Prophets of the Procrustean Collective

Antony Flew

After this Theseus killed a man called Procrustes, who lived in what was known as Corydallus in Attica. This person forced passing travellers to lie down on a bed, and if any were too long for the bed he lopped off those parts of their bodies which protruded, while racking out the legs of the ones who were too short. This was why he was given the name of Procrustes (The Racker). — Diodorus Siculus, The Library of History, IV 59(v)

“The greatest single force changing and expanding the role of the federal government in the USA is the push for equality.” In saying this the Editors of Business Week recognized how right Alexis de Tocqueville was when, toward the end of Democracy in America, he warned: “The foremost, or indeed the sole, condition required in order to succeed in centralizing the supreme power in a democratic community is to love equality, or to get men to believe that you love it. Thus the science of despotism, which was once so complex, has been simplified and reduced, as it were, to a single principle.”

Paul Kurtz asked me to write, with particular reference to “the state of freedom in Great Britain,” about the way in which so many intellectuals have “become enamoured of egalitarianism, and have often abandoned the idea of freedom.” I can think of few topics of more concern to everyone committed to a democratic and secular humanism, while the particular reference proposed is the one from which today the clearest lessons can be drawn. But here and now I shall concentrate on general ideas, leaving to some later occasion the task of describing and explaining to a North American public the unfortunate historical, institutional and constitutional facts combining to make the prognosis for my own country almost unbearably gloomy.

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2. Lincoln might have added that the equality which the Signers were affirming is of a categorically different kind from that which he correctly insists they were not maintaining. Rights are, in Stanley Benn's happy phrase, normative resources. So to assert that all men are endowed with certain rights is to assert not that they are equal in fact but that in these respects they ought to be treated equally. It is also part of the logic of rights that these normative resources have to be grounded in some non-normative fact about what the persons so endowed either have done or are.¹

This too was altogether clear in the mind of the man who, thanks to his "peculiar felicity of expression," was deputed to draft that Declaration. Readers of his Notes on the State of Virginia, will remember how, assuming that talent is, as it is, both scarce and unevenly distributed, Thomas Jefferson sketched a highly meritocratic program for secondary and tertiary education. In the same place he also permitted himself to advance, "as a suspicion only," the proposition that "the blacks are... inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (pp. 146 and 143).⁴ This dangerous thought did not weaken — nor should it have weakened — his consistent insistence that "the faculty that gives man his unique dignity, that grounds his rights, that makes him self-governing" is common to all mankind; black and white together.

Nor did Jefferson ever lapse, with Kant, into an incoherent description of rational beings as "ends in themselves."⁴ Both, however, were fully seized of the crucial importance of the facts: that we are all able to, and cannot but, form aims for ourselves; and that in giving to ourselves or to others our reasons for acting thus but not thus we are, however unsatisfactory those reasons, rational beings. Of course, from these neutral and necessary facts of our common human nature nothing can be immediately deduced about how such creatures ideally ought to treat one another. Nevertheless — to borrow a more fortunate conceptual creation from Kant — "as legislating members of the Kingdom of Ends" we ourselves can lay it down that, in so far as they are doing no harm to others, all such rational agents are to be respected in their pursuit of their own chosen ends; or, in favorite words of a much more recent generation, their doings of their own things. Indeed if I do claim, on some ground, to have a right, then, by that same claim, I necessarily concede to everyone else satisfying the same condition a corresponding right.

The three fundamental and universal rights of that Declaration are all option rather than welfare rights. The notion of essential equality enters through that of reciprocity. My right to be left alone generates both your duty to respect that right and my duty to respect your parallel right. Nor is the right to the pursuit of happiness a right to be provided — By whom and at whose expense? — with either happiness itself, or the means of its achievement. (Here the contrast is with contemporary manifestos containing long lists of rights to various welfare goodies. These are to be provided, presumably, always by somebody else and at the expense of others. The U.N. Declaration, for instance, includes rights to "periodic holidays with pay... a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and his family... and... security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.") Equality of option right also provides a basis for, even if it does not absolutely require, one-person-one-vote democracy. But at the same time, most certainly, it forbids total popular sovereignty; the doctrine that anything and everything goes, provided only that it is supported by a majority. For that could and surely would constantly conflict with the rights to equal liberties of members of minorities.

The ideal proclaimed in 1776 just is, therefore, an ideal of equal liberty. So if anyone is enamoured of this first sort of egalitarianism, then they have not "abandoned the idea of freedom." The threat comes from quite different ideals of equality, though some adherents of these may mistakenly believe that their own ideals are either the same as, or logical extensions of, those of the Founding Fathers.

3. The second of the three kinds of ideal to be distinguished here has traditionally been labeled equality of opportunity. Wherever this label is construed thus, as referring to what the Revolution of 1789 called "La carrière ouverte aux talents," it would be much better to speak not of equality of opportunity but of fair and open competition for scarce opportunities. For in that revolution the original drive was simply to open all public appointments to competition from members of formerly handicapped or excluded groups. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen says: "The law is an expression of the will of the community... it should be the same to all... and all being equal in its sight are equally eligible to all honours, places and employments, according to their different abilities, without any other distinction than that created by their virtues and talents."

Equality of opportunity, in this traditional understanding, begins to clash with rights to equal liberties as soon as the law imposes on private providers of opportunity what legislators call fair employment practices: the USA has in the last ten years provided plenty of ludicrous yet at the same time burdensome and vexatious examples of such imposition.¹ The clash becomes more extensive, and more fundamental, to the extent that enthusiasts for equality of opportunity try effectively to equalize the pre-competitive environments and even the original heredities of potential competitors. In his monster volume, A Theory of Justice, John Rawls responds by musing — like a Press Secretary diverting an awkward one: "Is the family to be abolished then? Taken by itself and given a certain primacy, the ideal of equal opportunity inclines in this direction. But within the context of the theory of justice as a whole there is much less urgency to take this course" (p. 511). On our side of the Atlantic spokespersons are bolder and more brutal: "It is," according to one socialist educationist, "the business of education in our social democracy to eliminate the influence of parents on the life-chances of the young."²

The conclusion that equality of opportunity demands a universal uniformity of early environment may sometimes arise from a crude misreading — a phrase traditionally construed as referring to the career open to the talents is mistaken to mean literally equal opportunities; which, presumably, is just what such a state-imposed uniformity would provide. A somewhat more subtle sophism argues that whatever constitutes an actual competitive advantage must by the same token be unfair, that
whatever makes the actual chances of the various contestants winning different one from another cannot but be a scandalous inequality in the conditions of the competition itself. A contributor to one of the torrent of volumes of essays on equality argues angrily, for example, about an imaginary track event: “Three of the competitors are forty years old, five are overweight, one has weak ankles, and the tenth is Roger Bannister. What sense does it make to say that all ten have an equal opportunity to win the race? The outcome is predetermined by nature, and nine of the competitors will call it a mockery when they are told that all have the same opportunity to win.”

Maybe they will. But, if the inference from unequal probabilities of actually winning to scandalous inequality in the treatment of the contestants is admitted, then there is no room for the realization of any ideal of fair and open competition for scarce opportunities — however limited or however extended its application. For, by the hypothesis, any such competition must result: either in a dead heat, leaving the allocation of scarce opportunities to be made in some other way; or else, while there will be both winners and losers, the winners will have won only what has in effect become not a competition but a game of pure chance.

4. The third and today most intellectually fashionable ideal of equality is not merely different from but ultimately incompatible with both of the first two. The objective here is equality of opportunity but of outcome — equal condition rather than equal liberty. Commonly it is said to be a matter of (social) justice that everyone should be assigned, if not a perfectly, at least a more nearly equal share of all goods of every kind. Most aficionados of this third ideal are hot to disclaim commitment to precise equality of incomes or absolute equality of condition. Yet surely, all such disclaimers notwithstanding, must it be the perfection of equality which is here cherished as an ideal and a value. For that is what the trade-offs with other values are trade-offs against.

Take this, for example, from C. A. R. Crosland, a man usually considered to be the very model of a modern British social democrat: “The standard of living of working class people, it is (rightly) said, can be improved much faster by economic growth than by any conceivable redistribution of existing income. . . But this is not the point. For, at least in the advanced industrialized countries, the argument for more equality is based not on any direct material gain to be poor but on the claims of natural and social justice. And the question is: do these claims conflict with the need for incentives?” The same point comes out even more clearly from an article in the London Observer by the doyen of Britain’s Procrustean intelligentsia. D. V. Donnison begins by listing “Britain’s longer-term aims” as three: first, liberty, “the right to run one’s own life in one’s own way without interference”; second “a secure home to live in, medical care when we need it, and a reasonable income when we cannot work”; and, third, progress, including “the expectation that work will bring its reward.” These undoubtedly common aspirations are then, without explanation and falsely, described as “egalitarian.” The conclusion drawn — this too being in all probability equally false — is that the general public must share the author’s devotion to “equalizing policies,” and his corresponding revulsion from “inequalities of earnings.” These, he declares, are tolerable, if at all, only when “required to keep the economy moving.”

Since no conceivable measure of work done can rate everyone’s actual or possible inputs or outputs equal, it is manifest that egalitarianism of the present third kind is flately incompatible with the last of what Donnison misdescribes as three “egalitarian aspirations.” That it is irreconcilable with the first I shall suggest in Part II at greater length. It remains in Part I: first, to show its incompatibility with our second ideal — equality of opportunity; and, second, to distinguish it from state-supported welfare-floor policies — policies designed to guarantee for everyone the fulfillment of the second of Donnison’s miscalled “egalitarian aspirations.”

Both these points ought to be similarly obvious. Yet in many places they are not. So, first, the reason why equality of outcome must in the end preclude fair and open competition for scarce opportunities is that any opportunities which cannot be made available to all must be, by the hypothesis, either forcibly taken from everyone or artificially offset by compensating disadvantages. Until and unless this is done there remains or emerges that most infamous of evils, inequality. Second, there is a world of difference both theoretical and practical: between, on the one hand, trying to secure some minimum; and, on the other hand, labouring to enforce equality. It is of the essence of egalitarianism to demand maximax as well as minima — to insist that ceilings and floors be screwed down as close as may be each to the other. But a minimum you can support while allowing that above it the sky’s the limit.

Many prominent egalitarians, at least some of the time, appear unable to grasp this simple yet crucial distinction. Such spasmodic bouts of intellectual scotoma are here, I think, to be understood as largely diplomatic afflictions. For even our most notoriously right-wing figures support, and always have supported, policies for the public provision of a welfare-floor or safety-net: both images were, indeed, part of the stock-in-trade of Sir Winston Churchill’s domestic speeches. But Procrustean politicos find it convenient to blackguard opponents, while sanctimoniously representing themselves and their party as holding a monopoly on compassion. (I treasure a letter from one of these paragons containing the sentence, apparently written with a straight face, and reproduced here exactly as received: “It is arguable that bad housing, pollution, ignorance, etc. are good. But unless you are prepared to argue that case you must be an egalitarian . . .”)

II

We now, at rather long last, consider how far the third kind of ideal distinguished in Part I can be reconciled with the first; how far, that is to say, the most intellectually fashionable egalitarianism is compatible with liberty — “the right to run one’s own life in one’s own way without interference.” The first thing to notice is that for few of its often rather conspicuously under-deprived adherents this is a self-imposed individual ideal; which, by the force of argument and by sometimes sacrificial example, others are to be persuaded voluntarily to accept for themselves. Instead it is almost always a proposed or actual aim of public policy, to be enforced by the full power
egalitarianism typically constitutes the uniting and justifying of an ever-growing state apparatus. Indeed — though this neither is nor is offered as a refutation — Procrustean egalitarianism typically constitutes the uniting and justifying ideology of members of the new class making or hoping to make above average incomes, and to hold positions of very much above average power, in machinery for its enforcement.

Were we confronted by an ideal of the former sort — as found among those volunteering to remain in or enter an Israeli Kibbutz — there would be no question of any threat to liberty, and the epithet 'Procrustean' would be inappropriate. But as things are — and especially when equality of outcome, even if only a somewhat qualified equality, is presented as an imperative of justice — we should never be too shy to press upon all the "rather conspicuously underdeprived adherents" aforementioned one embarrassing but potentially instructive question: 'Why have you not yourself relinquished all those surpluses above average which must be, on your own account, unjust acquisitions unjustly held?'

This question is potentially instructive as well as embarrassing. It may make the persons questioned wonder whether, construed as an egalitarianism of this third kind, social justice is any more genuinely justice than People's Democracy is democracy. To the Procrustesians it is extremely tempting — nor, again, is it on that account alone wrong — to present their ideal as a sort of justice. For this form of presentation legitimates their activities both in their own eyes and in the eyes of other people. It answers awkward questions about the right of the Procrustesians to impose their ideals by force. They can therefore see themselves as good guys in a classical Western, sling their guns and swing their fists to ensure that justice is done all round. They would, however, be ill advised to pursue such reveries very far. For in these traditional contexts justice is universally agreed to be a matter not of equality but of everyone getting and keeping their several, and often extremely different, deserts and entitlements: *suum cuique tribuere* — to each his own, his due.

Social justice, construed as some more or less qualified version of equality of outcome — or, for that matter, any other predetermined pattern of distribution — can be achieved only through a fully socialist, centralized, command economy: an economy socialist in the straightforward sense of all the means of production, distribution and exchange as well as all health, education and welfare services being publicly and hence presumably state-owned and state-controlled. (The expressions 'state capitalism' and 'state socialism' I read as, respectively, self-contradictory and tautological.) That socialism is a necessary although by no means a sufficient condition of social justice, so understood, seems to me certain. I am pleased to notice that things are equally clear to that egalitarian ultra Christopher Jencks and his Harvard colleagues. In a fine sociological study they first confess: "Our primary concern is with the equalizing of the distribution of income." A page or two later they conclude: "We need to establish the idea that the federal government is responsible not only for the total amount of the national income, but for its distribution."

Rawls by contrast is reluctant to recognize socialist presuppositions and implications: he seems sincerely dedicated to "the priority of liberty." Yet suggestions of collective ownership and central distribution are there from the beginning, in his very definition of 'social justice.' This is, he says, concerned with "the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation..." As he begins, so he continues: "...the chief primary goods at the disposition of society are rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth... All social values... are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution... is to everyone's advantage" (pp. 7 and 62: italics supplied).

All this threatens liberty in three ways. First, the intention will be to offer uniform goods and services to all: since equality is everyone's due, there must be no choices between alternative providers or alternative provision. Second, there will be no room for those who would go round producing things or providing services without permission or direction. Third, a socialist concentration of all political and economic power in the central collective never has been and never could be reconciled with democracy and the basic liberties of a free society. On this most vital of all issues extremes are agreed. Mill, in the essay *On Liberty*, wrote: "If the roads, the railways, the banks, the insurance offices, the great joint stock companies, the universities, and the public charities were all of them branches of government... not all the freedom of the press would make this country free except in name." In 1971, with its eyes most immediately upon Chile and France, Moscow's Institute of Marxism-Leninism outlined tactics for achieving irreversible Communist domination: "Having once acquired political power the working class implements the liquidation of the private ownership of the means of production... As a result, under socialism, there remains no ground for the existence of any opposition parties counter-balancing the Communist Party." Perhaps I shall find some later occasion to explain, with homely illustrations, that the party establishing its irreversible domination by these means does not have to have been originally, or now or ever to be actually called, a Communist Party.

NOTES


3. See, for instance "What is a Right?" in the Summer 1979 special number of the *Georgia Law Review* (XIII 4, pp. 1117-41); and compare, again, *PP*, Chapter II 2-3.


