

Equality: The History of an Elusive Idea. By Darrin M. McMahon.
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There is a great deal to like about this book. In the first place, the sheer ambition can only be applauded. Darrin McMahon offers a history of equality ranging from our primordial ancestors (and commonality with our ape cousins) through the earliest archaic states, the Axial age, and then onward into the more familiar territories of the Western classical world, the mediaeval period, and then of course the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, down to the present. The scope is staggering, and along the way one learns a great deal, both about the facts of history, and the ways in which conceptions of equality have been both advanced and rejected. The book is also highly readable, aimed at a wide audience beyond reclusive academic thinkers (even if, on occasion, the prose tries a bit too hard, tipping over into kitsch).

For many readers, there will certainly be surprises along the way. To pick the two most obvious contenders, there is, first, McMahon's demonstration that Marx and Engels—and thus in turn much Marxist thinking—were decidedly uninterested in equality and how to bring it about, seeing this instead as just one aspect of the false ideological schema imposed by bourgeois capitalist liberalism that needed to be overcome. By contrast, far-right thought in the early twentieth century turns out to have been much more interested in equality than a passing familiarity with these murderous regimes would lead one to expect. German Nazis and Italian fascists were acutely interested in how to establish equality for those considered part of the *volk*, as the flip side to explaining why those who were outside this grouping, and thus unequal, must be excluded politically (and, indeed, ultimately murdered).

In this regard, however, fascistic thinking turns out to be only a particularly extreme manifestation of a feature in discourses on equality that McMahon shows to have been persistent for pretty much as long as human beings have wrestled over—and with each other about—the notion. More often than not, equality has been defined in terms of something accorded to those within a particular grouping, while simultaneously *not* applying to those deemed outside. And this exclusion is not accidental, nor epiphenomenal, but integral to the conceptual delineation of equality: that *we* are equals precisely (at least in part) because *they* are not. Of course, who counts as “we” has changed (and been contested) in myriad ways over the long course of human history: the men, the freeborn, the citizens, the believers, the property holders, the whites, and various combinations thereof, to pick only obvious examples. Often, affirmations of equality are part and parcel of affirmations of inequality.

The point is well made, and surely correct regarding the history of ideological contestation in this area, but it is also here that academic readers (such as myself) are liable to become frustrated. The reason for this is that McMahon is insufficiently attentive to important distinctions in the conceptual minefield of equality that underlies his history. (The full title of the book is *Equality: The History of an Elusive Idea*, but a perhaps more accurate, albeit less snappy, title might have been *Equality: The Fiendishly Complex History of a Set of Interrelated but Different Ideas*.) At the very least, there is a crucial distinction between what philosophers now tend to refer to as “basic equality,” versus debates that pertain to equality of *distributions* (with regards not just to wealth and property, but also to such important human goods as social respect and political inclusion). To simplify somewhat, the first of these relates to questions about what (if anything) might render human beings of inherent equal worth merely as human beings. It is, we might say, a question about their fundamental status as moral equals (if indeed that is what they are). The second relates to questions we might broadly categorize under the heading “who gets what, how much, and

why?" Yet alongside these philosophical questions, there are also issues that we might classify as pertaining more to the interests of economists and social scientists: attempts to look at a given social arrangement and pass verdict on the extent to which it instantiates different levels of (say) equality of income (the kind of thing the famous Gini coefficient attempts to measure), but *without* taking a stance on the normative status of whatever distributions are empirically observable.

This is by no means exhaustive, but these three kinds of inquiry are clearly different, and although often interconnected, it is crucial to separate them out if one is to have a coherent sense of what kind of equality is under discussion. Unfortunately, McMahon consistently flits between these basic distinctions, without warning, and indeed without appearing to realize that he is often conflating very different ideas. (See, for example, the opening of the Conclusion, where McMahon moves from a superficial summary of recent views about basic equality directly into a discussion of income inequality.) At times the book is an intellectual history of ideas about equality, but one which oscillates unstably as regards precisely which kind of philosophical discussion is being reported (which, to be fair, is sometimes a feature of the very texts being examined—but it is incumbent upon the intellectual historian to point this out). At other times, however, the book switches without warning into a social scientific mode and offers assessments of the broad-brush (in)equalities of past societies in material terms. And while of course these issues are connected in various ways, such connections are fiendishly complex, and must at the least be recognized as connections, rather than proceeding as if equality is, despite evident disagreements, ultimately a unitary idea.

In part because of these frustrations, I often felt as though what I was reading was not so much a book about equality as hierarchy. In fairness to McMahon, he is explicit at the outset that ideas about equality are intimately connected with ideas about hierarchy. It is also to be applauded that he makes no attempt to shy away from two indisputable, although often unpopular, truths: that human beings inevitably and always sort themselves into hierarchies, and that without this hierarchical tendency in our psychologies, complex social living would be impossible. McMahon correctly emphasizes that the problem is not hierarchy *per se*, but that hierarchies have a strong tendency to quickly become schemes of domination, exploitation, violence, and cruelty, directed by those at the top toward those at the bottom. The point is to try and find ways of organizing hierarchy that are as tolerable as possible, for as many as possible.

But as a result, one way to read the history of arguments about equality is as part of wider (themselves protean) arguments about how to justify systems of rule and power: on this picture, complex claims about equality emerge as making sense in relation to, and themselves conditioned by, a more fundamental attempt to explain who gets to decide, and who has to do what they're told (or else). McMahon is by no means blind to these features. Yet I am left wondering if the book might not have been more successful if the polarities had been reversed: the emphasis put on hierarchy, with debates about equality an important, but subsidiary, intellectual phenomenon, and where skating over the conceptual thorniness of the latter would hence likely be less of a problem. Nonetheless this is a rich and enjoyable book, one that deserves the wide audience it is aimed at.

PAUL SAGAR

King's College London