

Bruce Robbins

Equality in (Our) Time

One of what I consider the immense privileges of academic life is the ability to build a broad network of interlocutors through colloquies that take place in many locations. Long before we began to find each other so easily through the internet, academics met at seminars and conferences to share research, with breaks and meals providing opportunities to further exchange ideas and to get to know one another as people. Bruce Robbins and I first met at a meeting of progressive left-leaning professors convened by Stanley Aronowitz in New York City in the early 1990s. We just happened to be seated next to one another and when Bruce asked my name, he started speaking flawless Greek to me. Between our politics, our academic fields, and our connections to Greece, we were always happy to bump into one another, most frequently at the annual meetings of the Modern Language Association. Bruce helped me and my career concretely as a reviewer of my promotion dossier and supporter of the risk I took in writing my study of my paternal family's experiences during the Fascist Occupation of Greece, Daddy's War, in an experimental fashion. (One only finds out about such support after the fact because these kinds of evaluations are highly confidential while they are happening and are forever kept so in most private universities.) More recently we laughed over a very negative critique he gave of one of my early articles – you didn't think I would like this, did you? – something I had forgotten until I unearthed it recently, while finally going through decades-old files.

This is what Bruce Robbins shares with us about his intellectual journey.

To be honest, I didn't pursue a graduate degree in hopes of changing the world. Like so many other young people in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I did want to change the world. But all that was vague, atmospheric, a matter of marching in occasional demonstrations. What I could see right in front of me was the absolute need to make a living and the desire to do so while having an interesting time, if possible. Also, in a time of war, I was eager to do no harm, again, if possible. Inequality was present to my mind, but present in a complicated way. My parents had not been to college, and when I got to Harvard, that put me in an embattled minority, competing with other students who had major cultural advantages. What spurred me on was the desire to compete and do well, as my parents had, not a desire for equality. It was only when I started work on my dissertation that my identification with my grandparents kicked in. They had had no education at all. One grandfather had died in an industrial accident. My grandmother had

come to America to escape life as a servant. I wrote my dissertation and my first book about servants.

I wrote that dissertation while living in Europe and considering the prospect of exile – or expatriation, if I chose to consider life in Europe a choice rather than an accident. I was inspired by Edward W. Said's writings on exile as a model for the intellectual. The next books I wrote (back in the U.S. by then) were about intellectuals, professionalism (seen as a defensible career choice even on the left), and cosmopolitanism. I addressed cosmopolitanism first of all as distance FROM nationalism and militarism, but also as a vehicle for global economic justice. It's at this point that economic equality came back to the fore for me.

I teach in the department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, where I am proud to be able to sign myself as Old Dominion Foundation Professor of the Humanities – a title once held by Edward W. Said. My most recent books are *Atrocity: A Literary History* (forthcoming in 2025), *Criticism and Politics: A Polemical Introduction* (2022), and *The Beneficiary* (2017). My other books include *Perpetual War: Cosmopolitanism from the Viewpoint of Violence* (2012), *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* (2007), *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress* (1999), *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (1993), and *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (1986). A collection of essays entitled *Cosmopolitanisms*, co-edited with Paulo Horta, came out in July 2017. I have also edited *Intellectuals: Aesthetics, Politics, Academics* (1990) and *The Phantom Public Sphere* (1993) and co-edited, with Pheng Cheah, *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (1998) and (with David Palumbo-Liu and Nirvana Tanoukhi) *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World* (2011). My essays have appeared in *The Baffler*, *n+1*, *The Nation*, *The New Statesman*, *Public Books*, the *London Review of Books*, and the *LA Review of Books*.

My organized efforts on behalf of the Palestinian cause began in 2002, when I collaborated (with the physicist Alan Sokal) on an "Open Letter of American Jews to Our Government," that called for cutting off all American aid to Israel if Israel would continue not to recognize the relevant United Nations resolutions. The "Open Letter" was published in the *New York Times* with over 4000 signatures, translated around the world, and re-published in 2006.

In 2014 I was co-proposer of Modern Language Association Resolution 2014-1, calling on the U.S. Department of State to contest Israel's denials of entry to the Palestinian West Bank to United States academics who have been invited to teach, confer, or do research at Palestinian universities. The resolution gained the support of an overwhelming majority, 1500 of the 2500 votes cast, though the required 10% of members did not vote.

I am also the director of a documentary entitled “Some of My Best Friends Are Zionists,” available at bestfriendsfilm.com, and another called “What Kind of Jew Is Shlomo Sand?” available at Mondoweiss.com.

And here is what Bruce Robbins shares with us. I include the date on which he drafted it, as that date’s proximity to the events of October 7 might be of interest to readers.

October 16, 2023

These days we academics, among others, are talking with more ease and enthusiasm about equality, and that’s a good thing. Not long ago, talk of equality was a bit awkward, a bit constrained. People saw the virtue of it, but they were hesitant to hold that banner too high as they marched in one cause or another. The social movements of the 1960s suspected that demanding equality was not enough; maybe equality was even the wrong thing to demand. Like other social movements, so-called “difference” feminism looked, at least from the outside, as if it were suspicious of any and all universal norms, including equality, on the grounds that such norms were masculine, false universals, willfully blind to the essential and irreducible differences between categories of people, like men and women. Any supposedly common standard always implicitly favored one side over the other, so its results were biased. Quantification, the most blatant standard of measurement, seemed self-evidently to be a mistake. Any quantification of injustice was itself an injustice.

On these issues, “difference” feminism lined up against “equality” feminism, which was more concerned with measurable matters like equal pay for equal work. Another way the battle lines were drawn (notably by philosopher Nancy Fraser) was between the struggle for recognition and the struggle for redistribution. Equality was the obvious goal of the struggle for redistribution, which called for rights and material resources to be distributed more equally. But was equality even relevant to the struggle for recognition? In those struggles, what was being called for was recognition of what one *was*. That was a matter of identity. Identity has of course continued to be invoked since, under the indirect influence of Nietzsche’s critique of morals and Foucault’s extension of that critique to all norms and all forms of normativity, and the more it is invoked, the more uncomfortable the proponents of equality have felt in pressing their claims.

It would be a terrible distortion to say that in our time everything has changed, though change has indeed happened and some of its causes are readily identified. The financial crisis of 2008 and following, Occupy Wall Street, the Bernie Sanders campaign, the glaring difference in vulnerability to Covid-19 among different social

groups, successful strikes in unlikely places like Amazon, a general reinvigoration of labor campaigns, and other recent events have all reminded us of equality's power to gather together the energies of impatience with the status quo. Of course, equality had already been throwing its weight around. Noam Chomsky has pursued a rigorously universalistic "no double standards" critique of American foreign policy for what seems like forever. Edward W. Said's challenge to American policy in the Middle East is popularly associated with his book *Orientalism* (1978) and with his identity as a Palestinian, about which he wrote with great insight, but the basis of his politics was not different from Chomsky's: equal rights for all, Palestinians and Israelis alike, in a single shared state of all its citizens. People like Stuart Hall, Adolph Reed, and Robin D. G. Kelley have been insisting for decades that there is no serious politics of race that doesn't include or place itself within a politics of class, which is to say, at least roughly, an egalitarian politics. Among feminists, Nancy Fraser has never been a lone voice crying in the wilderness, and indeed her insistence on redistribution now seems to fit snugly within a Black feminist politics of intersectionality that goes back to the 1970s and that never for a micro-second forgot economic inequality.

And, of course, matters of identity also remain very much in the forefront of politics today, and not just because of moral panics on the right about trans youth and so-called wokeness. Indigenous people have every right to demand that their children be educated in their native language. Their claim to difference can be generalized. Equality shouldn't mean sameness.

To say this is to admit that the struggle for greater equality is by no means an uncomplicated one. What does equality mean? Equality of what? Many of the champions of equality speak explicitly or implicitly in favor of equality of opportunity, not equality of resources or outcomes. To take that position is to accept the legitimacy of the competition for resources. More precisely, it is to accept competition as the proper principle by which society's resources should be allocated. In that sense, even though the loudest and most relevant critique of capitalism is that it creates such terrible inequalities, egalitarianism is not as anti-capitalist as it might seem. To demand, say, that people control the fruit of their labor is to demand something more than equality, and perhaps even something different from it.

Here is another complication. Inequalities of income, for example between men and women doing the same work, are blatant and infuriating, but they are arguably no more consequential than inequalities of total wealth, which most often depend on other factors, especially inherited wealth. More inequality comes from inheritance than from income. For many people, the largest single source of inherited wealth derives from family property. And that means that redlining, the policy by which bankers consistently denied mortgages to potential home-

owners in neighborhoods where the majority was made up of people of color, has helped increase and entrench an already impressive economic inequality along racial lines.

To this I add a further complication, which I developed a few years ago in an article for the online journal *Aeon*. Are “we” really the 99%? Many of us who have applauded that stirring figure, beginning with the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, knew that the number was not precise and was never intended to be. The slogan did not arise because someone calculated that 99% was more accurate than 92% or 85% or 66%. It arose because it seemed to capture the grossness of a prevailing inequality. The problem is that a global perspective forces us almost to reverse the percentage. At the level of the planet as a whole, inhabitants of metropolitan capitals who proclaim “we are the 99%” are in fact much more likely to belong to the top 10%, if not to the top 1%. As many have observed, the so-called developed world accounts for a disproportionate share of the world’s resources. The rich in global terms are relatively few in number, but they punch above their population weight in terms of consumption of goods and services as well as the production of toxic wastes. Internationally speaking, the official statistics on mortality rates and childhood malnourishment are similarly out of whack.

As World Bank economist Branko Milanovic has been insisting for decades, there is ample empirical evidence that the division between have and have-not countries has come to outweigh the division between haves and have-nots within any given country. Milanovic writes: “most differences in income can be attributed to someone’s country of citizenship rather than their position within their own society.” Thus to achieve “even simple equality within states” – already of course a utopian goal – “would make very little difference to global inequality.” Inequality *within* nations, bad as it is, pales in comparison to inequality *between* nations.

Yet even those of us who find global inequality indefensible hesitate to raise the subject. Mostly because things being how they are, talking about it doesn’t seem to do any immediate good, politically speaking. It sounds like moralizing in a void. The economy is supranational, while even at its best, politics seems restricted to the scale of the nation. Even where the equality of “one person, one vote” exists, and we know that this is far from the case in the United States, national citizenship does not confer any voting rights at all, let alone equal rights, on “foreigners,” and this despite the fact that those foreigners are often directly affected by the policies that will be decided upon in supposedly democratic national assemblies. Since the foreigners don’t vote, what political party would campaign for global economic equality? How can we even start to speak about economic equality at the global scale when the equal right to vote has no global meaning? I say all this without even beginning to speak of inequality as it per-

tains to refugees or, in more general terms, to precarity, another, somewhat less tangible measure of material deprivation.

Another reason for hesitation is the not unfounded fear that, if we were to take inequality with the seriousness that it deserves, to push for a more equitable distribution of existing resources (rather than miraculously managing to add new resources without furthering the extractivist model that is destroying the natural habitat), we would have to imagine sacrificing some of the comforts to which we have become accustomed. The issue is more often associated with responses to climate change, including leaving fossil fuels in the ground. Austerity not in the neoliberal sense, in which the rich get richer and rest of us tighten our belts, but in an environmental sense, which would require belt-tightening for the rich as well. Globally speaking, recall, “the rich” doesn’t mean the 1%. It probably includes anyone who would be reading these words. And points at much the same political obstacle.

If we take equality seriously on a global scale, we should not imagine that afterwards we will continue to value equally those things we are in the habit of valuing, or to see them so valued by others. Certain things that have seemed to be necessities, an absolute part of who we are, will be in danger of being seen as luxuries, things we can and must learn to do without. We should not imagine that we will continue to be ourselves. We will have to become something or someone else. There are no technocratic solutions, no merely economic solutions to inequality. In that sense, equality is a program of cultural re-invention, aimed at identity itself. That does not make it any less frightening.

On this note – equality as a program of cultural re-invention – I will pivot here from the mainly material sense of equality that I have been referring to above and instead try to consider the term in a moral and cultural sense, as for example when it performs as a silent partner in phrases like “there have been atrocities on both sides.” On Saturday, October 7, 2023 Hamas militants broke out of Gaza and attacked villages and army bases on the Israeli side of the fortified border, killing over one thousand noncombatants, including many women, children, and elderly people. This was an atrocity. The outrage it elicited was natural and legitimate. Equally natural and equally legitimate was the response on the Palestinian side, which reminded the world of the killing of Gazans, including women, children, and elderly people, stretching back over seventeen years, by means of Israeli bombings of densely populated areas. Given the massive support for Israel in the United States and Europe, even in the face of Israeli plans for further violence that might properly be described as genocidal – plans that have not yet been carried out as I write this, that is, still in the month of October 2023 – a sense of rough moral equality between the two sides, each with its innocent victims of violence, should perhaps count as an improvement. It would certainly be

an improvement over the idea of Hamas fighters as animals and of Hamas itself as an organization that deserves to be eliminated from the face of the earth. (How easy it would be to say the same of Israel and the Israelis, who have so much more innocent blood on their hands). And yet equality of this balanced sort does not seem satisfactory.

In “The Compass of Mourning,” an immediate response to the Gaza events published online at the *London Review of Books*, philosopher Judith Butler gave surprising prominence to the concept of equality. “I ask myself whether we can mourn, without qualification, for the lives lost in Tel Aviv as well as those lost in Gaza without getting bogged down in debates about relativism and equivalence. Perhaps the wider compass of mourning serves a more substantial ideal of equality, one that acknowledges the equal grievability of lives, and gives rise to an outrage that these lives should *not* have been lost, that the dead deserved more life and equal recognition for their lives.” The ideal of equality referenced here sounds familiar and unthreatening. But it does not stop at “equal grievability.” As Butler goes on, the ideal of equality does indeed get “more substantial.” “How can we even imagine,” she asks, “a future equality of the living without knowing, as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has documented, that Israeli forces and settlers had killed nearly 3800 Palestinian civilians since 2008 in the West Bank and Gaza even before the current actions began. Where is the world’s mourning for them? Hundreds of Palestinian children have died since Israel began its ‘revenge’ military actions against Hamas, and many more will die in the days and weeks to come.”

As you will have noticed, Butler takes a turn here away from “equal grievability,” which is to say away from “there have been atrocities on both sides.” This is a turn from morals to politics. In 1676, in what white Americans of the time called King Philip’s War, which drove most of the Native Americans out of New England, the Native Americans burned villages and massacred women and children, just as the settlers did. The Indians too committed atrocities. But the fact that they committed atrocities does not erase or repeal the justice of their cause. This is what I take Butler to be saying. Atrocities inspire horror. If you look them in the face, you deplore them. But true equality, like true justice, is a terminus that can only be obscured by lining up atrocities on one side against atrocities on the other. In Palestine, as in New England, the question was and is driving people off their land.

The past tense of “was” and the present tense of “is” suggest another sense in which equality is not necessarily sameness. Difference comes with time. Butler can also be understood as taking a turn that is pragmatic and temporal, as if she were saying that what we have to concentrate on *now* is not the violence that has already happened but the violence that is about to happen by way of “revenge,”

violence that will be committed by Israel, violence that we still might have time to do something about. From this perspective, formal equality would be deflected by time, and where we are situated in time. Violence that can still be stopped is unequal to violence that has already happened.

During the French Revolution, Edmund Burke wrote in a letter to a friend, “It is possible that many estates about you were obtained by arms, that is, by violence, . . . but it is *old violence*; and that which might be wrong in the beginning, is consecrated by time, and becomes lawful.” I for one would very much like to see today’s titles to land, and more generally the ways in which the rich obtained property rights over the riches that define and disgrace our very unequal society, reopened to scrutiny. Burke invites this mental experiment; he seems to want the violence that underlies so much inequality displayed for all to see. He is admitting that the results would be scandalous. And, at the same time, he is saying that the passage of time makes a moral as well as a legal difference – that old violence is not the same as new violence. I can imagine looking back at these new acts of bloody expropriation from the perspective of a future when the people of Gaza and all the other Palestinian refugees, whether from inside or outside the borders of 1948 Israel, will enjoy equal rights and protections in a state of their own choosing. The violence suffered and the violence committed will still have been terrible, but by then the violence will not look as terrible as it looks today.