

LEVELLING OUT

EQUALITY CURRENTLY FUNCTIONS as a shared ideal in both political rhetoric and philosophy. No politician calls for ‘a more unequal society’, and within political theory philosophers of almost every persuasion advocate some form of egalitarianism. The consensus is now so broad that many consider it the presupposition of meaningful political debate, and the universal basis on which governments are held to account by their citizens. Seen from what, following Dworkin, is often termed the ‘egalitarian plateau’, there is little indication that the period during which equality has functioned in this way is one in which global inequalities have remained stubbornly unchanged.¹ In this respect, the image of an egalitarian plateau perhaps conveys rather more than is intended—not just the flatness of the surface, but also the way in which a plateau stands above the surrounding landscape.

There is obviously a distinction to be made between the egalitarian plateau as a level playing field for theoretical discussion, and the egalitarian plateau on which people might seek to live their lives. However, theoretical equality is the basis on which actual inequalities are routinely justified, and the boundaries of the two overlap insofar as the greatest actual inequalities are to be found between those who are the subjects of theoretical concern and those who are not.² Around the edge of the plateau is the precipice of relevant difference, into which fall all those to whom its egalitarianism is inapplicable.

In recent years these boundaries have become the focus of lively philosophical debate, and, to a lesser degree, public contestation. Moving from the able-bodied human citizens of the nation-state who currently inhabit the plateau, these discussions have spiralled out to include the disabled, resident aliens, would-be migrants, the citizens of other countries, the members of other species and, hypothetically, the inhabitants

of other planets. Supposing that we discovered the inhabitants of another planet to be living in circumstances less favourable than our own, would their small green heads or distant abode be relevant differences? Should not a consistent egalitarian be committed to a redistribution of goods in favour of needy space aliens, and, if necessary, bring them back to share the dwindling resources of planet Earth?³

These attempts to move beyond the egalitarian plateau do not necessarily have a common agenda. Not only does the currency of equality (legal status, opportunity, resources, capability, or welfare) differ from one case to another, but so too does the theoretical justification for extending it. The position of resident aliens is of more concern to communitarians, free migration to anarchists and libertarians; global equality is espoused, very cautiously, by some egalitarian liberals, while equality for animals appeals mostly to utilitarians and so on. Although all of these philosophies find common ground on the plateau, their efforts to move beyond it have diverse motivations.

Nevertheless, criticism of these moves is recognizably a variation on a single theme. The root objection to both egalitarianism itself and attempts to extend its range is that, taken too far, equality will result only in pointless levelling. All egalitarians view with equanimity the prospect of making the relatively well-off worse off, and levellers do so even if no one else will benefit. Luck egalitarians are committed to eliminating the benefits of sheer good luck, and if they are prepared to equalize rather than merely neutralize its effects, they are open to the accusation that they want to make us all equally unlucky. What could be more pointless than that?

In addition to objections to levelling down within a given population, there are objections to levelling out between populations, which argue that there has to come a limit beyond which a smaller population at a higher level has to be preferable to a larger one at a lower level of welfare.

¹ Sudhir Anand and Paul Segal, 'What Do We Know about Global Income Inequality?', *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 46, no. 1, March 2008, pp. 57–94.

² See Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Cambridge, MA 2006.

³ Cécile Fabre, 'Global Distributive Justice: An Egalitarian Perspective', in Daniel Weinstock, ed., *Global Justice, Global Institutions (Canadian Journal of Philosophy supplementary volume)*, Calgary 2005, pp. 139–64.

The two types of argument are rarely considered together in that the first functions primarily as an objection to egalitarianism and the second to utilitarianism. However, juxtaposing them may reveal something that is obscured when taken separately, namely the extent to which levelling down and levelling out may be linked.

In what follows, I will briefly discuss a series of debates for and against political revolution in which questions of levelling down and levelling out become entwined. They are all from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period during which egalitarian social change was largely brought about either as a result of revolution or in the attempt to pre-empt it. While the contemporary discourse of egalitarianism contains few echoes of this history, critiques of egalitarianism rehearse the accusation of destructive levelling that was long the critique of revolution itself. Might this discrepancy reveal something about the contours of the egalitarian plateau? And does the critique perhaps retain the negative impression of an egalitarianism more comprehensive and far-reaching than its contemporary variants?

A secret path

Equality has had no fiercer critic than Nietzsche, whose ‘*fundamental* insight with respect to the genealogy of morals’ is that social inequality is the source of our value concepts, and the necessary condition of value itself.⁴ His rejection of equality is unequivocal. He distinguishes himself absolutely from the ‘levellers’ and ‘preachers of equality’.⁵ There is, he claims, ‘no more poisonous poison’: ‘it seems to be preached by justice itself, while it is the *end* of justice’, for ‘men are not equal’.⁶

However, Nietzsche’s anti-egalitarianism is not unnuanced. He does not reject equality based upon attributes that people actually share, only the imputation of equality in the face of obvious differences of strength and weakness: “‘Equality for equals, inequality for unequals’—*that* would be the true voice of justice’.⁷ He therefore accepts equality up to a point; it is

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Oxford 1996, 1.4; hereafter GM.

⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, New York 1966, 44; *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (hereafter Z), Harmondsworth 1969, p. 124.

⁶ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (hereafter TI), Harmondsworth 1968, p. 102 (48); Z, p. 124.

⁷ TI, p. 102 (48).

just that his understanding is restricted to the flat summit of ‘good men’ who, ‘*inter pares*’,⁸ are constrained by ties of reciprocity. But whereas ‘the good are a caste, the bad [are] a mass like grains of sand’.⁹ For Nietzsche, the problem with egalitarianism is not that it acknowledges equality within these two groups, but rather that it erodes the distinction between them by making equal what is unequal: ‘Are we not . . . well on the way to turning mankind into *sand*? Sand! Small, soft, round, unending sand!’¹⁰

The metaphor proved to be a significant one for Nietzsche, because it simultaneously suggests a result, ‘the desert’ of nihilism,¹¹ and the nature of the process through which it occurs. According to Nietzsche, nihilism means that values become devalued.¹² Because value is created by valuation, and valuation, as will to power, requires social difference, the way devaluation takes place is ultimately through social change. Making empty is the result of making small. A ‘law-like communism’ in which each must recognize every other as equal would therefore be ‘the destruction and dissolution of man, an attack on the future of man, a sign of exhaustion, a secret path towards nothingness’.¹³

The path originated, Nietzsche suggests, in the idea of equality before God. The human species endures only through sacrifice, for evolution requires that the weak perish. However, with Christianity, ‘all souls became equal before God’. This was ‘the most dangerous of all possible evaluations’, for by designating all individuals as equal, and valuing the sick as much as, or more than, the healthy, it undermined the justification for human sacrifice, and so ‘encourages a way of life that leads to the ruin of the species’.¹⁴ For Nietzsche, there is a clear route that leads from the New Testament’s ‘war against the noble and powerful’¹⁵ to the atrocities of the French Revolution:

The aristocratic outlook has been undermined most deeply by the lie of equality of souls; and if the belief in the ‘prerogative of the majority’ makes revolutions and *will continue to make them*—it is Christianity, let there be no doubt about it, *Christian* value judgement which translates every revolution

⁸ GM, I.II

⁹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, Cambridge 1986, 1.45.

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Daybreak* (hereafter D), Cambridge 1982, 174; cf. Z, p. 189.

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power* (hereafter WP), New York 1967, 603.

¹² WP, 2.

¹³ GM, 2.II.

¹⁴ WP, 246.

¹⁵ WP, 208.

into mere blood and crime! Christianity is a revolt of everything that crawls along the ground directed against that which is *elevated*: the Gospel of the 'lowly' makes low.¹⁶

The road that leads from 'the lie of the equality of souls' via the French Revolution to the 'ruin of the species' is the path of nihilism. But is it, as Nietzsche implies, also that of egalitarianism?

Permanent revolution

What is the belief 'that makes revolutions and will continue to make them'? Is it equality, as Nietzsche claims? This, at least, was the assumption of Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals. Even before Thermidor it had become a commonplace to say that the revolution was over. When, for example, Le Chapelier put forward his law limiting workers' associations, he argued that they had been useful while the revolution lasted, but were superfluous now the revolution had finished.¹⁷ To such suggestions the conspirators responded that the revolution was not over as long as there were more people who could be made equal: 'one single man on earth richer, stronger than his like, than his equals, and the equilibrium is broken: crime and unhappiness are on earth'. Far from being finished, the revolution was nothing but the precursor to a still greater one.¹⁸

The revolution had to continue because there were more people to be included amongst the equals and, if necessary, it would continue even at the expense of that level of culture or equality that already existed. Maréchal may have gone beyond some of his comrades in proclaiming: 'Let the arts perish, if need be, as long as real equality remains',¹⁹ but Babeuf too was clearly a leveller. He suspected that the counter-revolutionaries in the Vendée had been decimated by Jacobin forces in order to facilitate the distribution of resources amongst a smaller population, and argued that a true egalitarianism required not a reduced population in order to sustain a higher level of equality amongst those who remained, but rather shared deprivation for all.²⁰

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Harmondsworth 1968, 43.

¹⁷ Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Les citoyennetés en révolution*, Paris 1992, pp. 81–2.

¹⁸ Sylvain Maréchal, 'Le Manifeste des Egaux', in Philippe Buonarroti, *La Conspiration pour l'égalité, dite de Babeuf*, vol. 2, Paris 1957, pp. 94–8.

¹⁹ Maréchal, 'Le Manifeste des Egaux', pp. 94–8.

²⁰ Gracchus Babeuf, *La guerre de la Vendée*, Paris 1987, pp. 90–6.

Babeuf's argument here is precisely that which Nietzsche attributes to egalitarians: equality precludes the possibility of sacrificing some people for the benefit of others. Yet the target of Babeuf's remarks is not the *ancien régime*, but rather the egalitarianism of the Jacobins themselves. The point of equality, he suggests, is not making some limited number of people more equal, even if they constitute a majority, but rather making as many people as possible equal, even if that means a lower level of equality for all. The revolution must continue not so much because equality is imperfect, but because its scope has been too limited.

Reflecting on Babeuf's ill-fated project, Proudhon recognized the issue Babeuf was trying to address, but he did not see Babeuf's programme as the solution, complaining that it 'reduced all citizens to the lowest level'.²¹ And as such, Proudhon argued, it was inegalitarian rather than egalitarian—though in the opposite sense to that in which the term is usually understood, for whereas 'property is the exploitation of the weak by the strong; community is the exploitation of the strong by the weak'.²² Marx also criticized the primitive communism of Babeuf as motivated merely by the desire to level down,²³ but nevertheless identified strongly with the idea that revolution must continue; not perhaps, as Maréchal had argued, for as long as there was one man raised above his equals, but at least as long as one class was raised above the rest. As he famously remarked after 1848: 'it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent, until all more or less possessing classes have been forced out of their position of dominance, [and] the proletariat has conquered state power'.²⁴

Marx's simultaneous rejection of Babeuf's communism and acceptance of his motivation for continuing the revolution requires explanation. The ultimate basis of this move may perhaps be found in Pufendorf's threefold distinction between private property, positive community and negative community.²⁵ This meant that there were potentially three

²¹ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?*, Cambridge 1994, p. 100.

²² Proudhon, *What is Property?*, p. 197.

²³ Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', *Early Writings*, London 1975, p. 346.

²⁴ Marx, 'Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League', in Jon Elster, ed., *Marx: A Reader*, Cambridge 1986, p. 270.

²⁵ See Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Introduction', in Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, London 2002, pp. 162–76; Stedman Jones draws on István Hont, 'Negative Community: the Natural Law Heritage from Pufendorf to Marx', unpublished paper, 1989.

ways for equality to be realized. If property is private, each individual will have whatever they have in equal shares to the exclusion of every other proprietor. In positive community, where property is in common ownership, each individual will have exactly the same as all other proprietors, to the exclusion of non-proprietors. While in negative community each individual, without exclusion or exception, will have equal access to resources but no property rights, either individual or collective, because property, as such, will not exist. As Pufendorf pointed out, the key difference is the question of exclusivity:

Both positive community as well as proprietorship imply an exclusion of others from the thing which is said to be common or proper . . . Therefore, just as things could not be said to be proper to a man, if he were the only being in the world, so the things from the use of which no man is excluded, or which, in other words, belong to no man more than to another, should be called common in the former [negative] and not in the latter [positive] meaning of the term.²⁶

The unfolding narrative of revolution reflects these distinctions. To the Jacobin acceptance of private property, Babeuf has juxtaposed a form of positive community. Both Proudhon and Marx explicitly criticized him on this basis.²⁷ But whereas Proudhon favoured a synthesis of positive community and private property, Marx seems to have looked beyond positive community to a form of communism that was still more inclusive and utopian, a form of negative community governed by the principle ‘from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs’.²⁸

However, Marx postpones the realization of this community to the post-revolutionary transition from socialism to communism, and offers a conception of permanent revolution that itself potentially contains two limits, the proletariat and the state. The discrepancy did not go unnoticed. If the revolution was over when the proletariat controlled the state, what of those outside the proletariat and beyond the boundaries of the state? As Bakunin noted, Marx conspicuously excluded from the agents of revolution the *Lumpenproletariat*, ‘that great mass, those millions of the uncultivated, the disinherited, the miserable, the illiterates . . . that great *rabble of the people*’, and by affirming the role of the state re-inscribed the chief limitation of the Jacobin republic itself, which ‘hardly knew

²⁶ Samuel Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium libri octo*, vol. 2, Oxford 1934, p. 535.

²⁷ Proudhon, *What Is Property?*, p. 196; Marx, *Early Writings*, p. 347.

²⁸ Marx, ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’, in Elster, ed., *Marx: A Reader*, p. 166.

man and recognized the citizen only'.²⁹ In contrast, Bakunin advocated 'the emancipation and widest possible expansion of social life' by which he meant 'the natural mode of existence of the human collectivity, independent of any contract.' Society therefore included not only those inhabitants of a state excluded from full citizenship, but also the rest of humankind, beyond the borders of the nation-state.³⁰ One of Bakunin's followers drew the obvious conclusion: 'The revolution cannot be confined to a single country: it is obliged under pain of annihilation to spread'.³¹

Trotsky's reformulation of the idea of permanent revolution picks up both of Bakunin's objections. Believing that 'The proletariat, in order to consolidate its power, cannot but widen the base of the revolution',³² he argues that 'permanent revolution . . . means a revolution which makes no compromise with any single form of class rule . . . a revolution whose every successive stage is rooted in the preceding one and which can end only in the complete liquidation of class society'; and just as there can be no class limit, so there can be no national boundary: 'the socialist revolution begins on national foundations—but it cannot be completed within these foundations'. Every limit must be sloughed off by society, 'revolutions . . . do not allow society to achieve equilibrium'; rather, 'society keeps on changing its skin'.³³

Although one is concerned with economic and the other with political goods, there is a parallel between the argument made for an ongoing revolution in order to end exclusion from property, and the argument made for a form of permanent revolution that will prevent exclusion from revolution itself. In both cases, there is a potential limit—represented by positive community and socialism in one country—which is exceeded not on the basis that those outside the limit are necessarily the equals of those within, but rather that the existence of the limit perpetuates a

²⁹ Mikhail Bakunin, 'The International and Karl Marx' [1872] and 'Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism' [1867], in Sam Dolgoff, ed., *Bakunin on Anarchy*, London 1973, pp. 249, 117.

³⁰ Bakunin, 'Statism and Anarchy' [1873] and 'Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism', in Dolgoff, ed., *Bakunin on Anarchy*, pp. 327, 129, 136.

³¹ James Guillaume, 'On Building a New Social Order' [1876], in Dolgoff, ed., *Bakunin on Anarchy*, p. 378.

³² Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, London 2007, p. 166.

³³ Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, pp. 117–20, 119.

form of inequality which otherwise might not exist. Rather than making access dependent on a certain level of productivity or a certain level of development, negative community and permanent revolution offer to the unequal (unproductive individuals, undeveloped classes and peoples alike) access to that on which they might not otherwise have a claim.

The parallel serves to highlight the changing relationship between inclusivity and equality in the earlier example. In the Conspiracy of Equals, equality demanded a greater inclusivity which potentially resulted in the loss of social goods or diminished access to finite resources. Marx's alternative to the levelling down involved in positive community goes a stage further. Negative community may level out so completely that it dissolves everything it touches. For this reason, as Pufendorf notes, critics argued that it was 'opposed to human, that is, rational nature, appropriate only to animals, and unsocial'.³⁴ If anyone can just take what they need, the ideal of egalitarian inclusiveness is extended to the point where it dissolves the concept of property, and with it the possibility of equality, or any form of distributive justice. Eventually, of course, negative community undermines species-being itself.

Down and out

This genealogy reveals the steps through which the idea of permanent revolution might be articulated, and the potential objections to it. First, there is levelling down within a given population of the kind advocated by the Conspiracy of Equals. This is simple egalitarianism, open to the criticism that if equality makes nobody any better off it is effectively pointless (indeed, that it becomes impossible to specify the sense in which equality really is better). Second, there is Babeuf's point that a larger population at a lower level of well-being is preferable to a smaller one at a higher level. This is something other than simple egalitarianism: it assumes equality but also makes an implicit appeal to total utility, or at least to the happiness of the greater number. The potential objection to this type of argument is the implication that having an enormous number of people living lives barely worth living would be better than even a very large population with a very high quality of life, a possibility Parfit has called the repugnant conclusion. Finally, there is Marx's rejection of

³⁴ Pufendorf, *De jure naturae*, p. 554.

egalitarianism in favour of a version of negative community in which resources are available to all in proportion to need. Negative community does not presuppose equality at all, and so objections usually take a Malthusian form. If there are no boundaries and uncontrolled access to finite goods then a society is vulnerable to the tragedy of the commons, in which the resource in question diminishes and eventually disappears due to the absence of any restrictions on its use.³⁵

Although these arguments are philosophically distinct, a couple of simple thought experiments show how one might lead to the next. For example, in response to levelling down objections, Jonathan Wolff has offered a case in which levelling down appears to be justified.³⁶ Suppose you are the mayor of a small town in a southern state in the United States. Your town has one swimming pool and no funds to build another one. The state legislature passes a law on the racial segregation of swimming pools. You are opposed to racial segregation, so you close the town pool. No one is any better off as a result and the white population is worse off, but it was nevertheless the right thing to do. Wolff argues that this is indeed an example of levelling down, and that levelling down may sometimes be reasonable on account of the symbolic importance of the issue.

But is this, in fact, what makes the example plausible? Wolff assumes that his is a same number case and that we are simply moving from inequality to equality within a fixed but racially mixed population. However, the argument is explicitly constructed in such a way that it is not sensitive to any actual inequality within a given population—it is not necessary that there should be any black swimmers who are prevented from using the pool (indeed he specifies that the black population may be indifferent to its closure) or indeed, that the small town in question should currently have a black population (though the location of the example in the southern US implies the possibility that it might have). The argument would be equally valid even if no black person had ever wanted to swim in the

³⁵ The classic statements of the ‘levelling down objection’, the ‘repugnant conclusion’ and the ‘tragedy of the commons’ are, respectively, Derek Parfit, ‘Equality and Priority’, in Andrew Mason, ed., *Ideals of Equality*, Oxford 1998, pp. 1–20; Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford 1984, pp. 381–90; and Garrett Hardin, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, *Science*, vol. 162, no. 3859, December 1968, pp. 1243–8.

³⁶ Jonathan Wolff, ‘Levelling Down’, in Keith Dowding, James Hughes and Helen Margetts, eds, *Challenges to Democracy*, Basingstoke 2001, pp. 18–32.

pool, i.e. even if there was currently no one to whose level the white swimmers were reduced.

The essential steps in the argument involve:

- 1) An original population enjoying some benefit: the white people who, under state law, are allowed to use the pool;
- 2) An additional population who do not enjoy it: the black people who, under state law, are not allowed to use the pool;
- 3) A combined population who do not enjoy it: a racially mixed population unable to use the pool because it is closed.

The argument therefore appears to be sensitive not to inequality in the original population, but rather to the number of additional people involved, and the ease with which they might be included in a combined population. Even if justifiable, the mayor's decision would lose some of its plausibility if there were only one individual excluded from using the pool, however unjustly (e.g. because of the personal prejudices of the state legislators); or if the category of persons excluded, however numerous, were not remotely likely to use it (e.g. the native population of a remote Pacific island). In no case would anyone at all be gaining any benefit from the closure of the pool, but the mayor's decision becomes easier to justify the larger the additional population of non-beneficiaries and the greater the plausibility of uniting them with the original one.

Rather than hinging on its symbolic import alone, Wolff's example appears to smuggle in an unspecified but significant number of extra people of sufficient proximity to appear relevant to our assessment of the argument. It is not so much a case of levelling down within a racially mixed population, as of levelling out between a small racially exclusive population and a larger racially mixed one. As such, it points to the possibility that what we might take to be examples of levelling down are often examples of levelling out, and that they owe at least something of whatever appeal they have to their ability to accommodate a larger population at the lower level.

Cases of this kind are actually very common, and it is easy to see how they might eventually switch from levelling out to negative community.

For example, suppose that you are planning a large and expensive birthday lunch with some close friends. You then think of a couple more people you really want to invite, and so realize everyone will have to have smaller portions. The extra people all ask if they can bring a friend, and you decide you will have to change the menu. Then it dawns on you that with so many people coming, many others will be aware that you are having the party and may feel excluded. You decide to invite anyone who wants to come, and put up a notice: 'It's my birthday. Join the celebration.' Realizing there might not be enough to go round, you add a *PS*: 'please bring and share a bag lunch'.

Repugnant conclusions

Parfit's Mere Addition Paradox provides a more formal account of this sort of progression, and of the potential problems with it. In its simplest form it starts with a population of equals at a high level, adds some extra people at a lower level outside the existing population (say, the inhabitants of a previously undiscovered continent or planet), equalizes the two groups separately (not necessarily levelling them down), and then unites them to form a single larger population at a lower level than the first equal population. If you are comfortable with each of these steps, and repeat them, you eventually end up with the repugnant conclusion. You will in effect have created a Utility Monster (a term Parfit borrows from Nozick) capable of devouring all the goods in the world in order to distribute them ever more thinly—an outcome distinct from but similar in effect to a tragedy of the commons which assumes scarcity but not equality.³⁷

It is important to note, however, that we cannot arrive at this destination just by levelling down. In levelling down, just as much as with equality *inter pares*, there is a limit below which no one may fall, namely that of the worst off in the initial population. The repugnant conclusion can only be reached if the level to which a population has been levelled down is transformed into the level from which it levels out. Only in levelling out, where extra people are added at every step, is there no limit to how low you can go. But in order to level out, there has to be some acceptance of extra people at a lower level. The cumulative dynamic is therefore not so

³⁷ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 419–41, and Parfit, 'Overpopulation and the Quality of Life', in Jesper Ryberg and Torbjörn Tännsjö, eds, *The Repugnant Conclusion*, Dordrecht 2004, pp. 7–22.

much egalitarian as extra-egalitarian in that it explicitly favours a move from egalitarian to inegalitarian distributions. It both exceeds and stands outside egalitarianism, while always presupposing and returning to it.

What would such an extra-egalitarianism involve? One way to describe it would be as the conjunction of two principles: (1) individuals or groups within a collectivity should be as equal as possible, even if no one is any better off as a result; (2) there is nothing wrong with extra people, even if they are not equal to those included already. The first is an egalitarian principle open to a levelling down objection: how is it better for people to be equal even if no one is any better off? The second, in its most obvious philosophical form, is a total utilitarian one open to an egalitarian objection: why allow inequality where none existed before? All extra-egalitarianism does is use one to justify the other: levelling down is justified by increased numbers; increased numbers by further equality. Levelling out furthers both equality and utility, but not at the same time.

Given that the repugnant conclusion might be defended on some conjunction of egalitarianism and utilitarianism, what is repugnant about it? The most widely cited objection to both levelling down and levelling out is that they undermine value: levelling down removes the inequalities that are necessary to generate particular things of value, while levelling out progressively removes all possibility of higher forms of value from the world. Maréchal's 'Let the arts perish . . .' acknowledges and accepts the consequences of the former argument . . . but most commentators have followed Nietzsche in considering it unacceptable. Even an egalitarian like Thomas Nagel admits to striking a mildly Nietzschean note when he argues that a society which supports creative achievement and encourages maximum levels of excellence will have to accept and exploit stratification and hierarchy, and that 'no egalitarianism can be right which would permit *haute cuisine*, *haute couture* and exquisite houses to disappear'.³⁸

Similarly, Parfit, though rejecting the Nietzschean view that it would justify great suffering, nevertheless argues that 'even if some change brings a great net benefit to those who are affected, it is a change for the worse if it involves the loss of one of the best things in life'.³⁹ He therefore

³⁸ Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, Oxford 1991, pp. 135, 132, and 138.

³⁹ Parfit, 'Overpopulation', pp. 19–20.

imagines the Mere Addition Paradox as a series of steps in which the best things in life disappear one by one. In common with most modern philosophers, he supposes the best things in life to be aesthetic. So at the first, Mozart's music is lost, then Haydn's; then Venice is destroyed, then Verona, until eventually all that is left is a life of muzak and potatoes. The sequence may be personal, but the nature of the examples is meant to be uncontroversial. Along the way, any of these irreplaceable things might be taken as the unacceptable loss, the limit beyond which no more extra people could be added.

Alternatively, each step could be taken as a means of dispensing with these valueless luxuries once and for all, just as the expanding guest list in the earlier example effectively disposed of plans for a grotesquely expensive lunch. Even Wolff's case raised a question it did not appear to address: why does this small town need a swimming pool? This is why Nagel complains that 'it is not always easy to prevent egalitarianism . . . from infecting other values'.⁴⁰ And it is for just this reason that Nietzsche identifies egalitarianism as nihilism's secret ally. But as Nietzsche also points out, there is nothing nihilistic about equality itself; it only becomes so if the less than equal are introduced into the equation and everyone is levelled out.

Passive revolution

Is this how revolution works? One way to answer the question is to look at another potential Utility Monster, Plato's great beast. In the *Republic* he derides the Sophists for merely echoing the opinions of the multitude:

It is as if a man were acquiring the knowledge of the humours and desires of a great strong beast he had in his keeping, how it is to be approached and touched, and when and by what things it is made most savage or gentle, yes, and the several sounds it is wont to utter on the occasion of each, and again what sounds uttered by another make it tame or fierce, and after mastering this knowledge by living with the creature and by lapse of time call it wisdom, and should construct thereof a system.⁴¹

There is, Plato argues, no difference between this and the man who takes on board the political and aesthetic judgements of the crowd, and is then compelled 'to give the public what it likes'. Thereafter, the great beast

⁴⁰ Nagel, *Equality*, p. 130.

⁴¹ Plato, *Republic*, 6.493.

became the symbolic embodiment of levelling down in the interests of the multitude. Thomas Browne calls it the ‘great enemy of reason, virtue, and religion’, and Nietzsche himself refers to the promised socialist utopia as the time when ‘the day of the *bestia triumphans* dawns in all its glory’.⁴²

Could such a creature be transformed from *reductio ad absurdum* to revolutionary paradigm? At least one intellectual trajectory suggests that it might. For Vincenzo Cuoco, the Neapolitan political writer who was himself a protagonist in the short-lived Parthenopean Republic of 1799, Plato’s great beast may have offered an alternative model for revolution. Although the author of a philosophical novel titled *Platone in Italia*, Cuoco rejected ideal republics as too utopian, instead arguing that any successful revolution must gratify the wishes of the people: ‘This is the entire secret of revolutions: know what it is that all the people want, and do it’.⁴³

However, although Cuoco saw no other way of activating a revolution than that of inducting the people, he acknowledged that there were two ways this could come about: if the revolution is active, the people unite themselves with the revolutionaries; if it is passive, ‘the revolutionaries unite themselves with the people’.⁴⁴ Of the two, Cuoco considered active revolutions the more effective because the people acts of its own accord and in its own interest, whereas in a passive revolution ‘the agent of government divines the spirit of the people and presents to them what they desire’.⁴⁵ To the objection that it is impossible to know what the people want, because a ‘people’ does not speak, he advocates precisely the technique that Plato mocked the Sophists for following when they made a system of the sounds uttered by the great beast—noting and interpreting other less articulate expressions of the popular will and then acting accordingly. Although a people stays silent, ‘everything speaks for it: its ideas speak for it, its prejudices, its customs, its needs’.⁴⁶

Taking on the opinions of the people is the way to expand the base of the revolution. Indeed, the two operations are potentially identical. The only way to co-opt the people is to allow yourself to be co-opted by

⁴² Nietzsche, D, 206.

⁴³ Vincenzo Cuoco, *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione di Napoli*, Milan 1820, p. 102.

⁴⁴ Cuoco, *Saggio storico*, p. 171.

⁴⁵ Cuoco, *Saggio storico*, p. 114.

⁴⁶ Walter Carridi, ed., *Il pensiero politico e pedagogico di Vincenzo Cuoco*, Lecce 1981, p. 250.

them, even when, as Cuoco makes clear was the case in Naples, the people are the ‘lazy *lazzaroni*’, Marx’s *Lumpenproletariat*.⁴⁷ The Neapolitan revolution did not fail because it was a passive revolution; rather, it was a failed passive revolution, where the interests of the revolutionaries and the people were irreconcilable. Gramsci claimed that Cuoco’s use of ‘passive revolution’ was no more than a cue for his own.⁴⁸ But read as a version of the great beast, the continuities between Cuoco and Gramsci emerge more clearly, and with them the possibility that passive revolution might be more than a type of failed revolution or prototype of counter-revolution.

In order to explore this possibility, it is necessary to return to the beginning of the narrative, the point at which the history of revolution first appeared to have come to an end. Gramsci maintained that the French Revolution ‘found its widest class limits’ in the Jacobins’ maintenance of the Le Chapelier law. It was for this reason that the Jacobins ‘always remained on bourgeois ground’. ‘Permanent revolution’, which the Jacobins appeared to be initiating, had reached its limit. Paradoxically, however, Gramsci argues that ‘the formula of Permanent Revolution put into practice in the active phase of the French Revolution’ later ‘found its “completion” in the parliamentary regime’, which ‘realized the permanent hegemony of the urban class over the entire population’. This was achieved through a combination of force and consent, widening the economic base, and absorbing successful members of the lower classes into the bourgeoisie. In this manner, ‘The “limit” which the Jacobins had come up against in the Le Chapelier law . . . was transcended and pushed progressively back’.⁴⁹

According to Gramsci, something similar occurred in the Risorgimento, which was also characterized after 1848 by the formation of an ever more extensive ruling class. In this case, too, ‘the formation of this class involved the gradual but continuous absorption . . . of the active elements produced by allied groups—and even those which came from antagonistic groups and seemed irreconcilably hostile’. The result could be described as “revolution” without a “revolution” or as “passive revolution””.⁵⁰ For in a passive revolution ‘the thesis alone in fact develops to the full its potential for struggle, up to the point where it absorbs even

⁴⁷ Carridi, ed., *Il pensiero politico e pedagogico di Vincenzo Cuoco*, p. 253.

⁴⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London 1971, p. 108.

⁴⁹ Gramsci, *Selections*, pp. 79–80n.

⁵⁰ Gramsci, *Selections*, p. 59.

the so-called representatives of the antithesis: it is precisely in this that the passive revolution or revolution/restoration consists'.⁵¹

Juxtaposed like this, Gramsci's arguments carry the clear implication that permanent revolution is or can only be completed as 'passive revolution'. It is an inference that he never explicitly makes, and it is one his commentators decline to draw as well, yet it is suggested not just by historical analyses, but by his own fragmentary attempts to reconcile his conceptual frameworks. His basic conceptual opposition is between the war of movement and the war of position, and he identifies the former with the concept of permanent revolution, and the latter with the concept of hegemony.⁵² However, where 'hegemony is rule by permanently organized consent',⁵³ like that realized by the urban class over the entire French population under the parliamentary regime, it may function as the completion of permanent revolution represented by the Jacobin experience from 1789 to Thermidor. Hence, it is consistent for Gramsci to claim that 'the 48ist formula of "Permanent Revolution" is expanded and transcended in political science by the formula of "civil hegemony"'.⁵⁴

But Gramsci not only identifies the war of position with civil hegemony, he also identifies it with passive revolution. He asks himself whether Cuoco's concept of 'passive revolution' can be related 'to the concept of "war of position" in contrast to "war of manoeuvre"', and whether there may be historical periods in which there exists 'an absolute identity' between them in which 'the two concepts must be considered identical'.⁵⁵ Gramsci clearly thinks so and identifies Europe post-1848 and 1871 as examples. So if the war of manoeuvre gives way to the war of position, in which permanent revolution is transcended by civil hegemony, does this not also imply that permanent revolution is transcended by passive revolution?

Gramsci avoids this implication for a reason, namely that he wants to save the concept of passive revolution for specifically counter-revolutionary attempts to co-opt the forces of revolution to its own ends—the

⁵¹ Gramsci, *Selections*, p. 110.

⁵² Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. 2, Turin 1975, p. 973.

⁵³ Gramsci, *Selections*, p. 80n.

⁵⁴ Gramsci, *Selections*, p. 243. See further, Perry Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *NLR* 1/100, November–December 1976, pp. 5–78.

⁵⁵ Gramsci, *Selections*, p. 108.

restoration, the state-led passive revolution of the Risorgimento, and fascism itself. But in fact there is no reason why the concept of passive revolution cannot be considered as politically neutral as that of the war of position, or of hegemony itself. And this becomes clear in the threefold distinction Gramsci makes between (1) the *ancien régime*, whose ruling classes 'did not construct an organic passage from other classes into their own, i.e. to enlarge their class sphere'; (2) the bourgeoisie, which 'poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level' but which has become 'saturated'; (3) a class really able to assimilate the whole of society that would bring about 'the end of the State and of law—rendered useless since they will have exhausted their function and will have been absorbed by civil society'.⁵⁶ Both the latter two are classic passive revolutions, absorbing their antitheses. The difference between them is that the former, bourgeois revolution is a raising up which of its very nature must reach a limit or point of saturation, whereas the proletarian version of passive revolution, which culminates in the end of the state, has no lower limit.

If these passive revolutions are differentiated only by being limited or limitless, then this carries the implication that if any passive revolution were to continue indefinitely, it would inevitably become permanent revolution. A class that absorbs its antithesis (passive revolution) will, unless it reaches saturation, become the class that absorbs the whole of society. (As the state is of its very nature a class state, the class that absorbs the whole of society will also reabsorb the state into civil society.) According to Gramsci, the state in the West is 'only an outer ditch', behind which lie the robust institutions of civil society.⁵⁷ On this analysis, that outer ditch marks the class limit that restricts the scope of passive revolution; as the state is reabsorbed, the ditch becomes an open border, and Gramsci's account of permanent revolution regains its nihilistic edge.

Extra-egalitarian

Do these fragments from the history of revolution provide glimpses of Nietzsche's secret path? Nietzsche's critique of egalitarianism highlights both its nihilistic potential and the role of inclusivity in realizing that potential. He identifies egalitarianism with nihilism on the basis that if

⁵⁶ Gramsci, *Selections*, p. 260.

⁵⁷ Gramsci, *Selections*, p. 238.

value presupposes inequality, equality must undermine value. But his argument suggests that even if equality is a form of nihilism, nihilism is not necessarily always egalitarian. To the question: what is egalitarianism and where are its limits?, Nietzsche answers that there are two types: the egalitarianism of mutual recognition between equals, and the egalitarianism of levelling down. Both have an internal limit, but in the latter case the limit may be used to pivot from levelling down to levelling out, opening up equality to those below the existing threshold. Egalitarianism in this sense is incompatible with equality as a state, in that it is constantly prompting reevaluation in favour of the less than equal, and returning to equality only via inequality.

Each of the fragments above describes a moment of disequilibrium when the argument pivots from levelling down to levelling out. Such moments appear within the revolutionary tradition in the moves from equal property to negative community, from revolution to permanent revolution. Less obviously, they are reflected in the transformations of the great beast. In Plato, the great beast is merely an illustration of levelling down. In the aftermath of revolution, a further possibility emerges: the level to which society has been levelled down might be the level from which it levels out. Cuoco picks up the idea of an inarticulate people absorbing the elite, and turns it into the idea of passive revolution in which the revolutionary elite absorb the people, taking on their opinions in the process. In Gramsci's hands, this process of extending the class base of revolution is implicitly identified with permanent revolution, a revolution that ends by dissolving the state and with it the possibility of revolution itself.

Although it might be assumed that egalitarianism lies at the heart of the revolutionary project, the dynamic described above is not so much egalitarian as extra-egalitarian in that it both exceeds and stands outside egalitarianism, even when presupposing it. Unlike telic egalitarianism, extra-egalitarianism is not a one-shot political project. Indeed, it is not clear that equality is the point of extra-egalitarianism at all. It is never satisfied with it, and it would be possible to devise a non-egalitarian form of levelling out that did not require equality to be realized at any stage.

If extra-egalitarianism has a point, it may be closer to what Nietzsche calls nihilism. There is, as its critics point out, something distinctly negative about any form of egalitarianism that goes beyond a concern

to make the poor better off. But the type of negation involved in extra-egalitarianism is rather different. What makes it nihilistic is not just the loss of value (either in the form of particular goods or average utility) but the potential disappearance of what at the start of the process is the good being distributed. Yet to some extent, history suggests that the revolutionary tradition has actually been inspired by the idea of advancing to that point where the absence of limits negates the existence of those things the limit seeks to preserve and distribute—property, class, law or the state—and which equality serves to maintain precisely because it presupposes them. There is indeed a sense in which, as Nietzsche said, this is the ‘secret path to nothingness’.

But is this a destination to be avoided at all costs, or does it rather say something about the justification of extra-egalitarianism itself? There obviously comes a point where we are all dead, but in cases where all involved still have a life worth living, it is possible to question the value of the things that we take to be social goods. In which case, equality represents not a utopian distribution, but a form of socially realized scepticism about value. Equality already functions like this in the case of positional goods, where sharing in, and diminishing the value of, are effected simultaneously. Extra-egalitarianism takes this further: it implicitly registers the ambiguity of all goods, and transforms questions about value into questions about need.

Viewed in this light, the egalitarian plateau takes on a different significance. The various attempts to extend the plateau may together represent a larger political project than any embodies individually. If the plateau has the contours of a saturated passive revolution, attempts to go beyond it contain the promise of a permanent one, reaching out across the uneven terrain of the universe. If so, this would suggest that the egalitarian plateau is itself not just the ground of political debate, but, as a community whose collective but exclusive possession is equality itself, that which stands to be demolished.