.3 What Is a Society of Social Equality?

Tawney’s ideas, supplemented by Morris and Ruskin, push us in the direction of thinking that the goal of equality is to create a society of equals, rather than an equal distribution of goods. And indeed this notion of social equality has been revived through the work of Elizabeth Anderson\(^\text{19}\) and Samuel Scheffler,\(^\text{20}\) as well as earlier, and underappreciated, contributions from David Miller\(^\text{21}\) and Richard Norman.\(^\text{22}\) As we saw, Tawney identifies snobbery, servility and the reproduction of privilege as evils he wishes to overcome alongside material deprivation. Yet one struggles to find in Tawney a positive model of the society he desires. He presents no theory of equality, and says little if anything about the institutional forms a society of equals would take. David Miller and Richard Norman, who argue that equality should be conceived in social or relational terms, are also clear what they are against—hierarchy and authoritarian power relations—but have been less assured in their positive accounts of what they are for, rather than what they are against. Miller writes: “It is possible to elucidate the ideal of social equality in various ways, but difficult to give it a sharp definition... It is a matter of how people regard one another, and how they conduct their social relations.”\(^\text{23}\)

In a similar vein, Elizabeth Anderson suggests that the negative aim of egalitarianism is to end oppression.\(^\text{24}\) Its positive aim, she says, it to “create a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others.”\(^\text{25}\) Everyone sympathetic to social equality will agree. But how do we explicate the ideal further and what would it mean in practice? Anderson does helpfully

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\(^{24}\) Ibid., “What Is the Point of Equality?” 288.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., “What Is the Point of Equality?” 289.
discuss these issues at length, setting out a view she calls “democratic equality” offering “equality in the space of capabilities.”\textsuperscript{26} However, Anderson is clear that, in order not to be overly intrusive, governments have reason to concern themselves only with a limited range of capabilities that fall into two groups. First, those capabilities that enable people to “escape oppressive relations.” Second, those that are necessary to allow people to function as equal citizens, as exclusion from the political life of a community reduces people to the status of second-class citizens.\textsuperscript{27} Anderson’s positive account, then, is suffused with conditions that are to be avoided—oppression, second-class status—rather than an independent characterization of the content of equal social relations.\textsuperscript{28} And indeed my own attempt to come to a view of social equality is clearer in its opposition to “clustering of disadvantage” than it is in its positive view, which is little more than the negation of the negation.\textsuperscript{29}

The abiding problem, therefore, for social egalitarians has been to provide an account of what egalitarian social relations are. Distributive egalitarians have been able to say what is to be distributed and to what pattern—equality of resources, or equal opportunity for welfare, for example—and to develop their theories in detail, analyzing key concepts, and providing examples of what their theories prescribe in practical dilemmas. Social equality has not provided an equivalent.\textsuperscript{30} And here the great theorists of social equality are little help. Tawney wears his Christian Socialism fairly lightly, yet the tendency of his view would see a society of equals as one as extending Christian notions of universal love to all. This is a paradigm of a good where “to divide is not to take away.” Yet it is a demanding goal with limited appeal and relevance in large-scale secular society. Morris and Ruskin, so it seems, would like to return to something like feudal production with guilds of art workers, which again hardly seems appropriate for large-scale, multicultural, industrial, or indeed postindustrial society. Notions of “civic friendship” could be helpful to

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., “What Is the Point of Equality?” 316.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 317.
\textsuperscript{28} To be fair to Anderson, the notion of a community in which people can justify their actions to each other is also central to her picture. My point is not that her vision is entirely one of “avoiding negatives” but only that it is very difficult to say very much more about the positive content of social equality and it is natural for social egalitarians to fall into talk of what they wish to avoid.
\textsuperscript{29} Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit, Disadvantage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
elucidate the idea of egalitarian social relations, but still seem fairly weak as an ideal. Perhaps the idea of “solidarity” could be useful for further development, yet on its own offers little illumination.\(^{31}\)

### 10.4 The Role of the Theorist of Justice

For those who defend social equality, the lack of a clear positive model of a society of equals may appear to be a significant problem, in urgent need of remedy. And yet there is another perspective we could take. Consider Amartya Sen’s recent book, *The Idea of Justice*.\(^{32}\) One central message of Sen’s book is that it is a mistake to think that the task of political philosophy is to formulate precise principles of justice as a template for criticizing the present state of affairs and as a model for how it ought to be refashioned. Although it is traditional for political philosophers to write as if they were legislators for the kingdom of the imagination, Sen argues, by contrast, that the task for political philosophers is to identify manifest injustice and to work out how those injustices can be overcome.\(^{33}\)

Sen’s view is that it is a wrong-headed to set out an ideal or positive model of a just society. What we might think of a weaker, in the sense of more concessive, version of Sen’s theory, is that it is not so much mistaken as unnecessary or perhaps, inappropriate, to formulate a clear theory of justice in order to identify a situation of manifest injustice. The concessive view agrees with Sen that social reform should not consist in the attempt to realize an independently formulated ideal of justice. However, it can afford to be neutral on whether there are sound reasons for formulating ideals. Sen appears to think not, but a contrary view is that the formulation of ideals is an important part of political and intellectual culture, and the evaluation of current arrangements against such ideals can serve a number of important functions, including identifying manifest injustice. However, both the strong and concessive position reject the converse argument: that in order to identify manifest injustice, it is necessary to have formulated a positive idea of justice. Rather they claim that manifest injustice can be identified without reference to a positive theory of justice (what I shall call, for short, the “manifest injustice thesis”). It is this thesis that will be the central focus of the remainder of this essay.

Note that the manifest injustice thesis is not the rejection of theoretical reason. The rejected position is one that uses theory as a type of template for a

\[31\] For a discussion of the fall in the idea of “solidarity” and its need for revival, see my “Political Philosophy and the Real World of the Welfare State” (forthcoming).

\[32\] Sen, *The Idea of Justice*.

\[33\] Ibid., 21.
just society: something rejected as unnecessary or inappropriate (concessive) or wrong-headed (strong). This is a very particular rejection of theory and not necessarily a rejection of all theoretical reasoning. It may be very important to use aspects of political theory—for example when thinking about human motivation—but formulating an ideal theory of justice and applying it to the process of social reform is ruled out. The general point is illustrated very well by Iris Marion Young:

Rejecting a theory of justice does not entail eschewing rational discourse about justice. Some modes of reflection, analysis and argument aim not at building a systematic theory, but at clarifying the meaning of concepts and issues, describing and explaining social relations, and articulating and defending ideals and principles. Reflective discourse about justice makes arguments, but these are not intended as definitive demonstrations. They are addressed to others and await their response, in a situated political dialogue.\textsuperscript{34}

Methodologically, the advantage for social egalitarians of Sen’s observation is clear. What appeared to be a defect—the lack of a clear positive account of social equality—turns out to be no such thing. Social egalitarians can have a clear sense of what they are against—hierarchy, snobbery, servility, oppression—and this is all that is needed.\textsuperscript{35} I must enter one qualification, though. Even if Sen is right about justice in general, it may not be that the same lessons apply to equality. We will have to return to that issue.

10.5 Philosophical Justification of the Manifest Injustice Thesis

However, it is one thing to take comfort and cover in Sen’s approach and the inspiration of earlier theorists; it is another question as to whether Sen is correct. Indeed the manifest injustice thesis may simply seem baffling. How is it even possible to identify an injustice unless you first have in your head an ideal of justice? I will now turn to this methodological question, and then to the

\textsuperscript{34} Iris Marion Young, \textit{Justice and the Politics of Difference} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 5.

\textsuperscript{35} I owe to the editors of this volume the observation that in practice social egalitarians, at least in recent decades, have not been as forthcoming about the details of the defects as they might have been. However, there seems no reason in principle why these accounts should not be supplied.
more substantive question: is it true that contemporary societies are afflicted by manifest injustice, or rather manifest social inequality? For if they are not, then Sen’s approach seems to leave us nowhere, or perhaps endorsing the status quo. But first to the methodological questions.

The most obvious criticism of the manifest injustice thesis is to allege that it is incoherent. On this view, criticizing something as unjust is only possible by appealing to some sort of standard of justice, whether explicitly or implicitly. Injustice is failure to measure up to a standard, and any judgment of injustice relies on an account of justice. If this criticism is established then the manifest injustice thesis is an evasion, not a resolution.

In the abstract this may seem a strong objection. But let us consider some of Sen’s own examples of manifest injustices: famines and missing women. Regarding famines, Sen argued that famines in the modern world have not principally been caused by lack of food but rather lack of entitlement to food. In many famines food has been exported from the famine-affected region. And in a well-functioning democracy with a free press famines do not happen, because it is not actually difficult to feed a population if there is the will to do it. As allowing the people to starve is not a way of getting reelected, the combination of publicity and democracy will ensure that there is protection against famine, at least in normal circumstances. Consequently famines are political failures, not highly unfortunate, but ultimately random events.

Regarding missing women, Sen reports that there are far fewer women alive in the world—many millions fewer—than biology alone would predict, suggesting that neglect has led to poorer survival rates for young girls than for their brothers.

Both of these facts about the world are likely to give rise to a widespread belief that certain political and social practices are profoundly unjust and that changes are called for. Note, though, that by referring to these practices as “manifest” injustices it is not supposed that they are already widely acknowledged to be unjust, for the phenomena are barely known or reflected on. The point, rather, is

36 For identification of the thesis of the priority of justice over injustice as a possible fallacy see Judith Shklar, The Faces of Injustice (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 15. Her point is that philosophers have tended to ignore injustice, perhaps wrongly thinking that “once we know what justice is, we know all we need to know.” Shklar asks, however, whether we should not think of experiences of injustice as “independent phenomena in their own right” (p. 16). Philosophy, says Shklar, ignores injustice while history and literature “deal with little else.” See also Stuart Hampshire, Justice as Conflict (London: Duckworth, 1999).
38 Amartya Sen, “More than 100 Million Women are Missing,” New York Review of Books, 37, December 20, 1990. Note that the demographics were distorted well before the widespread adoption of ultrasound, which has made selective abortion an option.
that these previously hidden or masked situations, when exposed and brought to
full attention, will immediately elicit a judgment of clear injustice.

Consider how one makes such judgments. It does not seem to the case that
one consciously recalls a theory of justice as a template and then considers the
examples against the template. Rather it just seems obvious that something has
gone seriously wrong in a world in which such things take place, and steps should
be taken, if only that were possible, to remedy the situation. Now, the phenom-
enaology of making the judgment, it has to be conceded, is not a decisive argu-
ment that no theory of justice is being utilized in making the judgment. It may
well be that one’s account of justice is so well ingrained that it can be applied
without recalling it in thought, especially in easy cases. A theory of unconscious
recall could be used. By analogy, think of the intuitive grasp of grammar people
typically have over their mother tongue. An ability to identify and correct errors
typically far outstrips the ability to articulate the correct grammatical rule, but
few would doubt that the rule is being used at some subconscious or precon-
scious level. Or, perhaps more plausibly, rather than using a theory of uncon-
scious recall in the case of justice, it may just be we realize that we do not need to
appeal to any particular theory of justice as pretty much any reasonable theory
would condemn the situation. In either case there is priority to the notion of jus-
tice over the idea of injustice, although it does not have to be expressed. Yet it
would be dogmatic to insist that there must be a positive theory, or numerous
theories, in play without considering further possibilities, and this is what I want
do next, in fact by drawing on other areas of philosophy.

Why would we want to insist that in order to make a judgment of injustice it
is necessary to have a theory of justice, however implicit or inchoate? It appears
that such insistence rests on two assumptions: first, that we can make a clear dis-
tinction between “positive” and “negative” concepts and, second, that the posi-
tive has logical, conceptual, or epistemological priority over the negative. In fact
it is the epistemological thesis that is most clearly under consideration here: that
one can only know the negative by knowing the positive, although the epistemo-
logical thesis itself is likely to be based on a claim of conceptual or logical priority,
which is the more fundamental issue. But is it true that there is a clear distinction
between negative and positive concepts, and that the positive has epistemological
(or conceptual) priority? Both premises, in fact, can be challenged.

First, is there a genuine distinction between positive and negative con-
cepts?39 Where two terms are exclusive, there may be pragmatic reasons why
it is easier to treat one of the two terms as dominant in the relation, but, at
least at the level of language, it could equally be an accident of usage. We
define injustice as “not justice,” but could we have not used different words

that would have had the effect that “justice” meant “not injustice”? In reply, however, it will be said that while it is not obvious that “justice” must have logical priority over “injustice,” surely “equality” has logical priority over “inequality”? But this, in turn, implies that “sameness” has logical priority over “difference,” which could be contested. For one thing, it could plausibly be said that we do not recognize sameness until we are confronted with difference. For another, we could replace the term “socially unequal” with the term “divided” and “socially equal” with “undivided.” Does “divided” then become the dominant term in the relationship, expressing the positive concept?

Presumably, however, surface grammar does not settle anything, and I will not press this objection further. Instead, for the purposes of the argument, I will accept that there is a distinction between positive and negative terms. However, I do want to contest the claim that the positive always has epistemological and conceptual priority over the negative. And to obtain support for my position, I want to turn to a somewhat unlikely place: J.L. Austin’s Sense and Sensibilia. In this work of painstaking ordinary language philosophy, Austin, in Chapter VII, turns, grandly, to a discussion of the nature of reality, which, predictably, turns into an investigation of the word “real.” Taking as an example “real colour” Austin suggests that a straightforward definition could be “the colour that [an object] looks to a normal observer in conditions of normal or standard illumination.” Yet he immediately points out that when someone remarks “that isn’t the real colour of her hair,” the question is not about how it appears, but rather whether it is dyed. In this case, “real” contrasts not with a generic “unreal” but with a very specific way of not being real. Out hunting one hunter might ask another “is that a real duck?” not knowing where the decoys had been set. Back at high table in the 1950s one fellow might ask another “is this real cream?,” resigned to the dismal fact that once again the college has only been able to obtain the artificial variety. But artificial cream, decoy ducks and dyed hair are still real objects. And illusions, hallucinations, and afterimages are only each unreal in a very specific sense, different to each other.

40 This is, of course, an oversimplification. “not justice” can also mean “not an appropriate subject for discourse about justice”: a point that turns out to be important in the debate about Marx’s views of capitalism, communism and injustice. See Steven Lukes, “Marxism, Morality and Justice,” in Marx and Marxisms, ed. G.H.R. Parkinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
42 Ibid., 65.
43 Ibid., 65.
44 Ibid., 67, 69.
45 Ibid., 64.
Austin, rather confusingly, calls “real” a “trouser word” as it is “the negative that wears the trousers” in each case. The point is perhaps better put by saying that the meaning of “real” is context dependent, and it is always the negative—the unreal—that we use to specify the context. So whether or not there is a genuine distinction between “positive” and “negative” terms, it is not true that the positive always has epistemological and conceptual priority over the negative.

To take stock, I am considering the challenge that it is impossible to identify a situation as being unjust, or socially unequal, without having, at least implicitly, a theory of justice or equality in mind. So far I have tried to loosen the grip of this objection by suggesting it is most likely to rest on two assumptions that can be questioned: that there is a clear distinction between positive and negative terms, and that the positive always has epistemological and conceptual priority over the negative. While for the sake of the argument accepting the former, we have shown the latter to be false. Nevertheless, this is not yet enough to establish the epistemological priority of inequality over equality, or, indeed, the redundancy of a theory of social equality for the purposes of social criticism, which is the main question I am pursuing here. However, having loosened the grip of the objection we can now turn to an open discussion of how the concepts “social equality” and “social inequality” relate to each other.

So far I have presented the idea that social inequality is constituted by certain forms of asymmetric social relations. What then is social equality? I suggest it is primarily the absence of social inequality (i.e., the absence of asymmetric social relations), although this is not yet enough to make a society an appealing one for egalitarians: it would also need to achieve a level of material well-being for all and to avoid antagonism and alienation, whether asymmetric or symmetric. These conditions together could be called a theory of social equality although it falls short of anything worthy of the name of a “model” or “ideal.”

At this point it may fairly be asked why I wish to insist on the priority of social inequality when a positive ideal of social equality would be much more intellectually satisfying and politically inspiring, and the position I am advocating may seem inelegant or defeatist. My defense is twofold. First, I find aspects of my own views very well expressed in a passage from Stuart Hampshire:

I came to recognize that my socialist sympathies, and loyalty to the political Left, were far from unreasonable, and not at all difficult to defend, in proportion as they were traceable to emotions engendered by the persisting evils of human life: and poverty in all its modern forms is certainly one of these. My political opinions and loyalties, when challenged, did not any longer include or entail any generalizable

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46 Ibid., 72.
account of a future ideal society or of essential human virtues. Rather, they pointed to the possible elimination of particular evils found in particular societies at particular times, and not to universalisable principles of social justice.\(^{47}\)

The second reason is that when we look at forms of social organization that we might describe as egalitarian, it is not at all clear that they have much in common rather than avoiding certain forms of divisions. Compare the Quaker religion, the Bloomsbury group, the Kibbutz and Cohen’s camping trip.\(^{48}\) All of them strive toward social equality, and all achieve it to a greater or lesser degree. Yet they are very different to each other, and will appeal to different people. Although they are all examples of social equality it is hard to identify what they have in common beyond the avoidance of certain types of asymmetric social relations. And it would also be hard to argue that one of these provides the sole template for a society of equals.

These different ideas of social equality compete for “social space” in that they all have features that would be hard to reconcile with features of other models, and they compete for “loyalty” in that, as noted, they will be found differentially attractive to different people. However, it is far less clear that they compete for “philosophical space.” In contrast to the search for the “currency of egalitarian justice,” it is possible to deny that there is a parallel search for the “currency of social equality.” Once social inequality is avoided a range of different and incompatible models can each be seen as exemplifying social equality. Any philosophical argument for one over another needs to be made on grounds other than those of social equality, if indeed, any such argument is to be made at all.

### 10.6 Manifest Social Inequality and Severe Disadvantage

Having set out the idea of the priority of social inequality, our next question is whether there are, in fact, manifest social inequalities in contemporary society that show that we do not live in a society of equals. There are, I am sure, very many examples of social exclusion, oppression, discrimination and exploitation that we could document in detail.\(^{49}\) For the remainder of this essay, I would like

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to explore what I believe is a manifest hidden injustice in the United Kingdom. It may not be on the scale of Sen’s missing women, or famine victims, but nevertheless it affects perhaps hundreds of thousands of people in the United Kingdom. These are people who are known as “benefit cheats.” Now I have no doubt that there are some people engaged in benefit fraud in a systematic and clearly criminal fashion. But I am more interested in people who are unable to find a job with decent pay and conditions, and so, reluctantly, claim state benefits. Yet these benefits are sufficient only for a basic level of existence. If you have a family, can you afford to buy birthday presents? Can you afford a night out now and again? Can you afford the fare to visit friends and family? A report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that, according to their survey, one of the greatest necessities of life was “being able to visit friends and family in hospital” (behind “beds and bedding for everyone,” “heating to warm living areas of the home” and “damp-free home,” but above “medicines prescribed by a doctor” and “two meals a day,” p. 15). This—alongside the other things mentioned—can be very difficult for people on benefits given the cost of even public transport.

Simply in order to provide themselves with the necessities of life many people on benefits engage in minor acts of criminality. Some work a few hours a week for cash, often in domestic cleaning. Some purchase goods they strongly suspect to be stolen. Some drive without tax or insurance. These are “victimless crimes” at least at the first remove, in that no identified individual is harmed. And they are undertaken not out of a “criminal mentality” or greed, but simply to be able to afford the things that other people take for granted. But the fact that people act outside the law makes them vulnerable to arrest, prosecution, fines, or even a prison sentence. And, of course, this is a group that cannot complain about their situation without thereby admitting to criminal actions that could see them jailed, and thus the group is silenced. On my account these people suffer from a form of severe disadvantage. They start from a situation of significant disadvantage, and the only eligible strategies they have for improving their situation puts them at significant risk of making themselves much worse off. In this case, the “benefit cheat” risks a court appearance, prison or fines, and public disgrace. In other cases borrowing at very high rates of interest or taking very dangerous or health-damaging job are also highly risky “exit strategies,” leaving a strong possibility of returning people to a position that is worse than their already disadvantaged starting place.

50 David Gordon et al., Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000).
A similar point has been made in the development literature. One of the problems for people in poverty is that the options they may have even to sustain a very low level of well-being have narrow margins of error and irreversible consequences.\textsuperscript{52} It is like trying to overcome poverty by walking a tightrope over a ravine. For example, one of the more surprising statistics in world health is that one of the most common causes of death for young men in the developing world is drowning (this does not include drowning in floods).\textsuperscript{53} Presumably a significant proportion of these deaths are fishing accidents of various kinds: risky paths with low margins of error and the most irreversible of consequences. Conversely, part of what it is to be “comfortable” is for one’s risk taking to be underwritten by a safety net. The children of the affluent middle classes can try their hands as poets, film makers, minor entrepreneurs and so on, but if it all goes wrong little is lost except face. To be comfortable is to be able to bounce back from life’s reversals. To be severely disadvantaged is to be in the opposite situation: one that is very fragile.

The case of “benefit cheats,” I would contend is a situation of manifest injustice. As noted it is not as striking as Sen’s examples of famines or missing women, but then examples of injustice in the developed world are likely to be less striking than those on a global scale. Nevertheless, I think it is hard for anyone to consider the case just made and conclude it is perfectly reasonable that those who cannot find a job must choose between crushing and humiliating poverty or breaking the law. I can imagine someone trying to argue that I have the proportions wrong, and most benefit cheats are not as I have described. Or someone arguing that any attempt to reform the situation will make things worse in some way. But I find it hard to think of people who could accept the description and think there is not even reason to consider reform of the welfare state.

Notice, as with Sen’s examples, one does not come to the conclusion that this is a situation of injustice by applying a template of justice. Rather the judgment is fairly instinctive. However, I am offering the case not only as an example of manifest injustice but of one of manifest social inequality. Is that also so apparent? Again I feel there is little difficulty. A group of people face a very difficult situation, which is broadly ignored, or even made worse, by the ruling powers. In a generally affluent society a considerable group of people have been unable to find work, or at least have not found work that offers decent pay and conditions. Luckily they do not have to starve are beg, for there is a


social safety net. The safety net, though, provides a bare minimum, and anyone who has a normal set of interests, desires and social commitments will find it very difficult to do more than pay for the bare necessities of providing basic food, housing and clothing. Anything more—an occasional night out, gifts for friends and family members, provision for emergencies—is very difficult or perhaps even ruled out completely, at least by legal means.

It is not surprising, therefore, that anyone in this position—whoever they are whatever background they come from—will consider resorting to illegal means, such as working for cash in cleaning jobs or on a market stall, buying goods suspected to be stolen, shoplifting from a supermarket, fiddling an electricity meter, or driving without insurance. Although no one is literally forced to do any of these things, the alternative, if no work can be found, is to live a barely human existence. It is reasonable, therefore, to talk of people who are socially excluded, albeit unwittingly. No deliberate effort is made to shun people who have to try to live on welfare benefits; they are not like an ethnic group who suffer from discrimination. Yet the way society is structured means they are unable to conform to its norms of behavior. If they want to meet one norm of “normal life” they need more money and to get that they need to break another norm of “law-abiding behavior.”

I should add the further point, however, that I am not here arguing that we should allow things to continue as they are, but show mercy when benefit cheats are caught. Rather we need to rethink laws and structures. Perhaps we can allow those claiming benefits to earn a certain level of income before they lose any benefits at all. (This is known as a “disregard” and in current welfare systems are typically trivial. My argument would be for a substantial disregard, which would decriminalize a large number of people.) Or perhaps other creative schemes could be devised. My point is that we live in a society of significant social inequality for as long as we tolerate the current situation. And, consistent with the general picture provided in this essay, I would be happy to concede that there are many different ways in which the problem could be solved.

10.7 Conclusion

My main concern in this essay has been to try to understand what it is to live in a society of social equality. It has seemed an embarrassment to theorists of social equality that it has proven much easier to say what we are against than what we are for. We oppose snobbery, servility, discrimination, hierarchy, oppression, exploitation, and exclusion. It has been hard to come up with a convincing account of what, positively, we want. My argument, however, is that this is just how it should be: a society of social equality avoids social inequality,
and there are many different ways of doing that. The project of seeking a positive model of social equality can certainly be pursued, and attractive visions may be achievable. I suggest, however, that it is unlikely that any detailed positive account will command wide assent among those who favor social equality.

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