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DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

WITH AND WITHOUT CULTURE

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Abstract

Academic treatments of distributive justice normally adopt a static approach centred on resource allocation among a set of individual agents. The resulting models, expressed in mathematical language, make no allowance for culture, as they never engage with the society's way of life or the moulding of individuals within society. This paper compares the static approach to distributive justice with a cultural one, arguing that a case for redistribution should rest upon its cultural effects in assisting well-being and social cohesion. Unless we recognise culture, we can have little understanding of why inequalities matter, where they come from, and how they might be reduced. Redistribution may be motivated by universal value judgements taken from external sources, but it also entails internal cultural changes that refashion social relations through cumulative causation. In practical terms, it has to penetrate beyond reallocating resource endowments to bring revised attitudes in a society less tolerant of unequal outcomes. Egalitarian reforms will flourish only if they generate and reflect an egalitarian culture.

Keywords: Culture, distributive justice, inequality, egalitarianism, cumulative causation, welfare state

Introduction

Equity and equality are much discussed in the academic literature on distributive justice, but from a narrow perspective. Analysis revolves around allocating resources among a set of individual agents: egalitarians would choose a more even allocation over a less even one. To simplify things, inequality is often condensed to one dimension (usually income or wealth) and equitable distribution becomes a cake-dividing puzzle, as if an outside observer could decide on fair shares. The simplified framework facilitates mathematical modelling at the expense of putting distribution within its social and historical context.

Omitted from the allocative view of equality is any mention of culture defined as either a way of life or process. Culture as a way of life refers to everyday activities, attitudes and beliefs. Exclusive stress on resource allocation neglects the non-material elements of a way of life, along with the social consequences of inequality. Culture as a process links the individual and social levels to document how the social environment shapes human beings – it deals with what economists would call preference formation. Static models of redistribution assume fixed preferences from the outset with no effort to explain their origin or social background. Important issues are brushed aside: the roots of inequality, how it is perpetuated, how it channels people's lives, why we care about it, and how we might reduce it. The cultural vacuum shrinks egalitarianism down to an abstract assignment of resources among an atomistic population of individual units.

A wider view of equality would recognise culture by looking at a way of life rather than resource allocation and asking how unequal societies come forth. History, cumulative causation and belief systems could then claim their due place in the discussion. If we argue that equality transforms society by fostering social solidarity and communal values, then we make a cultural case for it, where it becomes both cause and effect of changing attitudes. Preferences cannot then be fixed, as the desire for equality turns on how it changes them for the better. Distributive justice branches out beyond an allocation problem.

Culture as a way of life includes attitudes to inequality held by the general public. A cultural approach should acknowledge everyday notions of justice and injustice that have little to do with academic theories but appear regularly in conversation, opinion polls, voting behaviour and the media. The public may commend inequalities, keep silent about them (thereby tacitly accepting the status quo) or criticise them as being unfair. Much disapproval of inequality is voiced by members of the poor against other poor people thought to have secured small but unjustified advantages; it can be heard in the language of ‘scrounging’, ‘free-riding’, ‘getting something for nothing’, ‘workers versus shirkers’ and ‘strivers versus skivers’. Similar disapproval could be directed against the rich, especially those with inherited wealth and unearned incomes, although the complaints tend to be rarer and more muted. Popular sentiments about inequality yield an informal, bottom-up brand of distributive justice that stands beside the top-down, academic brand.

The present paper examines the significance of culture for distributive justice, formal or informal. It begins by looking in further detail at the static, culture-free approach, before moving on to alternative, culturally based arguments and locating them within a different theoretical framework. The last two sections consider the practical implications of a culturally sensitive viewpoint and draw general conclusions.

Distributive justice without culture

Academic debates on distributive justice are apt to treat it as a topic in analytical philosophy – the aim is to find logical decision rules to allocate resources optimally among individual agents typically modelled as rational utility maximisers with fixed preferences (Roemer, 1996; Sen, 1997; Moulin, 2003). The individualistic method addresses inequalities among individuals but pays less attention to social classes, structures or institutions, which are secondary and noticed only if they impinge on distribution at the individual level. Since analysis takes place inside a single period, redistribution would have to be a one-shot

reallocation of resource endowments. Nothing is said about how the current allocation emerged, why it has persisted or how it might evolve: assessment is hemmed within a timeless, artificial realm.

Value judgements in the Benthamite, utilitarian tradition would select individual utilities as the yardstick of welfare and maximise the sum of utilities over the whole population to achieve the highest possible total. This may not be egalitarian, for it values total utility regardless of distribution and awards priority to agents who produce the most utility from given resources (Sen, 1997, Chapter 1). Equality would be optimal only if everybody had the same utility function with diminishing marginal utility; otherwise the optimum is unequal and may endorse discrimination against the sick, disabled, elderly, etc. A greater degree of egalitarianism requires a concave objective function that values even distributions of utility above uneven ones – the more concave, the more egalitarian (Moulin, 2003, Chapter 3). Judgements are made first about the utility distribution and then, through utilities, about the distribution of incomes and other resources. As with individual preferences, the origin of egalitarian values passes unremarked and we are not told why we should want equality or how we could attain it.

Distributive justice based solely on utilities (‘welfarism’) has obvious drawbacks: utility is poorly defined and not directly observable, may be an unreliable indicator of well-being, and may not represent rational behaviour. Critics of welfarism from within the static perspective have proposed adding non-utility information into welfare assessments so as to supplement or replace utility: Sen’s capability approach, for example, replaces utility with the capability to function and participate in social activities (Sen, 1993). Non-utility information offsets the pre-eminence of utilities and creates space for social determinants of personal capabilities. The capability approach is essentially individualistic, however, and says little about culture, social structures or ways of life (Jackson, 2005; Dean, 2009; Sayer, 2012). In order to get further away from welfarism, one needs a deeper account of culture and social context.

The static perspective follows the linear sequence in Figure 1. At the starting point comes distributional information on incomes, goods and other resources. Under welfarism, this must filter through individual preferences before social welfare can be assessed, introducing

utilities as another stage in the sequence. Any case for redistribution comes from basic value judgements about the distribution of utilities. The external source of the values leads to a fact/value split in which a ‘positive’ analysis of resource allocation is transmuted into a ‘normative’ blueprint for redistribution when values are appended. Both individual preferences and basic value judgements stay fixed and distinct from each other, without interaction or historical development. In non-welfarist variants of the static perspective, non-utility information can enter directly into welfare assessments that reach beyond utilities alone (Sen, 1982, Part IV). The ethics remain individualistic, because value judgements still rest on individuals, as against social structures, classes or other groups. Adherence to the linear sequence gives the literature on distributive justice a strong family resemblance, even though it is portrayed as a series of welfarist and non-welfarist alternatives.

Figure 1: Static distributive justice

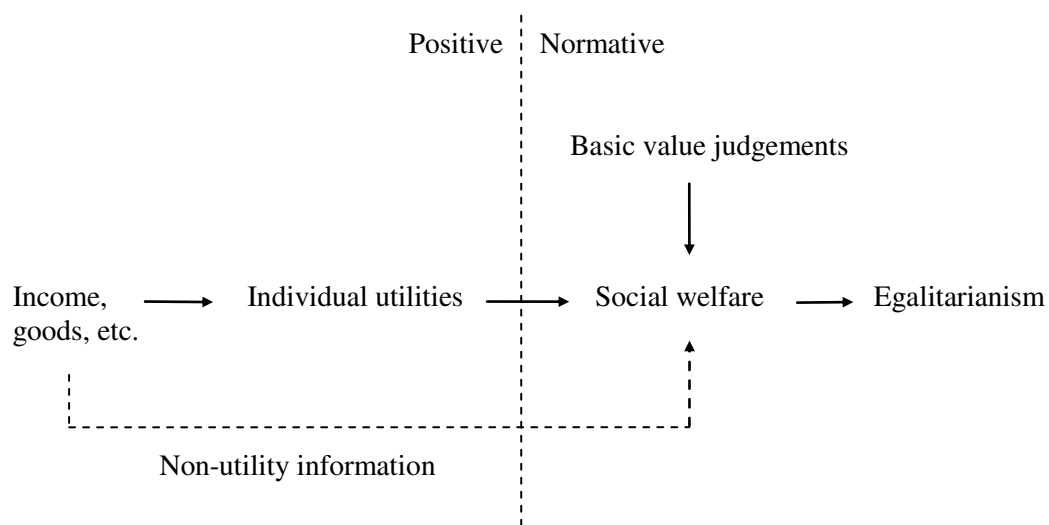


Figure 1 lends itself to mathematical expression but cannot readily accommodate culture as a way of life or process. Ethics are separated from the past and future to be collapsed into a

technical problem of maximising an objective function for an anonymous bunch of individuals at a single, unspecified time. The individualistic method and dearth of social structures mirrors how orthodox economic theory has become desocialised (Jackson, 2013). Social influences on the individual are at best implicit, playing no overt part in the analysis, and ethics must hinge on individual welfare. Culture as a process, whereby individual preferences are formed within society, would swap the linearity of Figure 1 for circularity that permits backward causation from the social to the individual. A cultural outlook demands an alternative vision awake to the social formation of preferences and values.

Cultural arguments for equality

Disquiet about static, ahistorical theorising has long been voiced, dating back to the onset of utilitarianism and classical economics in the early nineteenth century. Criticism came from writers in the Romantic tradition who focused on the neglect of history and culture in economic theorising (Ryan, 1981; Löwy, 1987; Löwy and Sayre, 2001; Connell, 2001; Jackson, 2009, Chapter 3). They saw economists as promulgating mechanistic theories that erased the human life from economics and condoned the harsh social conditions bred by early capitalism. Many of these critics were prominent literary authors and commentators (including Edmund Burke, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Cobbett, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold), but they stood outside the economics profession and had little sway over the practice of economics. Few of them are regarded as egalitarians – their ideal was often to have benevolent, paternalistic leadership rather than equality. The cultural critiques do not preclude a case for equality, though, and can be turned in that direction.

An early statement of the cultural arguments for equality was made by Matthew Arnold in his 1878 essay *Equality* (Arnold, 1986). Equality, for Arnold, is to be valued not as an abstract principle or natural right but for its contribution to social cohesion and the

complexion of everyday life. A society marked by extreme inequalities of income, wealth and status loses the shared interests and experiences needed to forge common values and friendship among all individuals and groups. Social divisions are institutionalised into a permanent hierarchy with adverse effects on both rich and poor. The rich, enjoying inherited fortunes, are spoiled from birth, relieved of any constructive social purpose, flattered and pampered by ingrained deference, and subject to the temptations proffered by idleness and lavish material wealth. The poor face difficulties of subsistence, lack the material and social advantages possessed by their fellow citizens, find themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy, and become excluded from full participation in society. Social divisions when established are taken for granted in what Arnold termed a 'religion of inequality'. Beliefs supportive of the status quo enter the national culture, thus legitimising the social order and suppressing debate over reforms.

The questions raised by Arnold were discussed at length by R.H. Tawney in his classic book *Equality*, first published in 1931 (Tawney, 1964). As an economic historian he was attuned to cultural thought, having stressed how cultural and religious values guided capitalist economic development (Tawney, 1920, 1926). Inequality, in Tawney's view, can never just be about uneven distribution of resources or asymmetries among specialised economic functions: these are at the core of inequality but far from the whole picture. Enquiry must extend beyond the material dimension to embrace the social structure of a society, as well as its beliefs and values. An unequal society is unequal not only in its resource allocation but in its social roles, personal relationships and attitudes – various dimensions are entwined to make up a generalised hierarchy reproduced across generations. The dominant values justify inequality and confirm it as the natural order, so the only route to greater equality is to challenge them and loosen their grip. If they endure, then progress towards equality will be modest at best and prone to counter-attack.

Within economics, the role of culture in preserving inequalities has been emphasised by institutionalist writers (Galbraith, 1992; Stanfield, 1995; Dugger, 1996; Zafirovski, 2000; Brinkman and Brinkman, 2005; Streeck, 2011). Pivotal here are the 'enabling myths' that rationalise disparities in income and status, asserting that people receive their due rewards and should be happy with inequality (Dugger, 1998, 2000). Privileged elites supposedly

deserve their good fortune through their superior abilities, skills, intellect and knowledge. The poor merit their lowly status because they lack the talents, enterprise and application essential for success: they are the culprits of their own misfortune in a fair world. Lower social classes will be more likely to go along with the status quo if they can be persuaded to defer to the upper classes and try to emulate them. Spread throughout a society, these attitudes ratify a hierarchical way of life. The privileged rest at ease, sure that their conspicuous wealth and consumption will be accepted and even admired by the mass of people below – what Thorstein Veblen termed the ‘leisure class’ lives at a standard miles above the average without having to work and without having its idleness queried (Veblen, 1899). Hierarchies built into social attitudes cannot be dismantled at a stroke by redistributive measures; as products of culture they can be removed only through cultural change. Egalitarianism has to take us from a culture of enabling myths to one that cherishes equality and rejects social divisions.

Outside economics, the cultural aspects of inequality have been highlighted by recent social theory, with the work of Pierre Bourdieu as the exemplar (Swartz, 1977, 1997, Chapter 8; Savage, 2000, Chapter 5; Crompton, 2008, Chapter 6). For Bourdieu, inequalities in culture sustain and legitimise inequalities in income or wealth: economic capital is accompanied by other kinds of capital (social, cultural, symbolic) that have parallel inequalities (Bourdieu, 2002). Privileged social classes are sanctioned by property ownership but cement their status through their cultural milieu, which gives access to the arts and plenty of free time for artistic connoisseurship. Cultural inequalities can be replicated by informal means, even when education is formally open and meritocratic (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Teaching people about the arts would disseminate knowledge but would not tear down the cultural walls between classes. Unequal distribution of cultural capital finds an outlet in consumer tastes that take on a layered quality delineated by social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu’s work on consumption has affinities with Veblen’s institutional economics, exploring the class divisions in consumer behaviour and the inducements for ordinary people to covet the lifestyle of the rich (Campbell, 1995; Rosenbaum, 1999; Bögenhold, 2001; Trigg, 2001; Shipman, 2004). Consumption acquires symbolic value over and above any value in fulfilling material needs, so theories dwelling on the material

dimension will be blinkered. A true understanding of inequality must deal with its numerous interrelated dimensions and how it has been socially constructed.

Common features of the cultural arguments

The writers who have discussed inequality from a cultural viewpoint belong to no single movement and advocate no single theory; they are scattered across academic disciplines, some standing outside academia, and cannot be categorised as a school of thought. They nonetheless share ideas that distinguish them from the egalitarianism put forward in static notions of distributive justice. Without wanting to play down the differences, one can summarise common features:

Multidimensionality - Cultural arguments for equality apply to a society's way of life, not the allocation of incomes and other resources. Several dimensions are involved, so it is impossible to reduce inequalities to a single, measurable scale. Welfare assessment must go beyond selecting the 'right' dimension (utility, income, goods, etc.).

Social structures - Appraising social structures is fundamental to a cultural approach. Egalitarian arguments make little sense if they overlook how individuals are socialised into a hierarchical, structured way of life (culture as a process).

Ideology - Unequal arrangements are defended by an ideology that depicts them as inevitable and banishes more equal alternatives (enabling myths, a religion of inequality). The ideology purports to be self-evident and impervious to serious criticism, a distillation of eternal realities.

Preference formation - Beliefs that encourage acquiescence in an unequal society will change individual behaviour. Preferences should not be viewed as fixed, and the origin of

beliefs should be considered. A population brought up to abide by inequalities will actively participate in their reproduction.

Adverse effects on the individual - Long-standing inequalities harm all individuals, both rich and poor, and damage their social relationships. The rich become selfish, arrogant and complacent in the assurance that their advantages are warranted, as are the disadvantages of those beneath them. The poor become segregated, listless, resigned to their fate but perhaps envious of their superiors and aspiring to join the rich.

Adverse effects on society - Inequality yields a less cohesive and harmonious society. Lower classes, excluded from participation in social activities, will feel alienated. Upper classes, facing the resentment of the poor, will retreat into their own social circles and stay as far from the poor as they can. Instead of being cohesive, society will fragment into separate, sometimes antagonistic groups.

Power and authority - Culture as a way of life incorporates the asymmetrical power and authority that maintain inequalities and block attempts at reform. Reallocating resources is necessary but insufficient for greater equality, which depends on recasting institutions and reducing tolerance of big disparities in economic and social power.

Internalised values - From a cultural perspective, egalitarian values cannot merely be tacked on to an otherwise value-free analysis. Values that influence behaviour will have to be internalised into the culture. A quest for equality must emerge through cultural change, even if it is not unique to the society and originates in universal value judgements.

Cumulative causation - Cultural changes occur in historical time, subject to cumulative causation. Whenever inequalities are established, they will increase through economies of scale, competitive advantage, concentrated power and property inheritance. Egalitarianism must seek to reverse the cumulative trends, creating a virtuous circle of greater equality.

Outcomes not opportunities - Arguments for equality of opportunity are too weak to generate an egalitarian culture. Under equal opportunities, people have the same life chances

but may 'choose' unequal outcomes that are deemed acceptable. A thoroughgoing egalitarianism should have a desire for equal outcomes at the forefront of social attitudes.

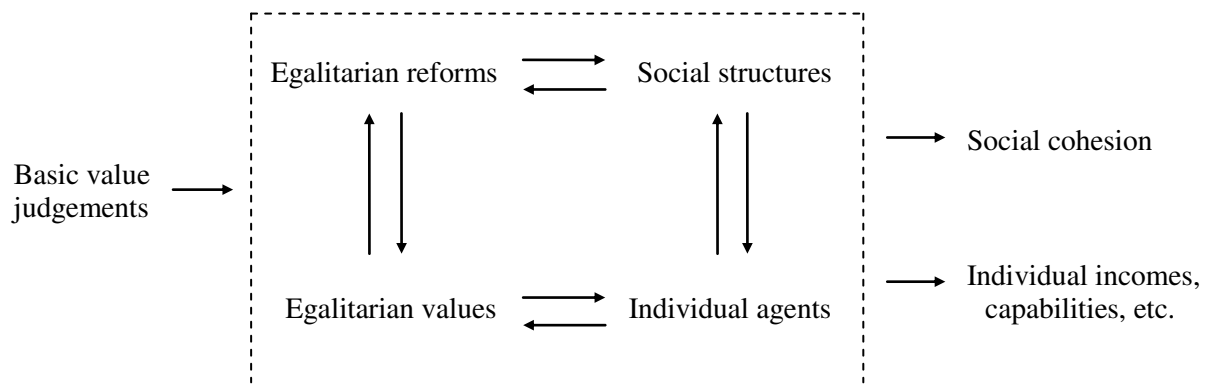
Distributive justice with culture

The cultural arguments for equality see it as more than a trait of a population of individuals, given that it changes people's behaviour and aids their relationships. If we are to acknowledge how preferences are formed and how values persist within the ongoing social context, we need a non-reductionist social theory that encompasses agency-structure interaction: individual agents can then be shaped within society and social structures produced and reproduced through individual agency (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1977 and Giddens, 1984). Similar social theories are set out by critical realist writers, who avoid reductionism and pay heed to culture and agency-structure interaction when making assumptions about the nature of reality (Bhaskar, 1979; Archer, 1995, 1996; Lawson, 1997, Part III). A non-reductionist stance implies that Figure 1 must be inadequate, as it omits social structures and imposes fixed individual preferences as the arbitrary basis for value judgements. Once social structures are a level of analysis in their own right, coeval with the individual level, methodological individualism is ruled out. Values may not be concerned only with individual states but with personal relationships, group interests and social cohesion. Egalitarianism becomes a circular process of cultivating and preserving values woven into the fabric of society.

Figure 2 shows the resulting theoretical framework. At the heart lies the interplay of agency and structure augmented by egalitarian values, such that the wish for equality impresses upon current behaviour and institutions: agency upholds egalitarian values, while social structures embody egalitarian reforms. Basic value judgements may still enter from outside as the catalyst for the internal forces driving egalitarianism. Practical benefits

emanate on the right of Figure 2 in a more cohesive, less divided society and a more even distribution of incomes, capabilities and other outcomes.

Figure 2: Cultural versions of distributive justice



Unlike the linear sequence of Figure 1, egalitarianism in Figure 2 is a self-reinforcing process occurring in historical time. The case for equality, if it is to have practical success, must be absorbed into values and reproduced through cultural transmission. As soon as the relevant values enter the culture, the positive/normative barrier breaks down, with basic value judgements no longer inserted at a late stage into a positive analysis. Values bearing on social conditions must be present within the society and not limited to a hypothetical assessor.

Internalisation of values stops short of moral relativism that abandons universal principles and treats each society as morally unique. From a relativistic angle, societies differ in their values with no presumption in favour of equality – Figure 2 could be adapted to inegalitarian values and reforms. Unequal societies have their enabling myths that justify inequality and

spread the associated values as widely as possible among the public. A generic case for equality has to include cross-cultural values external to the societies under consideration. Many of the cultural arguments summarised above are global and proclaim the benefits of greater equality at any time or place. They appeal to culture but keep away from relativism that might be neutral towards distribution. Absolute arguments for equality are supported by the recent empirical literature that examines the effects of inequality on health and well-being (Hagerty, 2000; O'Connell, 2004; Neckerman and Torche, 2007; Phelan, Link and Tehranifar, 2010; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Oishi, Kesebir and Diener, 2011; Cooper, McCausland and Theodossiou, 2013, 2015). The main finding is that more equal societies fare better on a range of welfare criteria, irrespective of local variations in culture and institutions. Basic value judgements making a universal case for equality can be introduced from outside a society, as in Figure 2, and then call forth an egalitarian culture within the society. External in origin, they must percolate through the culture before they can influence behaviour.

Being circular, Figure 2 has no starting or finishing point. Nor does its circularity go in one direction – this can vary according to how we interpret things. Suppose, for example, that we begin with individual agents at the lower right-hand side of Figure 2. In the agency-structure relation the initial causal thrust is upward and causality seems anti-clockwise: individual agents reproduce social structures, which preserve egalitarian reforms, which help to sustain egalitarian values, which impact upon individual agency and preferences. Causality comes full circle and starts all over again. Suppose, on the other hand, that we begin with social structures at the upper right-hand side of Figure 2. Now the initial causal thrust is downward and causality seems clockwise: social structures mould individual agents, who have egalitarian values, which promote egalitarian reforms, which alter social structures. Causality again comes full circle but this time in the opposite direction. The complex, two-way interaction means that motion can be perceived as going either way: an individualistic interpretation suggests anti-clockwise motion, a structural interpretation clockwise. Figure 2 entails neither individualistic nor structural reductionism, and the two circular motions are equivalent.

The ethics in Figure 2, thanks to their avoidance of individualistic reductionism, are not confined to comparisons among individuals. In a circular process of cultural reproduction we cannot pick out fixed individual preferences as the foundation for allocative decisions. Basic value judgements enter into the circular causality that determines the society's way of life. Without an individualistic benchmark, egalitarian values are released from the obligation to boil everything down to the individual level and can embrace factors other than individual welfare. Judgements can be made directly about social structures and relationships: ethics can evaluate social hierarchies, power, work organisation and family arrangements. Individual welfare loses its monopoly on how social outcomes are judged, and appraisal of structural context comes into play. Neither individual nor structural levels have ethical sovereignty.

Figure 2 does not compel us to choose among income, utility and other dimensions, an issue that preoccupies much of the standard literature on distributive justice. The urge to have one dimension comes from the desire to quantify welfare on a single scale. A cultural approach deals with a society's way of life that comprises various dimensions, none of which has supremacy – electing to operate on a single one would be misguided. Material resources are not exhaustive in the assessment of welfare. Social justice should venture beyond distribution of material resources to take in cultural matters such as social inclusiveness, status differences and recognition of minority groups (Fraser, 1995, 2003; Sayer, 2005; Lister, 2007). Multiple strands of inequality can exist in themselves without being weighted and combined into an overall welfare score. It remains useful to measure inequalities in income, wealth, etc., and empirical studies retain their importance, though immeasurable dimensions of inequality should also be given due attention.

The theory in Figure 2 is stratified, with at least two levels of analysis – individual agents and social structures – that are irreducible to each other. Inequalities pertain not only to persons but to impersonal roles and positions within firms, government, the media and other institutions. Power concentrated among a few owners or managers will determine the working environment and have repercussions for society. A thoroughgoing egalitarianism must be alert to roles and positions as well as personal circumstances – the two are bound together, and sole emphasis on the personal level will be futile in curtailing inequality.

Structured relations among social classes and other groupings lead to asymmetries of property ownership, social/cultural capital and power. If huge inequalities are embedded in social structures, then the chances of greater equality at the personal level are minimal. Egalitarianism has to stretch across many levels of analysis and include structural inequalities within its remit.

Practical implications

Although analyses of distributive justice are frequently ahistorical, the likelihood is that we are discussing a modern capitalist economy defined by private ownership of capital and ubiquitous markets for labour and finance. Capitalism exists in several varieties, but they all approve of private capital accumulation as the vehicle for economic development. Simultaneously with the amassing of private capital comes the rise in private property incomes and wealth, with burgeoning inequality when wage incomes lag behind. A capitalist economy, left unchecked, sponsors income and wealth gaps that get ever bigger and do not converge on a balanced equilibrium (Wade, 2004; Rigney, 2010, Chapter 3; Piketty, 2014). The gaps become institutionalised and justified by the culture, in the inegalitarian counterpart of Figure 2. While the poor lose out, they are encouraged to be satisfied with any real income gains from economic growth or ambitions to join the rich.

Inegalitarian attitudes do seem to have thrived lately, for the ballooning inequalities in developed countries have been accepted by the general public and not met with widespread opposition (Horton and Bamfield, 2009; Kelly and Enns, 2010; Unwin, 2013, Chapter 3; Shildrick and McDonald, 2013). Whether or not the public actually support inequality, they have been willing to comply with trends that benefit the rich and hurt the poor. The lack of visible concern gives the impression that the rich somehow deserve their rewards, even though the reasons for this are seldom clarified (Rowlingson and Connor, 2011; Sachweh, 2012). In a culture accustomed to income and wealth accumulation, perceptions of inequality

will be dulled or biased and people may underestimate its extent (Norton and Ariely, 2011; Cruces, Perez-Truglia and Tetaz, 2013). Any push towards progressive redistribution will happen only when attitudes swing back to egalitarianism.

Pursuit of equality within a capitalist economy is possible but faces an uphill task. The role of the state will be crucial if ambiguous. As Karl Polanyi pointed out, the state created capitalism (contrary to libertarian doctrines about spontaneous markets) and introduced welfare measures afterwards in order to soften its sharp edges – state planning gazed first and foremost on markets rather than social policies (Polanyi, 1944). Radical and Marxian writers have been sceptical of state activity under capitalism and viewed the welfare state as a palliative that makes concessions to workers’ interests but serves to legitimise the economic system (Gough, 1979; Mishra, 1981, Chapter 5; Offe, 1984; Pierson, 2006, Chapter 2). Less sceptical were R.H. Tawney and Richard Titmuss, who saw the welfare state as a motor of social and cultural change with genuine transformative capacity (Reisman, 1982, Part II, 2001; Alcock et al., 2001, Part 3; Deacon, 2002, Chapter 1). Given the political will and democratic mandate, the state could implement a ‘strategy of equality’, in other words a comprehensive programme of measures designed to curb disparities of income and wealth (Tawney, 1964, Chapter IV). Components of such a strategy would include welfare benefits, progressive taxation, socialised health care and education, subsidised public utilities, full employment policies, new types of property ownership, and reforms to the organisation of work. As it unfolded, the strategy would gather momentum through the cumulative causation in Figure 2, which would halt and reverse the inegalitarian tendencies of laissez-faire capitalism.

Recent income trends in developed countries hint at both the feasibility of redistributive measures and the obstacles to them. Empirical evidence divides into two contrasting periods: from the 1940s to the 1970s the personal income distribution became more equal and inequality measures fell, whereas from the 1980s onwards the inequality measures have risen as personal incomes have become more unequal (Caminada and Goudswaard, 2001; Alderson and Nielsen, 2002; Brandolini and Smeeding, 2009; McCall and Percheski, 2010; Atkinson, Piketty and Saez, 2011). Factor incomes display a similar pattern, with a rising wage share of national income until the 1970s, followed by a falling wage share ever since (Kristal, 2010;

Wolff, 2010). The earlier trend towards equality coincided with expansion of the welfare state during the post-war decades and high employment guaranteed by Keynesianism. It demonstrated that, despite the capitalist environment, egalitarian policies can succeed. The reversal of trend coincided with the turn to neo-liberalism from the 1980s, which brought welfare retrenchment, withdrawal of progressive taxation, privatisation of public services and utilities, deregulation of finance, deflationary macroeconomic policies, and rejection of the Keynesian commitment to full employment (Glyn, 2006; Irvin, 2008). Neo-liberalism has restored the inegalitarian counterpart of Figure 2, supplanting egalitarian values and reforms with inegalitarian ones. Even the financial crisis prompted only marginal adjustments rather than a search for alternatives, and the surrounding culture stays intact (Allon and Redden, 2012; Glynos, Klimecki and Willmott, 2012). Conventional wisdom is comfortable with enormous personal incomes, coupled with individualistic attitudes that spurn social cohesion and collective identity.

Attempts to regain the path of greater equality would have to slow down and reverse cumulative changes propelling the economy in the other direction. Cumulative causation is self-reinforcing and never ends of its own accord – to stop it requires some outside agency or event to intrude and disturb the circle (Skott, 1994; Berger, 2009; Pluta, 2010). A renewed trend towards equality will come about only through dedicated government policies, a prospect that seems distant in today's political climate but might ultimately be provoked by the widening gulf between rich and poor. Part of a new strategy of equality would be to revive the welfare measures and progressive taxation weakened under neo-liberalism. Tawney was aware that these policies on their own are insufficient for an egalitarian redrawing of society – they are vital to any strategy of equality but fail to tackle the causes of inequality in the private sector (Martin, 1982; Elliott and Clark, 1989). Stalwart egalitarianism cannot afford to ignore a private sector that authorises vast discrepancies in income and status: it would have to open out control of industry, give employees more clout over their working lives, and redress gross imbalances of power. Marketisation and commodification would have to be resisted, leaving room for decommodification that bolsters non-market sectors of the economy (Williams, 2005, Part III; Vail, 2010). In the long-term vision of Tawney and Titmuss, the gradual spread of an egalitarian culture could underpin evolutionary transformation towards a more cooperative, less competitive society. At the

moment this vision appears over-optimistic, but it still offers the best hope for attaining greater equality within a capitalist economy.

Conclusion

Static concepts of distributive justice, which dominate the academic literature on the subject, are hampered by their neglect of culture. When expressed in mathematical models, distribution becomes a timeless allocation problem, as if an omniscient ethical advisor could step up and reallocate resources to ensure fair shares. Such ahistorical, non-cultural theory has little truck with the social consequences of inequality and, indeed, says nothing about why we might be egalitarians. The result is a sterile exercise in meeting an objective that could quite as easily be inegalitarian. It remains unclear how the chosen resource allocation could be reached, especially if it differs dramatically from the current one. The political ramifications of reassigning property rights are sidestepped, and the cultural aspects of inequality are absent from the theoretical models. Belying its apparently rigorous treatment, distributive justice shrivels into a one-dimensional mode adopted chiefly for analytical convenience.

Greater equality will occur only with a shift away from the ideology of laissez-faire capitalism, which tolerates and even celebrates inequalities. Other belief systems, less tolerant of inequality, can be found in social democracy, socialism, communism, Marxism and so forth. Egalitarianism in a capitalist economy could be carried out through progressive redistributive measures and social policies but would need a switch from neo-liberalism back to the social democratic values that held sway during the mid-twentieth century. Stronger forms of egalitarianism that query the unequal property ownership under capitalism could not be brought to fruition in a capitalist economy. Marxian views, for example, would dismiss private ownership of the means of production as being inherently exploitative and argue for non-capitalist alternatives with different property relations based on socialist or communist

guidelines. These political matters lie beyond the scope of the present paper, but they illustrate the importance of culture and belief systems for enacting social change.

A cultural approach to distributive justice has two major advantages worth reiterating. The first is that it can supply a proper rationale for egalitarianism by pondering the cultural effects of inequality. Arguments for equality must explain why a more equal society is better than a less equal one, and the case has to invoke culture as a process – equality is desirable because it can improve the well-being and behaviour of every member of society and strengthen social relationships. People who are equal have more in common with each other and develop greater social harmony than they would if divided by large income and other gaps. These arguments are impossible in a static model where individual preferences are fixed and the case for equality relies on external value judgements: a reshuffle of resource endowments would leave people unchanged, the only gain being a higher score on an objective function, whatever that may mean. If culture goes unmentioned, then the grounds for egalitarianism will be hazy.

The second advantage is that a cultural approach can address the cultural transmission of inequality. Social divisions must have had historical origins – inequalities in income are tied to inequalities in social position and bound up with beliefs and attitudes. Long-standing disparities in income, status and power have been applauded by a culture of inequality and are perpetuated through that culture. With cumulative causation, a society that welcomes inequalities will watch them grow as wealth becomes concentrated. Egalitarian reform is not just about changing resource endowments but about reversing the social and cultural pressures towards inequality. An absolute appeal for distributive justice can be introduced from outside but, if it is to change things, must have some purchase on the culture. Equality would not then be imposed against the grain by central government but would permeate the cultural atmosphere at all levels and among all organisations: social symmetries would be preserved through reproduction of existing arrangements. No longer an external goal, equality would be internalised as the norm. Egalitarianism can prevail only if it becomes enshrined in social attitudes and gets passed on to future generations as a culture of equality.

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