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Egalitarianism

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Anthropology makes a unique contribution to the study of egalitarianism. While 'egalitarianism' has long been the purview of moral philosophy, anthropology is unique in that it is the only discipline that claims to know, empirically, what it is like to live in an egalitarian society. This entry summarises some of the numerous ways that anthropologists, working with a broad variety of people from hunter-gatherers to state bureaucrats, have used the term 'egalitarianism' to describe forms of social and political organisation concerned with 'equality'. What it means to be 'equal', however, is widely debated not only among anthropologists, but among the people they study. As is true for moral philosophy, there are numerous approaches to the question—with some that emphasise equal rights or freedoms, and others that emphasise equal wealth or opportunities. Engaging critically with debates concerning the meaning of 'equality', and with ethnographic evidence of efforts to achieve it, this entry provides insights not only into what 'egalitarianism' is and is not, but also into the contextual factors that threaten egalitarianism and the situations that might allow it to flourish.

Introduction

Egalitarianism, the view that all people are equal and should be treated as such, is a well-developed area of study in moral philosophy. There are numerous traditions, from those that emphasise equal rights or freedoms and are known as 'liberal' traditions, to those that emphasise equal wealth or opportunities and are at times referred to as 'socialist' traditions (see Sen 1980). These traditions are diverse, but they tend to converge on the basic point that egalitarianism describes a form of social and economic organisation that ensures people are free from tyranny, i.e. free from seeing their freedoms or opportunities oppressed by others, and free from hierarchy in that their rights to wealth or to opportunities, for example, are not determined by rank or status.

One of the ways in which these traditions differ, however, is in their assessments of how we might achieve such relative equality and what role property should play. Where classically 'liberal' traditions stress that egalitarianism depends on people having personal property rights to what they produce or accumulate, classically 'socialist' traditions stress that the wealth people generate should be redistributed—if not to everyone, then to those who are most in need.

These forms of egalitarianism are obviously at odds with one another, and much discussion has been had on how to reconcile them (Arneson 2013). Anthropology has long made a contribution to this discussion by looking, empirically, at what it is like to live in an egalitarian society, i.e. a society that, on the face of it,

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values both personal autonomy and material equality. Anthropological research shows that such societies keep mechanisms in place to reconcile problems of freedom and problems of redistribution—maintaining not only certain ideas about persons (be they human or non-human), but certain practices of sharing or ways of relating to one another. Anthropology also studies ethnographically how people attempt to bring egalitarian societies about—revealing where these efforts fall short and where they succeed. Taken together, the discipline does not only tell us about the values that people associate with egalitarianism or equality, but about what happens when people try to live by them. It shows that lived egalitarianism is much more than simply a set of either 'liberal' or 'socialist' values and that a greater degree of equality is achievable almost everywhere.

Early writing on freedom and equality

Early writing on egalitarianism can be divided into texts that emphasise equality of rights and opportunities (in other words, freedom of choice and equality of rights under the law), and those that emphasise equality of outcome, often assumed to be equality of wealth. These are not mutually exclusive, but they have developed into distinct schools of thought. Though there are numerous early contributions to this area of study, the most widely cited social theorists are John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Karl Marx.

The popularity of these European authors may give the impression that egalitarian thought originated from insurrections against the tyrannies or hierarchies of seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century Europe, but increasingly the archive suggests otherwise. These were also periods of European empire, and with that came resistance and rebellion from those people that Europeans were colonising or enslaving. Their dissidence, as Priyamvada Gopal (2019) writes, shaped the way people in Europe thought about freedom and emancipation. In Spain, the atrocities suffered by colonised indigenous peoples led Bartolomé de las Casas to develop a Christian form of egalitarianism. In France, the egalitarian thinking that was central to the French Revolution followed from discussions with indigenous theorists such as the chief of the Huron people, Kondiaronk (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). In the United States, Frederick Douglass became a leading abolitionist writer who made the case for human equality, and in the Caribbean C.L.R. James' (1938) account of the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture illustrates the persecution that people of colour experienced then, and still experience disproportionately today. All these writings indicate that egalitarian thinking is not the privilege of one region, but may resonate with people around the world who have been subdued by tyrannical rule, colonisation, and slavery.

Writing in the late seventeenth century, English philosopher John Locke emphasised that people have 'natural rights' to do as they please so long as the 'natural rights' of others are not violated in the process. His writing was revolutionary within a context where philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes supported absolute monarchy, and in the lead up to England's 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 that saw the partial separation of Parliament from the Crown. Locke's central claim was that people have inalienable rights to

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what they produce, and should be free from coercion, either in the form of enforced redistribution or in the form of forced labour—quite unorthodox ideas at the time.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was similarly concerned with freedom, but his writing is more sensitive to the problems posed by the pursuit of self-interest and by systems of private property. Since people depend upon one another, both materially and psychologically, Rousseau argued, it does not make sense to speak as if this were not the case—as if they are not obligated or compelled to care for one another or part with their wealth. In *Discourse on inequality* (1755), Rousseau argued that it was in establishing systems of private property that inequality was able to develop. Yet, Rousseau did not go so far as to advocate for private property to be abolished. Where inequality was natural for Locke, for Rousseau it could be overcome through the development of laws based on the 'general will' of the people—in other words, laws that would ensure the common good.

Like Rousseau, Karl Marx was concerned with the way private property could develop into systems of oppression. His analysis, however, was much more sophisticated in its account of how this happens under capitalism. Like Locke and Rousseau, Marx emphasised that people have rights over what they produce. He recognised, however, that this would necessarily exacerbate inequalities where people's natural abilities were beyond their control or where the economic system was structured in such a way to privilege some over others. Marx claimed, contrary to the Lockean definition of equality effectively as 'liberty', that measures must be put in place to redistribute wealth to those who deserve it—not only those who are less able or less fortunate, but those who had produced the wealth in the first place.

Stated differently, where Lockean notions of 'property' focus primarily on the wealth one can produce or accumulate, Marxists expand this notion of 'property' to include not only the wealth one is able to produce but one's abilities or opportunities as 'properties' as well. This distinction is key because where differences in abilities or opportunities are largely 'natural' to Locke (the property, like wealth, of individuals), they are largely the product of political and economic processes for Marx, and therefore the property of more than simply those who 'own' or 'possess' them. This forms the basis for Marx's critique of capitalism, but Marx's recognition of political and social context also serves as the basis for his own formulation of what an 'egalitarian society' might look like.

Drawing upon Lewis Henry Morgan's ethnographic writing on the Iroquois, Marx wrote with Friedrich Engels ([1884] 1972) of 'primitive communism'. This was a form of social and economic organisation that supported neither the accumulation of wealth nor the development of hierarchy. Only with the development of pervasive forms of capital accumulation would these earlier forms of egalitarianism give way to present day forms of inequality. The thrust of the argument surrounding primitive communism was that capitalism (and by extension, inequality) was not the inevitable consequence of granting people freedom, but rather historically specific and changeable. For contemporary followers of Marxist thought, it is in fact Lockean

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notions of assumedly 'natural' rights that are at the root of contemporary problems of inequality. Political systems privileging natural rights, they argue, lead to a sort of 'possessive individualism', where the individual is conceived of 'as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them' (Macpherson 1962, 3). For liberal and neoliberal thinkers, these principles are central to their own formulations of a fair, well-functioning society (see Morningstar 2020).

While anthropologists have generally opposed the notion that neoliberalism, i.e. the expansion of market logics, practices, and institutions, is a solution to problems of inequality, they have not escaped some of the promises and problems neoliberalism brings about. Most notably, they have not escaped the issue of how to value freedom or autonomy (in the sense of people being free from the claims of others or from coercive political and economic processes), without fostering inequalities of wealth or opportunity. Similarly, anthropologists grapple with the question of how to value that people make claims upon and care for one another (something at times called 'communalism'), without supporting social hierarchies or socially destructive forms of dependency.

The following section presents some key ethnographies of hunting and gathering populations, who are renowned not only for their traditions of sharing but also for their respect of personal autonomy. This body of ethnographic work provides significant insights into the way that certain groups of people reconcile the tensions that arise between conflicting sets of values and into the contextual factors that shape such values in the first place.

The entry then looks at contributions to the study of egalitarianism that emerge in contexts where we might not expect it, such as in the Indian caste system or in the Sicilian mafia, and returns to the problem of what we understand 'equality' to be. Does 'equality' stand for sameness or equivalence when it comes to personal rights or abilities, or does it refer to wealth or opportunities?

Subsequently, the entry turns to ethnographic writing on animism and 'vitality' which shows that equality of rights or abilities as well as wealth or opportunities condition one another. In these instances, wealth or opportunity make the exercise of rights or abilities possible. It raises the question of what we owe to one another as humans but also what we owe to other sorts of beings that give us vitality and make life possible, pointing out that an 'egalitarian society' may have to include non-humans as well.

The final section then turns to people's frequently messy attempts of trying to work out what they owe to one another. It asks how people pursue egalitarian values when they are not sure that they can trust others to do the same, or when other forms of uncertainty make it hard to do so. This section plays to anthropology's strength, in that it shows how the tension between different forms of 'equality' play out in its practical pursuit. Ethnography is a crucial resource here—providing insights not only into the contextual factors that threaten egalitarianism, but the situations that might allow it to flourish.

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Hunter-gatherers and 'egalitarianism'

For many classically liberal thinkers, the absence of systems of rights and forms of governance that protect private property and individual freedoms would entail a steady descent into war (the most violent form that claim-making can take). Responding to this claim, anthropologists writing in the post-war period turned to ethnography and to some of the last so-called 'primitive societies'. They sought to better understand hunting and gathering as a mode of subsistence, and in turn were able to challenge the claim that the absence of systems of private property was synonymous with tyranny or poverty. Drawing upon early ethnographic studies of hunter-gatherers who lived with a minimal amount of private property (notably Lee and DeVore 1968, see Solway 2006), Marshall Sahlins famously argued that hunter-gatherers enjoyed not only 'a kind of material plenty' (1972, 9), but greater degrees of personal autonomy. Later studies argued in a similar vein that greater equalities of wealth, power, and prestige are ensured in hunter-gatherer societies than in any other (Woodburn 1982).

Something interesting was certainly going on here. These societies were not only said to value sharing and shun the accumulation of wealth, in line with Marx and Engels' writing on 'primitive communism', but also to value personal autonomy of the sort cherished by liberal thinkers (see Widlok 2020). Rather than have the value of sharing develop into forms of hierarchy or oppression, where one has no choice but to give up one's wealth, these were societies that valued sharing without thereby sacrificing personal autonomy. The form of sharing valued here is not based on a primacy of private property, which many readers may associate with philanthropy or systems of taxation. Instead, it is a type of sharing that gives anyone the right to claim, or 'demand', an equal share of whatever is produced or gathered. One can make such a claim, so long as the outcome of sharing is equality.

How does such 'demand sharing' (Peterson 1993; Widlok 2004, 2013, 2017), however, square with the value of personal autonomy? While there is certainly an obligation, or a compulsion to share within these societies, sharing is not strictly enforced. It is not only possible to refuse the demands that people make, but to avoid those demands being made in the first place. This is important because demand sharing does not automatically ensure equality. Not only is it not always obvious when someone has accumulated more than others (due to the fact that wealth can be concealed or simply out of sight), but it is not always possible to know who can be trusted to be transparent about their wealth when they have. Refusing the demands that people make or preventing them from making them in the first place are, therefore, not simply indicative of the breakdown of egalitarianism. To the contrary, they play an important role in its realisation and to the realisation of personal autonomy. Personal autonomy, however, carries its own risks; the risk, no less, of making it possible for people to conceal their wealth or keep it in the hands of only those they prefer.

Faced with this eventuality, people who value egalitarianism typically develop measures that either

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maintain a certain amount of transparency or that remind people of their commitments to one another. Among !Kung (or 'Ju|'hoansi') for example (Wiessner 1977, also Laws 2019b), there have long been gift-exchange relationships (called *xaro* or *hxaro*) that limit accumulation and the development of hierarchy between 'clans' or 'bands' who live apart from one another and whose wealth at any one time is unknown. Gift-giving thus establishes a pattern of visiting that not only ensures the circulation of certain goods but creates opportunities for demand sharing between those whose wealth is out of sight. Other means of orienting people towards egalitarian behaviour include deriding those who seek to gain greater wealth, power, or prestige (or who are suspected of doing so) or managing the claims that others can make by choosing when to make one's wealth visible or accessible to those who hope to make demands (see Laws 2019a, also see Lee 1984, 48 on 'insulting the meat' for a popular example of a levelling mechanism against the development of prestige).

Egalitarianism then, much like hierarchy, is not natural; rather it is maintained through a series of social levelling mechanisms (Woodburn 1982, also see Clastres 1972), practices that encourage the redistribution of wealth and regulate personal autonomy. They attune people to the value of egalitarianism *and* to the various ways it may be threatened. We see such efforts to attune people to the values of egalitarianism not only in the hunter-gatherer literature, but in numerous contexts where the benefits of sharing or maintaining autonomy outweigh the benefits of accumulating wealth, power, or prestige. These levelling dynamics play out on the streets of Addis Ababa (Di Nunzio 2012, 2017), Johannesburg (Dawson 2021), Nairobi (Thieme 2013, 2017), or the Zimbabwe-South Africa border (Mate 2021), where getting by means not only accumulating relationships with others (at times referred to as having 'wealth in people' [Guyer 2009]) but hustling to get whatever material forms of wealth one is due. We also see this in the many print and digital forums set up to provide a space for political commentaries against dictators (Bernal 2013), governments (Coleman 2014), or other sources of oppression (see Kapferer 2015), where achieving or maintaining autonomy means, at times, tricking or deriding others. These all provide further evidence of the surprising ways in which people go about trying to achieve equality, and of the contextual factors that shape whether, or how successfully, they do so.

The study of mostly egalitarian societies raises the question of whether these are people who simply share certain values, or whether they are in fact compelled towards them by states of mutual vulnerability. Put differently, the question is: can egalitarianism flourish irrespective of the circumstances people find themselves in, or do certain conditions need to be met for egalitarianism to develop or be maintained? Within writing on hunter-gatherers, there has been a tendency to argue both ways. On the one hand, egalitarianism is said to have developed over thousands of years of living under very specific conditions, often in some of the most challenging environments in the world, and to be sensitive to those conditions. On the other hand, egalitarianism among hunter-gatherers appears to be remarkably resilient to changes in circumstances—precisely because, as Thomas Widlok (2020) puts it, the resilience and reappearance of

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egalitarianism 'relies to a large extent on these levelling practices being kept in place across generations'.

This has, as Stan Frankland (2016, 561) shows, often given the impression that hunter-gatherers are 'stuck in a cosmological loop of "hunter-gatherer situations"' that compels them to remain the way they are. This fits with a tendency to turn to hunter-gatherers as exemplary of a non-Western, non-modern kind of utopia (c.f. Trouillot 2003, 17; Gable 2011, 2). This tendency has not only had the effect of distorting their lives, pitting egalitarian 'societies' against non-egalitarian ones when both pursue egalitarianism but in ways that are shaped by the different circumstances they face. To minimise this risk, some anthropologists have decided not to analyse societies as a whole, but instead look more closely at the broader contextual factors that shape how, and whether, people (in general, not just hunter-gatherers) pursue egalitarianism (see Gulbrandsen 1991).

The analysis of egalitarian circumstances and situations allows anthropologists to recognise egalitarianism in places where we would not have expected it, beyond hunter-gatherer contexts, including in large social groups (see Graeber and Wengrow 2021, 276-327). Research into egalitarianism can therefore take place even in highly hierarchical societies. This broadening of research contexts, however, has led some analysts to use the term 'egalitarianism' somewhat indiscriminately. Recalling the central distinction between freedom and autonomy on the one hand, and sharing and redistributive equality on the other, it often becomes hard to know what exactly the term egalitarianism means (also see Buitron and Steinmüller 2020). The next section addresses this with respect to a key determining factor: how people approach differences in property, and what we take 'property' to be.

Property, personhood, 'equality', and 'equivalence

Outside of hunter-gatherer studies, the term 'egalitarianism' was perhaps most famously used by Louis Dumont (1980) in his structural analysis of the Indian case system. Comparing India with 'the West', from the perspective of both the society 'as a whole' and the individual within it, Dumont begins by equating the Indian caste system with 'hierarchy' as individuals are organised legally and in their everyday lives in relation to their rank, and the West with 'equality' or 'egalitarianism' because here individuals are equal before the law. However, Dumont goes on to challenge this standard formulation, arguing that rather than equate egalitarianism with the sort of equality exhibited by the Western legal system, it should be seen in the Indian caste system. Where the Indian caste system sees persons defined in relation to one another, the Western legal system sees persons defined in relation to themselves—whether, in other words, they are 'equivalent' to one another. Where the Indian caste system is an instance of 'holism' and inclusivity, the Western legal system is an instance of individualism and exclusivity.

Dumont's 'egalitarianism', however, is one that focuses almost exclusively on identity—in other words, on how persons are defined. According to the Western legal system, persons are equivalent to one another to

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the extent that they share the same rights. According to the Indian caste system, persons are equivalent to one another insofar as they are similarly defined in relation to one another. The move that Dumont makes, as Joel Robbins (1994, 21) points out, is to ensure that 'the mere existence of inegalitarian elements in a society does not prevent us from studying it as an egalitarian one'. While this comparison is insightful and allows us to consider egalitarianism from more than one vantage point, it is also limited. As David Graeber (2007, 47) has argued, it misses the basic point that 'from the perspective of those on the bottom' (Graeber 2007, 26), either of the formal hierarchy in India or from a standpoint of material deprivation in the West, both systems are highly exclusive, either restricting peoples rights and opportunities or limiting their access to wealth (see Beteille 1986, also see Leacock 1978 or Finnegan 2013 for an analysis of how this plays out in relation to gender). The relationship between how one is defined and one's material equality or rights and opportunities is not fully explored. It is possible, in other words, to be equivalent in some way but not to have equality.

Naomi Haynes and Jason Hickel (2016) offer a complementary, albeit different, perspective on the relationship between equality and equivalence when proposing the term 'egalitarian hierarchy'. This, they argue, is not a contradiction in terms but rather an analytical descriptor for situations where positions within a hierarchy are open to anyone. One's position within the hierarchy, in other words, can shift—meaning that those at the bottom can take positions at the top—addressing, to an extent, the issue raised by David Graeber. This is not 'egalitarianism' as described by Dumont, but it is 'egalitarianism' insofar as the opportunity to occupy certain subject positions is equally shared. We see this in Haynes' (2015) ethnography of Pentecostal Christianity in Zambia's Copperbelt where, among the Pentecostal congregations she studies, we find a clear separation between leaders and laypeople. However, both kinds of positions can be held by anybody, and neither position can be held permanently. The Holy Spirit is 'poured out on "all flesh"' (Haynes and Hickel 2016, 9). It may be the case, in other words, that there are differences between people and their access to opportunities or to wealth, but these differences are not stable, nor do they necessarily result in unequal access to wealth—in this case, the Holy Spirit.

Studies such as these, that challenge any neat distinction between hierarchy and egalitarianism, or that draw attention to the differences between equality and equivalence, are significant because they challenge the claim that natural or social differences in abilities necessarily give way to inequality. By extension they also challenge the claim that equivalence or 'sameness' must entail equality or egalitarianism (Walker 2020). An early analysis of gender relations among Hagen people living in Papua New Guinea's Mount Hagen region had already picked up on this issue (Strathern 1988, 138-58). In this area, during the late 1960s, numerous 'inequalities' existed between men and women in terms of their division of labour—in the raising of pigs by women, or the hosting of public ceremonies by men. However, these differences were not indicators of inequality proper because ownership over the resources that come from labour does not discriminate between them. Pigs raised by women may help men further their political interests, but the

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prestige they gain from the labour of ceremonial exchange may be the benefit of women (148). What makes this 'egalitarian' is the fact that what people accrue from their labour is not their property alone. This must be so because people are not regarded as the sole authors of their own actions. This applies not only to the products of their labour, be that pigs or yams, but to working bodies too as the outcome of social relations. One observes a similar recognition across much of the Amazon, where the language of 'masters' and 'owners' suggests that all capacities to act are themselves seen as the outcome of the acts of others (Rival 1998; Fausto 1999, 2008). What follows from this is that egalitarian societies rely on commonly accepted understandings of the debts we owe to one another, both with respect to wealth and with respect to status or ability.

Some writers have recently taken a more critical stance towards the idea that 'egalitarianism' can exist in a context of hierarchy. Within Australia, for example, 'egalitarianism' has been used to describe the view after World War II that people are 'a society of equals who possessed as inner qualities the capacity to govern themselves' (Kapferer and Morris 2003, 91). This view has also been used as the basis of populist rejections of efforts to address existing inequalities in Australia, typically between majority and minority populations, on the grounds that providing minorities with exclusive welfare programs could be considered 'inegalitarian' (Kapferer and Morris 2003, 91). Similarly, in Switzerland, 'egalitarianism' is used to describe the Swiss system of direct democracy which aims to ensure consensus between different political groups (Gold 2019). Yet this same system facilitates exclusionary practices if the will of the majority dictates it. An equivalence between voters, or between party members, may entail equality in other words, but it does not in itself ensure it. In Sicily, the 'popular metaphor associating the Mafia with power, exercised through power' (Rakopoulos 2017, 113) would suggest that the relationship between members within a Mafia cooperative is necessarily one of coercion. By contrast, Rakopoulos explains, relationships between Mafioso and those who form the political economy in the region, such as winemakers, are egalitarian in the sense that they are frequently based not on coercion but on consent. The question, then, is how to keep it this way? Or how to challenge and transform hierarchies of power if they develop? The following section addresses these questions in more depth, focusing not only on how humans redistribute or balance inequalities of power, but also how this extends to non-humans.

Vitality and uncertainty

It may be possible to bring together 'egalitarianism' as freedom or autonomy and 'egalitarianism' as sharing and redistribution. Terms like 'sharing' and 'redistribution' do not just refer to what we do with objects or goods. They also describe our abilities or capacities to act, i.e. the 'properties' of us as living beings. We often produce these properties in much the same way as we produce objects or goods: through labour, or by attending to or caring for one another, for example. Such a renewed focus on the qualities or properties of persons may help us appreciate that egalitarianism entails not only the sharing or

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redistribution of objects but of vitality itself. On the one hand, this highlights the important question: 'to whom do we owe our existence?' (Graeber 2011, 67). The social processes that enable us to live, of course, are not always equalising; however, investigating them is one good way to not just reflect upon our debts towards others but also on what others may owe to us. Here, a focus on vitality foregrounds that the 'products' of people's actions are not only goods but people themselves. It shifts the question of how unequal distributions of wealth, power, or prestige are 'levelled' to how such desirable aspects of life are brought about in the first place

On the other hand, a focus on vitality foregrounds that many people survive by harvesting, hunting, or consuming beings they regard as having a vitality of their own. All social life, whether between humans, or between humans and non-humans, entails a degree of violence, and egalitarian societies are no exception. As David Graeber writes, with reference to anarchic sociopolitical formations, this 'spectral violence seems to emerge from the very tensions inherent in the project of maintaining an egalitarian society' (2004, 31). What is important in bringing about egalitarian situations is not preventing violence entirely, but rather to prevent these forms of violence from becoming excessive or overly exploitative. Language may play an important role here. Among Ju|'hoansi in northeastern Namibia, for example (Laws 2019b, 219), there are 'owners' and 'masters' not of goods or objects but of actions. Such 'owners' or 'masters' (indicated by the suffix *–kxao*) perform a particular action either especially well or excessively. A 'master thief' (*dcàákxao*), for example, is only ever referred to as such if they do so excessively. This suggests a certain tolerance for wrongdoing but also provides a language that marks excessive negative behaviour. The tolerance that this language communicates is borne not simply of the view that some theft is fine, but the reality that distinguishing theft from permitted acts of taking requires an understanding of intentions—something that is difficult and takes time.

Investigating the creation and distribution of vitality has also allowed anthropologists to highlight how important non-humans are in bringing about egalitarian situations. Non-humans feature prominently in efforts to rebalance all kinds of distribution. Within animist contexts, spirits who are often all seeing and all powerful regulate vitality both among humans (Laws 2021) and among humans and non-humans. Among the Yukaghir people of North Siberia, we see how this principle operates between hunters and their prey (Willerslev 2012). All prey are said to have spirit-masters. These spirit-masters regulate hunting among the Yukaghir by threatening to strike them with sickness or death if they hunt too much. The implication is that if the balance of vitality shifts from the forest to the Yukaghir, there must be mechanisms in place to restore it through comparable acts of violence. Similarly, in Amazonia, most things are described as having an 'owner'—a 'mediator between this resource and the collective to which he or she belongs' (Fausto 2008, 330; also Walker 2012). What matters is not that people refrain from hunting or from getting into debt, but that they refrain from doing this too much. Their actions should be directed towards the right ends. People may of course attempt to resist these efforts, for example by 'playing tricks' to avoid being struck with

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sickness or death (Willerslev 2012) or to avoid sharing (Laws 2019a), but they do this not because they wish to exploit one another or the environment but because they fear they themselves are being exploited.

This line of analysis builds on scholarly insights in anthropology that non-humans are often deeply embedded in social relationships and processes. They are not simply the 'products' of labour that get shared among humans, but agents that make demands of their own. In her analysis of egalitarianism among Nayaka hunter-gatherers of South India, Nurit Bird-David (1990) illustrates how Nayaka root metaphors of the forest as a 'giving parent' are embedded in broader processes of ascribing agency (or rather, social sentience) not only to humans but also to the environment more broadly. Just as people, in the spirit of demand sharing, construct their needs in terms of their desire for an equal share (Bird-David et al. 1992), so too do the plants, animals, or environments they demand from. Similarly, when the balance of wealth shifts—in other words, when people take more from the environment than they give, or when their activities become unsustainable—the environment demands a share of the life-force that early acts of giving made possible. They are embedded within a 'cosmic economy of sharing' (also see Lewis 2008) that extends well beyond human interpersonal relations.

This raises a critical question: how should we go about balancing vitality? Writing on resistance and revolution in anthropology (see Wright 2016, Wilson 2019) demonstrates a variety of responses to this question, or rather a variety of approaches to efforts of societal transformation (see Cherstich et al. 2020), within both state and non-state contexts. We see everything from highly visible forms of political action in the form of revolutions or protests (see Rasza 2015; Graeber 2008; Sitrin 2012), to more 'unobtrusive' forms of political struggle (Scott 1990, 183; Maeckelbergh 2011, 2016). Writ large, what this literature suggests is that balancing vitality takes two primary forms: one which involves resisting oppression or overcoming marginalisation, and one that involves embodying the forms of political and social life that ought to take their place.

A key problem that emerges in the literature on egalitarianism is to do with the problem of uncertainty. To bring about an egalitarian society, one must know where wealth or power reside and whom to trust. We find that people are often concerned not simply with whether a given interaction is fair, but with whether actions or processes that seem putatively fair may, in fact, allow inequalities to develop over time. It is also in situations of scarcity and marginality, where uncertainty is rife and where people depend upon one another greatly, that concerns of this kind seem to become all the more pressing. In these situations, egalitarianism appears not simply as a possibility for social organisation but as a necessity or an inevitability (Gulbrandsen 1991, Laws 2019b).

At the same time, the anthropological literature warns us against teleological arguments about the nature of egalitarianism (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). A close analysis of archaeological and historical records finds that the relationship between modes of production and forms of social organisation are not

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straightforward, and that societies depending on agriculture may remain mostly egalitarian while hunter-gatherers may not. Whether human groups began as egalitarian or hierarchical ones is still up for debate. David Graeber and David Wengrow have recently argued that 'we do not have to choose…between an egalitarian or hierarchical start to the human story' (2021, 118) as we should not underestimate human capacities for creativity when living under and responding to different material conditions. The authors draw upon archaeological and historical evidence from Çatalhöyük or early cities from Egypt to China to Central America to argue not only that egalitarianism appears within a wide variety of contexts, but that people develop ingenious ways of responding to the different challenges that these contexts pose for pursuing egalitarianism. We can start by agreeing that it is not simply the case that egalitarianism entails the rejection, under any circumstances, of relations of property. It is certainly the case that egalitarianism tends to mean holding the products of people's labour as common property and, by extension, the abilities or qualities that people possess. But any 'genuinely egalitarian system' (Graeber 2007, 48)—one, in other words, that values autonomy—has embedded within it hierarchical possibilities and unequal potential that must be actively guarded against, often with recourse to relations of property.

This brings attention to at least one recurring challenge that people face when they pursue egalitarianism—the challenge of not knowing, on the one hand, where wealth or power resides and, on the other, whom we should trust to share wealth or power when they have it. 'Assertive egalitarianism', with this in mind, is less about performing sharing or acting autonomously and more about attuning oneself, and others, to these broader problems of knowledge that may allow inequalities to develop over time. We see this in 'Melanesian egalitarianism', where ceremonial processes of giving and receiving appear to be more about denying the 'new manifestations of power' that may emerge from the accumulation of resources, than they are about day-to-day processes of redistribution that circumscribe such forms of accumulation (Rio 2014).

One way that people go about addressing problems of uncertainty that arise is through developing moral arguments that remind people that they need each other, and that they owe their vitality and the products of their labour to each other. There are many ways that people do this and ensure that people refrain from the kinds of actions that lead to hierarchy or inequality in its most enduring forms, but one common way is through the development of universal systems of kin classification (see Barnard 1978, 2016; Leacock and Lee 1982; Bird-David 2017). These systems take 'kin' to be those who act in particular ways (most notably, those who share with one another), not those who are related by blood or residence. What this does, coupled with broader narratives of what it means to be 'good' and to be a 'person', is sustain a moral argument about the relationship between equality as an outcome and different ways of behaving or treating others.

These approaches to achieving equality, and the moral arguments that accompany them, can take a wide variety of forms. What unites them, however, is a subjunctive mood—a mood, in other words, that is

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attuned to doubts and suspicions (see Laws 2021, also see Stasch 2015). These doubts and suspicions concern not only people's commitments to the principles of egalitarianism but the way contingencies of scale and time shape people's ability to recognise inequalities developing over time or prevent people from acting upon them. The study of egalitarianism suddenly looks quite different. It is not simply the study of values of freedom or sharing, but the study of the way people address uncertainty and the impact it has on efforts to achieve equality. This highlights the importance not only of redistribution or freedom but of concomitant practices of tracing inequalities of wealth, power, and prestige over time and finding ways to address these as they develop. When we take these practices seriously, we start to see egalitarianism at work in unexpected places—in political commentaries that use dark humour and satire to call out coercive or self-seeking behaviour, among programmers seeking to develop alternatives to centralised banking systems, among hackers seeking to expose or disrupt hierarchies, or in ordinary acts of mutual aid. How successful these are depends not only on the values people have, but on the availability of knowledge and the ability to address inequality when it does become apparent.

Conclusion

The study of egalitarianism makes clear that there is a tension between 'freedom' and 'equality', or 'autonomy' and 'communalism', with one 'running as a strong counter-current' to the other (Guenther 1999, 42)—a 'paradox', even, at the heart of egalitarianism (see Kapferer 2015). Anthropological engagements with the topic suggest, however, that any model of equality that does not take sharing seriously fails to recognise the enabling conditions of individual freedom and autonomy. Anthropological scholarship of egalitarianism focuses as much on the creation of wealth, power, and prestige as on its redistribution. It broadens the object of inquiry to include the study of vitality and links the creation and maintenance of egalitarian relationships to notions of 'property' and personhood and to certain understandings of the non-human.

By analysing lived egalitarianism, it shows that distinguishing between the performance of egalitarian values and their enactment is a fundamental problem. It also shows that in contexts of high uncertainty, when people are compelled not only to share but to respect one another's autonomy in the interests of social cohesion, equality appears almost inevitable. In many other contexts, however, equality must be actively pursued—not only as a value or set of values, but as a material reality that depends upon being both open about one's relative wealth and committed to achieving equality as an outcome (and not simply to pursuing a particular set of values).

By exploring how people actually go about pursuing the values associated with egalitarianism and how they navigate the many challenges that they face along the way, ethnography gives us a sense of what it might be like to live in an egalitarian society. More importantly, it teaches us under what conditions performing the actions or processes associated with egalitarianism might actually help us to bring equality about.

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