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The pursuit of equality in the West

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Review by

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Preview

Aldo Schiavone has written a considered and considerable monograph, which is worthy of the magnitude of its subject-matter: equality. His knowledge of political thought is both deep and broad (its Index of Names is indicative), the presentation of his arguments mostly clear, and his combining of historical inquiry with conceptual work successful.^[1] *The Pursuit of Equality in the West* is chronologically organized according to epochs or ages. It starts with the ancient Greeks (chapter 1) and Romans (chapter 2); it moves on to the modern ‘Age of Capital’, which is divided into pre-revolutionary and revolutionary Europe (chapter 3); next comes a study of twentieth century political thought (chapter 4), and, finally, historically motivated reflections about how equality ought to be construed in our contemporary ‘Age of Technology’ (chapter 5).^[2]

The Preface disarms the reader with its modesty: *The Pursuit of Equality in the West* is not ‘a history of equality in the West...but just a path within it’ (vii).^[3] Schiavone wants to reaffirm equality as ‘a constitutive feature of our tradition’ at a time when its ‘value and perhaps the very meaning of this presence have been lost’ (vii). The Prologue is devoted to a liminal figure who managed to think anew: Montaigne. Schiavone describes him as ‘a frontiersman, suspended between two ages [viz. antiquity and modernity]’, because he discovered ‘a particular and barely glimpsed equality: the impersonalized and common measure of each life—as the true destiny of civilization’ (7). The author returns to this idea of equality in chapter 5.

Chapter 1 begins the historical reconstruction of the path not taken. Its expositor is the pre-Socratic Antiphon, who proposed the ‘radical idea, that of equality as a “natural” feature of the human’ (9), doing away with intra- or inter-polis distinctions, not least that between Greek and barbarian. This proposal stood in contrast to the hegemonic view of equality in ancient Greece, which was ‘rooted entirely within the grid of exclusion and negations that defined...the space of citizenship in the *poleis* of classical Greece’ (19). Its advocates in fifth- and fourth-century BCE Athens, respectively, were Pericles and Aristotle. Theirs was an equality ‘political [in character] and more limited’ than that of Antiphon’s ‘naturalistic and universal’ alternative (21).

In chapter 2, with Cicero as his primary guide, Schiavone establishes how equality for all in private affairs was achieved by Roman law (*ius*). Decoupled from any public design it may have had in democratic Athens, private equality ‘form[ed] the nucleus of a genuine legal machine of equality’ (35). Resting upon aristocratic *ius* rather than democratic *lex*, Roman equality had its origins in kinship relations, and specifically the sovereignty of the single heads of the clans (*patres* or *paterfamilias*) (40). Equality in private relations (most significantly, property relations) remained a constant in an otherwise mutating Roman polity. This was in no small

part due to Roman jurists such as Scaevola, Cicero, and Ulpian who transfigured historically determined social relations into metaphysical and depersonalized legal concepts. Legal discourse became what it is to us today: 'the fruit of a cognitive operation whose every phase could be rationally controlled, standing aloof from the disputability of moral values but also from the possible abuse and will of political command' (48).^[4] The formal, legal equality of persons without subjectivities—an equality of statuses (see 106)—was born.

Chapter 3 comes in two halves and treats the modern history of equality between 1800-2000. Schiavone frames his account in the historically determined manifestation of labor 'as commodity—of labor power sold in exchange for a wage...Labor as toil and as emancipation: the labor that shaped the social classes and gave form and substance to lives' (73-74). Bruno, Bacon, and Spinoza valorized the materiality of nature, overcoming previous, disparaging attitudes towards labor. Human 'action and toil' were seen as transformative of nature and the environment (81), the social relation of capitalist production destroying collective forms of life, thereby permitting the individual and individualized subject to emerge. It is against this subject that the state would exercise its awesome power (91). The problem for modernity, then, was 'how to control the individual diversities, and at the same time enable them to be completely free' (94). To address it, the moderns picked up Rome's depoliticization of equality, with thinkers like Hobbes and Locke distinguishing between formal and substantive equality (101). Roman private law was reorganized around two cores: first, the consent-based contract to regulate 'capitalistic transactions, beginning with the increasingly decisive exchange of wages for labor'; and second, property, understood as 'constitutive of individual identity itself as possession of one's own body and labor' (108).

Equality had to wait for the eighteenth-century revolutions to be re-politicized (128), the author argues in the second half of the chapter. The American and French revolutions 'managed to transform the question of equality into a political issue...and to do so without forgoing...a universalization of it: all human beings have the right to be treated as equals' (145). Now, intellectuals like Tocqueville and Marx had to consider both the formal and the substantive equality of the individual, that is, as an abstract possessor of rights *and* a subjectivity occupying a specific socioeconomic context (145-146). A new problem arose, namely, when to limit equality so as 'to ensure that its pursuit is not transformed from an indispensable prerequisite for the functioning of a democratic system into a mortal danger to its survival' (175).

Chapter 4 treats the twentieth century, an age in which individualism was universalized and became a mass phenomenon. This century offered two routes to equality (230): Marxism (i.e. socialism and communism) or liberal democracy. European and American liberal democracies linked their attempts to redress capitalism's injustices 'to a historically determined paradigm of labor—the large-scale production of material commodities' (241). Politics, or state command and enforcement, assumed an outsize role as political and social rights were extended to all citizens. New thinking about equality emerged from North American academia, primarily through John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. Reflecting the struggles for gender and racial equality in American society, equality now meant 'a strong and urgent demand for inclusion' (248).

The late twentieth century saw the end of the age of industrial labor and the beginning of a 'techno-financial form of capital' which privileged services and immaterial commodities (259). Modernity's 'cornerstone', namely, 'the historic relation between equality and [industrial] labor' has been broken, bringing about 'the complete devaluation human activities that do not possess new knowledge and new technology' (263). The social relation that is capital is thus 'losing any spatial or national point of reference', shedding its materiality to meet the needs of technological development (261). Hence the impoverishing of individual, laboring lives and the subsequent 'erosion of the mass bases that enabled the birth and existence of the twentieth-century democracies' (264). For a few years now, the author concludes, we are in a new, post-ideological but still capitalist age.

Schiavone addresses this challenge in chapter 5. The chapter is the very last of the book, and serves as the endpoint in the path of the history of equality, a path which began in ancient

Greece with Antiphon's 'naturalistic and universalistic perspective' (18). New thinking about equality—'the measure of our vision of the human' (266), as Schiavone puts it in a remark reminiscent of Protagoras of Abdera—ought to 'look beyond the individual' (276). In a post-ideological economy of services and immaterial commodities, the impersonal human is the fountainhead of equality (275). I understood this as Schiavone's take on Montaigne's discovery that in every human being is 'a "common model" reproduced identically in each of us' (5), which he elaborates upon in this chapter using the writings of Averroes, Spinoza, and Hegel. These intellectuals recognized the contradiction and the potential characteristic of the human condition: human beings are historically situated, finite beings who can and should transcend their historical context (282-288). The human, in other words, is an infinite, impersonal category of thought, which can overcome difference and motivate cross-border solidarity.

The Pursuit of Equality in the West gives pride of place to the written texts of the intellectual classes in the history of equality, rather than equality-denying institutions like the transatlantic slave trade or leveling natural disasters like the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. When thought is lacking, moreover, human endeavors go awry, as was the case during the Russian Revolution of 1917 (217).^[5] Therefore, when Schiavone discusses the future of equality in a time of technological revolution, we are to understand its author as doing a small part of the necessary intellectual work.

With this caveat in place, I doubt whether the impersonal human is a robust enough notion upon which to base global human solidarity. In late twentieth century Europe, for example, it is a solidarity among the oppressed which has shown itself to be both motivational and consequential: witness Solidarity (*Solidarność*), the Polish trade union which boasted a third of the country's population in its membership and whose influence extended beyond Poland to the Eastern Bloc. Perhaps new thinking about equality ought to be negative in character; rather than find a common measure of the human, democracies ought to work hard to check the ambitions of the few through political institutions.^[6] Or, to go in a direction Schiavone might approve, new thinking about equality could cultivate awe and wonder for the impersonal human common to all, such that violating it would constitute an evil. This latter suggestion is already constitutive of a theistic mindset—already present in early Christianity—which grounds human value in having been made in the image of God. Whereas Schiavone discusses Tertullian and Augustine as evidence of 'the political sterilization of equality' (66-72, quote on 69), he misses the pointed criticisms of wealth and power by late antique intellectuals such as John of Antioch and Basil of Caesarea, figures who sit uncomfortably on East/West binaries in the history of political thought.^[7]

Notes

^[1] Also responsible for these virtues is Schiavone's translator, Jeremy Carden. The book was originally published in Italian as *Eguaglianza: Una nuova visione sul filo della storia*, Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2019.

^[2] Features of the book not discussed herein include, among others, arguments about the reception of central notions like *persona* (106); judgments about the historiography of the French revolution (140-141); and insightful if scattered remarks about the historian's method (vii-viii, 134, 182, *et passim*).

^[3] Schiavone favors the navigational metaphor of 'path' and 'route' throughout (vii, 18, 31, 227, 291 *et passim*).

^[4] The abuse of political command is a red thread through the book: see the discussion of Robespierre's France (134-145) and the Russian Revolution (214-223).

^[5] Schiavone does not reckon Marx a political thinker (185ff.)

^[6] See John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

and New York, 2011.

[7] See St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catherine P. Roth, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York, 1981; and St. Basil the Great, *On Social Justice*, trans. C. Paul Schroeder, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York, 2009.