

AN INTRODUCTION TO EGALITARIAN THOUGHT AND DYNAMICS

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Abstract: In this introduction we approach egalitarianism as an upsetting force that in various ways has shaped much of modern, especially Western, human history. We outline philosophical trajectories from the Enlightenment onward; consider the historical realization of an agency of 'the people' for the articulation of state, society, and politics; and highlight some issues that arise when the claims to freedom and equality clash against established institutions and values. Stressing the dynamic intertwining of the egalitarian with the hierarchical, we portray egalitarian life forms as modes of relationality that negate, subvert, or take advantage of open potentials in existing systems. Egalitarian life strives toward reconfiguring social orders through rupturing moments of effervescence and liminality while attempting to redefine central categories of life.

Keywords: egalitarianism, equality, freedom, hierarchy, life, politics, revolution, social order

The articles in this special issue address contemporary egalitarian or egalitarianizing dynamics, in other words, practices that explicitly attempt to challenge and overcome socio-economic and political circumstances that place constraints and limits on human potential, usually oppressively so. Those orientations toward equality take many forms, articulated as they might be around notions of status, gender, leadership, redistribution of wealth, and so forth, but they are always relative to vernacular terms and social processes that might or might not correspond with how one frames 'equality' in the most dominant discourses today. Broadly, we approach egalitarianism as immanent



in all societies, past or present, and integral in diverse and varying heterogeneous ways to their dynamic process. Our approach thus entails moving away from anthropological discussions that associate (often ideologically) egalitarianism primarily with particular societies—typically, non-state, pre-industrial, or hunter-gatherer societies,¹ or variants of political systems such as social democracy within modern liberal nation-state systems.

We stress that what is embraced by the term ‘egalitarianism’ is a complex of meanings, senses, and potential, reaching far back in historical time, perhaps to times when human beings in a great diversity of contexts achieved a reflective awareness and consciousness of their human beingness. There are many starting points of an egalitarian consciousness (simultaneous, as we shall suggest, with that which would counterpose it) and of its evolutionary direction and potential. The discussion in Graeber and Wengrow’s *The Dawn of Everything* (2021) has recently initiated refreshing speculation about a universal preference for a sort of anarchic egalitarianism in pre-historic systems (for an apt critique, see Appiah 2021). Graeber and Wengrow argue against the idea that there has been a progress toward egalitarianism and hold that while expansive egalitarian systems were already present in the past, they have never been sufficiently recognized. We disagree with the idea of egalitarian systems ever existing without also their dynamic counterparts. The vision of egalitarianism that today commands so much global current discourse, including Graeber and Wengrow’s book, has much of its grounding in modern history, especially the emergence of European and American global domination motivated by the growth and transformational potencies of what is broadly discussed (and critiqued) as capitalism, associated with staggering innovations in science and technology. The debates surrounding the egalitarian idea—so closely connected with a grand vision of equality and liberation from constraint, enslavement, and oppression—have made great contributions to better futures for humanity, but rarely without their inherent contradictions (see Patterson 1998).

One of the implications of the Euro-American emergence is the commanding dominance of egalitarian-oriented ideological regimes of highly contested and divisive kinds (e.g., liberal democracy versus communism) that block and obscure egalitarian possibility and potential within and outside their domain. The clashes between these commanding political theories of the egalitarian type have also tended to conceal the smaller actions and reactions that more quietly manifest themselves nested *inside* those larger and encompassing dynamics. And they have also blinded us to the potential of egalitarianizing movements arising *outside* the orbit of the Western hegemonies. Those creative and generative practices of human populations may not be reduced to or measured against the assumptions and essentialisms (often self-legitimizing and self-defeating) in accounts of Western expansion that center on, for instance, democracy, equality, or redistribution.

In this special issue, we pursue the configurations of social life that develop under circumstances of revolutionary movements or socio-political struggles, when egalitarianism forms a crucial fixture as a value, practice, goal, or otherwise orienting relational practice (see also Cherstich et al. 2020). The articles contain a selection of case studies in which egalitarianism, in some capacity, is explicitly addressed or expressed in vernacular terms as a form or ideal of life. The contributions are concerned with ongoing lived realities in what may be termed the everyday working world. We find ethnographically detailed descriptions of people grappling with circumstances experienced as restraining or harmful, attempting to work something out between themselves and aspiring toward diverse and sometimes locally conceived notions of emancipation, equality, and justice, or bringing into life an equalizing state policy or a fairer conception of the economy. Driven by the desire to attain some egalitarian qualities in their life, their efforts are momentary and experimental. We also pay attention to how such efforts build particular social formations that tend to work against or in tandem with the egalitarian orientation. The organizational challenges that confront or may contradict the very dynamic of egalitarianism often provide its potency.

In contrast to earlier efforts to privilege certain social arenas for egalitarian practice, such as activism, the Occupy movement, or the political left (see, e.g., Graeber 2007), we assume a wider perspective on egalitarian life forms taking shape within the market of money (Shapiro), labor (Korsbrenke), industry and resource extraction (Szolucha), government reform (Bertelsen, Hasan), democratic leadership (Rudi), and state and civil society (Rio). The articles approach the energetic forms of political experimentation unfolding in these domains by framing how the egalitarian orientation is dealt with, released, instantiated, transformed, or contained. The egalitarian lives and forms described differ in the ways in which they do or do not succeed in upsetting hierarchies, how they do or do not create new hegemonic socio-political formations, or, indeed, how they manage to sidestep in practice the problem of becoming their own authoritative masters, so much debated in the history of egalitarianism.

The rest of this introduction will consider the historical and undeniably philosophical origins of the Western egalitarian tradition. This revolves around the historical realization of an agency of 'the people' for the articulation of state, society, and politics. Our effort in the following is to highlight some of the problematics that arise once that agency starts to push against established institutions and values. It gives force to a multitude of problematics, among them the potential to bring about change and rupture. This is not meant to complete or cast a new light on the contributions to this issue, as the articles fully explore distinct egalitarian life forms in their own right, independently of these historical or philosophical developments. We instead seek in the following to give an outline of the possibilities and restrictions in Western egalitarian thinking.

Egalitarian Trajectories

In keeping with the empirical horizon of the contributions to this special issue, we limit our exploration of egalitarianism to certain domains revolving around equality and freedom. Egalitarianism in those domains becomes a concept that gathers around it and collects a great many other pragmatic operators that may be relevant to its concrete realization. These include notions of democracy, commons, human rights, justice, or indicators that are often integral to logics of measurement and policy for economic equality, equality of opportunity, and so forth (see, e.g., Kapferer 2011; Nussbaum 2019; Piketty 2022; Rosanvallon 2013).

Key among the trajectories of equality and freedom is pre-revolutionary France, where egalitarianism condensed some Enlightenment visions, particularly an understanding in rational and secularist intellectual thought carried into social and political movements of liberal opening and of revolution. The French revolutionary cry *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* established egalitarianism as an abstraction that could be mobilized and specified spatially and historically and whose force continues to echo around the globe. *Égalité* (equality) is the middle conjunctive transitive word—a liminal term that links emancipation (freedom) to the realization of the undivided fraternity of humankind or, in Victor Turner's (1969) more inclusive sense of *communitas* in which human beings are a collective unity on the basis of their shared human beingness, their raw humanity alone. *Égalité*, therefore, is an active word bearing the meaning of the whole toward an ever-changing world in a performative fashion. In the condition of *égalité*, or in the tension toward *égalité*, some or all of that which may differentiate or otherwise distinguish human individuals from others, to socially separate or to elevate one over the other (e.g., in terms of status or power), is suspended or negated. In other words, the hierarchializing dimensions and forces in human sociality and in the forming of social relations, which oppose as much as they may unite human beings, are rendered inoperable, irrelevant, or suspended. This is the significance of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of the Noble Savage and his argument in *A Discourse on Inequality* ([1754] 1984).

A second key trajectory may be found analyzing discourses centered more broadly on egalitarianism—especially those associated with political and economic modernity, ushered in during the circumstances of what Eric Hobsbawm (1962) labeled 'the age of revolution'. Frequently, the American, French, and Russian revolutions, as well as the English, are seen as marking the beginning of contemporary global realities, that is, as a rupture from the past and the worlds of tradition. In other words, Europe and the Americas present themselves as sites of the apotheosis to full consciousness of the emancipatory desire of human beings to burst the shackles of their oppression and to realize their potential for undivided equality with their fellow human beings. This paradox of geopolitical provenance *and* purported universality is apparent in political

ideological usage when notions of egalitarianism are presented simultaneously to be Euro-American and to legitimate claims to dominance and accompanying moral authority across the globe. The egalitarian idea, thus deeply embedded in European and North American political philosophy from the seventeenth century to the present, is also strongly dualist, especially opposing egalitarianism to hierarchy and the state to society. Vital in that matrix of orientations are also the commanding ideological values of freedom and democracy. They may be understood as underpinning the egalitarian idea, giving it historical depth and providing the basis for the regency of the concept. But the possibility for destabilizing that matrix is also in the anthropological record.

A third trajectory, then, may be the anthropological one, tightly bound to the others but also providing its own forms of critique. Anthropology has perhaps most prominently attempted to mobilize ethnographic materials that point to other ways of balancing out egalitarianism with hierarchy and state with society (Dumont 1970; see also Clastres [1974] 1998). In the comparative perspective established after World War I, the exploration of alternatives to the grand Western narratives of equality, freedom, and modernity tended to focus on other possibilities for equal redistribution and social arrangements based on solidarity and generosity. This anthropological interest in non-Western social, political, and religious formations, harboring or realizing combined hierarchical and egalitarian potentials, has been crucial not only to the intellectual labor of the discipline but also to its politics of cultural critique. Once anthropology searched outside the immediate Western parameters, the grounds for the most stubbornly universal ideologies and truths about society seemed to crumble.

For instance, it soon became clear that hierarchy and egalitarianism in most societies stand for general formational principles or different moments in social process. At their extremes, they are thoroughly contradictory or negating of the other, but at other moments they incorporate that to which they are opposed. In this sense, as already indicated, the concept of egalitarianism is inclusive of far more than simply the notion of equality, as this term is commonly used in a reductive sense of monetary wealth. Likewise, the concept of hierarchy includes more than distinctions of class, rank, status, and power that may have dominating and subordinating effects (Iteanu 2009; see also Rio and Smedal 2009). Current discourses centered on gender and sexuality, for example, expand the understanding of hierarchy (and its egalitarian reduction) beyond that of status and power (Flanagan 1989; Moore 1994). They may indicate the inadequacy of economic notions of inequality where, for example, providing women with greater access to higher pay may have little overall effect in reducing a general subordination of women.

Buitron and Steinmüller (2020) also underline that the idea of equality has too often merely been reflecting Eurocentric biases instead of the actual properties within societies themselves: “‘Egalitarianism’ insinuates a scripted unity

that contradicts the fundamentally relational, flexible, and ephemeral nature of the forms of co-living anthropologists have found on the ground” (ibid.: 9). Further, mirroring in many ways Dumont (1970) and Pitt-Rivers (1963), Buitron and Steinmüller (2020: 29) strongly emphasize that hierarchy and egalitarianism are mutually imbricated in any human society: “Each hierarchy needs to accept the fundamental equality of those who are on the same rank; and each system promoting equality needs to exclude some who are less or more than those who are equal (be it subhuman, bestial, criminal, terrorist, or sacred). Egalitarianism and hierarchy are two sides of the same coin.”

While we recognize that a projection of a Western idea has been important, this has to be complemented also by an opposite direction. For, since the inception of the anthropological project, the discipline has also mobilized ethnography for modifying and critiquing the Western concept of egalitarianism *from without*, actually from the point of view of the ‘exotic’, or that conceived and defined as such from a European perspective (see Kapferer 2011, 2013). The anthropology of the small-scale and so-called traditional societies achieved a relevance for the study of human being *in general* and opened one way in which anthropology itself could break free from some of its own self-imposed conceptual constraints and contribute to the theorizations and understanding of the human being and sociality.

These three trajectories, however, all point to a shared egalitarian orientation that operates as a potential for restructuration and change. As we also emphasized above, it can often be an unrecognized facet of a greater, locally defined struggle or movement, but it is *there*, as a question, irrespective of what people want to change or do. Being a perpetual potential of the social, egalitarianism is always a mode of relationality, at the edges of all hierarchical interaction taking place around it, and therefore also a major force in history. We stress in these genealogies the dynamic intertwining of the egalitarian with the hierarchical. In this understanding, our perspective moves away from a common position that presents hierarchy to be external to the egalitarian and absolutely contradictory. Instead, we recognize egalitarianism and hierarchy as being mutually implicated, that is, egalitarianism and hierarchy are generative or productive of the other: their contradiction is as much internal as it has the appearance of being external. Hegel ([1821] 1967) also suggests this dialectic as a continuing force, impelling changes over the course of history.

Egalitarian moments and processes can and do occur in what may be described as dominant and overarching hierarchical orders. Buddhist practice, for instance, is egalitarian and offers liberating potential to those enmeshed in Brahmanic Hindu systems that otherwise share similar cultural logics. Conversely, much recent anti-colonial nationalism, which is powerfully egalitarian, often exhibits exclusionary hierarchizing effects, frequently of a racist kind (see Getachew 2019; Kapferer 2011).

Thomas Hobbes (1991) famously presents the hierarchical monarchical state as essential to social order, a position that Jean-Jacques Rousseau sharply contends. Yet such Hobbesian monarch-headed hierarchical tradition-oriented orders are rarely without egalitarian spaces that may be functionally necessary to them. This is very much the case with the hierarchical status and class system of contemporary Britain, for example. As we write this article, this is highlighted in the ceremonial surrounding the death and funeral of Elizabeth II. The body of the Queen became the space of the *demos*, as the crowds that massed to her funeral expressed for a moment a unity, a kind of public *communitas* in which the socially separating hierarchizing differences of class, status, ethnicity, and power seemed all but suspended. The ideological expressions surrounding the Queen's funeral demonstrated that an egalitarian ethos is necessary for the perpetuation of the monarch-headed hierarchy of the British social and political order.

Egalitarian Life and Form

Our outlining above of key aspects of egalitarian thought is also important to counter three key tendencies within conventional research on equality that often conflates equality and egalitarianism as types of or features of society—a position that we find problematic. First, a common problem when approaching notions of 'equality' is that one encounters research and forms of generalization at the nation-state level that are often calibrated along various geopolitical scales of the macro-order. Some countries, such as the Nordic countries, are habitually analyzed as egalitarian or equal (Bendixsen et al. 2017), while others, such as India, Brazil, or South Africa, are conventionally described as unequal (Humphrey 2001). These forms of labeling are commonly found in works relating to state ordering and the left (e.g., Giddens and Diamond 2005). Second, and related to the first problem, critical works on egalitarianism rely on what one may call the 'capitalism as pervasive ontology' point of view. Works on equality following this line are usually centered around instrumental issues that include economic income disparities, unequal wealth distribution, the many forms of capital and their localized or vernacular understandings, or other micro- and macro-economic dimensions (see, e.g., Hart 2001). Typically, critical works in historical and contemporary political economy (e.g., Piketty 2014) operate with equality as a universal and absolute ideal contrary to capital, but they fail to discuss that capitalism (as well as its critique) is a movement based on egalitarian ideals around freedom of exchange and equal distribution of wealth. Such approaches in turn operate with capitalism as a natural system or as an organizational principle, and there is no significant outside to it in an ideational, systemic, or semiotic sense. A third line of

inquiry into egalitarianism takes as its point of departure ‘notions of rights’, as in overviews and assessments of the implementation of human rights or universal citizenship rights. Commonly focusing on the formal legal apparatus, this scholarship tends to analyze political orders from the vantage point of individuals and groups as rights-bearing entities, for instance, in the domain of health (e.g., Farmer 2003; but see Goodale 2009).

While recognizing the important contributions made by the above three lines of inquiry, they do not capture well instances of experimentation that transgress, attack, or circumvent institutional frameworks, systems, or orders. Thus, the various ethnographic cases analyzed here portray orientations or practices aimed at establishing openings in the human situation, attacking or being antagonistic to the conditions of political, economic, historical, or cosmological circumstances that impinge on human life. Furthermore, the cases underline how emancipatory and participatory agency constitutes a form of emergent egalitarianism that exposes and alters the terms for its own existence. Following the notion of ‘aporia of power’, which can be extended to the institutions of society and state (Kapferer 2010), egalitarian actions, in these empirical cases, commonly institute themselves as anomalies, as gaps and cracks or as external to society and state institutions. Egalitarian life forms, often fleeting, are modes of relationality that negate, subvert, or dissolve and take advantage of open potentials or lacunae in the existing systems. They are attempts to shift the balance and reconfigure social orders, in more rupturing moments of effervescence and liminality, and efforts to redefine what counts as central categories of life (e.g., democracy, history, nation, the public and the private, leadership, family, etc.). When attempting to move beyond the impasses of the three problems we have hinted at above, we propose the notion of ‘egalitarian life’ as a socio-political activity oriented against repressive structures that seeks to experiment with horizontal, non-hierarchical principles and modes of being. Moreover, a focus on precisely life in combination with life form is taken consciously in order to situate egalitarian struggles in predominantly challenging and adverse contexts that are anthropologically and not just philosophically accessible (see Arif 2016; Helmreich 2016), reflecting also recent work on life as a crucial domain for rethinking the political, aspirational, and emancipatory (see Blanes and Bertelsen 2021).

Society and State and Experimentation in Philosophical Thought

In this section our aim is to extend the above discussions through what we see as key philosophical perspectives. When we probe the notion of egalitarianism in this special issue, we draw from that larger concept an upsetting force which, in various ways, has shaped much of modern human history, especially that

of the Western world. It articulates the Enlightenment's encounter with a new world—the literal New World of colonialist expansion, but also scientific discovery, industry and labor, capitalism and private property, the emergence of a new class of workers, and the downfall of aristocracy in the Old World. Inside this overturning of the old for the new, the egalitarian orientation came to stand for a massive reorganization of both worlds. Foremost of these changes are of course the breakdown of celestial aristocracy, the creation of new classes between the bourgeoisie and workers, the invention of paper money and bonds against resources in the colonies, the break with landed estates and wealth forms, the hegemonies of trading companies, and a booming globalized industry, as famously argued by Polanyi ([1944] 2001). But inside these major breaks with and expansions beyond existing orders, boundaries, and institutions, there was also a deeper egalitarian orientation being enacted that took up a direct call for 'the people' to form a society as an egalitarian life form outside of, or in dynamic opposition to, the orders of religion, state, and law (Taylor 2004: 92–93).

The concepts of 'civil society', 'common action', and 'everyday life' began to take shape as practical arenas for the articulation of rights, freedoms, equality, and quality of life. They were developed in dynamic opposition to—and in some instances challenged and attacked—God's rational state (Balasopoulos 2014; see also Lefebvre 2014). In that sense, egalitarianism was crucial to the Protestant Reformation, where the relationality with God was on more 'equal footing' in the sense that prayers and liturgy could bypass the priest (and the Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy). This was not an entirely new egalitarian order, but egalitarianism intervened in restructuring hierarchy and placing itself in a different social 'pocket' than before. Arguably the French and American revolutions thereby introduced what we might call a new kind of politics, reflecting also the teachings of Rousseau on the bourgeois ideals: the fusion of self-love and love of country, a loathing of self-interest and corruption, upholding the nation and its people as innately sacred, and, finally, political representation expressed not through elected assemblies but through *la volonté générale* (the general will). The general will would be produced in public spectacles, with performers and spectators taking part on an equal footing as in a religious festival, "so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united" (Rousseau, quoted in Taylor 2004: 123).

The above serves as a brief introduction to the massive place of egalitarianism in becoming a form of habitus in the Western world, a recurring mode of considering both history and practice through its value on a scale or degree of equality. While we will refrain from any attempt at presenting a full history of egalitarianism in modern times, we will highlight a few key points in the discussion forming that historical habitus.

At the time of the French Revolution, the bond between state and freedom arose as a major topic. The problem of the revolution as a political form was

that while unifying—for instance, into the body politic of ‘the people’—it could not take hold as a legitimate sovereign. The whole dilemma for Rousseau’s thought on sovereignty had been oriented around the problem of how to adapt egalitarian life and general will to forms of government and representation. There was no easy match between freedom and democracy. Who would represent the unity and in what kind of representative body? This discussion also heavily influenced Hegel, who oriented his entire investigation of ethics and freedom to state formation. In contradistinction to Rousseau, Hegel ([1821] 1967: 6) despised the egalitarian idea flourishing from revolutionary politics and critiqued the notion that ethics and philosophy could arise from a communal spirit from below, from the people, “in the broth of heart, friendship and inspiration.” Instead, he saw ethical orders to be structured from without, irrespective of popular opinion, and belonging to a higher order of state-based totality: “The state ... which sets determinate limits to the different circles of public life and their rights, uses the strict accuracy of measurement which holds together every pillar, arch, and buttress and thereby produces the strength of the whole out of the harmony of the parts” (ibid). The endeavor of Hegel in that revolutionary period was to avoid seeing the state as a principle of rationality, as it *ought* to be, or as a practical problem of organization. His state was simply the spirit, the general will of the kingdom, irreducible to practical politics and regulations—in sum, a state form, a holism that transcends its parts.

Arising from an anthropological and not a philosophical or ethical tradition, a similar point is also underlined by Louis Dumont (1977). The state as Hegelian ‘spirit’ evokes the imagery of a self-governing social organism and, by implication, an awareness of every individual belonging to it. The state, through the thinking of Hegel, is attributed with encompassing qualities, argues Dumont: “The State is the spirit of a people. As such, it is at the same time a political institution and the general principle or law of social relations in general, hence the mores or values and the consciousness of the individuals that compose it” (ibid.: 122). With Hegel, the state is where the contrary is overcome or ceases to exist. That might in a sense signify the end of the dialectic. However, for Dumont, with his view of historical developments in Europe, that sort of logic also defies what may be seen as generative or ‘good’ about hierarchy. The strength of Hindu cosmology, for example, is that hierarchy is able to encompass the contrary, say, the processing of impurity through Brahminic practices, while also maintaining impurity as part of the system. Here one could elaborate on how the egalitarian orders of modernity in South Africa, for instance, are in fact achieved by peripheralizing that to which they are opposed—as in those categorized as “Whites” as opposed to those signified as “Blacks”—while such a racial exclusion nonetheless remains the principle for the White unified order. Another example would be the persistence of the racial cleavage that has a class dimension in the nominally egalitarian United States (see also Patterson

1998). The inseparability of egalitarian and hierarchical features in these social processes, or the hiding of hierarchical elements intrinsic to the egalitarian state, demonstrates to us what we have pointed out above as lacunae in the thinking about the Western state. The examples point to paradoxes integral to egalitarianism as conceived in the process of Western historical formation, when the egalitarian force of ‘the people’ is not incorporated but cast out.

The French Revolution brought up the question of what egalitarian life would be like as a social form. Into the nineteenth century one had to begin by ‘recovering’ egalitarianism as a mode of relationality, and thereby all of its explosive potential. Marx made this a key point of disagreement in his critique of Hegel. For, whereas both Rousseau and Hegel would associate the state with a transcendent principle—a spirit—which could only be thought and understood as an idea, Marx ([1867] 1990) introduced his materialist dialectic to speak about the practical circumstances of creating institutions. He made the point that the ‘spirit’ of the state, for instance, was merely “the material world reflected in the mind of man and translated into forms of thought” (ibid.: 201). Marx’s position was that the bourgeois thinkers of the time could not appreciate the rationality of the dialectic since it also allowed negations and contradictions to be sustained in the account of historical process. Seeing the entire idea of holism in Hegel as a grand mystification, Marx became occupied with ‘real men’ and their material reality—a position Dumont (1977: 126) later saw as a new form of political economic individualism.

Admittedly, the aim for Marx was to paint a portrait of a deeply problematic ideological construction at the heart of political philosophy, namely, that “Man is acknowledged as *real* only in the form of the egoist individual, and as *true* only in the form of the abstract citizen” (Marx, quoted in Dumont 1977: 126). Philosophers like Rousseau and Hegel had thereby more or less unconsciously created a political theory out of the Christian religious cosmology, where heaven was linked to the state and civil society was earth. By abolishing the distinction between true and real, Marx proposed his material dialectic for reuniting people’s empirical life with their universal essence. That entailed taking away from the concept of the human any religious sense of universal nature or sacred status. What Marx defined as reality could only be found inside the concept of civil society—and neither state nor religion had any significant explanatory purchase here. From this point forward, analytics became narrowly concerned with individuals and relations between them in the newfound category of ‘society’. The individual and the will to agency became a unit of independent value.

Marx’s theories allowed for novel and radical forms of analysis through notions such as class struggle, emancipation, alienation, and subordination—all of which deeply shaped anthropological approaches to egalitarianism (for an early example, see Bloch 1975). It was through particular humans, their actions, and particular relations that human totality could be found, and the

creation of communism would be a practical arrangement whereby society would take charge of the common interest and productivity of the proletarians (Marx and Engels 1848). Hence, in Dumont's view, it was not so much Rousseau or the French Revolution that configured our understanding of egalitarianism as it was the modern economic ideology around Karl Marx and emergent capitalism. For Dumont (1977: 137), Marx's approach implied a reduction of the human being and the social (through the reduction of the state order) to a form of material practicality and economic transactions, belonging to industrial orders and liberal politics.

In an interesting advancement on these points, Henri Lefebvre (2009) develops Marxist thought in an anthropologically helpful way when approaching egalitarian life forms in modern contexts. He argues that the dialectic relation between society and state, between the economic and the political, is not exercised directly in European history. It always goes through intermediary processes of "mobilized social forces," and if there are no such forces, the political system remains inert (*ibid.*: 61; italics added):

Democracy is nothing other than the struggle for democracy. The struggle for democracy is the movement itself. Many democrats imagine that democracy is a type of stable condition toward which we can tend, toward which we must tend. No. *Democracy is the movement*. And the movement is the forces of action. And democracy is the struggle for democracy, which is to say the very movement of social forces; it is a permanent struggle and it is even a struggle against the State that emerges from democracy. There is no democracy without a struggle against the democratic State itself, which tends to consolidate itself as a bloc, to affirm itself as a whole, to become monolithic and to smother the society out of which it develops.

For Lefebvre, what has often been forgotten—within Stalinism, for example—is that "the proletariat needs only a state which is withering away" (*ibid.*: 71). In a revolutionary formation, the proletariat has to become a ruling class in charge of the state but simultaneously must start dismantling the state as an institution. This principle is in fact the very dialectic that habituated the revolutionary classes to the idea of perpetual opposition between egalitarianism and state. Therefore, emancipation for Marx had to begin with the individual "taking back into himself" the social forces (*ibid.*: 78).

Indeed, egalitarianism as a form of relationality would be the foundation for the eventual overturning of both capital and state, where the mutual recognition of one's own situation in the struggle of the other becomes perpetually more clear, eventually releasing this egalitarian potential to revolutionary effect. For our analysis of egalitarian life and its form, an implication of the above is that what is often cast as civil society does not reflect society fully but may, if we lean on Lefebvre's Marx, be seen as a corruption, a prison for the

ideological construction of the human as individual and of private property. Lefebvre thereby also manages to crystallize the spirit of egalitarianism—its perpetual movement as a social force in opposition to institutional rule, civil society domination, and any kind of state formation, including the ‘democratic’.

Sheldon Wolin (2016) helpfully expands on Lefebvre’s position, outlining an important distinction between the meaning of ‘the political’ and ‘politics’, bringing the debate on egalitarianism further along from the difference between Hegel and Marx and the critique of civil society and the state launched by Lefebvre. For Wolin, the political refers to episodic moments of social commonality geared toward well-being, while in contrast politics captures the “continuous, ceaseless, endless” public contestation over access to resources or influence (ibid.: 100). Following Wolin, arguably a substantial amount of what is labeled politics today—from media-propelled attention to voter polls and day-to-day government decisions—tends to eclipse the idea of the political. As Graeber (2007) has argued, through the foliage of group interests, consumer identities, and populist agendas, we rarely see in analyses of politics any real importance credited to emancipatory collective practice. But, like Lefebvre, Wolin (2016) is eager to point out that there is always the potential for activist political life in democracy, and most often democracy should be in opposition to institutional frames. For Wolin, therefore, democracy is always a “fugitive” from its own boundaries and framing (ibid.: 108).

The approaches of Lefebvre, Wolin, and Graeber underline an important feature in the formation of our contemporary world, namely, that the paradoxes inherent in egalitarianism have shaped our contemporary institutions of state and democracy, and that their friction is immanent in their very formation. Such theoretical reconfigurations have had the merit of deconstructing an otherwise elite understanding of social mobilization—one that removes individuality, consciousness, and creativity from political acts of anti-hegemonic struggle, dissidence, and resistance. The egalitarianizing movements portrayed in our case studies are similarly significant in the development of the contemporary world.

The Articles

This special issue offers analytical angles for recognizing the potency inherent in actions that uphold equality and emancipation as primary values. Taken together, the articles all have an empirical basis in ethnographic case studies and provide open-ended approaches to understanding the great diversity of global egalitarian ambitions. Concretely, each article reports on social situations where participants aspire to lead a fully egalitarian and political life—such as in the shape of intentional activism, participant democracy, revolutionary liberation, experiments in popular sovereignty—while enduring the hierarchical

aspects of capital, states, and institutions. Further, in all our examples this aspiration to egalitarian life is taken as fundamentally experimental in form, process, or effect, and is often also limited in temporal duration or spatial expanse. This implies that our notions of egalitarian life and life form are proposed as analytical devices to capture empirical phenomena that would remain elusive to (or uncapturable by) modes of political analysis that privilege, for example, citizenship, electoral rights, formal sovereignty, political parties, and constitutional democracy. We pose instead the existence of a global political dynamic in which egalitarian life is the foundation for experimentation. What types of social forms are created in the moments when egalitarian life is upheld as a primary value? How do they balance the paradox of breaking with some institutional frames when also creating new ones? And how do their social innovations and/or experimentations spill over into mainstream society? In this sense we see a sliding scale in our cases—from activists, communards, and freedom fighters who act on pure egalitarian impulse and are in the middle of their struggle, to other cases where people are in the process of being molded into idealized egalitarian shapes as community police, model workers, or bourgeois citizens.

In Mari Korsbrekke's account of the Twin Oaks 'intentional community' in the US, communards continuously struggle to overcome the potential in the egalitarian structure to become too authoritarian, too obsessed with labor quotas, too target-oriented, and too dismissive and unforgiving of members who cannot live up to the ideals of the egalitarian. The success of the Twin Oaks community, from the emic point of view, is grounded in its capacity to react when the system of management and organization becomes 'too egalitarian', for instance, when the value of personal quirks and flaws is overrun and disrespected. At this tipping point, communards flip the system over, either turning it into fun and play or simply changing its rules. In this way, the democratic attitude continually derails the community's own capacity for becoming overly authoritarian.

Anna Szolucha's article likewise asks the reader to acknowledge the sense of openness and emergence that is needed to uphold the idea of democracy—not as a form of governance or a system of state, but as a crucial social force outside of state-cum-corporate orders. One of her informants in the anti-fracking movement in the UK wondered "how people all of the sudden can be of such little importance," and this popular disappointment with democracy recalls a human being able to break free from that form. Democracy is understood not as a concrete political structure, but rather as an "egalitarian human bond" that is a primary ontological condition for the existence of the state and the legitimacy of all decision making.

Matan Shapiro in his contribution also identifies egalitarian dynamics within settings that one would think of as capitalist in a formal sense. Analyzing Bitcoin adopters in Tel Aviv, he juxtaposes an egalitarian life form premised on

decentralization with the hierarchies of the dominant centralist system of the nation-state. Opposing the structural hegemony of banks and government with their extra-statist cryptocurrency, these activists advance the use of Bitcoin to break with mainstream lifestyles and speak of themselves as ‘a community’ with the social practice of Bitcoin as its unifying infrastructure. For them, the consequences of the ultimate mass adoption of extra-statist money will be the radical crumbling of societal institutions and the rise instead of new ad hoc agreements premised on experimental and ideological individualism.

Axel Rudi’s article explores the cosmological and ideational formations of the Kurdish revolutionary landscape. Focusing on the paradoxical figurations of authority and, particularly, on the position of legendary leader Öcalan, Rudi’s contribution maps many of the contradictions that dog egalitarian formations and forms of experimentation, as we have also sketched in this introduction. Specifically, Rudi proposes that inside the Kurdish freedom movement and revolution, a third kind of leader is emerging—an egalitarian figure between king and charismatic prophet. He shows how this affects the encompassing egalitarian order and impacts how we may, anthropologically, approach egalitarian life.

In his article Bjørn Enge Bertelsen builds on the historical legacy of experimenting with the New Man concept in Mozambique. Analyzing the context of community policing, he outlines how such a horizontal form of policing draws on cosmologies of New Man in global discourse and how it engenders violent forms of egalitarian processes. There is, it seems, an *inevitability* of the New Man as a cosmological and cosmogenetic principle fueling utopian politics as emergent and dynamic (Buck-Morss 2002). Drawing on Nietzsche, Gomel (2004: 373) therefore underlines that “the New Man is a process rather than a goal, open-ended and contingent, borne away on the tide of history, which cannot be arbitrarily dammed when the desired state is achieved.” In the context of being an egalitarian allegory, the New Man is a long-standing figure in utopian configurations and modes of thought (Skradol 2009), comprising aspects of being, longing, and becoming. Given its perpetuity, diversity, and impact, egalitarians seem doomed to invent, again and again, the New Man—a form of political experimentation in egalitarian life that is reverberating across post-colonial urban contexts in Mozambique.

This invention of New Man as part of state policy is also highlighted in Mohammad Tareq Hasan’s contribution. He portrays the female garment worker in Bangladesh as a particular kind of universalized egalitarian figure—living her life in that social space of urban factories, in a rupture with more hierarchical and kinship-bound rural and agricultural space. Thus, the development and economic growth that manifests through industrialization is realized not only by means of a specific kind of state operation or capitalism, but also through the innovation and subjectivity of the dedicated worker—the free and independent egalitarian woman. The *joggo nari*—the worthy woman—breaks

with patriarchal orders and *pardah* regulations and is free to sell her labor to the garment industry, becoming a linchpin in a bottom-up transformation of Bangladeshi society. While one would hardly characterize Bangladesh as an egalitarian nation, the country has seen the emergence of a grassroots army of workers, or New Women, ready to satisfy the cares of the nation.

For Knut Rio, the trajectory from the French Revolution of 1848 impacted how notions of the public and commons manifest themselves in citizenship and actual spaces, such as the Bois de Boulogne in Paris. In Rio's case the bourgeois revolution opened up paths into certain egalitarian domains and commons, equipped to facilitate the glorious life of the new industrial worker. Yet in the very process of becoming subject to commoning processes, those spaces also disintegrated and fragmented as commons. When moved from public spaces into the enclaves of associations and sports clubs, egalitarian life, as referred to above, left the streets and squares open to life forms apart from the political.

The goal of our special issue is to reassess egalitarianism in anthropology and to free it from its sheltered location in political ideology. When actual people in actual social circumstances build a life on the ideals of change, emancipation, and alternative lifestyles, they do not experiment with a new form of political life in a detached way—they become political *with their life*. In the articles that follow we will see that for many, their life and action might be their only asset against corporate forces, state repression, or other oppressive forms. In that sense, the new human that we describe is a precarious character, less heroic and less sensational than the New Man or revolutionary hero of bygone political ideologies.

Conclusion

A key unifying thread running through the different articles is the centrality of the exceptional, the temporary, the transitional, the external, the freak—indeed, the liminal—in egalitarian life forms. Egalitarianizing processes engage and express the dynamic intensity of the liminal, centered on contestation, contradiction, and opposition. As with liminality, egalitarian energies are a vortex of transitions involving creative and (re-)generative action often of transformative or transmutational effect upon what they challenge. Egalitarianism as liminality is itself an expression of change, of opening up to change and new emergence. Egalitarian life—as all the articles here make clear—may be a transitory condition, but one with great effects for political struggle and for human horizons of liberation, emancipation, and rupture.

Given these transitory and liminal conditions, the lives of the people under scrutiny in this special issue also reveal ways to practically reorganize society

according to and in response to their liminal experiences. This is when political experimentation tends to shift momentum and bring about more restrictive and encompassing systems of organization. When people come together in *communitas*-like circumstances, they do so with the intention to break away from an already defined hierarchical structure. At the same time, they become subject to their own encompassing forms of organization or management. They willingly let themselves be governed through instantiating their own particular egalitarian rule—be it in intentional forms of activist experimentation (as in Korsbrekke’s analysis of US intentional communities and in Szolucha’s article on participatory democracy in the UK), in cosmological and ideational systems and discussions (as in Shapiro’s work on Bitcoin entrepreneurs in Israel or in Rudi’s article on Kurdish revolutionary state formation), or in large-scale political regimes (as we see in Rio’s analysis of the formation of the French Republic, in Berthelsen’s analysis of community policing in Mozambique, and in Hasan’s work on the modeling of female garment workers in Bangladesh). In all these case studies, it is clear that in order for the egalitarian orientation to be kept alive—to be functioning in accordance with anti-structure, so to speak—community members must allow the emergence of encompassing forms of hierarchy, for they recognize that they can stay equal only by putting some rules into operation. This phenomenon, that is, the more or less voluntary submission to forms of organization, we term the ‘hierarchical structure of equality’, or the ‘double hierarchy’ confronting egalitarian life.

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Note

1. Such societies are exemplified by James Woodburn (1982) and Julian Pitt-Rivers (1963) for Southern Africa and Papua New Guinea respectively (see also Laws 2022).

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