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OPINION

No Billionaires? How Much Inequality Is Too Much?



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Anyone who accuses the left of egalitarianism is met with swift rebuke: “We accept differences between people, including differences in income and wealth. We just believe the differences should not be allowed to become too extreme.” This sentiment reflects what can probably be described as a prevailing consensus in today’s society: differences are acceptable, but too much is too much. And it is encapsulated in the rallying cry of “no more billionaires,” a demand first championed by Bernie Sanders.

The economist Murray N. Rothbard used the following argument against egalitarianism in his essay “Egalitarianism as a Revolt Against Nature”: “This means, of course, that equality of all men – the egalitarian ideal – can only be achieved if all men are precisely uniform, precisely identical with respect to all of their attributes. The egalitarian world would necessarily be a world of horror fiction – a world of faceless and identical creatures, devoid of all individuality, variety, or special creativity.”

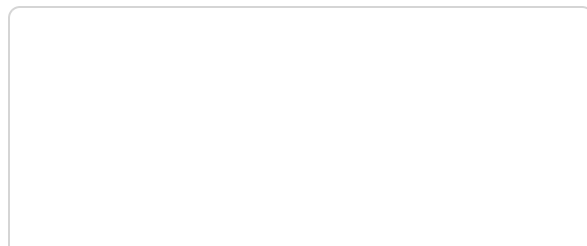
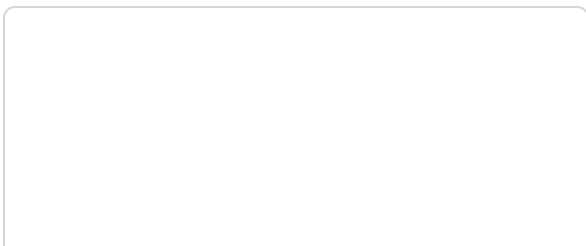
Indeed, such conceptions of equality are nothing new; if anything, the authors of classical utopian novels were obsessed with the notion of equality. In almost every design of a utopian system, private ownership of the means of production (and sometimes even all private property) is abolished, as is any distinction between rich and poor. As early as 1516, the novel *Utopia* by the

Englishman Thomas More, who established the name of this literary genre, states: “Thus I do fully persuade myself that no equal and just distribution of things can be made, nor that perfect wealth shall ever be among men unless this propriety be exiled and banished. But so long as it shall continue, so long shall remain among the most and best part of men the heavy and inevitable burden of poverty and wretchedness.”

In philosopher Tommaso Campanella’s 1602 novel *The City of the Sun*, almost all of the city’s inhabitants, whether male or female, wear the same clothes. And in Johann Valentin Andreä’s utopian description of the Republic of Christianopolis, there are only two types of clothing. “They have only two suits of clothes, one for their work, one for the holidays; and for all classes they are made alike. Sex and age are shown by the form of the dress. The cloth is made of linen or wool, respectively for summer or winter, and the color for all is white or ashen gray; none have fancy, tailored goods.” Even the architecture of the houses is entirely uniform in many utopian novels.

The mirror image of such utopias are dystopias, such as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Harrison Bergeron*. In this short story, published in 1961 and later adapted into a feature film, a government enforces complete equality among all individuals to prevent anyone from feeling superior. Anyone with a high IQ is forced to wear annoying ear devices, the beautiful are masked, and the strong are burdened with weights. Any hint of individual talent or superiority is viewed as a threat to the social order, with the state closely monitoring its citizens and punishing any deviation from equality. Harrison Bergeron, an exceptionally talented teenager, rebels against this system.

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Hardly anyone who deplores “social injustice” would today advocate the kind of radical egalitarianism propagated in these utopias or castigated in these dystopias. While most accept that there should be differences in income, many add that these differences should not be “too extreme”. But what is too extreme and what is acceptable? Many critics of social inequality point out that the wealth gap has only widened in recent decades – for example, a manager today earns much more in relation to his employees than in the past. So, was the gap “in the past” the right size? Hardly, because many of the people who complain about excessive inequality today were just as vocal about unfairness in the past, to which they now like to refer. The good old days are only good today; in the past, they were just as “unfair” in the eyes of the critics.

The promotion of total equality has been replaced by the outcry against “excessive” inequality. Take the popular calls for a country in which there should be no billionaires. According to the Forbes list of the world’s billionaires, such countries do already exist – the poorest African countries, North Korea, and Cuba. In contrast, countries like Switzerland and Sweden boast a disproportionately high number of billionaires. In fact, Sweden even has a higher ratio of billionaires per capita than the United States. One can’t

help but wonder if the people in Cuba and North Korea are happier than those in Switzerland and Sweden?

Historically, the decline in poverty has always been accompanied by an increase in the number of billionaires. Under Mao, there were no billionaires in China, but 88 percent of the Chinese population was living in extreme poverty. Today, there are more billionaires in China than in any other country in the world – with the exception of the United States. The cause of the decline in the number of Chinese people living in extreme poverty to less than one percent is the same as the increase in the number of billionaires: economic growth.

Anyone who accepts the argument that social inequality should not be rejected per se, but should not be allowed to become “excessive,” must explain who decides what constitutes “excessive” inequality. Often, “excessive” starts slightly above what you have yourself: Billionaires are a thorn in the side of multimillionaire Bernie Sanders. For philosopher and university professor Christian Neuhäuser, who calls for wealth to be banned, “excessive” starts just above the salary of a university professor.

Neither Neuhäuser nor Sanders is calling for everyone to be made equal; what they oppose is “excessive wealth.” That’s why, in my dystopian novel *2075: When Beauty Became a Crime*, I didn’t have the radical “Movement for Optical Justice” (also known as *MOVE*) call for everyone to be made equal in their appearance. This movement is against the minority of “overly beautiful” women who benefit most from the beauty bonus and are thus branded “privileged beauties.” All women between the ages of 15 and 40 undergo annual scans, during which artificial intelligence compares their appearance to an ideal standard of beauty. Those deemed to exceed a 95% match are labeled as “overly beautiful.”

Unlike in the popular film *Uglies*, in which compulsory operations make everyone equally beautiful, in *2075*, only the “overly beautiful” are subjected to

forced surgery known as “Optical Optimization Therapy” to make them conform to the average standard. I chose this fictional device because the essence of envy is not to uplift the “disadvantaged,” but to bring down the envied. Enviars are not primarily concerned with improving their own situation; they are perfectly happy if, for example, the rich people they envy lose out via tax legislation or expropriation or – as in my novel *2075* – stunningly beautiful women are made less beautiful through surgery.

Of course, sooner or later a kind of dynamic develops, because once you abolish billionaires, for example, resentment builds against people who are not billionaires but do have a few hundred million dollars. However, modern egalitarians are generally not concerned with absolute equality – and therefore all arguments against it are futile.

Rainer Zitelmann is a historian, sociologist, and author of the dystopian novel "[2075: When Beauty Became a Crime](#)."