The governance of equability

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“…democratic peoples… have an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion for equality; they want equality in liberty, and, if they cannot obtain it, they still want it in slavery”

Alexis de Tocqueville

Introduction

_The Wealth of Nations_ – the foundational work of Adam Smith on the invisible hand that promotes the view that coordination may be ensured by an invisible hand in market economies – was always meant by Smith to be read in parallel with his _Theory of Moral Sentiments_, as his foundational work on _morality_. It is the second and equally important invisible hand that is meant to ensure that the moral underground of socio-economies will keep society within a corridor that prevents excesses capable of throwing the market economies out of whack. Both coordination mechanisms were seen by Adam Smith as necessary to ensure socio-economic peace and progress.

Over the last seventy years, immense attention has been given to the first invisible hand, the one celebrated in the first book, and this has often led to the message of the second invisible hand’s being occluded and ignored. This willful blindness to ethico-cultural considerations has been encouraged by the positivist ideology in good currency in the social sciences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – an ideology in which any reference to normative dimensions was regarded as out of bounds. This Manichean attitude has considerably undermined the work of social scientists, especially as redistributive state interventions have grown exponentially in the name of egalitarianism, and have had both positive and negative effects on both the workings of the market economies and on their cultural and moral undergrounds.

While the beneficial stabilizing effects of redistributive initiatives over the cycle have been celebrated in the short run, their negative longer term impacts on both the workings of the market economies, and on the decay of their cultural and moral undergrounds, have been ignored. Indeed, those who have drawn attention to such long term malefics have often been brutally rebuffed as anti-progressive – a deadly label in some intellectual quarters, where _progressive_ has come to connote any stance based on self-righteousness and public compassion, that is thereby exonerated from having to demonstrate its effectiveness, and forgiven for its toxicity.
In 2012, we were reminded sharply of the taboos attached to any critical statement about the quest for equality through redistribution. The most notable quotation of that year (according to Fred Shapiro, the associate librarian at the Yale Law School on December 11, 2012) was the statement by Mitt Romney (the Republican presidential candidate in the 2012 US federal election) that 47% of the U.S. population have now become somewhat permanently dependent on government transfers, and are on the take, so to speak. This quotation, secretly recorded at a fundraiser meeting in May 2012, was posted in September 2012 by Mother Jones magazine, and is regarded by many as a statement that may have cost Romney the presidency of the United States.

Whether the percentage is correct or not, and whether this quotation was the cause of Romney’s loss or not is not the point here. Rather, it is about how inconvenient it is to ever raise questions about the way in which redistribution may possibly have negative external effects, and may have generated a culture of entitlements in our society, thereby eroding the citizen’s sense of self-reliance, independence, and responsibility.

Entitlements have become a sort of second nature for the citizens of Western democracies, akin to sacred cows. Former Canadian Liberal federal minister David Dingwall made use of this conviction in the hearts of citizens in his famous statement, when questioned about some unusual reimbursements of expenditures he demanded when he was Master of the Mint – “I am entitled to my entitlements” – a statement that was meant to close the discussion. And most citizens would appear to share this view about entitlements – however they have come about, and however rationally indefensible they might be when the full details of the circumstances are explained. Indeed, anyone bold enough to challenge entitlements does so at his peril.

This paper is about the dark side of the notion of equality when elevated to the stance of egalitarianism – or the dogmatic search for equality of outcomes – and, consequently, of the notion of income and wealth redistribution, both when it interferes toxically with the workings of our socio-economies, and when it generates a culture of entitlements that erodes the character of our citizens. And it is about the way in which we may usefully reflect on the governance of equability – a notion we suggest is less toxic than egalitarianism.

First, it throws some light on the sociology of equality as expounded by Alexis de Tocqueville in the 19th century. Second, briefly, it sketches the process that has led to the exponential growth of governmental gratifications, and to their hardening into a cumulative ratcheting of non-negotiable entitlements or acquis. Third, it examines the ways in which such a drift may have had positive effects in the shorter and medium terms on socio-economies experiencing sharp business cycles, but has also had a toxic effect in the longer term on the burden of office of citizens as governors – increasing irresponsibility, disengagement, and victimology. Fourth, since egalitarianism is the philosophy underpinning this entitlement edifice and entitlement drive, an argument is made in favor of replacing it with a philosophy of equability as an alternative foundational anchor. Finally, the paper outlines what the governance of equability might look like.
The de Tocqueville mechanism

Alexis de Tocqueville has shown that “les peuples démocratiques… ont pour l’égalité une passion ardent, insatiable, éternelle, invincible; ils veulent l’égalité dans la liberté et, s’ils ne peuvent l’obtenir, ils la veulent encore dans l’esclavage”.

The core of De la démocratie en Amérique II [the 1840 book] is a sort of sociology of equality in democratic societies. It argues that the basis of modernity and democracy is rooted in this sentiment of equality.

Equality in the sense of Tocqueville is not an observed fact, but it is fundamentally an ideal, an “imaginary equality”, an egalitarianism that drives democracy [II p.189]. Tocqueville has shown that equality is not only the dominant value in democracy, but that “le désir de l’égalité devient toujours plus insatiable à mesure que l’égalité est plus grande” [ II p. 144] : even when a very egalitarian status has been realized in a society, “on peut compter que chacun de ses citoyens apercevra toujours près de soi plusieurs points qui le dominent, et l’on peut prévoir qu’il tournera obstinément ses regards de ce seul côté” . So, contrary to what one might have suspected, greater equality does not generate less envy, but more.

This sort of passion for equality applies as well to ethnic and cultural groups. And it works with even more force when there is a coexistence of decreed egalitarian rights with considerable de facto differences in power, wealth, etc. among the different groups. Strong resentment ensues. It leads not only to cultural jealousies (an innocuous zeal in the preservation of something possessed) but to envy (defined as displeasure and ill-will at the superiority of another person in happiness, success, reputation, or the possession of anything desirable).

The rise of egalitarianism as a modern democratic dogma, and the concomitant acceleration of the global demographic shuffling process, have consequently produced a heightened degree of tension, frustration, and envy at the intercultural interface. It has contributed to the accumulation of culture-specific social capital, and to the further balkanization of modern societies. Moreover, in countries like Canada, where multiculturalism has become a national policy, and where cultural rights have become entrenched in charters and laws, the process of segmentation has been accentuated, and envy has been further promoted in view of the stark contrast between the equality of ethno-cultural groups decreed as the norm, and the realities of intercultural differences.

The transformation of the socio-economic process over the last century has also fostered this passion for equality. In a poor society, consumption is concentrated on basic material goods. But, when the standard of living rises, the demand for luxury goods and positional goods increases. Competition for positional goods is underpinned by a passion for distinction, for resources in

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absolute scarcity that bestow upon individuals possessing them some relative superiority. “The distinctive appurtenances of the rich then become squirrel’s wheels for those below: objects of desire that the most intensive effort cannot reach”\(^5\). The increase in the relative importance of positional competition has heightened the relative frustration of those on the lower rungs, increased resentment, and made the whole socioeconomic process more envy-driven.

**The dynamics of the entitlement revolution**

In a world of surprises, accelerated change, and necessary adaptation and adjustments to constantly changing circumstances, the quest for stability and certainty may be illusory, but it is a constant human aspiration. It has inspired a variety of strategies by individuals and groups to immunize themselves from the vagaries of the environment by all sorts of contraptions. Some of these contraptions have been insurance schemes of various sorts to alleviate the dramatic impacts of unforeseen tragedies, or to prevent the miseries attached to gross inconveniences, like the abrupt interruption of earnings. Such schemes (private, public, or social) have not eliminated uncertainty, but they have mitigated the destructive effects of unpredictable tragedies.

Over time, the natural preference for not having one’s life disturbed has come to be regarded as a widely-shared reasonable preference-cum-expectation. This legitimate quest for certainty has induced many individuals and groups (with the complicity of governments, which are always seeking ways to please more and more active and vocal citizens, and obtain their electoral support) to allow these preferences for certainty to be transubstantiated into some version of human rights, and those rights to be translated into the entitlements of citizens to have protection from undesirable circumstances provided by their governments.

When compounded with the egalitarian ethos that breeds envy, the welfare state doctrine that not only needs but preferences are to be met has been toxic. The egalitarian doctrine has preached that any citizen *qua* citizen is as meritorious and deserving as the next one, and this has made it possible to regard as odious any form of differential outcome. Indeed, it has been argued that if one cannot have access to a service, neither should anyone else – all in the name of equality of outcome. This means that entitlements have come to be not only related to basic needs, but also and most vociferously to positional goods: one should not have to suffer that others are allowed to avail themselves of goods or services that one is not able to access. Envy has become a barometer of legitimate expectations, and any form of inequality denounced as fundamentally illegitimate.

Once preferences have been articulated as rights and entitlements, they quickly crystallize into a set of guarantees that come to be regarded as having been earned (*des acquis*) and they are thus expected to be provided by the state in perpetuity. Moreover, any existing platform of *acquis* in good currency at any one time quickly becomes the legitimate basis from which it can be expected that additional protections might be added in due time – down the wish list of the United Nations 1947 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and more.

This sort of progressive ratcheting up has acquired such sanctimonious respect that any attempt to renegotiate a previous arrangement in the light of changing circumstances, or of the discovery

of unintended toxic consequences (financial or behavioral) as a result of previous engagements, has come to be regarded as *de facto* unacceptable for any reason.

The cumulative effect of some fifty years of such entitlements – something that Nicholas Eberstadt has referred to as an “entitlement epidemic”\(^6\) – has been an exponential increase of state transfers to individuals. A growing dependency of citizens on such transfers, and the parallel growth of a culture of entitlements would appear to make this increase likely to continue unabated. The result will be possible toxic effects on governments for whom this may become unaffordable, and on the citizens themselves, for whom such arrangements may generate malefits in the form of learned dependency and helplessness, of an erosion of their burden of office as citizens, and even of their *moral character* as members of a liberal democracy.

Indeed, moral agency has been undermined as governments have started to take over tasks that individuals used to do themselves. The very idea of *vulnerability* “has become such a cannibal that it now covers not only the victims of misfortune or delinquency but even the delinquents themselves”\(^7\).

**Impacts of the entitlement revolution**

The progressive intelligentsia denies any negative impact of the entitlement epidemic. Yet there is much evidence of negative impacts on all fronts (affordability, perverse incentives, market distortions, and moral vacancy). Well intentioned and generosity-inspired transfer mechanisms (like inter-regional equalization payments or region-based unemployment insurance benefits to reward more generously, and in a semi-permanent way, the unemployed in hard-pressed regions) have been shown to deter inter-regional migration, and to lead to higher rates of unemployment and social welfare recipients than what would otherwise have materialized\(^8\). At the very time when such transfers have come to be regarded as indispensable, they have also become unaffordable, and regarded by experts as deterring growth, being self-defeating, and generating pure waste\(^9\).

Discussions about these issues have led to an increased recognition that mechanisms of equalization, fuelled by the egalitarian spirit, have a dual effect – to allay the inconveniences of unfortunate circumstances in the short run, but, especially if the benefits are unduly generous, to slow down the process of adaptation to such circumstances (e.g., adjustment in location or in the skills matrix), and possibly to generate additional and more serious and deeper malefits in the long run, if the capacity to adapt is significantly thwarted.

This new awareness has called for a balancing of these positive and negative effects in the assessment of the ever larger number of equalizing and redistribution schemes that have been put in place over the last 50 years. Economists have generally stood in stark opposition to the

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egalitarianism drive propounded by the progressives: for them, such schemes are likely to have toxic impacts on the behavior of individuals or groups being thereby dissuaded from adjusting as much, or as quickly as they might otherwise have. Incentives matter.

The progressives’ view has come to be regarded not only as the view in good currency, but also as the only defensible view in the common public culture. Sixty years of ideological programming has made it politically incorrect to acknowledge (or even to mention) that some behavioral modification might be ascribable to perverse incentive reward systems, rooted in excessively generous and indiscriminate redistribution schemes that were put in place in the name of egalitarianism.

A Keynesian case for temporary transfers in time and space

The notion of redistributive mechanisms, either inter-regionally or over the business cycle, to ensure system stability, has been in good currency for the past sixty years. Indeed, it has been suggested that some of the European economic problems these days are ascribable to the fact that Europe did not manage to put in place arrangements to recycle surpluses among countries, and thereby ensure system stability.10

While such mechanisms are not guaranteed to work well and most effectively all the time, and while there may be reasons for them to operate better or worse under certain conditions, they usually have done some good at ensuring system stability in the shorter run. Even in the case of Canada, which has experienced disparity among resource-rich provinces and others, fine-tuning such redistribution schemes has proved useful in unusually difficult circumstances. So the short-term benefits of such automatic stabilizers or equalization schemes are not generally fundamentally questioned, although it has been recognized that they may not work as well as expected all the time, and some critics have questioned the effectiveness of interregional redistribution schemes in the medium term.

Our concern here is the impact of redistribution schemes in time and space, leading to long term dependency on government transfers by a large portion of the population, and thereby leading to behavioral changes by individuals and groups.

The standard argument, pointing to the market distortions and inefficiencies generated by such schemes, is well known, and has been forcefully made by Thomas Courchene. The Courchene argument was hotly contested in the 1980s.11 Courchene’s contentions were not denied, but they were side-swiped by ‘progressive’ arguments that conjectured that the inefficiency losses were more than compensated for by the growth effect of the redistributive schemes. No proof was ever marshaled for this contention: the moral superiority of the redistribution argument was considered sufficient.

Not all distortions are innocuous

More recently, Nicholas Eberstadt has added some flats and sharps to the Keynesian argument: the point that the entitlement epidemic may transform some liberal democracies into “nations of takers”, and that it is in the process of eroding the character of self-reliant citizens in a country like the United States.

The Eberstadt argument moved the debate squarely to the moral ground. It suggested that the entitlement epidemic was not only undermining the work of the invisible hand of the market, but that it had been destructive of the moral fiber of the citizenry. This argument was attacked by progressives who suggested, somewhat unpersuasively, that ‘taking’ was not a problem, and certainly did not lead to dependence.

It is clear that not all aspects of the entitlement epidemic can be ascribed to the implementation of entirely indefensible arrangements. Many redistribution schemes have responded to new problems (aging), and to new expectations that are not unreasonable in a richer society (health, education, etc., especially when one is dealing with public goods – i.e., those where the social benefits are greater than the private benefits, and, where there is a danger of underinvestment since the person investing can only capture a portion of the benefits engendered). Moreover, not all aspects of the welfare state have necessarily contributed to the growing moral vacancy. Other factors may, in part, explain the growth of entitlements, and the new dependency on government transfers. But it is quite ostrich-like to deny that much of the underlying wave of entitlements has taken root very deeply in a new culture of rights, and that it is unlikely to be self-correcting.

In fact, the silent but fundamental tinkering by the state with the process of distribution of income and wealth over the past sixty years has had a first set of distorting effects on the production and finance processes (that Courchene has underlined), and economic inefficiency has ensued. But it has also had a second set of distorting effects on the ecology of social groups and their motivations (that Eberstadt has underlined), and an erosion of the moral basis of the social compact is emerging from this second set of distortions.

The first set of distortions has been reluctantly conceded and rationalized as the social inefficiency cost that we should be willing to pay to ensure a more human and collaborative vivre-ensemble – the efficiency cost of living in a decent and civilized society.

The second one has generated much more unease, and has met with a much starker denial, because it points to the erosion of the social compact itself (even though William Galston strenuously denies it), and of the reciprocity and solidarity on which our society is built, and its replacement by a form of dependency that is much more akin to voluntary servitude than to solidarity.

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Indeed, the second set of distortions cannot really be as easily rationalized as the first one. Compensation schemes may be envisaged and designed to correct the toxic disincentives that ensue from redistributive schemes on the production and finance system, but such schemes cannot easily be envisaged when the second type of distortions in the socio-ethical underground generates changes in belief systems and behavior, and causes a form of disengagement and greater irresponsibility.

In the latter case, there is a sense of irreversibility when there is a discontinuous shift – from a state of affairs where we deal with temporary inconveniences that we might wish to attenuate, to a state of affairs where inconveniences has to be eliminated as a matter of right. This sort of rights or entitlements inflation both debases the legitimacy of the defensible core of human rights, but also makes this inflation immensely more difficult to debunk once it has acquired entitlement status. The language of rights and entitlements does not lend itself easily to discussion and compromise: once something is claimed as a right or an entitlement, the conversation is all but terminated°.

This irreversibility makes the entitlement epidemic one of great consequence. In the absence of a crisis or its equivalent, it is most unlikely that a new philosophy can develop the capability to contain the epidemic, and to reduce the harm it generates. Yet without such a new philosophy, it is unlikely that the necessary reframing of perspectives, and the necessary transformation of the ruling cosmology and belief system, can be accomplished.

The entitlement epidemic has made a dent in the common public culture and in the moral order, and it has transformed the set of assumptions and beliefs on which our notion of vivre-ensemble is built. The correctives required cannot only build on some changes in the plumbing of the socio-economy: they must expose the assumptions and question the beliefs that are at the basis of the cosmology in good currency at this time.

The toxicity of the entitlement epidemic

The entitlement epidemic has been regarded by many as an innocuous modification of the technology of the state/income-and-wealth distribution subsystems. In fact, this change in the state/income-and-wealth distribution subsystems has impacted not only the production/finance subsystems (the Courchene effect), but also, and more profoundly, the ecology of social groups and their motivations (the Eberstadt effect). As a result of these impacts, the entire social system (technology, structure and theory°) has been modified. It would therefore be futile to try to initiate simple technological fixes or structural correctives to tame these toxic effects of the entitlement epidemic on the ethos. Nothing less than an all-out effort to transform the way the social system envisages its purposes and its future will do.

° An organization or a social system contains structure, theory, and technology: a set of roles and relations among members; the views held by members about its purposes, its operations, its environment and its future; and the prevailing technology of the system reflecting and influencing both structure and theory Donald A. Schön 1971. Beyond the Stable State. New York: Random House.
While it may be clear that the common public culture has been eroded by the entitlement epidemic, and that this epidemic has been bolstered to a great extent by state excesses, it is necessary also to be clear about the forces at work in civil society before an effective set of correctives can be designed.

(a) The weakening of the common public culture

This is not the place to develop a full theory of civil society and its foundations. However, it is not possible to reflect on what might be a useful strategy to correct the toxic impacts of the entitlement epidemic without putting this problem in context.

The evolution of the texture of a socio-economy as instituted process may be considered as a chronicle of the armistices between the geo-technical constraints defining the material realities, and the values and plans of individuals and groups attempting to impose their preferences and wishes on it. This takes the form of human contraptions of all sorts, originally designed to create new forms of reconciliations among the families of pressures, but then these contraptions develop their own dynamics. This definition of the socio-economy as instituted process, à la Karl Polanyi, may usefully be mapped onto a triangle identifying at each of its apexes one major principle of integration – economy (market exchange), polity (hierarchy or coercion), and society or civil society (solidarity or network) – with the possibility of mixed arrangements combining these principles. Such a triangle, inspired by the work of Kenneth Boulding, can be visualized in Figure 1.

For any particular socio-economy, the center of gravity may at any particular time be closer to one of the apexes, and through time this center of gravity may evolve in certain directions. For instance, the development of the welfare state, and the growth of the state in the second half of the 20th century, have nudged the texture of socio-economies of Western Europe towards a greater role for the hierarchy/coercion arrangements in the polity, and a lesser role for the other two organizational principles.

The entitlement epidemic (originating with the state’s decisions to transubstantiate some preferences into rights that the state has to honor) has resulted in the role of the polity in the Boulding triangle being increased, and it has crowded out activities that were previously handled by the other two mechanisms. This has led to an erosion of the common public culture (i.e., of the civil society’s capacity to handle these activities). This erosion of the common public culture has in some way undermined and weakened the social and moral foundations – the character – of the society in question.

The debates around the Eberstadt thesis have centered on the source of the common public culture – or, to use a slightly different vocabulary, on the social capital enabling the society to perform all sorts of enabling functions. On the left, it has been argued that it is the redistribution

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20 For an illustration of this process of erosion of the common public culture in Quebec and the rest of Canada, see Gary Caldwell 2012. Canadian Public Culture. Ste-Edwidge-de-Clifton; Fermentation Press.
functions of the state that are at the source of much of this social capital. On the right, it has been argued rather, that the market has been the source of social capital. As a matter of consequence, when confronted with the toxic impact of the entitlement epidemic on civil society, representatives of the left have at first denied any such toxic effect, and then have argued that increased state redistributive action should be used to refurbish social capital. Observers from the right have been more circumspect.

Figure 1

The Adapted Boulding Triangle

Polity

Civil Society

Economy

This caution is based on an old tradition going back to Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Tocqueville suggesting that market relations (le doux commerce) have been at the foundation of civil society, and that the role of civil society has been to limit the encroachment of the state on the operations of the socio-economy.

(b) Weaker ties and equability

The idea of rebalancing the Boulding triangle by getting the state to pull back may be attractive to the right, but it is an abomination for the left which regards solidarity as being produced by state redistribution, and the inter-regional and inter-group laundering of money. The great opacity of the production of social capital does not help in arbitrating these different contentions, but I think it is fair to say that intrusive state action is more likely to crowd-out solidarity.
One of the dirty little secrets nobody wishes to face is that the virtuous circle of more solidarity generating more redistribution generating more solidarity is broken. We have known for quite a while that interregional and inter-group laundering of money and other redistribution schemes have ceased to generate national solidarity (if indeed they ever did) except perhaps in the sermons of the progressives for whom it is an article of faith.

Redistribution may reduce the differences in levels of economic welfare, but the smaller the differences, the higher the tension. What has to be debunked is the sacred character of outcome-equalizing egalitarianism. Only its replacement by a weaker and softer notion is likely to lend itself to trade-offs. Equability may be a more useful reference.

This word — “equability” — is a term that Merriam-Webster defines as the “lack of noticeable, unpleasant, or extreme variation or inequality”. The term focuses on finding the right balance in the practical search for a balance between equality, efficiency, and fairness. Yet this is a word that is not in good currency in Canada, where terms like “entitlements”, and “egalitarianism” — words that are quite legalistic and reek of non-negotiability — are the sort of reference points most often quoted.

A shift from egalitarianism to equability as a reference point would transform the doctrinaire position of the progressives from an either-or to a more-or-less framework. Instead of having to staunchly deny any possibility of trade-off between equality and other dimensions of interest like efficiency, etc., this would pose the challenge of how much egalitarianism needs to be abandoned to accommodate a requisite but not absolute degree of efficiency. Equability would raise the possibility of acceptable inequalities. It may not be possible One may not be able to proceed much further without some relativization of what the progressives have tended to absolutize.

This entails factoring in the psycho-social dimensions and the moral order, and finding ways to have some countervailing effect on the egalitarian system of beliefs and the cosmology that are now in vogue. In such a shift from an egalitarian to an equability cosmology, the code of honor may be the determining factor making possible the transition from one system of beliefs to another, from one state of the common public culture (and the ultrasociality or morality attached to it) to another21.

At the foundation of redistribution initiatives were genuine local efforts to attenuate the toxic effects of unbearable human conditions. Much of it came to be inspired, rationalized, and legitimated by a commitment to lesser inequality: equality of opportunity in the soft version, and equality of outcomes in the harder version. This is the ground on which the redistributive state interventions grew, and the entitlement mentality flourished. It continues to be defended as

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21 As Appiah would have it, social and moral revolutions often originate with a slippage in the code of honor. There obviously was a lag between the first nobleman responding to a dueling challenge by sending his valets to punish the insolent challenger, and the disappearance of dueling; or the first denunciation of slavery, and the abolition of slavery. But it may be that it is only when some egalitarian form of redistribution comes to be regarded – as it was once – as dishonorable, that it will be really possible to challenge egalitarian redistribution as an institution. K.Anthony Appiah 2010. The Honor Code. New York: Norton.
interventions warranted on the basis of just desert and merit as a matter of distributive justice rooted in lesser inequality, even when it has become a Moloch that has been assessed as neither economically effective, nor socially helpful, nor morally or culturally desirable – because of its toxic impacts.

The governance of equability

The egalitarian illusions that have inspired, bolstered, and supported the entitlement epidemic have been exposed for quite a long time. It has been shown that “a society cannot long endure unless it rewards and protects its productive members, and punishes and curbs depredators, cheaters, and free-riders” (p. 206). But even if compassion is an indefensible basis for morality, it remains most seductive. Both Courchene and Eberstadt (among others) have shown that egalitarianism-inspired policies generate distortions in the workings of both invisible hands (market for Courchene and morality for Eberstadt) and have argued for taming the entitlement epidemic based on egalitarianism. But, it is fair to say that their message has not been heard.

The difficulty is that these matters have been debated as a black and white dichotomy that appeared to leave no possibility for a compromise position between zero redistribution and indiscriminate and imprudently generous egalitarianism-inspired redistribution. What needs to be recognized is that modest and prudent redistribution, based on a philosophy of equability (i.e., a philosophy geared to eliminating unacceptable inequalities) may very well be a middle-of-the-road position that could be defended as underpinning reasonable policy choices.

That would entail incurring efficiency (technical and social) costs, but only to the point where they would generate technical, social, and moral benefits that would make such a choice defensible. This would hardly simplify the task, since there is a great amount of imprecision in the data that might help to ascertain what such a stance might mean in real-life situations. But it might be a sufficient guidepost to rein in the entitlement epidemic, and to help to tame it.

In the case of the first invisible hand (market), much discussion has already taken place that can guide the design of decisions as to how much redistribution is optimal – for instance, over the business cycle to make the intervention worth the trouble. It is much more difficult when it comes to redistributing across groups or between generations, but, except for unrepentant ideologues, there is at least some ground for meaningful conversations.

In the case of the second invisible hand (morality) – a territory already broached when one deals with redistribution across groups and generations – the debate is still stuck in Manichean positions, and even the legitimacy of the question of how far redistribution should proceed would not appear to be agreed upon. There is probably a certain degree of redistribution through entitlements that can be defended in terms of economic, social and moral net benefits. But equally much of what is going is indefensible by this sort of standard. The fact that a serious debate is systematically avoided may be ascribable to the fact that no single position can be defended in completely persuasive ways in the abstract, but also because the different actors use different reference points and ordres de grandeur to defend their positions (e.g., utilitarian or egalitarian gauges, for instance).

But the notion that there might be trade-offs that might be regarded as acceptable to different parties as second-best compromises would appear to indicate that conversations that would challenge important mental prisons are becoming thinkable.

This sort of debate is unlikely to be initiated as long as the terrain is quasifully occupied by beneficiaries, and unabashedly compassionate journalists and experts. These three groups have little tolerance for ambiguity: they thrive on self-righteousness and black-and-white problem definitions and solutions. These groups have made public administration an inhabitable terrain because of their doctrinaire positions. Indeed, they would rather not even try to tackle normative questions like the workings of the second invisible hand than allow a compromise response to be entertained as plausible – a solution that would be regarded as a betrayal of their creed, even though such a compromise might be politically desirable.

The only hope might be a return of politics in public administration. This might be the only way to de-fundamentalize the debates about the failures of the two invisible hands. Some wise observers are already calling for a drift in this direction. But there may be no shortcut except through a revolution in the mind first – a revolution that would recognize the legitimate existence of many different ordres de grandeur, or legitimate reference points, and the need to find an appropriate blending of perspectives based on the recognition of each party’s views as legitimate to a degree. This would delegitimize clinging to extreme ideological positions, and would allow a reasonable code of honour to emerge that would stand somewhere on the continuum – between living on welfare being regarded as dishonorable, to its being crystallized as a fundamental right and honorable entitlement. Any negotiated position on this continuum might be regarded as tolerable and honorable, but only temporarily, and contingently – depending on circumstances.

Modest general propositions

(1) The governance of equability must start with the demythologization of the notions of equality and of egalitarianism.

This is a travail that has been underway for quite a while in the tradition of the indictment initiated by Tocqueville. Its has been done in different ways: first, through frontal attacks by Harry Frankfurt or John Kekes among others, on the very meaningfulness of such ideals; second, through a probing of the toxic, deleterious, and violence-generating impact of the pursuit of such ideals; and third, through finessing all sorts of attenuation of the basal notions of equality and egalitarianism via the deconstruction of its polysemic nature, the affirmation of necessary trade-offs with many other valuable purposes, and the denunciation of undue reliance on ex post relative incomes and resources, rather than on the more fundamental insufficiencies of basic capabilities, ascertained ex ante.
The net results of these efforts may have been intellectually powerful, but they have done little to minimize the dominium of equality and egalitarianism in the lifeworld. The observations of Tocqueville remain extraordinarily salient in the 21st century: envy remains a phenomenal force, and still carries the day. The dynamics of the psycho-social underground remains the main driver that ensures that egalitarianism remains a constant reference.

Consequently, it will be a Herculean job to dislodge this passion for equality from its dominant position in the culture, despite all the costs generated by this stance. An epistemological coup based on a crippled epistemology is responsible for this dominance, and nothing less than another epistemological coup will succeed in slaughtering this sacred cow.

The governance of equability must be rooted in sufficiency and respect as a way to diffuse envy and contain redistribution.

To topple egalitarianism, it is necessary to make it unpalatable and dishonorable, but it is not sufficient. It is also important to tame the envy at the source of this drive, and to contain redistribution as a futile response to the egalitarian drive.

On the envy front, G.M. Foster has examined in detail various cultural forms used by persons who either fear the envy of others, or fear that they may be suspected of envy. These take a variety of forms: from concealment, denial, and sharing (symbolic or real) in the first instance, to reassurance and withdrawal in the second instance. But there is also a gamut of institutional devices to reduce envy and contain violence: redistributive mechanisms, but also diverse forms of encapsulation and segregation, designed to mark boundaries between groups.

On the redistribution side, the containment could come from an alternative to the doctrine of equality – the doctrine of sufficiency – the idea that what is important from a moral point of view is not that everyone should have the same, but that each should have enough. Frankfurt has developed this alternative more fully in a 1997 paper. He argues that there is no necessary connection between having a low social position and having a low quality of life. Treating persons with respect entails dealing with them impartially and without arbitrariness, One should not confuse being treated disrespectfully with being treated unequally. And if greater equality is to be regarded as desirable, it should be only because it facilitates the pursuit of other socially desirable aims. not because one regards envy as warranting it. The governance of equability must not be allowed to fall prey to the infernal logic of position and envy.

The governance of equability must establish why equability and equability of what, and allow some inequalities in order to avoid worse ones.

Equability would therefore focus on sufficiency rather than on equality and egalitarianism. This does not make it easier to determine what is sufficient, and what sort of inequalities might be undesirable for other socially desirable aims, but the focus and intent are different: as Frankfurt

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would put it, the focus is on respect and sufficiency, not on giving a dominant place to envy and equality of outcomes in whatever form.

This does not deny that a significant degree of inequality may be of relevance in the pursuit of other desirable aims, and that corrections to these situations must depend on circumstances. For instance, if there is an agent responsible for a discrepancy generating inequality of condition because the agent has failed to treat each person with respect, it may be objectionable, but not because of inequality of outcome, but because of the lack of respect.

This leads to certain pragmatism in recognizing that there are different *ordres de grandeurs* that one must blend in defining regimes of engagement, that the governance of equability must therefore gauge the desirability of many social aims, and that the way of defining unacceptable inequalities depends not on the degree of envy that it fuels (which in itself is not a defendable basis for anything) but on the extent or degree to which such a state of affairs may impair the pursuit of other legitimate social aims.

This leads to the conclusion that the denunciation of inequality *per se*, and the elevation of egalitarianism to the role of dominant value is illegitimate and unwarranted. Consequently, redistributive policies aimed at taming the destructiveness of envy may have been used unwisely and imprudently. Such imprudence may be particularly toxic when the dynamics triggered by such devices not only interfere with the effective working of the first invisible hand – that of the market – but also the second one – morality. Often, in this latter case, redistribution generates entitlements and changes in belief systems that are fairly difficult to reverse once the common public culture has been tainted.

The outcome of this sort of logic becomes unpalatable and objectionable when a society elicits a culture that edicts that if some resource (however much in excess of the sufficiency level it might be) cannot be made available to all, it should be denied to the one person who can afford it. This is only one step away from the Harrison Bergeron world of Kurt Vonnegut Jr where, in the name of egalitarianism, one systematically cripples the higher capabilities of superior individuals (by the stronger being forced to carry a load on their shoulders to slow them down, or the brighter ones being equipped with electrodes to ensure that noise bombardment will impair their thinking) all in the name of equalizing down everyone.

Michael Sandel somewhat flippantly discards such a *dérapage* on the grounds that defenders of equality like John Rawls do not wish to emasculate capabilities, but only to redistribute the proceeds from superior abilities. But radical egalitarianism, fueled by envy, is not so tolerant. It argues that if one cannot get access to a certain service, others should be denied it. This is the argument against the so-called two-tiered health care system.

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29 It is astounding to hear some egalitarian like Ronald Dworkin indulge in speculations about the “envy test” of the ideal distribution – one that would lead no one envious of any other person – and that he proposes therefore to elevate the vice of envy to the role of moral standard. See John Kekes critical comments on that position in J. Kekes 2003. *Op.cit.* 70ff.


Conclusion

An entirely new useful research program might be focused on gauging the corridor of wise use of mechanisms to tame envy in our plural and complex world, taking into account that the use of mechanisms has the potential of influencing the moral/ethical underground. This terrain has been shunned by social scientists, and has remained largely colonized by fundamentalists and ideologues.

In the case of limited redistribution through time over the cycle, it would appear that economists have been able to regain some hold on this terrain, and to establish fairly well the conditions of success for limited redistribution. When redistribution goes further, and encroaches on the system of beliefs and the common public culture, this is *terra incognita*. 