Equality and the Revolution

The dynamic of modernity

As a concrete social and political demand, equality is a child of the great revolutions that inaugurated the modern world. 'The poorest he that is in England has a life to live as the richest he, and therefore . . . every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government,' said Colonel Rainborough, a leader of the Levellers, the radical wing of the English Revolution, during the Putney debates of October 1647.1 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, & the pursuit of happiness . .' Nearly fifty years after he wrote these words in the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, Thomas Jefferson reaffirmed the same view in his very last letter: 'The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favoured few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.'2 And, of course, the Great French Revolution of 1789–94 nailed to its mast the watch-words liberté, égalité, fraternité.
Equality as a political ideal thus emerged from the struggle against the hierarchical order of the European ancien régime: even the American revolutionaries of 1776 turned against the Hanoverian state the ideologies of republican liberty and natural rights that had played their part in the seventeenth-century battles against Stuart absolutism. To a society where an ordered structure of ranks and estates was supposed to reflect the divine will was counterposed one where all had a right to consent to and participate in their government. As such, then, equality was conceived essentially as a political condition, justifying, as Rainborough argues, government by consent rather than any changes to the social and economic structure. Indeed, the fear of the propertied classes that enfranchising the propertyless masses would lead to social revolution ensured that even manhood suffrage made only fitful progress in Europe during the century after the French Revolution.

Nevertheless, comparatively early on in this protracted process, Alexis de Tocqueville in Democracy in America (1835, 1840) discerned the emergence of a new form of society characterized by 'equality of condition'. Tocqueville's analysis of democratic society conceived equality less as a well-defined normative concept, or a specific set of institutions or social structures, than as a mentalité or structure of feeling. 'Equality of condition' represented the absence of the status hierarchy constitutive of aristocratic societies and therefore was consistent with the existence of considerable differences in wealth and income. Tocqueville was chiefly interested in tracing the spiritual consequences of this new social order, its effects on how citizens conceived themselves and their relationship to public life; in doing so, he formulated a remarkably prescient account of the privatized individualism that is so central a feature of modern Western societies.
It is, however, the failure to realize equality as an ideal, rather than these supposed consequences of 'equality of condition', that has dominated the modern debate. The contrast between aspiration and reality is built into the initial formulations of the ideal. Most obviously, Rainborough and Jefferson speak of the equality of men. The Levellers sought actually to enfranchise only property-owners. Jefferson, notoriously, was a Virginia slave-owner: 'how is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of negroes?' asked Dr Johnson during the American Revolution.4 The ideal of equality came, it seemed, packed with tacit or explicit clauses excluding women, the poor, slaves and many other groups from its ambit.

In a remarkable essay, Etienne Balibar has suggested that these limitations imply not the abandonment of equality as an ideal, but its radicalization. He argues that the fundamental meaning of the main programmatic document of the French Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of August 1789, is precisely the equation of Man and Citizen: individual humans, simply by virtue of their humanity, are political subjects. This equation, however, implies another, that of equality and liberty. This is what Balibar calls 'the proposition of égaliberté'. By this 'deliberately baroque . . . portmanteau-word' he does not mean 'the intuitive discovery or the revelation of an identity of the ideas of Equality and of Liberty'. Rather, 'it is the historical discovery, which one could in fact call experimental, that their extensions are necessarily identical. To put it plainly, that the situations in which each is present or absent are necessarily the same.' In other words: 'There are no examples of restrictions or suppression of liberties without social inequalities, nor of inequalities without restriction or suppression of liberties.5
Balibar draws two main implications from the idea of égaliberté:

the meaning of the equation Man = Citizen is not so much the definition of a political right as the affirmation of a universal right to politics. Formally at least – but this is the very type of a form that can become a material weapon – the Declaration opens up an indefinite sphere of the ‘politicization’ of demands for rights which reiterate, each in its own way, the requirement of a citizenship or of an institutional, public, inscription of liberty and equality: in this indefinite opening is inscribed as well – and as early as the period of the Revolution one sees the attempt – the demand for the right of wage-earners or dependants such as women and slaves, later that of the colonized. This right finds itself formulated later in the following form: the emancipation of the oppressed can only be their own work, which underlines its ethical significance.*

Balibar argues, secondly, that intrinsic to ‘the proposition of égaliberté’ is its ‘absolute indeterminacy’. There is always a discrepancy between the abstract equation of equality and liberty and the concrete historical circumstances in which a particular version of this statement is uttered: ‘There will be a permanent tension between the conditions that historically determine the construction of institutions conforming to the proposition of égaliberté, and the hyperbolic universality of the statement.’ This tension gives the idea an inherently subversive character.

This account of égaliberté runs contrary to one of the main assumptions of the liberal tradition, which, from Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill to John Rawls and Isaiah Berlin, has tended to treat equality and freedom as necessarily in conflict with one another. I return briefly to this issue in chapter 3 below. For the present, it is more important to stress that Balibar offers an intriguing analy-
sis of how the political demands of the great revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have an inherent tendency to outflank themselves. Ideals that were intended initially to have quite a narrow reference, to benefit primarily white men of property, proved capable of indefinite extension. The result is a process of permanent revolution in which a succession of new political subjects—workers, slaves, women, colonial subjects, people of colour, oppressed nationalities, lesbians and gays, disabled people . . .—emerge to stake their claim to the liberty and equality won by earlier struggles.

Jacques Bidet has constructed an ambitious theory intended to show that this dynamic is inherent in modernity itself. He argues that all modern societies presuppose what he calls a 'metastructure' constituted above all by 'contractuality', which embraces both the transactions among individuals on the market and the social contract by which autonomous agents agree to govern themselves. The aspiration to égaliberté implicit in this metastructure is, however, 'reversed' in the structures of domination and exploitation that survived the ancien régime. But, Bidet insists, 'in modernity, domination, exploitation and violence are based on a, metastructural, reference to contractuality, to free and equal relations'. Thus, for example, the structure of class inequality 'cannot be conceived except by starting from it [the metastructure], as its "reversal": the structure constitutes itself (and therefore can only conceive itself) in the reversal of the principle it poses, it builds itself under the form of the promise unfulfilled, the pact denied'.

Bidet's concept of the metastructure doesn't seem to me particularly helpful inasmuch as it rests on the claim that modern societies are best understood by starting from the promise of égaliberté that constantly shadows their progress. As Bidet himself says, 'the metastructure only
ever advances in the conditions of the structure, in conflict’. In other words, the demand for freedom and equality is made in societies that systematically deny it, that indeed are riven by social and political struggles. What is it about the structure of these societies that encourages the aspiration towards égaliberté? In my view, it is the contrast between the fact that capitalist societies treat their members as legally free and equal and the systematic socio-economic inequalities that they still harbour in their depths. Thus Marx argues that ‘the concept of human equality’ can acquire ‘the permanence of a fixed popular opinion . . . only in a society where . . . the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities’ – a relationship that, as we shall shortly see, he believes gives rise to capitalist exploitation. This structural conflict feeds the political discourse of freedom and equality rather than, as Bidet suggests, that discourse providing the necessary starting point for understanding modernity.

In any case, however precisely we theoretically interpret it, the historical reality seems plain enough. Since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, no inherited institution or practice can any longer claim justification by appeal to tradition or to divine sanction. Every social relationship is open to question, in an endless debate in which every human must be treated as an autonomous subject possessing the same rights as others. The rectification of particular injustices – for example, the status hierarchy of the old regime or New World chattel slavery – simply draws attention to others – the exploitation of workers, say, or the racial oppression of black people – that themselves demand remedy. The very generality of the demand for égaliberté puts it in permanent conflict with the particular historical conditions that prevail at any time.

This analysis casts Tocqueville’s account of ‘equality of
condition' in a different light. It suggests a more dynamic picture, in which existing social and political arrangements are constantly liable to subversion by new demands to extend the application of égaliberté. If this is right, then the proposals cited in the previous chapter that we abandon the search for equality are likely to be disappointed: as long as there are significant discrepancies in wealth and power, there will be movements denouncing them as unjustified and demanding their removal.

Socialism and equality:
Marx, Tawney, Crosland

The significance of socialism in this context is that it originated in the recognition of the discrepancy between the French Revolution's promise of égalité and the reality of the society that emerged from the upheavals after 1789. Theodore Zeldin describes the concrete form taken by this discrepancy in the Napoleonic Code Civil:

Troplong, First President of the Cour de Cassation, and author of the leading commentary on the Civil Code . . ., revealingly declared himself satisfied with it because he considered that democracy existed when men have an equal right to the protection of the law 'in conditions of inequality which they have created for themselves by the legitimate exercise of their natural powers'. The Civil Code certainly confirmed these inequalities. It had a narrow view of citizenship, which it confused with the possession of property, and so it made the penniless worker almost an outlaw. It was concerned not with making men equal but with protecting property.12

This duplicitous equality is well captured by Anatole France's bon mot: 'The bourgeois law forbids with the
same majesty both the rich and the poor to sleep under the bridge.' But it was Marx who subjected it to the most stringent analysis. In a famous passage in Capital, he considers the contract struck by capitalist and worker on the labour market. This transaction takes place in the 'sphere of circulation or commodity-exchange',

a very Eden of the innate rights of man. It is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, let us say labour-power, are determined only by their own free will. They contract as free persons, who are equal before the law . . . Equality, because each enters into the relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks to his own advantage.13

Once, however, we follow the capitalist and the worker into 'the hidden abode of production', the picture changes. The equality between them is only formal; really they are unequal. For the worker is 'free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid of them, he's free of all the objects needed for the realization [Verwirklichung] of his labour'. The worker enjoys political and legal freedom: he does not suffer from the kind of personal disabilities imposed on slaves or serfs. At the same time, however, his only economically relevant property is his labour-power. Denied access to the means of production, he is 'compelled by social conditions to sell the whole of his active life, his capacity for labour'.14 The capitalist uses his control of the means of production to strike a highly favourable bargain: once employed, the worker produces commodities for the capitalist under the
latter's control in exchange for a wage that represents only part of the value he creates. The worker's apparent freedom and equality with the capitalist conceal an underlying subordination and inequality whose outcome is the former's exploitation.
Equality

ALEX CALLINICOS

Polity