What was the point of equality?*

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I. Introduction

As the defining commitment of moral and political philosophy, equality often commands more allegiance than investigation. While scholars generally acknowledge that both as a premise and conclusion of political argument, ‘equality’ is perhaps a bit more complicated than its veneer of mathematical certainty suggests, most political theorists and philosophers have understandably focused on understanding and redressing the harms of inequality for social, political, and economic relations,¹ rather than to question what it might mean to describe human beings or citizens as equal in the first place.² The neo-Kantian formulation that their ‘basic equality’ entitles individuals to ‘equal respect as moral persons’ has been subjected to more scrutiny of late than it once was.³ Still, the concept of equality remains the unquestionable ‘underlying major premise’ of the moral mathematics of modern political theory, as well as its most sound and certain conclusion.⁴

Ronald Dworkin described equality in the language of Euclidean geometry as ‘axiomatic.’ His essay entitled ‘In defense of equality’ offered anything but; for him, a political theory either

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4 Waldron, One Another’s Equals, 2, 14. Waldron makes clear that he is interested exclusively in the former—equality as a premise of political argument—and not as a policy, but the weight of egalitarian political theory has been on the latter.
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occupies the ‘egalitarian plateau’ in embracing that the idea that the ‘interests of the members of the community matter, and matter equally,’ or it does not.\(^5\) And very happily, most (if not all) modern political theories do.\(^6\) What they disagree about is precisely how the ‘equality of concern and respect’ agreed to follow from our basic or human equality should be best expressed. For many years in our discipline, the agreed-upon domain, at least, after political rights was economic distribution. Yet since her epochal essay, ‘What is the point of equality?’\(^8\) Elizabeth Anderson and others have sought to break out of the distributive justice cul-de-sac by figuring equality not as a metaphysical or mathematical fact, but a social one.\(^9\) For these ‘relational egalitarians,’ the inequalities we care about are not ‘cosmic’ in origin or the product of ‘bad luck.’ Unequal relations of domination or subjection are things that people do; hence, they can be undone by relating to one another as ‘equals’—that is, by treating one another with respect and avoiding contempt in our interactions, and structuring our society so that such distortive and stigmatizing relationships do not emerge.

Anderson’s attention to the ‘expressive demands’ of equality is important.\(^11\) But even as she and other relational egalitarians fault their predecessors for a narrowly or reductively ‘arithmetic’ approach,\(^12\) in the end the disagreement reduces to different accounts of what ‘equal respect for persons’ in a ‘society of equals’ entails—rather than whether or how we should hold to, let alone understand, equality as an ideal in the first place.\(^13\) And this remains a problem. Because, for all of its supposed self-evidence, equality’s conceptual problems are obvious. As a


\(^6\) Waldron makes this point of the utilitarians, but the same can be said of critical theorists and communitarians. Waldron, One Another’s Equals, 25.

\(^8\) Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?”


\(^13\) Fourie, Schuppert, and Wallimann-Helmer, Social Equality.
premise of *identity*, the description of any two human beings as ‘equal’ is evidently false. Even construed in the weaker sense of *similarity or likeness*, debates often founder on what the relevant criterion by virtue of which similar individuals should be considered ‘equal’ might be, and on the degree or threshold of similarity required.\(^\text{14}\) So, too, as an outcome: the so-called ‘levelling-down’ and ‘prioritarian’ objections to equality as a principle of distributive justice are well known, but the paradoxes of ‘equal respect’ are well and truly endless. As a disjunctive concept, it is not obvious that respect is the kind of thing that *can* be equalized. ‘Respecting’ something, or someone, means discriminating or distinguishing it some way. If humans are all equally worthy, they are also (it would seem) equally worthless. In order to be meaningful, equality in one respect would seem to presuppose inequality in others, some background hierarchy—of humans beings over animals, citizens over non-citizens, or the saved over the damned—against which one’s equal status as a member of the privileged group is something worth having.\(^\text{15}\)

Bernard Williams once noted the ‘discomfort’ arising from the conceptual confusions and contradictory demands of equality, but concluded that these was ‘no greater…than it is with liberty, or any other noble and substantial political ideal’.\(^\text{16}\) Yet equality has been noticeably spared the endless genealogical scrutiny to which the latter concept has been subjected. Apart from the occasional nod to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, political theorists have largely set the question of its historical emergence as a social and political ideal aside.\(^\text{17}\) This indifference to its

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history reflects our sense that equality did not have much of a history before the late eighteenth century. It isn’t that the idea that human beings were somehow ‘equal’ by nature was absent. Far from it—in early modern Europe, natural equality was a commonplace with deep roots in Roman law and Christianity.\footnote{Berman, \textit{Created Equal}; Hoekstra, “Hobbesian Equality”; Siedentop, \textit{Inventing the Individual}.} In 1631, Robert Filmer began \textit{Patriarcha}, his infamous defence of divine right monarchy, by complaining that the ‘supposed natural equality…of mankind’ had achieved the status of a ‘truth unquestionable’: hence ‘equity require[d] that an ear be reserved a little for the negative.’\footnote{Robert Filmer, \textit{Patriarcha}, p. 3.} Thus, even as this commonplace was adopted increasingly as a premise of political argument by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century natural law theorists, the social or political, let alone economic, consequences modern egalitarians see as obvious simply did not follow.\footnote{For example, Francisco Suarez and Althusius, for both of whom accepted slavery and social relations based on natural differences of superiority and inferiority. See Kaari Saastamoinen, “Hobbes and Pufendorf on Natural Equality and Civil Sovereignty” in Hunter and Saunders, \textit{Natural Law and Civil Sovereignty}, 191-192.}

Alive to these conceptual difficulties however, some theorists have returned to seventeenth century England in their efforts to restore some efficacy and concreteness to egalitarian justice by pointing to the rare historical cases where the demand for ‘equality’ did seem to have the consequences we expect, as the cry of the oppressed against unjust social and political relations. While Jeremy Waldron has focused on Locke,\footnote{Waldron, \textit{God, Locke, and Equality}.} Anderson and others have pointed to the Levellers active during the English Civil War as the most promising early modern egalitarians.\footnote{See Elizabeth Anderson’s first Tanner 2015 Tanner lecture, “When the Market was ‘Left’”. Published as Elizabeth Anderson, \textit{Private Government} (Princeton, 2017).} In this she joins a venerable tradition of political theorists who, to lend their arguments historical texture, have quoted Col. Thomas Rainborough at Putney in 1647: ‘Really, I
think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he’. 23 For others concerned to trace the origins of equality as both a major premise and conclusion of political theory to seventeenth-century England, one need look no further than Thomas Hobbes’s pithy marginal note in Leviathan (1651): ‘Man by nature equall,’ the political and social consequences of which are then cashed out in the laws of nature. 24 While most would happily trade mutual vulnerability in the face of certain death for neo-Kantian dignity and autonomy in the face of an uncertain future, many theorists nonetheless recognize in Hobbes the characteristic aspiration of modern political philosophy as a form of moral and political geometry in which equality stands as the self-evident premise from which our conclusions about justice follow in the form of an elegant, logical deduction.

For most political theorists, this is where the discussion stops. Having located the ‘egalitarian’ premise in the Levellers or Hobbes (or ‘neo-republicans’ like James Harrington 26), one can now get on to the really important work of tracing its imperfect application thereafter. Left unexplored is what these early modern authors actually meant by ‘equality,’ and why on earth they thought that what had been for centuries a common piety should suddenly become a major premise of political argument with profound social and political implications. Instead, theorists assume that what ‘they’ meant by equality must, broadly speaking, be what we do—conveniently ignoring that it’s not at all clear what we mean either. Hence we have nothing to gain from the past, except the historical authority of unexpected recruits to our side in present debate, when we discover that they ‘agreed’ with what we know already. (To be fair, the


26 E.g. Pettit, Republicanism.
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mythology of prolepsis can go either way, with theorists either congratulating past authors on being ‘ahead of their time’ as they trace the high road of human dignity from Genesis 1:27 to Kant, or else condemning them as failures for not recognizing or acting upon equality’s obviously democratic or ‘emancipatory’ implications.

One might expect more from historians of political thought. And yet, despite their long-standing focus on Hobbes and other thinkers associated with the Civil War and Interregnum, there is no ‘Cambridge School’-style history of ‘equality before egalitarianism’ to match Quentin Skinner’s epochal *Liberty before liberalism* (1998). Even in taking an earlier generation of Marxist historians to task for reductionism, what attracted intellectual historians like Skinner to seventeenth-century England was precisely the conviction that ‘equality’ was (re-)discovered in this period as a single, eternal, and immutable idea that, however imperfectly instantiated, was as true and morally and politically attractive then as it is now—and that true ideas simply don’t have histories beyond a record of their imperfect application. Some even commit the unconscionable anachronism of using the adjective ‘egalitarian’ as an evaluative-descriptive term in describing early modern persons and positions in a way that they never would never ‘democratic’ or ‘liberal’.

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28 Waldron, *God, Locke, and equality*. Waldron presents his argument in that work as a broadside against the Cambridge School, represented chiefly by John Dunn. See also Waldron, *Dignity, Rank, and Rights*; cf. Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*.
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In equality, we thus find the last bastion of unapologetic Whiggery remaining in political thought and intellectual history. Given its pre-eminence, it seems only fair to ask this grand abstraction, like liberty and toleration before it, to submit patiently to contextualisation. And so taking a page from Anderson, in this article I explore not only what equality meant for these early modern English authors, but what ‘the point,’ as they saw it, was. Working towards Hobbes’s theory of natural equality as a principle to be ‘acknowledged’ rather than an empirical reality, this article seeks to untangle the mass of competing and contradictory ideas about early modern equality—as a political principle, a religious commitment, and most importantly as a social and linguistic practice—with and against which Hobbes’s own, deceptively familiar theory developed.

What we shall see is that there was not one concept or ‘idea’ of equality to be found in the seventeenth century, nor one argument for it. Among the early modern aequalitarians considered below, one finds very different ideas, social practices, and biblical proof texts. It seems that Hobbes, in particular, was attuned to the claims that radical Protestants were making on the basis not only of both accounts of creation in Genesis (not only 1:26-7, but 2:7), but—above all—Acts 10:34. In the immortal words of the King James Bible: ‘God is no respecter of persons’. For those more attuned to the neo-Kantian formulation ‘equal respect for persons’, this may sound a bit jarring. Yet in what follows, I argue that it was Acts 10 and not Genesis that did the heaviest lifting in seventeenth-century debates, both in Leveller campaigns for political and

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36 Jeremy Waldron has challenged the dominant, secularising story about the advent of equality by arguing for the importance of creation imago Dei in Genesis 1:27 as its only adequately ‘transcendent’ foundation.
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legal reform, as well as in the most fascinating—and forgotten—demand for equality in the seventeenth century: namely, the strategic performance of disrespect through the withholding ‘hat honour,’ ‘titular respects,’ and other forms of ‘civil worship’ by the early Quakers.

This work of historical recovery should be of more than merely historical interest, with two significant pay-offs for political theorists, in particular. First, my recovery of the concept of ‘parity’ central to early modern debate promises to bring some analytical clarity to ongoing debates about ‘social’ or ‘relational’ equality today. The evident mismatch between equality as a moral premise and as a political, social, or economic conclusion can, I think, be explained by the loss of this concept, which early modern aequalitarians—and their critics—saw as essential. Secondly, the historical debates outlined below will also illuminate a persistent confusion arising from the nebulous demand of ‘equal respect,’ while illustrating the unexpected promises—and perils—of the ‘relational’ turn. As we shall see, modern egalitarians are at risk of reinventing the wheel (and forgetting the breaks) when it comes to the difficult work of constituting a ‘society of equals’ through the mutual acknowledgement of equal status.

II. Pre-modern concepts: Aequalis, similis, par, pars

Before we can recover the point of equality in the past, we must first answer the more fundamental question: what is equality? At its most basic level—whether in the seventeenth century, the fourth, or the twenty-first—‘equality’ refers to a relationship of identity, sameness, or exact correspondence between two things, quantities, or values. In Medieval Latin, aequalitas conveyed an abstract ideal of balance derived from the root aequus (and, in turn, from the Greek isos), meaning ‘level’ or ‘even’. Its representative image was that of a set of scales,

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38 See the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) entry for ‘Equality, 1b.’
evenly balanced between two weights.⁴⁰ In mathematics, this relationship was expressed symbolically with a geometric image of two parallel lines of identical length (what we know today as the ‘equal sign’) for the first time in 1557 by the English mathematician Robert Recorde.⁴¹

As a principle of identity and balance, aequalitas was central both in ancient medicine and mathematics—especially with the medieval balancing act that was Islamic ‘algebra’—as well as the new physics of Galileo. Yet in what would become ‘Western’ Europe, the primary site of aequalitas remained the law, in which it was closely connected with ‘equity’ and the scales of justice. In English, as in classical Greek or Latin, ‘equal’ (aequalis) could be used as a synonym for ‘just’, while the verbs to ‘equalize’ or ‘level’ were plausible synonyms for restoring a just distribution.⁴² The commonsense notion that ‘justice is a kind of equality’ found in the ancient world has excited many a modern-day egalitarian. But aristocratic commentators like Aristotle were quick to point out that, equality-as-balance meant not simply identity but proportion in delivering aequalia aequalibus or ‘equal things to equals.’⁴³

The tension between these two conceptions of equality as identity or proportion will be familiar to any reader of Aristotle’s Politics, which argued that, as a principle of distributive justice, equality demanded equal shares (isomoiria) for equals only—hence unequal shares to unequals.⁴⁴ In pointing out this tension between isonomia (equal law) and isomoiria (equal fate), however, Aristotle also drew on another concept involved in describing human beings qua

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⁴¹ R.C.H. Tanner, ‘On the role of equality and inequality in the history of mathematics’, The British Journal for the History of Science, 1 (1962): pp. 159-69, at pp. 159-62. The idea of aequalitas as a balance between equal forces was also essential to ancient medicine, as well as the new physics of Galileo.
⁴³ See Kaye, Balance, pp. 1-19.
citizens as equals, or rather as homoioi or ‘similar’—that of similarity or likeness. Here, the relevant Greek root was not iso- but homo- (in Latin similis), and the relationship not one of identity, but of ‘mere resemblance,’ that is, of similarity despite difference.\textsuperscript{46}

It makes sense, then, that a third concept of equality should come to the fore in Rome to capture the sense in which different and dissimilar citizens might nonetheless be considered ‘equals’ with claims to the same set of political privileges or rights. Paritas, from the Latin par, had its origins in accounting in describing two things that were commensurable or matching (think a ‘pair’ of shoes). Applied to people, however, parity described an equality of rank or status between those who were both aequalis and similis, as with the Senatorial pares or ‘peers’, among whom the Emperor was said to be primus.\textsuperscript{48}

In modern parlance, parity is what Waldron and Rawls would call a ‘range property’—a form of status equality, in which individuals are deemed similar enough so as to be identical in some key respect, and thus commensurable or ‘on a par’—that is, ‘on the same level’ as their peers.\textsuperscript{49} As a species of social equality, parity thus implied both plurality (a set of discrete individuals belonging to the same rank or class) as well as hierarchy in two distinct forms, rank and degree. The former designated the relative ordering of the status in question (whether it was high or low), and the latter indicated the relative standing of the individual members within that class. Like the distinctions or ordines of the citizenry in the Roman republic, in England parity was associated with the division of society into two chief classes or ranks—peers and commoners—each with their several ‘degrees,’ a term with its own geometric resonances. As Sir

\textsuperscript{46} I’m grateful to John Shinkwin for providing clarity on these distinctions. See also the very helpful discussion in Crombie, Gymnasiwm, Sive Symbola Critica (1838), II.464.

\textsuperscript{48} Cicero De Sen. 111.7. The original Latin and English translation can be found here: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2007.01.0038%3Asection%3D7

Edward Coke explained it in the second book of his *Institutes* (first published in 1642), ‘every of the Nobles is a Peer to each other, though they have severall names of Dignity, as *Dukes…Earles…and Barons*; so…each Commoner is a Peer or Equall to another, though they be of severall Degrees, as *Knights, Esquires, Citizens, Gentlemen, Yeomen, and Burgesses*’.  

Before we consider the fate of these pre-modern concepts in early modern England, however, there is one final species of equality we must keep in mind—namely, *unity*. Equality-as-unity may sound particularly foreign to modern ears, but the idea that the various parts (*pars*) of a unified whole (*unitas*) were *equal* (*aequales*) by virtue of their shared membership in the body was prominent especially in Christian arguments about the Church as the *corpus christianum* and *corpus Christi*—the body of Christians just *was* the body of Christ, hence every Christian equal or identical by virtue of her membership within it. This sense of equality was expressed in Colossians 3.11 (KJV), ‘there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond *nor* free: but Christ *is* all, and in all,’ or in Paul’s explanation in Romans 12.4-5: ‘For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, *being* many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.’

This sense of spiritual equality could, of course, have radical and potentially subversive implications for traditional hierarchies of race, class and gender. But Paul’s reference to differential ‘office’ also indicated that equality-as-unity was also consistent with hierarchy. Unlike parity’s double hierarchy of rank and degree however, unity offered a single, vertical scale of differential dignity in the order of Creation. Whether in the body politic or the body of

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52 Berman, *Created Equal*; Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*.  
53 The differentiation of functions translating into different degrees or order in creation is closely linked with the idea of a ‘Great Chain of Being.’
the church, the ‘higher’ or ‘superior’ members ruled justly over the ‘inferior,’ but in a way that was consistent with and complementary to the *aequalitas* of all.

### III. Equalit(ies) before Egalitarianism

Today, political theorists and historians tend to run these different senses of equality together, and yet all of them—identity, proportion, parity, and unity—were alive and well in seventeenth-century England, where Aristotle’s arguments about distributive justice continued to loom large. One need not take Filmer at his word to see that the interesting question for historians should *not* be where did the ‘idea’ of human equality came from in seventeenth-century England, but rather what ‘it’ meant, and how and why this long-standing religious and political piety became *effectual* in this period such a spectacular way.

Before we turn to the uses to which it was put by supposed ‘egalitarians’ like the Levellers, the Quakers, or Hobbes, however, we must first correct the misimpression that, although natural equality was a commonplace in early modern England, it did not have any social or political consequences. It absolutely did, if not perhaps the consequences that modern egalitarians expect.

*Equality-as-Balance: Impartiality and Proportion*

In the first place, the idea that human beings were *aequales* under the natural law—a doctrine Justinian’s *Digest* credited to Sabinus, a jurist during the reign of Tiberius in the first century—rose to new prominence in early modern natural law theories as a principle of divine

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54 As a prelude to his own discussion of equality as a law of nature in *De cive*, Hobbes attacked Aristotle’s account of commutative and distributive justice as governed by ‘two kinds of equality’ or ‘proportion’—‘arithmetic’ and ‘geometric’, respectively. Nevertheless, he conceded that there is some truth in what ‘is said’ that ‘justice is some kind of equality’. *De cive*, pp. 46-7.
impartiality, which translated into the idea of formal equality under the law.\textsuperscript{55} Despite the persistence of differential status, including (most frustratingly) slavery, the law, like God, should non acceptio personarum—that is, it should not treat people differently on the basis of their external ‘person’ (their condition, their riches, etc). This notion was captured by the figure of blind justice and quoted in the words of the Latin Vulgate: ‘non est personarum acceptor Deus’; in the Geneva Bible: ‘God is no acceptor of persons’; and in the more memorable words of the King James: ‘God is no respecter of persons’.

Yet there were also those who argued that the premise of natural aequalitas should have direct consequences outside of the law. In the seventeenth century the adjective ‘equal’ was used to modify terms like ‘government’ and ‘representation’ far more than ‘citizens’, ‘human beings’, or even ‘Englishmen.’ Yet these ideals of political balance were rarely (if ever) demands for political equality in the way that we would recognize today. For example, Charles I’s Answer to the Nineteen propositions (1642) extolled the ‘ancient, equall, happy, well-poised, and never-enough commended [English] Constitution’.\textsuperscript{57} And Harrington’s ideal of ‘equal commonwealth,’ though radically different, reflected a similar preoccupation with balance—not of men, but of property and power through an agrarian law and rotation in office. Equality for Harrington did not mean treating all people, let alone all citizens, the same; rather, it meant balancing the different parts of the free citizenry through differential representation and rights on the basis of age, sex, wealth, marital status, and class (whether ‘horse’ or ‘foot’), not to mention the constitutive exclusion of ‘servants’ or slaves.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{55} Digest 12.6.64: “Quod attinet ad ius civile, servi pro nullis habentur: non tamen et iure naturali, quia, quod ad ius naturale attinet, omens hominess aequales sunt.”
\textsuperscript{57} Charles I, His majesties answer to the XIX propositions (London, 1642), p. 11.
\textsuperscript{59} As he put it in The Art of Lawgiving (1659): ‘An equal commonwealth is a government founded upon a balance which is perfectly popular and well fixed by a suitable agrarian...[and through] the free suffrage of the people given the ballot.’ Quoted in Ibid, 237. Harrington criticized the agrarian laws of Athens and Rome, in turn, as ‘unequal’ not because they failed to achieve the equal shares of isomoiria, but because they permitted a disproportionate
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*Equality-as-levelling*

Still, there was another possible consequence of equality as balance in the soup, as it were, in the seventeenth century more congenial to twenty-first century egalitarians—that of ‘leveling’ or the ‘equality of estates.’ The metaphor of levelling evoked the idea of simple or arithmetic equality, the identical weights of an even scale, and it called to mind an episode in Spenser’s *Faerie queene* (1596). In it, ‘a mighty Gyant’ stands upon a rock equipped with ‘an huge great paiare of balance in his hand’. With the help of his scales, the giant promises that he will restore ‘ballaunce’ to the world, ‘and all things…reduce unto equality’. When the Knight of Justice, Arthegall (whose name is itself a combination of ‘Arthur’ and ‘equal’), tries to teach him a lesson, the giant doubles down on his redistributive program, recalling the words of the prophet Isaiah: ‘Were it not good that…from the most, that some were giuen to the least? Therefore I will throw downe these mountains hie, and make them leuell with the lowly plaine…And as they were, them equalize againe.’ For one royalist observer, the contemporary resonances were too hard to resist. The ‘Levelling’ giant verses were reprinted in 1648 in an anonymous pamphlet entitled *The faerie Leveller*, the *dramatis personae* of which included King Charles as ‘Arthegall’ divide between landholders and the rest of the population. James Harrington, *The commonwealth of Oceana and A system of politics*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 36-7. For more on the peculiarities of Harrington’s understanding of ‘equality,’ see J.C. Davis “Equality in an Unequal Commonwealth: James Harrington’s republicanism and the meaning of equality” in Woolrych et al., *Soldiers, Writers and Statesmen of the English Revolution*. William Sprigg’s *A modest plea for an equal commonwealth* (1659) also used the phrase to express the stable balance of a mixed regime.

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60 The term (along with “Digger”) had been used to describe participants in the 1607 Midlands Revolt against enclosures.


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and Cromwell as ‘the Gyant Leveller’. This correspondence was confirmed by the unlikely anagram: ‘Oliver Cromwell. Com’ our vil’ Leveller’.  

With fabulous, proto-communistic fare like this, it is little wonder that Christopher Hill and other mid-century Marxist historians were fascinated by those they saw as the true egalitarians in the seventeenth century, those figures on the ‘lunatic fringe’ who embraced the ‘True Leveller’ label and the demand for equal shares behind it. Hill elevated men like the Christian mystic and leader of the ‘Diggers,’ Gerrard Winstanley, and noted the strenuous denials of Walwyn and others that economic ‘leveling’ was the Levellers’ aim with palpable disappointment.  

Winstanley appealed to Genesis and creation imago Dei in his arguments that men (and women) were ‘equals in creation’ and so should enjoy an ‘equal share’ and ‘creation-right’ with their ‘fellow-creatures’ in the earth. In practice, however, this looked much less like communism, and more like a proto-Lockean claim that the indolent gentry who allow their land to lay ‘waste’ should cede their title to industrious commoners. In his enthusiasm for Winstanley as a proto-proletarian, Hill also downplayed the importance of hierarchy in Winstanley’s ‘society of equals’: the communist utopia described in the Law of freedom in a platform replaced hereditary monarchy and primogeniture with an elective gerontocracy and forced labour camps, in which ‘slaves’ would be whipped and starved by the ‘taskmaster’ if they refused to work hard enough. (It’s not hard to see why Hill would want to leave this out.)

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64 Anonymous, The faerie Leveller: or, King Charles his Leveller descried and deciphered in Queen Elizabeths dayes (London, 1648), p. 4.
66 True Levellers Standard Advanced (1649), 82, 85-6, 90-100; cf. The Law of Freedom in a Platform (1652), 345.
67 Winstanley’s language was unapologetically Christian and millenarian; he called upon Christ as the “first and truest Leveller that was ever spoke of in the world.” “Therefore you rulers of England, be not ashamed nor afraid of Levellers, hate them not, Christ comes to you riding upon the clouds” (198-9).
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Equality-as-Parity: Respect Among Equals

Even for the self-professed enemies of equality however, economic levelling was not the conclusion they most feared. Another anagram from the hostile author of the *Faerie Leveller* points in a different direction: ‘Parliaments Army. *Paritie mar’s al men*’.69 Cromwell would later blame the mutinies within the New Model Army on those ‘who drive at leveling and parity,’ and so destroy ‘the ranks and orders of men,—whereby England hath been known for hundreds of years.’ He ended with an inadvertent echo of Spenser’s giant: ‘Did not that leveling principle tend to the reducing of all to an equality?’70

Coming from Cromwell, this fear that the radicals were after the eradication of the social distinctions described by Coke and the confounding of peers and commons was somewhat ironic. Ten years earlier, the unfortunate King Charles had warned that the upsetting of the delicate ‘equal’ balance between the three parts of the British constitution of Crown, Peers, and Commons would lead the people to ‘call parity and independence liberty…[and] destroy all rights and properties, all distinctions of families and merit, and by this means the splendid and excellently distinguished form of government end in a dark equal chaos of confusion.’71

This conservative and critical reaction against the rising tide of equalitarian claim-making in the decades of civil and ecclesiastical conflict is sometimes presented as ‘*the* language of equality’ in early modern England.72 On this view, ‘equality’ was effectively a synonym for ‘Democracie’ and ‘Anarchie,’ and (as Thomas Edwards put it in *Gangraena*) ‘making all alike, confounding of all rancks and orders, reducing all to Adams time and condition and devolving all

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71 Charles I, ‘Answer.’
power upon the state Universall and promiscuous multitude. Yet this is to pass too quickly over the language of parity in which these concerns about social equality were usually framed. This suggests that the critics’ reaction was a response to what they saw as a particularly egregious error in the air in the period—namely, that the natural aequalitas of human beings meant that they should all also be treated as pares or social equals within a single ‘rank’ of mankind. For the critics, this was a kind of category mistake. Men (and women) of all social ranks might be aequales through unity—that is, by virtue of their shared humanity or equal membership in the body of Christ—but that did not make them similar or alike enough to be pares or peers. This failure of discrimination threatened to undermine parity, not simply in theory, but in practice, by undercutting the social performance of respect that undergirded it.

Today, we tend to link ‘respect’ with honor or esteem and equate it with deferential behaviour expressive of a positive valuation. But this is to obscure approximately two-thirds of the early modern picture, in which ‘respect’ meant appropriate behavior reflective of the parties’ relative social standing. Deference might be ‘respectful’ towards superiors, whereas condescension was appropriate towards inferiors. ‘Respective’ behavior towards one’s elders and betters was thus thought to be a corollary of the fifth commandment, ‘honour thy father and mother.’ In the Larger catechism issued by the Westminster Assembly in 1649, ‘the honour inferiors owe to superiors’ included ‘all due reverence in heart, word, and behavior… and maintenance of their persons and authority according to their several ranks’, while the sins of inferiors against superiors included any ‘contempt of…their persons and places…cursing, mocking, and all such refractory and scandalous carriage’.

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73 Quoted in Davis, 236.
75 Cf. Waldron, One Another’s Equals, 6.
76 Williams.
Describing the codes of courtesy necessary to preserve the social order and keep these complicated hierarchies of rank and degree distinct was the work of the ubiquitous handbooks of civility translated into English from Latin, Italian, and French in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet in these, a central preoccupation was also delineating the standard of civility appropriate to one’s pari or equals, which required neither deference nor condescension, but a less formal or ‘common’ courtesy or civility. Translated into English in 1576, Giovanni Della Casa’s Galateo argued that ‘wee must doe nothing in their sight whome wee desire to please, that may shewe wee covet [more] then to live in a familiar equalitie amongst them.’

But easy-going behavior was not always so easy, because recognizing one’s ‘equals’ and treating them accordingly required a complex exercise in social accounting. Recalling the original monetary sense of ‘par,’ Della Casa suggested we must not measure men by our eyes, but ‘weigh them in the millers scales, then in the goldsmythes balaunce…[and] redily to receave them in to favour: not because they bee worthe it: but as men doe with coyness, bycause they be currant.’ Obadiah Walker stressed the same point a century later: ‘All men are in some sense disparata, and even those who are under the relations of superiority and inferiority, yet those obligations being satisfied as to all other matters, account themselves as equals.’

The modern tendency to understand equality and ‘equal respect’ as essentially democratic has masked the fact that, for ancient and early modern authors, they were just as (and indeed, more) often seen as aristocratic values. Respecting one’s equals equally was evidently a difficult, delicate, and elite business; seeing this can help the modern reader make more sense of

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79 Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility;* Bejan, *Mere Civility.*
82 Cf. Kurt Raaflaub, ‘Democracy, Oligarchy, and the Concept of the ‘Free Citizen,’” 518. This suggests that the supposed ‘absence’ of the idea of equality from pre-modern political thought is a function of teleological assumptions on the part of intellectual historians who consequently have been looking in all the wrong places.
the complaints about equality with which many early modern aequalitarians, including those below, were met.

IV. Egalitarians avant la lettre?

It should be clear by now that the early modern ‘egalitarians’ favoured by political theorists and historians—whether the Levellers, the Quakers, or Hobbes himself—were not making their claims in a vacuum. Instead, they were contesting the meaning of equality for political theory and practice in the midst of a thick conceptual stew, in which the same term could stand as a premise and conclusion in very different, often contradictory, arguments.

The Levellers

Unlike an earlier generation of ‘Levellers’ who protested enclosure by levelling the hedges to restore the historic privileges of the commons, their critics understood the Levellers of 1645-1649 to be after something more radical: the complete eradication of all social distinctions. Were they right?

Let us consider first the most famous Leveller demand for ‘equality’—that for ‘equal representation’ at Putney. Scholars have long construed this as a demand for political equality consistent with the Greek idea of democratic isonomia. Ever since C.B. Macpherson’s reappraisal of the Levellers as ‘possessive individualists’ rather than true democrats in 1962, much of the debate has focused on whether the demand for ‘equal representation’ in The agreement of the

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84 Historians of the period revisited earlier uprisings in English history with present problems in mind. In Fuller’s 1655 history of the Peasant Revolt of 1381, he suggested that all the peasants were ‘pure Levellers’, their leaders teaching that ‘no gentry was jure divino, and all equal by nature’. Quoted in Hill, The world turned upside down, p. 117.
people entailed universal manhood suffrage or not. Accordingly, Ireton and Cromwell are usually portrayed as rejecting equality at Putney in favour of a propertied franchise. But upon closer inspection, the emphasis of the Agitators at Putney seems much closer to Harringtonian balance or proportion. All sides agreed that ‘a more equal’—that is, proportional—representation was what they were after—they simply disagreed on the principle (population or interest) on which seats in Parliament should be redistributed.

Claims to ‘equal liberty’ and ‘natural rights’ on the basis of imago Dei were important in Leveller arguments as well. The prime example comes from Lilburne’s ‘Postscript containing a general proposition’ to The free-man’s freedom vindicated (1646), which states that ‘God…gave [man], His mere creature, the sovereignty (under Himself)…and thereby created him after his own image’. Hence: ‘every particular and individual man and woman that ever breathed in the world since…are, and were by nature all equal and alike…none of them having (by nature) any authority, dominion, or magisterial power, one over or above another.’ Both in the seventeenth century and in the twenty-first, critics have faulted the Levellers for failing to apply the principle of natural equality equally and so to extend their political and legal demands to other groups, including women. The conviction that the Levellers ‘fell short’ in this stems, in part, from the

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87 ‘Extract from the debates at Putney’, in Sharp, Levellers, pp. 102-30, at p. 112. Should it be ‘to all persons equally’, ‘equally amongst those that have the interest of England in them’, or ‘equally distributed amongst…the same persons that are the electors now?’ (pp. 107, 121). See also Blair Worden, The Rump Parliament, 1648-53 (Cambridge, 1977), p. 142.
88 Lilburne, ‘Freemans freedom’, p. 31. See also Richard Overton, An arrow against all tyrants (1646): For by natural birth all men are equally and alike born to like propriety, liberty and freedom; and as we are delivered of God by the hand of nature into this world…even so are we to live, everyone equally and alike to enjoy his birthright and privilege; even all whereof God by nature has made him free.’ Overton, ‘An arrow against all tyrants’, p. 55.
89 White, Equality, p. 31; Skinner, ‘Rethinking political liberty’, p. 160.
assumption that in ‘reaching for the religious language of their time’, as Stuart White puts it, they reached for Genesis, and the creation of men and women in the image of God.\(^90\)

If this were the sum of Leveller arguments about equality, it might be fair to indict them for inconsistency or exclusion, as their contemporaries did. But what if their failure to engage in the sort of levelling modern commentators expect was not a failure at all, but rather a function of their working with a different concept (parity), and a different proof text entirely? After all, the idea that men were created imago Dei had long been reconciled with natural hierarchies of domination and subjection. By contrast, the language of ‘respect’ in Acts 10:34—and more provocatively, the idea that God was ‘no respecter of persons’—could motivate this-worldly protests against entrenched, hierarchies in a way that creation could not.

Lilburne and Overton’s constant refrain that men were created not only ‘equal’, but always also ‘alike’ (that is, similis), suggests that the critics who excused them of pursuing ‘parity’ were on to something. While scholars have tended to focus on the Levellers’ political demands—and their failure to make economic ones—the lens of parity sheds light on what was actually the primary site of their ‘egalitarian’ claim-making, namely the courtroom.\(^92\) The relative weight of legal demands in Leveller pamphlets and petitions owed something to the fact that Lilburne spent so much time in the latter part of the decade in prison and on trial, culminating in his (first) trial for treason in 1649. But already in 1646, Overton and Walwyn had appealed to Coke’s commentary on Magna Carta in order to argue that the ‘charter of Liberties’ was the ‘Freemens Birth-right’—hence they belonged not only to aristocrats, but to ‘the whole English Nation’. For, ‘this word, liber Homo, or free man, extends to all manner of English

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\(^90\) White, *Equality*, pp. 42-3

\(^92\) *An agreement of the people* made the demand for ‘equal law’ in the language of parity, leaving social distinctions in place: ‘in all laws made or to be made, every person may be alike, and that no tenure, estate, charter, degree, birth, or place do confer any exemption from the ordinary course of legal proceedings whereunto others are subjected’. ‘An agreement of the people’, p. 95.
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people’—that is, ‘every man born in the Realm’.\textsuperscript{93} And, crucially, this shared inheritance included the ‘priviledge’ of a trial \textit{per legale judicium Parium suorum}—that is by his ‘Peers or Equals’, for, as the authors explained, ‘the [Latin] word \textit{Peers} [universally] signifies both’.\textsuperscript{94}

In a postscript to \textit{An arrow against tyrants}, Overton put the case for ‘equal law’ to Parliament thus: ‘Be no respecter of persons. Let not the greatest peers in the land be more respected with you than so many old bellows-menders, broom-men, cobblerers, tinkers, or chimney-sweepers, who are all \textit{equally freeborn} with the hugest men and loftiest Anakims in the land’ (the \textit{Anakim} were a race of giants described in Genesis).\textsuperscript{95} As a principle of divine impartiality, the Levellers saw the natural habitat of Acts 10 as the courts of law. Whether they were the ‘loftiest Anakims in the land’ or the lowliest bellows-menders and tinkers—Lilburne and Overton insisted that their equal birth, entitled all natural-born Englishmen to ‘\textit{equal} respect’—a demand they extended beyond legal rights, to the other non-legal \textit{privileges} that peers enjoyed in the courtroom, as well—of not swearing oaths, for example, and of keeping their hats on.\textsuperscript{96} Accordingly, the Levellers used the language of Acts not only to draw attention to these privileges, but also to claim them for themselves. Jurors should ‘be rightly informed of their places and authority…and therefore…not to stand bare any longer, but to put on their hats, as became them’.\textsuperscript{97}

Many were unconvinced. None other than the Parliamentarian polemicist—and oft-accused egalitarian—Henry Parker complained, ‘We perceive hereby plainly the substance of your Levelling philosophy to be briefly this: The Judges because they understand the law, are to

\textsuperscript{93} Overton and Walwyn, \textit{Vox Plebis}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., p. 18. Coke translates ‘\textit{Per Pares}’ as ‘By his Peers, that is, by his equalls’. Coke, \textit{Institutes}, p. 28. As Richard Tuck has argued in an unpublished essay, the modern assumption that trial by jury is the ‘natural institutional expression’ of the Magna Carta’s \textit{per legale judicium Parium suorum}, is not at all obvious and owes much to Lilburne and his supporters’ agitations in the 1640s. Tuck, ‘Hobbes and the jury’, pp. 3-4.
\textsuperscript{95} ‘An arrow against all tyrants’, p. 60. My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{96} See Lilburne’s ‘Untitled broadsheet of August 1645’ in Sharp, \textit{Levellers}, pp. 3-8.
\textsuperscript{97} William Walwyn, \textit{Juries justified: or, A word of correction to Mr Henry Robinson} (London, 1651), sig.A3.
be degraded…but the Jurors, because they understand no Law, are to be mounted aloft’.\textsuperscript{98} Parker was not worried simply about the implications of trial by jury for the status and authority of legal expertise. He saw in the denial of hat honour to judges a deliberate form of \textit{disrespect}, meant to bring judges into contempt. ‘The pretence of leveling’, Parker wrote,

\begin{quote}
is to put all men upon an equall floore, by adding to the inferior so much as may match him with his superior, and taking from the superior so much as may match him with his inferior: and this is sufficiently heretical in policie. But the intention of our Levellers…leaves an inequalitie amongst men as great as ever…whilest it elevates that which was depressed, & depresses that which was elevated: and so makes that the Head which was the Foot; and that the foot…the Head.\textsuperscript{99}
\end{quote}

For their part, the Levellers denied this and argued that the point was not levelling, but elevation. The courtroom should be a place where, whether high or low, all might be acknowledged as peers, on an ‘equall footing’.

It is tempting to dismiss Parker’s criticisms as reactionary and self-serving exaggeration. Parker was, after all, a barrister with an Oxford degree (so called for the elevated in-rank status it provided). But this would be too quick. The refusal of hat honour had a long history in medieval and early modern England, and yet, at the same time that Acts 10 was ascending to new prominence as an equalitarian proof text in the 1640s, this practice was gaining in popularity with radicals of all stripes, who refused to remove their hats to the powers that be within the new regime.\textsuperscript{100} By 1649, the year in which Parker wrote, the refusal of hat honour, coupled with the

\textsuperscript{98}Henry Parker, \textit{A letter of due censure, and redargytion [sic] to Lieut: Coll: John Lilburne: touching his triall at Guild-Hall-London in Octob: Last. 1649. Wherein if there be contemper’d some corrosive ingredients, tis not to be imputed unto malice: the intent is, to eat away the patients proud, dead flesh, not to destroy any sincere, sound part} (London, 1649), p. 21.
\textsuperscript{99}Ibid.
slogan that ‘God is no respecter of persons,’ had become the calling card of an increasingly rambunctious set of Protestant sectarians, who would soon coalesce under the leadership of George Fox.

The Quakers: That of God in every man

While the pejorative ‘Quaker’ would not be used in print to describe members of the nascent Society of Friends until 1650, Fox began his ministry in 1646. He described this auspicious beginning in his Journal as follows:

When the Lord sent me forth into the world, he forbade me to put off my hat to any, high or low; and I was required to Thee and Thou all men and women, without any respect to rich or poor, great or small. And as I traveled up and down, I was not to bid people good morrow or good evening; neither might I bow or scrape with my leg to any one; and this made the sects and professions to rage.101

The Gospel of the Inner Light preached by Fox was not exactly new; what was new, however—and what set the Quakers apart, both figuratively and literally—was their elevation of these social practices to a central tenet of their faith.

In adopting a distinctive manner of speech and dress, the Quakers represented an extreme version of sectarian practices traceable to the earliest days of Christianity. Part of what bothered the Romans about the early Christians had been their habit of ‘denominating’ one another ‘brother’ and ‘sister’, regardless of social status. This idea of equality through unity in the corpus Christianum (as in Colossians) fueled the Roman impression that Christianity was a religion for slaves and women, and after the Reformation, many sectarians adopted peculiar modes of dress

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and address for their members in an attempt to reclaim the purity of primitive Christianity.

‘Fellow-Creature’ was often the preferred salutation—including, in popular imagination at least, for the Ranters. The woodblock print that introduced *The ranter’s ranting* represented several familiar Familist features: a female figure welcomes her (male) ‘Fellow-Creature’ into the meeting with an extended hand—rather than a curtesy or demurely lowered gaze—while both keep their hats firmly on.  

To modern eyes, this early modern obsession with hats may seem rather silly or innocuous. Yet as we saw earlier, the performance of ‘civil worship’ was absolutely essential. It was this early modern awareness of the importance of social practices in the maintenance of social hierarchy—something political theorists have only recently rediscovered—that lent the refusal of hat-honour its power as a form of social protest.

In this, the Quakers recaptured the spirit of the infamous ‘oatmeal-maker’, who ‘taking upon him[self] to be a preacher’, was therefore imprisoned and ‘called before the high commission’:

> Where, keeping on his hat, and being asked why he did not put it off, he answered he would never put off his hat to bishops. ‘But you will [u]s’ said one of them. ‘Then as you are privy counsellors’, quoth he, ‘I put off my hat, but as ye are rags of the beast, lo! I put it on again!’.

Coming from a jury or men like Lilburne, keeping on the hat might plausibly be construed as a performance of parity or a demand for ‘equal respect’. But coming from Quaker men and women, this practice represented something altogether more radical. Not only did it turn the traditional sectarian forms of acknowledging equality through unity within the body of Christ

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outward, they applied them universally: refusing to doff and don and theeing and thouing everyone—whether family, neighbors, ministers, or magistrates. ‘To agree with flattering Titles, and do their Fellow-Creatures homage’, wrote William Penn, these were ‘the customs of the Gentiles that knew not God’. 105 The Saints knew better, and different. And they were at ‘war against this world’. 106

When it came to thee and thou, men like Fox, Penn, and Benjamin Furley went on the offensive. A battle-door for teachers and professors to learn singular and plural (1660) argued on the basis of over thirty dead and living languages that the Quakers’ use of the singular ‘thou’ to one and the plural ‘you’ to many was simply grammatically correct. 109 Similarly, Penn’s 1669 No cross, no crown (written while he was imprisoned in the Tower for, among other things, failing to remove his hat in court) was similarly exhaustive, including ‘Sixty Eight testimonies of the most famous Persons of both former and latter ages, in defence of the poor, despised Quakers’. Both of these works traced English exceptionalism in the use of the plural ‘you’ (instead of the appropriate ‘thee’ reflected in the King James Bible) to refer to one person, regardless of status, to Anti-Christian corruption. 110 What began as an honorific to magnify the Roman emperor became, over time in the Catholic world, universal: and this, they concluded, was to ‘fall into the respect of persons’. 111 Towards one’s better, the ceremonies of civil worship—such as the plural you, the ‘wagging of the hat’, the ‘phanatick fry of insignificant complements’, etc.—were but ‘lying words’ and a hypocritical ‘empty shew’ in order to flatter

105 William Penn, No Cross, No Crown, or several reasons against hat-honour, titular-respects, you to a single person, with the apparel and recreations of the times (London, 1669), p. 6.
109 George Fox, A battle-door for teachers and professors to learn singular and plural (London, 1660), sig. A2.
110 God spoke singular to one, God spoke plural to many. Christ spoke singular to one, He spoke plural to many. The Saints spoke singular to one, the Saints spoke plural to many’. Ibid., p. 2.
111 Ibid., p. 25.
the rich and powerful. Yet Furley and others also insisted that such common civilities towards one’s fellow men were but ‘cripple, ceremonial, shadowy, modish worshipping of mens Persons’ ‘of and from the Devil’. ‘May we not then say, that ye worship men?...[and] are not men also images?’

Furley’s deployment of *imago Dei* as an argument against respectful behaviour should give modern egalitarians pause. Not only does it reflect the Quakers’ rejection of the first account of Creation in Genesis in favour of the second (and third, in the Gospel of John), but also their interpretation of the phrase ‘God is no respecter of persons’ as a protest against all practices of social honouring, towards rich and poor alike. Unlike the Levellers, the Quakers did not conclude that ‘respecting’ everyone equally, or doffing one’s hat to all, would suffice. One should demonstrate true honour—that is, Christian love—to everyone, including one’s enemies. But when it came to ‘Salutations and Greetings’, they proposed to follow Jesus Christ and the Apostles—who ‘when they came into a City or Village, were to enquire who were worthy, and to salute such only’—in this case, ‘such as abode in the unity of the Spirit of Christ and brought his Doctrine’. These enlightened few they denominated ‘Friends’, but they took off their hats to no one. As James Nayler put it, ‘the Lord…is no respecter of persons, but every one that bears not the image of his son in well-doing, he hates’. This was in keeping with Quaker theology, in which *imago Dei* (which they identified with the Word as the Light of every man) was something individuals must cultivate, rather than something they automatically possessed. The Inner Light, like dignity, was permitting of degrees.

113 Ibid., pp. 16, 9.
114 Ibid., p. 28.
116 Furly, *The world’s honour detected*, p. 20.
117 Ibid., pp. 45-8.
Here, one hears echoes of Parker’s observation, that the result of the Leveller’s program would not be an even plain, but a mountain where the valley had been. Just like parity, in order to be meaningful, the Quakers’ commitment to spiritual unity through equal ‘membership’ in Christ also required that some people be more equal than others.121

_Hobbes (and hats)_

In his _Briefe view and survey of Leviathan_ in 1676, Clarendon would accuse Hobbes of being a ‘faithful Leveller’, resolved upon ‘the reduction of all degrees to one and the same…as if the safety of the People requir’d an equality of Person’.122 Hobbes began writing _Leviathan_ in Paris sometime after the Regicide in 1649. Fox was several years into his ministry, but the Quakers still had not broken out as a distinctive sect among the the ‘Anabaptists’, Familists, Ranters, Seekers, and Fifth-Monarchy-Men. By the time of _Leviathan_’s publication in 1651, the Levellers were still an uncomfortably recent memory as mutineers and accused traitors to the new regime.

Given this, it is striking that Hobbes did not seek to distance himself or his theory from the radicals more in that work. Instead, he wholeheartedly embraced the image of levelling—both in his chosen title, _Leviathan_, and especially in its striking cover image of a giant towering over a plain, equipped not with a set of scales, but with a sword and crozier balanced in each hand, come to humble (or level) the children of pride. Somehow it has escaped commentators attention that in the crowd of common people constituting this giant, each and every person has

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121 Quakers like Fell and Furley embraced the corporate metaphor: ‘Our Unity stands not in an external conformity of the Hat, Cap, or any other outward thing or action, but in that Light, Life, Power & Spirit…in and by which we are all united unto one Spirit, Soul, Mind and Body, of which Christ is the head…to the enlivening of each member, according to the measure which it is capable of where it is.’ Furley, _The world’s honour detected_, A2.

his hat still on. As ever, Clarendon’s timing was off when he accused Hobbes of publishing his doctrine ‘in a conjuncture when the Levellers were at highest’. But he was onto something when he accused him of contributing to ‘the delight [the people] have in the word Equality, which in truth signifies nothing but keeping on their hats’.123

Of course, the fundamentals of fundamental equality were already firmly in place well before the Levellers were active, in Hobbes’s first and most conventionally aristocratic pioneering work of political geometry, *The elements of law*. In presenting the ‘equality of nature’ as an axiom in the *Elements*, Hobbes was deliberately evoking the elegant certainty and stability of mathematical identity. And yet the equality of Man’s ‘natural estate’ presented in that work was necessarily rough, as an average of their different powers of body and mind.125 The upshot of this, as Kinch Hoekstra has noted, is that in all of his works, Hobbes’s theory of ‘natural’ equality was anything but. Rather, it is the fact that men are *not* equal in power, and yet *similar enough*, that is the problem. Here, we can recognize (as Clarendon did later in *Leviathan*) that Hobbes was making a claim to men’s natural *parity*, or equal rank, while abolishing the concept of degree. Rather than a descriptive fact, men’s equality ‘by nature’ is for Hobbes a principle that they *ought to admit* among themselves’.126 or, as he frames it in the *Elements*: it is a law of nature ‘*That every man acknowledge other for his equal.*’ And the breach of this law, is that we call PRIDE’.

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125 The ‘odds...of strength or knowledge between men of mature age’ are ‘little’, while the ‘difference...in men, from the diversity of their passions’ is ‘great’. Hobbes, *Elements*, p. 78. *De cive* drops this sense of averaging men’s powers in favour of emphasizing men’s equal vulnerability to death and their ‘equal power...to kill’. *De cive*, pp. 25-6. Evidently unsatisfied with this argument, Hobbes returned to the idea of averaging powers in *Leviathan*: ‘Nature hath made men so equall, in the faculties of body, and mind...[that] when all is reckoned together, the difference between man and man is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he’, *Leviathan*, p. 188.
127 Ibid., p. 93.
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One of the things modern egalitarians like about Hobbes is that his natural men are not ‘born’ or ‘created’ equal; hence, his formulation of this premise seems safely secular in a way that Locke’s or Thomas Jefferson’s do not. Still, there is an important sense in which individuals must also be created as equals for Hobbes, only not by Nature or Nature’s God, but by each other, through mutual acknowledgement.\(^{128}\) Certainly, one of the beliefs Hobbes thought most crucial for citizens to profess, whether they believed it to be true or not, was a belief in natural equality.\(^{129}\) But he also made clear that acknowledgement was not simply a matter of philosophic profession, but of practice—specifically, practices of honouring, and ‘the signs…such [as] actions, gestures, countenance and speech’ by which a man ‘acknowledge that [another] hath the odds or excess of power above him’.\(^{130}\)

This sense of acknowledging equality as something people do, and do together, is confirmed by the peculiar constellation of natural laws with which Hobbes associated equality throughout his works, against contumely, pride, arrogance, and partiality, respectively. Moreover, his chosen examples illustrating violations of the natural law against insult—the contempt shown by the rich towards the poor, and by judges towards defendants—demonstrated that his concerns went well beyond affairs of honour between aristocrats.\(^{131}\) Yet acknowledging equality had positive demands, as well.\(^{132}\) First, one must observe the principle of reciprocity in ‘allowing’ others equal right.\(^{133}\) Secondly, one must distribute aequalia aequalibus—by ‘weighing’ others’

\(^{128}\) Hoekstra focuses on acknowledgement as derived from the Latin agnos cere in its legal sense—that is ‘to declare, announce, allow, or admit a thing to be one’s own’—hence, philosophically, in the sense of accepting a premise or professing a belief. Hoekstra, ‘Hobbesian equality’, p. 102.

\(^{129}\) This was the work of the virtue of ‘compleasance’ or ‘animus civilis’. See Teresa M. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Harvard, 2017), pp. 100-101.


\(^{131}\) Hobbes, *Elements*, p. 92; compare with *De cive*, p. 49.


\(^{133}\) Ibid., 100-1.
interests as we would our own. In *De cive*, Hobbes described this principle of impartial distribution as ‘equity’ (*aequitas*), and its violation as ‘prosopolepsia’—in Latin, *acceptio personarum*. His chosen scriptural supports changed as well: against pride, Hobbes switched from the Golden Rule to the Levelling Giant’s favourite proof text, Isaiah: ‘*Every valley shall be raised, and every mountain and hill made low*’—to which he added the following, helpful explication ‘where assuredly the reference is to men, not mountains’. And in support of the law against ‘*Acceptio of Persons*’, *De cive* cited Colossians—and Acts 10 in the words of the Vulgate.

When it came to *Leviathan*, the architecture of equality—both as a premise and conclusion—laid in the *Elements* remained very much in place. Still, there are a few changes that appear significant in light of the kinds of arguments the radicals were making. For instance, while Hobbes continued to identify *prosopolepsia* as the violation of a law of nature, he discreetly dropped *De cive*’s scriptural citations to Colossians and Acts. Moreover, he did not update his phrasing to the more familiar and colloquial language of the King James, but retained ‘*Acceptio of Persons*’ throughout. Hobbes’s scrupulous avoidance of the language of ‘*respect*’ in acknowledging equality is significant. But for the fateful choice made by the translators of the King James Version to depart from the Geneva Bible and substitute ‘*respecter*’ for ‘*acceptor*’, would Acts 10 have become such an effective vehicle for reformist zeal? One thinks not.

134 For where every man is his own judge, there properly is no judge at all; as where every man carveth out his own right, it hath the same effect, as if there were no right at all…for every man’s passion weigheth heavily in his own scale, but not in the scale of his neighbors’. Ibid., p. 95-96. Compare Harrington’s discussion of the ‘silly’ little girls carving a cake. *Oceana*, p. 22.
136 *De cive* also cited Ecclesiasticus 35:16 and Romans 2:11.
137 Hobbes may have moved his discussions of the ‘grieving tongues’ and ‘contumelious greatness’ of judges towards defendants, or of the rich towards the poor, away from the core discussion of the acknowledgement of equality as a law of nature in ch. 15 of *Leviathan*, but he did not delete them—indeed, as Clarendon notes, he expanded them considerably.
Whether this is what Hobbes had in mind, one cannot say, but surely scholars must be much more attentive in reading Hobbesian equality, in which the significance of Hobbes’s own language choices has often been obscured. Such inattention to the conceptual distinctions in play helps explain why modern scholarship has lost sight of the distinctions between identity, similarity, parity, and unity highlighted above. Assuming that equality is an idea without history, they have, like Spenser’s Levelling Giant, ‘reduced them all to an equality’. Still, there are few thinkers more attuned to the power of words than Hobbes; it would behoove us to pay more attention.

V. Conclusion

What are we to conclude from this brief exploration of equality before egalitarianism? In the first place: never underestimate the power of a social practice or a proof text. Aequalitas had served as both a premise and conclusion of political theory before. Yet there was something about this practical conjunction of context and text that rendered these claims effectual on a societal scale, in a way they simply had not been before. The salience of the refusal of hat honour, when combined with the King James translation of Acts as an injunction to divine disrespect, provides a stunning testament to the power of contingency in the history of political thought against the persistently teleological accounts of early modern equality provided by modern egalitarians.

What should also be clear is that its arithmetic appearance aside, equality is not, nor ever was, simple. Thus there never was one ‘point’ to equality. For some it was a matter of disrupting social hierarchies; for others, it was about maintaining them, and for others still about creating new ones. Acquaintance with the many different concepts and relations associated with early
modern equality should thus remind us of these complexities while alienating us from the assumption that, as a political principle, ‘equality’ is obvious and ours—so why can’t our opponents recognize already that we’re right about its implications?

This survey has something to offer to ‘relational’ egalitarians, in particular, especially those like Anderson who have turned explicitly to early modernity in their quest to discover a continuous or consistent ‘point’ to egalitarian claim-making. In their emphasis on equality as a function of social status and the performance of equal respect, and hence on inequality as the product of social disrespect, it seems that these modern egalitarians are rediscovering the wisdom of the early moderns. If inequality is not cosmically ordained but rather something we do, the same must be true of equality. The constitution of a society of equals thus depends not (or at least not simply) on some centralized system of redistribution, but on every citizens’ continuous enactment thereof. This is, I think, what Hannah Arendt was getting at when she described equality as not a natural fact but something artificial we must ‘hold’ to. Like Hobbes, she saw that equality the stability of equality as a premise of political argument itself depends upon its reliable institutionalization in particular sites of equality (such as the courtroom) and everyday social practice.\footnote{A point that Waldron rather emphatically misses. Waldron, \textit{One Another’s Equals}, 51, 58-9.} It is only in light of these that this implausible premise comes to seem not only plausible, but probable, to us.

On the surface, Hobbes would seem to be the inventor of the reductively ‘arithmetic’ or abstract approach to equality with which today’s relational egalitarians fault their opponents. And yet his emphasis on ‘acknowledgement’ complicates this picture. Whatever his disagreements with the Quakers (and they were undoubtedly numerous) Hobbes agreed with them whole-heartedly in two things. Firstly, he shared their contempt for the credentialed classes—namely the ordained clergy and professors in the Universities—elevated to the status of
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gentry by virtue of what were, quite literally, Gentlemen’s Degrees.\textsuperscript{142} And secondly, he agreed with them as to the profound importance of social practices, including titles and ‘what signes of respect, in publique or private meetings, [men] shall give to one another’\textsuperscript{143} not only in the constitution of hierarchy—but, more importantly, in the constitution of a society of equals.

Here, I think that Hobbes’s rejection of the concept of parity embraced by both the Levellers and their opponents can offer a salutary warning to contemporary egalitarians like Anderson or Waldron who are finding their way back to the concept whether they know it or not. Hobbes considered the problem of how to equalize honour as a distributive good more seriously than any other philosopher before (or since). His fascination with this problem only grew in \textit{Leviathan}—and indeed, the unprecedented amount of time and attention he devotes to understanding honour in that work, in \textit{practice} as well as in theory—was an implicit challenge to both forms of social levelling embraced by his contemporaries. Notwithstanding his penchant for humbling the children of pride, Hobbes clearly saw that the ‘universal’ contempt proposed by the sectarians was impossible, for the simple fact that one cannot contemn another without implicitly elevating oneself (as the Quaker dependence on ‘weighty’ friends indicated). Similarly, while the Levellers thought equality might be achieved through ‘equal respect’ so as to \textit{elevate} everyone to the status of peers, Hobbes was not so sure. Competition and conflict don’t end once we recognize one another as equals; they have only just begun.\textsuperscript{144} Competition between those who are ‘equal enough’—\textit{pares or homoioi}—as in the state of nature, is the most vicious kind.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{142} Francis Higginson, ‘A brief relation’, p. 78.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Hobbes, \textit{Leviathan}, p. 276.
\item \textsuperscript{144} Compare Michael Walzer, \textit{Spheres of justice: a defense of pluralism and equality} (New York, NY, 2008), p. 254.
\end{itemize}
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For those political theorists and historians inclined to a view of equal dignity or relational equality that owes much to the ‘levelling-up’ conception of parity embraced by the Levellers, such fears about ‘the logic of warring equals’ may seem overblown. Philip Pettit has complained that Hobbes makes ‘use of an unargued’ and ‘implausible’ assumption ‘that people…cannot settle for the positional good of equality in standing with others’. As an alternative, Pettit quotes John Milton’s idea of a ‘free commonwealth’, wherein ‘they who are greatest are not elevated above their brethren; live soberly in their families, walk the streets as other men, and may be spoken to freely, familiarly, friendly, without adoration’. But Pettit’s quotation is selective. In the rest of the passage, Milton praised republican government as ‘the most agreeable to all due liberty and proportioned equality’; ‘what government comes nearer to this precept of Christ’, he continued, ‘than a free commonwealth; wherein they who are the greatest are perpetual servants and drudges to the public’.

I have quoted this passage at length not to suggest Pettit is deliberately misleading, but to show just how easily modern expectations of what an early modern ‘egalitarian’ should say get in the way of taking him at his word. That Milton was not an egalitarian in precisely the way that Hobbes feared can be seen from his statement that ‘No man who knows aught, can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were born free, being the image and resemblance of God himself, and were by privilege above all the creatures, born to command and not to obey’. Similarly, many writers on status equality and non-domination stress the language of ‘fraternity,’ of

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145 See Waldron, Dignity, Rank, Rights, p. 64; Elizabeth Anderson, ‘What’s the point of equality?’, Ethics, 109 (1999), pp. 287-337.
148 Quoted in Pettit, Made with words, p. 96.
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standing ‘upright’, looking others ‘in the eye’, and telling them ‘to get lost’—what Waldron calls
the ‘moral orthopaedics of human dignity’—in unabashedly masculinist terms.151 The similarity
with Furley’s argument that paying civil worship to one’s fellow men was ‘beneath the dignity
[of] Man, whom God made upright, and…in his own image’ is provocative.152

It seems that Hobbes was not the only one making implausible assumptions about human
psychology. For Hobbes, the persistence of hierarchies of rank and degree in the ‘societies of
equals’ proposed by his contemporaries was an inevitable consequence of the most important
respect in which human beings are naturally equal and alike: partiality. In our efforts to secure
our own status, we constantly seek to convert in-group hierarchies of degree into the more secure
out-group hierarchies of rank. Not only does this impulse account for the precarity of our
attempts to enact equality, it also suggests something more worrying. Oftentimes when it comes
to the ‘point’ of equality, what we’re fighting for—namely the easy-going familiarity, sense of
mutual belonging, and sincere respect of ‘fraternal relations’ with those we consider our
equals—is also what we’re fighting against.

Recognizing that what today’s egalitarians call ‘equality’ is very often parity can alert us
to the importance of constitutive exclusions in rendering our status as equals meaningful, as a
high rank worth having. The fact that equality-as-parity was originally an aristocratic concept
should encourage a healthy scepticism of the Rousseauvian solution to the problem of status as a
positional good.153 Certainly, Hobbes suspected that today’s egalitarians were often tomorrow’s
spiritual aristocrats—ready to condemn and contemn anyone they deem insufficiently committed
to equality. His solution, the acknowledgement of equality as the ‘equal estate’ of subjection to,

151 Waldron, Dignity, Rank, and Rights, 21. White, Equality, 7. For ‘fraternity’ see Dworkin, Taking Rights
152 Furly, The world’s honour detected, p. 9.
in, and under the sovereign Leviathan was thus a complicated balancing act, an attempt to square the circle by eradicating every notional hierarchy so as to overcome the paradoxes of equal respect. Whether it worked is a different question. Still throughout his works, and in navigating the complex—and occasionally convoluted—contemporary demands for equality, the point of equality, for Hobbes at least, remained the same: to put every self-styled aristocrat, whether by birth, spirit, or education, in his or her (low) place.