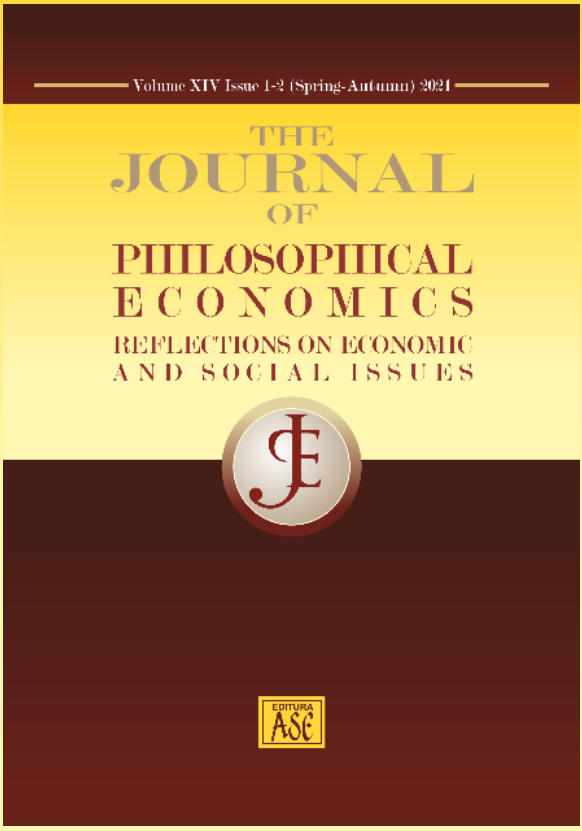
THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL ECONOMICS: REFLECTIONS ON ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES
Volume XIV Issues 1-2
Spring-Autumn 2021

ISSN: 1843-2298
EISSN: 1844-8208
Publication date:
20 November 2021
Paper format: 16.5x23.5 cm



Review of François Levrau, Noel Clycq (eds.), *Equality. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan/ Springer Nature, 1st Edition, 2021, 356 pp., ISBN 978-3-030-54309-9 and 978-3-030-54310-5 (eBook)

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EDITURA ASE

Review of François Levrau, Noel Clycq (eds.), *Equality. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature, 1st Edition, 2021, 356 pp., ISBN 978-3-030-54309-9 and 978-3-030-54310-5 (eBook)

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Levrau and Clycq have produced a monumental editorial work, dedicated to the topic of equality in times of great social polarization. Equality understood as a multidimensional concept is fundamental for the vital aspects of society such as human rights, solidarity and even freedom and how these are to be conceived implemented and experienced by subjects; these are accomplishments which do not occur without an overarching idea of equality. This observation sheds some light on the long history of the human attempts to understand the theoretical, social, and practical aspects of equality. The present book explores this idea extensively, investigating the concept of equality from a multidisciplinary perspective, where a diverse range of theories about equality and welfare are combined with concrete data about equality in the real world.

We emphasize the valuable distinction between equality and the welfare state, especially since, as Robert E. Goodin noticed, although the justification for the welfare state resides for the most part in the principles of social equality, 'the welfare state is not really very egalitarian', aiming to redistribute 'only a certain strictly limited set of social resources; it is concerned with minimum standards, not thoroughgoing equalization; it is concerned to readjust final distributions, not basic holdings of productive assets, and so on' (Goodin 1988, p. 51).

The research into equality is structured in three parts. The first part is entitled 'Theories & Histories' and covers the conceptual aspects, with reference to political philosophy, history, and multicultural theory. The debates are

Received: 1 September 2021

arranged around the 'object' of equality. Is it the capabilities, the resources, or the ends of (welfare)? The second part of the book looks at 'Institutions & Policies' and looks at the implementation of equality via institutional mechanisms and concrete policies. The third part of the book, 'Experiences & Impressions', critically examines the insights gained from psychology, sociology, and cultural studies concerning individual experiences and awareness of inequality.

The chapters in this collection represent some of the most relevant and pertinent contributions on the topic and they examine the boundaries of the concept and the way in which the ideal of equality can be experienced in real life. Equality is subject to a theoretical approach, but the confrontation between different theories has a practical purpose, as equality is vital to arrive at a more just, stable, and desirable society, as well as a life of autonomy, dignity, and liberty for all. At this point an important distinction needs to be made. Since *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 1971), the topic of equality has been part of the discussion of justice, provided that society is a system of cooperation among free and autonomous individuals: poverty and lack of opportunity, inequalities of all sorts are the highways for injustice. In this respect, the appeal to Rawls and his theory of justice is excellent. However, the relationship that is sometimes made between justice and redistribution can be too simplistic. This is the case for the present volume: failing to take sufficient account of the fact that welfare and redistribution are, in general, utilitarian, the interpretation and place of Rawls in the debate about equality are rather unnuanced and misplaced. Rawls talks about fair institutional and citizen arrangements and agreements which are principled and designed not only to legitimate the form of justice appropriate for society, but which are also trustworthy to ensure at the ontological and social level an appropriate conception of justice. It is necessary to understand that from the Rawlsian perspective a just society grants priority to basic freedoms over other social objectives, such as economic growth or prosperity, an aspect which is dealt with very well in the papers in this volume, associated with the presentation of the maximal principle (the maximisation of the situation of the most disfavoured ones, but in the context of maximising the most favoured level) in contrast with the *leximin* principle (the level of the worst off should be corrected first), but

which is not followed with consistency in the interpretations of Rawls throughout the volume. *The theory of justice designed by Rawls has a pragmatist, not a utilitarian dimension.* The theoretical construction follows the concepts of justice and distributive justice and not redistribution, in general. Besides justice, the key concept in *A Theory of Justice* is fairness, associated with the important discussion around the concepts of reasonable citizenship and goodness (Rawls 1999, pp. 55, 70, 86-105, 228-259). Therefore, the Rawlsian theoretical construction is not based first and foremost on a discussion about redistribution or 'simple' equality. It is rather about reasonable and fair access to everything, not only resources, and to the exercise of freedoms and rights for the enjoyment of the good life.

The studies in the volume approach welfare as a major concept in political science in different sections, incorporating both the work of Levrau, on the one hand, and of Wim Van Lancker and Aaron Van den Heede, on the other. The concept of welfare is based on principles such as equality of opportunity, the equitable distribution of wealth and the public responsibility for those citizens who cannot provide for themselves. To complete a 'big picture', the investigation shows the difficulties associated with the processes of government and management of the welfare state: assessing the desirable level for the services provided by the state; ensuring a correct, equitable and sustainable level of benefits provided and of the compulsory contributions required to sustain productive work and efficiency, without overburdening society with bureaucracy and diminishing its overall functionality. Thus, in the section dedicated to welfare and equality the investigations show that following the works of Richard Arneson, and especially Gerald A. Cohen, the main question is not to 'equalize' a specific type of 'equality of chances', nor to distinguish the level (depth) of equality targeted. The first one is 'bourgeois equality', which involves the elimination of the formal and informal restrictions applied to the equal chances in life. A formal restriction is slavery and racial prejudices constitute 'informal restrictions.' The second level is 'liberal left-wing equality of chances', which involves compensating for the circumstances of birth, upbringing, and socialisation. This represents a 'socialist equality of chances', pushing the idea of equality further on the basis of the idea that native abilities

are as 'unselectioned' as the differences in social environment and therefore going closer in its arguments to the Dworkian, 'luck' approach to equality.

The theoreticians who agree upon the necessity of distributive equality disagree on the topic of the 'equality of *what*': those who concentrate on resources argue for the institution and guarantee of an 'equal package of goods', the welfarists concentrate on the equal enjoyment of goods, services, opportunities etc. and 'capabilists' are preoccupied with equality of real freedoms. The accepted patterns of distribution may vary, too. *Right-wing libertarians* focus on the free market and the individuals' inalienable right to property and the accumulation of possessions. *Left-wing libertarians* support respect for liberty but advocate an egalitarian approach to natural resources. *Telic egalitarians* are for *strict equality* and the eradication of all forms of inequality. *Luck egalitarians* sustain a distributive principle combining respect for equality the individual's responsibility for their choices. *Prioritarians* call attention on the dire situation of the poor that is always noticeably worse than a decent standard of life requires, the level required by basic human dignity in our century, considering the scientific developments of humanity etc. (and, in our view, the most interesting aspects are raised by Parfit 1997 and Rawls 1971). S*ufficientarism* makes the case that poor do not have enough, which is morally problematic and undermines their human dignity. *Limitarians* look at the upper tail of distribution and consider that the conspicuous, extravagant luxury of the rich makes the fact that other people starve to death all the more blame worthy. *Social egalitarians* are interested in finding the appropriate distribution principle mainly because the enduring stability of society is threatened if people cannot meet each other as equals. Egalitarianism faces also global worries (scarcity of global resources, overpopulation, climate change, refugee streams, and religious terrorism and, more recently, pandemics) and the preoccupation with global justice and justice for future generations.

The historical view about vindication for economic and political autonomy explores situations where communal resources were not privatized and inspires the analysis of the connection between the contribution of people to their community and their entitlement to a share of resources and benefits, which relates to the discussion supporting the implementation of a universal basic

income. This might be linked to the multidisciplinary meaning of the concept of *Nahrung,* arguing in favour of the right to a decent form of life for every community member and in favour of correcting the way the invisible hand and bureaucracies allocate resources. However, nostalgic views of the past may be misleading and tend to mask the inequalities of former times, often regarded as 'natural' (unquestionable) occurrences. Welfare themes such as 'inequality of outcomes' and 'equality of opportunity' got more attention, although analysts remark that in practice the latter has served to legitimize the status quo by shifting responsibility from the collective to the individual. At stake is the difficult connection between 'equality of opportunity' and 'merit.' But should these two be disconnected? Thinkers as Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen redefined welfare in terms of the resulting well-being being what people consider important and in terms of people's capabilities (their liberty and capacity to live the life they want). Is this a compromise between equality and rights or is it *a reconnection of equality and rights*? And, again, the reference to John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* is misguided, since the implicit moral conception is not a welfare utilitarian conception, something which Rawls states this explicitly.

The inequalities of 'difference' irradiate inequality. Socioeconomic disadvantage triggers negative and stereotypical representation of people as backward, strange, and unintelligent, assigning and confining people to their more homogeneous, but impoverished and uneducated (and often non-white) groups. However, capitalizing on Platt (2005), the authors in this volume, and especially Ruby Gropas, conclude that 'ethnicity can sometimes be a resource as well as a liability, and while the disadvantages of class and ethnicity can sometimes reinforce each other, ethnicity can sometimes mitigate aspects of class disadvantage.' (p. 158) Socioeconomic generalisations are tempting and often wrong, while more complex views in sociology of ethnicity and in the politics of multiculturalism are necessary.

In the chapter considering the EU framework for the promotion of equality, mitigation of discrimination and respect for diversity, Ruby Gropas emphasizes several crucial pillars: law, positive action programmes, social cohesion policy instruments, anti-discrimination and equal opportunities measures, support for civic mobilisation good practices, and learning and cooperation programmes.

After which Gropas looks at the triggers of EU equality framework and its limitations. The main concepts distinguished determined the measures taken and the framework of fair treatment and equality.

The difficult correlation between religion, ethnicity and inequality is discussed, although from these discussions of discrimination and inequality the factors of age and sickness (however relevant) are missing. Emphasizing different meanings of the notion of 'equality', the authors Fr. Levrau and L. Franken examine a multitude of aspects, including those pertaining to 'difference-blind' and 'difference-sensitive' approaches. Especially when a situation calls for the intervention of a (statal) decision maker, what is the way to go? The authors argue (correctly, in our view) for a context-specific judgement and against the reduction of these cases to legal formulas. The approach should always be reasonable, that is contextual and oriented to an extensive consideration of the various factors at play in a situation (employment details and opportunities, functionally determined or not, the 'nature' of the 'offensive' act, the consequences and impact for others, the local and national context etc.).

Tim Reeskens and Wim van Oorschot investigate the model of redistribution preferred by Europeans using an empirical methodology. The data from the European Social Survey (2008), measuring the way people relate to the principles of equity and equality and to the realities of need, prompt the authors to discern main redistributive justice tendencies, especially, those pertaining to welfare provision, in terms of difficult situations such as unemployment and (old age) pension plans. The authors argue that individual beliefs reflect national opinions and not just individual standpoints.

The relation between equality and justice leads onto the relation between inequality and injustice and is dealt with in a psychological way by Johanna Pretsch. What makes things both interesting and difficult in this respect is that from a psychological perspective it is not so easy to state that inequality is always unjust or that equality is guaranteed to be a fundamentally just thing. Subjective and individual criteria are as important as the principles of justice in such evaluations. The reactions of people to injustice are subjective, too. Describing various reactions to distributions of resources considered unfair, the author takes into consideration three distinct contextual spheres, such as the

educational sphere, where injustice may be perceived in relation to the distribution of promotion, degrees, attention, praise, prizes or learning conditions etc.; the workplace context, where injustice might be induces by the distribution of pay, promotion, performance evaluation, perks, benefits of all sorts etc.; and family context, where fairness is affected usually by effects of attention, recognition, affection, control etc. But similar psychological aspects should be relevant in other contexts such as differential treatment by authorities and treatment in the public sphere, mediatic treatment, and medical care treatment, which the author does not take into consideration. An important conclusion made by Pretsch indicates that similar reactions to unfair distribution instances may transcend the limits of the contextual spheres described above. Also, in our view, similar factors may function as indicators which reveal justice/injustice in various spheres – recognition, for example, may trigger evaluations of unfairness, inequality etc., in the contexts of education, in those created in the workplace or in those encountered in family environments.

Opinions and beliefs concerning equality and inequality in society are shaped by media. Sieglinde Lemke captures the idea that media representations of 'economic suffering' are at least as important as artistic ones in cultivating the right sensitivity to the matter throughout society. Conducting the kind of analysis characteristic of cultural studies type, the author assesses this observation and goes further, establishing that popular trends in sensitivity toward the issues of inequality play a role in stimulating more transdisciplinary research dedicated to the topic of inequality. Confluence forms of discrimination are present in social life and they should be investigated in all their complexity and, ideally, within a new transdisciplinary critical paradigm. Even more interesting is the fact that the authors realize the connection with a relevant new area of studies, entitled 'precarity studies.' Investigating the conditions and the outcomes of precarity is paramount to providing a more accurate image of inequality, including aspects concerning class and social hierarchy, in general, but not limited to such aspects.

The volume is comprehensive and complex. However, among the missing distinctions we can identify the concept of equity which is important to the discussion, but not well differentiated from the concept of equality. Also, while

it is clear that we cannot dissociate the discussion about equality from a discussion of the chance of realising liberal justice (alleviating suffering, rejection of domination, stigmatisation and cruelty, universal freedom, personal development) without which is difficult to even conceive of 'the free society' (Scanlon 2018), it is difficult to avoid and make nuanced distinctions from the blunt, instrumental and 'downgrading' type of egalitarianism (Nozick 1974, p. 229). Equality has considerable value, derived directly from the enlightened human principles of respect and dignity, closer to Rawlsian principled foundations.

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