

Left, right and equality for its own sake:

Raymond Aron and Isaiah Berlin

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Abstract:

Raymond Aron in the *Opium* famously claimed that we could not define a timeless or universal content in the ideals of “left” and “right”, with ideas, slogans and policies, today on the left being harboured, tomorrow, on the “right”, and vice versa. He openly defied the very classification. Aron, like Isaiah Berlin, is known mainly for his reflections on “liberty” than for his ideas on social “equality”. They are both, usually, labelled as “liberals”, if of an odd kind. Both however meditated and wrote on “equality”, and gave more weight to this traditional criterion to distinguish left from right than we could think about it. We pretend in this paper to present their essential arguments on the topic, using overlooked or unpublished texts of the authors, and contrast them.

We wish to suggest that the social-economic criterion even if not fashionable is actually the most important to the contemporary political cleavage. After so many *criteria* and classifications of the political cleavages have been suggested and, after a while, been abandoned, equality, or at least the aversion to great social inequalities and social justice still remain the most common reference, and justly so. Equality is something more serious than the Gini index and, in a certain sense; it is the same as justice or fairness. Sometimes rethinking a major political issue implies going deeper and not abandon the classification and the concepts that define them.

Resumo:

Raymond Aron é famoso porque no *Ópio dos intelectuais* declarou que era impossível definir um conteúdo intemporal ou universal para os ideais da “esquerda” e da “direita”, com ideias, bandeiras e políticas, hoje à esquerda, a serem abrigadas amanhã pela direita, e vice-versa. Desafiou até abertamente a própria classificação. Aron, tal como Isaiah Berlin, é mais conhecido pelas suas reflexões sobre a liberdade que pelas suas ideias sobre a igualdade social. Ambos são considerados “liberais”, embora talvez de uma estirpe bizarra. Ambos contudo meditaram e escreveram também sobre a “igualdade”, e atribuíram mais peso a este critério tradicional de esquerda e direita do que poderíamos supor.

Pretendemos neste texto apresentar os seus argumentos essenciais sobre o assunto, usando textos menos conhecidos ou inéditos dos autores e fazer o seu

confronto. Desejamos sugerir que o critério económico-social é realmente o mais importante para a clivagem contemporânea. Depois de tantos critérios e classificações terem sido propostos para a substituir e, depois de algum tempo, terem sido abandonados, a igualdade, ou pelo menos a repulsa por grandes desigualdades sociais, e a justiça social ainda permanecem a referência mais comum, e ainda bem. A igualdade é algo mais sério que o índice de Gini e num certo sentido é a justiça. Às vezes repensar um problema político permanente significa aprofundar o seu conteúdo e não abandonar a classificação nem os conceitos que os definem.

Key words/Palavras-chave: equality, liberty, left, Raymond Aron, Isaiah Berlin / igualdade, liberdade, esquerda, Raymond Aron, Isaiah Berlin.

I. Introduction

Let me start by saying, a little mischievously, that the provocative challenge that the organisers of this conference have cast is not entirely new and even runs the risk of becoming an ongoing torment.

The left, or at least the democratic and moderate left, frequently feels the need to discover or rediscover what defines it, especially given that the death of Marx has left it orphaned. I'm talking about the moderate left, since, if there are for sure many lefts, the radical one has always been that which has known best what it was seeking and how it intended to achieve this.

This existential anguish is not due necessarily to failure. This periodic sensation of a loss of personality occurred at the time of the "end of ideologies" or of the "end of history", with the "Washington consensus", etc. and in the past has already led, as a reaction, to the defence of the mixed economy, the third way, new lefts, etc. One of the causes of this anguish can even, on the contrary, be ascribed to its success.

It is because democracy, equality under the law, private property, a regulated market (where the state compensates for the deficiencies of the market provided that its intervention is not too costly) are today, to a greater or lesser extent, the consensus that the left feels the need to reinvent. And the right is also subject to these summersaults.

These existential problems that lead the left or the right to the psychoanalyst's couch, can seem superficial and dated. There is no longer an implacable battle of values or abysses, but we, the ones who prefer the war against poverty to the war against Vietnam (or Iraq), are not likely to be willing to set aside this old division.

Of course, someone from time to time suggests that this old dichotomy has had its day and that it would be preferable to set materialists against

post-materialists, liberals against communitarians, etc. It has been since Alain's *Propos* that we have known how to reply to those who make such attempts: every time someone claims that there are no important differences between the left and the right it is because they are, without fail, located on the right.

But why are we so reluctant to let this dichotomy die? I fear that it is substantially because the left defines itself against the right as good against evil, right against wrong, or progress against reaction.

The left distinguishes itself through the moral superiority of its causes. What these consist of can change. Nowadays nobody clamours against slavery in the colonies or votes for women. The last western country to grant votes to women was Switzerland in 1971. These causes have already been won. But others arise to replace them, without their form dying with the subject matter, because the left has a soul.

No gulag, no kingdom of virtue and no cultural revolution have yet been able to make this moral superiority disappear or destroy this soul.

This state of things, which transforms policies into moral questions, bored and worried Raymond Aron. In his *Opium des Intellectuels*, after acknowledging that French intellectuals preferred revolutionary romanticism to the fragility of democracies, torn apart as these were by the permanent gap between the effectiveness of the means and the inertia of mass society, he even dared to challenge the very dichotomy and the moral superiority of the left.

To avoid this ideological way of thinking, he tried to separate the "eternal values" from the historical forms in which they appear and declared that it was impossible to pinpoint a timeless or universal content for the ideals of the "left" and "right", with ideas, totems and policies, which are today on the left, being taken on tomorrow by the right and vice versa. He even openly called into question his own classification. For him politics is made up not of essences but of history. And it is difficult not to see this point of view: when he wrote, anti-materialism and ecology belonged to the right but today they have been appropriated by the left, etc.

This is the fundamental sense contained in the critical examination of the words '*left*', '*revolution*', and '*proletariat*' in *Opium*, and '*inequality*', '*hierarchy*', '*property*', '*tradition*', '*authority*' and '*greatness*' in *Espoir et peur du siècle*.¹ What he tries to do is analyse the meaning of the totems and

¹ On his intention when criticising right and left's myths cfr. Aron, 1957: 9.

myths and reveal the concrete attitudes and policies arising from them, while looking for a basis for a reasoned debate. It nevertheless remains ironical that, while his book about the left continues to be published and read, that about the right and its values is almost unknown.

Having said this, I should like to launch a more or less daring hypothesis: perhaps, apart from intellectual romanticism or moral superiority, there is a differentiation criterion that is not difficult in practice to identify.

It is that, in spite of everything, in a parliament the representatives have little doubt about where to sit and electors have little hesitation about where to position parties in a hypothetical Hoteling space. And this occurs even when certain parties on the right or left define themselves as centre or even social democrats.

It seems to us that, even if the outward appearance differs significantly, and notwithstanding intellectual fashions, only three criteria are up to contesting this status: equality, trust in the actions of the state and progress, in contrast to inequality deriving from merit, freedom of choice and tradition.

Following Raymond Aron's suggestion further, we can nevertheless consider that trust in the interventions of the state is not confined to the left. When, in his book *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, he tried to define the ideal authoritarian regime, whether of left or right, Aron came up against this problem. And, in noting similarities between the most extreme lefts and rights, he suggested that they had one and the same principle as their basis. We could try to define it as a certain "impatience" to accelerate the course of history, with a reasoning of the following type: I know how to solve society's problems, provided, of course, I manage to get everyone thinking like me. The resorting to the state as an accelerator of change belongs to the same category as the allurements of authoritarianism. It can even be argued that the end of statutes and the market have done more, in the long run, for equality than the state, no matter how attractive it may be to resort to it in the short term.

And, in fact, an ever-present state is the common thread that usually unites the extremes in a parliament, no matter whether they are communism and authoritarianism or, more recently, the radical left and nationalist populism.

It is also not clear whether the right's conservatism is always present. There has always been an industrialist right and even anyone without Tony Judt's nostalgia for the old public enterprises running the railways and postal service, which maintained social cohesion in a Britain that was disappearing,

can today consider that there have been conquests that the left wants to preserve: the welfare state or even “acquired rights”.

Nevertheless, even if we accept like Aron that there are no timeless “essences” on the left or right, but just history, it is difficult not to see that in this history the attitude towards inequality is one of the most constant factors.

In spite of everything, it was during the French Revolution that the distinction first appeared, and what triggered it, whatever its underlying causes, were the last barriers against equality in access to jobs.

II. Equality in Isaiah Berlin and Raymond Aron

Raymond Aron and Isaiah Berlin are known more for their thoughts about freedom than for their ideas about social equality. Both are considered “liberal”, even if of an eccentric type. Both, nevertheless, thought and also wrote about “equality” and gave a greater weight to this criterion than we might suppose.

In this text we intend to present their essential contentions on the question, using less well-known or unpublished texts by the two authors, compare them and suggest that the socio-economic criterion really is the most important for the present day division between left and right, because it poses a perennial problem.

Every man counts as one and nobody counts for more than one

Two years before the conferences that led to his essay “Two concepts of liberty”, Isaiah Berlin had reflected about the meaning of equality. (Berlin, 1981)

In writing he makes his wager: “every man counts as one and nobody counts for more than one” (*Idem*: 81), the formula used by the utilitarian philosophers, seems to him to go to the “heart of the doctrine of equality or equal rights”, (*Ibidem*) which gives tone to liberal and democratic thought. Equality, just like freedom, belongs to the set of those “vast and vague” ideas that Raymond Aron considered a poor starting point for studying political systems.

But, despite the diversity of its connotations, this formulation is, according to Berlin, “the irreducible minimum of the ideal of equality”. (*Ibidem*)

Isaiah Berlin, who also includes it among the ambitious and vague ideas flourishing in political philosophy, considers that, given that it is not an empirical proposition or a proof *per se* (since it has not been shared in universally), this formula has in itself the advantage of not being strictly

dependent on a sole philosophical system or even on a philosophy based on rights, and of doing without metaphysics (even if it is undeniable that its most ardent champions were the defenders of the rights of man). (*Idem*: 82)

The link between equality and the philosophies underlying it is, in his view, more psychological and historical than logical and the worldviews are not mutually compatible, so that Berlin attempts to examine the egalitarian formula by distancing himself from its normal “historical and psychological context” in order to appraise the plausibility of this formula giving rise to its “universal and perennial appeal”, (*Ibidem*) which is sustained through “recorded human history”. (*Idem*: 84) “What makes equality an ideal”, (*Ibidem*) capable of inspiring or serving as a model to the rulers of a liberal society.

The principle that the formula tries to encapsulate is a “specific application: that is, that similar cases require, i.e. should, receive similar treatment”, (*Idem*: 82) and that, given that there is a class of beings that are human beings, it follows from this that they should, in all respects, be treated “in a uniform way and identical manner, unless there is sufficient reason for not doing so”. The problem, clearly, is in this “sufficient reason” escape clause, given that in practice this uniform treatment is in many respects impossible and “can render this rule void”. (*Idem*: 82-83) A lot depends, therefore, on what one considers to be a sufficient, or necessary, justification for inequality.

Equality for its own sake

This distinction of a sufficient reason “depends on different people’s views and scales of value and on the aims of a given association or enterprise, within the limits of which only general principles can maintain any degree of meaning”. (*Idem*: 83) Even when it appears that we can distinguish good and bad, or core and unimportant, reasons – “some inequalities (let us say those based on birth) are denounced for being arbitrary and irrational, others (let us say those based on efficiency) are not” – what manifests itself in the end is that there are other values at stake, other than equality ‘for its own sake’, that affect even the ideals of the most fervid egalitarians”. (*Ibidem*)

But Berlin wishes to point out that the application of this principle can never be upheld only by itself, “through its being ‘natural’, evident and just” (*Ibidem*). The egalitarian principle is often used as if it did not require a sufficient reason: a fixed reference. It is deviations that need justification. If I have a voice in the aims of society, or can transfer my property to my children or express opinions, others should have the same voice or rights.

Only “differences, non- systematic behaviour, changes in conduct” (*Idem*: 84) require an explanation: the general’s power to defend the city, the retribution of merit to ensure incentives, giving preference to the ill or old to ensure equal satisfaction, etc. This is not the case, he warns, because some are ready to go against western tradition and reject all the rules:

I mention this just as a warning against the theory that the commandment to treat all men similarly in similar situations does not require a separate argument to support it. (*Idem*: 99-100)

Complete equality: supreme good?

“What then is this ideal?”,² he asks and then replies: “in its most simple or ideal form of complete social equality it incorporates the desire that everything and everybody should be as similar as possible to everything and to all the others”. (*Idem*: 89) This is a point of reference that nobody probably defends, but through the modification of this absurd ideal “in the ideal egalitarian society, inequality – and this has in the last analysis to mean dissimilarity – must be reduced to a minimum”. (*Ibidem*)

Protests in the name of this ideal are against keeping a society where some are richer, stronger, more powerful or freer and prevent others from being so, an offence to the rights that “belong to all men in that they are men”(*Idem*: 90) or at least an irrationality to be extinguished.

Nevertheless there are, he also observes, large differences between those people who have no objection to inequality *per se* provided that it does not infringe natural rights and others for whom “equality is the supreme good”,(*Idem*: 91) an end in itself, (*Idem*: 93) and who do not tolerate any of the obstacles to this, even inequalities in skills.

In reality the latter defend equality at the expense of freedom. (*Idem*: 94) Moreover equality has many different methods – by luck, by turn, etc – all of them incompatible with each other and there is no way to consistently join the preferences together (*Idem*: 100) – an idea that in our time has ravaged university teaching with particular virulence after Arrow’s works, but which Condorcet had already anticipated.

² *Idem*: 90. “Some minimum degree of prevalence of rules is a necessary condition for the existence of human societies (and this seems an almost universal but still empirical law)”, (*Idem*: 85). Rules are opposed to *ad hoc* commands, but men claim rules for different reasons: “a) that rules are broken for no sufficient reason; that the rules are themselves bad or iniquitous or otherwise inadequate; or c) that rules are deplorable simply because they are rules”, (*Idem*: 89).

Nevertheless, none of this minimises the importance of equality:

Equality is one of the oldest and most profound elements in liberal thinking and not more or less natural or rational than any other of its components. Just like all human ends it can not itself be defended or justified, since it is it that justifies the other actions – the means for achieving it. (*Idem*: 102)

Essay about liberties

Half a dozen years later, in his second *Essay on liberties*, at the time of the end of ideologies, Aron observes the democratic and liberal synthesis (Aron, 1998: 14) for which there has never been so much agreement and optimism. (Cfr. *Idem*: 71-78, see: 75) Passions seem to be calmed.

He examines this democratic and liberal synthesis starting from the objections by those discontented with it.³ Criticisms about consumer passivity, the result of mass culture and industrial society, point to the “death of the citizen”. These and other tendencies have altered the nature of political participation, but do not mean that political liberties have been mown down: mobility is greater than ever and each person is free to choose his/her life.

Later, in a new epilogue in 1977, he considers that if he rewrote the text, he would perhaps invert the emphasis. But the essential conclusion is the same: “doctrinaire egalitarianism struggles in vain to overcome nature – both biological and social – and does not achieve equality but tyranny”. (*Idem*: 240). He feels the desire to return to this question, which he does in an unpublished text prepared for his lessons in the Collège de France, with the theme ‘*Liberté, égalité*’.

“Liberté, égalité”

A first meaning he finds in the term “égalité” is the fundamental equality in the eyes of the law in the declaration of 1789, which suggests an “equality detached from the juridical or political subject”. (Aron, 1978: 6, 1^{ère} leçon, 17-1)

There is a detachment of all the exterior characteristics of man, whether rich or poor, who, in the eyes of the law, becomes a subject who is anonymous and interchangeable with any other individual. Political equality involves the right to vote, which is ideologically included in the concept of popular sovereignty, of which each citizen possesses “the same portion as

³ On its five discontents, cfr. Aron, 1998 : 2^{ème} leçon, 79-80.

any other”, (*Idem*: 7, 8-9) i.e. infinitesimal. It is a “mental experience”, given that real power or influence are obviously unequal.

A second meaning of equality is that of access to all employment, which immediately raises the question of the sharing out of jobs and divisions in line with the norms of justice, since this equality is merely potential: not everyone can really have the jobs. The only criteria admissible for this division are collective usefulness and, as regards the individual, his merit and skills. But how to define collective usefulness and how to verify who possesses the skills? (*Idem*: 9)

Aron suggests that, when there is competition but the starting conditions are equal, it is possible to translate this “inter-changeability” in the eyes of the law through the principle of non-discrimination, proposed in his declaration of 1948, a negative formula comparable to the process of revealing the truth by falsification. (*Idem*: 11)

The principle of equality is not just a hypocritical mask; the ideas suggest a mechanism and contribute to rendering the proclaimed principle effective.

This is the essential theme to be found in the text that he had written before for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.⁴

Nevertheless, after a certain point, ideologues stop considering this equal treatment in the competition for jobs to be enough; *the results* of this competition also need to be more or less proportional. This is a much more weighty requirement and leads Raymond Aron to examine the mechanisms by which distribution gets processed socially.

Social redistribution mechanisms

What are the “immediately visible” social distribution mechanisms? (Aron, 1978: 14) He identifies four: inheritance, entrance examinations, cooptation and the market.

Inheritance, even of wealth and not of jobs, is an obstacle to an egalitarian society, since it is a form of transmission of goods “without reference to skill or merit”, (*Ibidem*) that Taine justified for reasons of family continuity but does not comply even with the idea of equal starting conditions.

⁴ In 1964-65, Raymond Aron wrote one “roof article” on occasion of the 200th anniversary of Encyclopædia Britannica, with the title “The social order. The promethean dream: society in search of itself”. The title of the book edition is different: *Les désillusions du progrès. Essai sur la dialectique de la modernité*. (cfr. Aron, 1969)

Nevertheless, even a rough analysis⁵ shows that the other three mechanisms are just as imperfect.

Are entrance examinations, “the selection method complying *par excellence* with the egalitarian principle” (*Idem*: 16) really a suitable form of assessing ability or are they restricted to perpetuating inequality? Equality of opportunity in such examinations is as desirable as it is unattainable, given that they do not cancel out differences in intelligence or character, or differences due to family background. Even comprehensive schools (à la Édouard Herriot) are not enough; children need at the least - utopia or nightmare depending on one’s point of view – to be removed from their families in order to place all young people in an analogous condition at the starting line, and there would still be the influence of the genetic lottery, unless the *brave new world* managed to nullify it.

And how can one avoid *cooptation*, the process of selection by superiors, where the lack of balance in information is less pronounced, but the choice risks being arbitrary.

Is the market, which Hayek “adopts as the least bad selection mechanism”, (*Ibidem*) the solution? Because it really is impersonal and avoids arbitrariness and nepotism, given that it derives from a huge number of anonymous decisions. But does it really recompense the most valued qualities? – which must not be confused in any case with moral merit.

Such is the gap between the intentions and the neither desired nor foreseen effects of these forms of division that the assessment of these mechanisms is an empirical question and the theory must not be without an examination of the consequences in fact verified.

Equality or “universalist principle”?

Aron concludes that from equality in the eyes of the law it is possible to extract an effective social norm, which is verifiable or falsifiable: non-discrimination. Whatever the practical difficulties in separating divisions that are justified from those that are not – would the minimum height of a police officer be justified? – it does not seem impossible for him to draw abstract principles.

What is not possible is to achieve a complete equality of opportunity, given that discrimination re-emerges as a consequence of the very selection process and its mechanisms, perpetuating an endless debate. It also results in

⁵ Cfr Aron, 1978 : 21. The description of these mechanisms occupies all this lecture.

a Baboeuf, ready to draw extreme conclusions from the principle of equality, arising every so often.

After presenting the banal idea that “in a society founded on the equality principle, not everyone finds themselves in an equal situation”, (*Idem*: 1, 2^{ème} leçon, 24-1) a sociologist like him prefers, as a result, to use the term “universalist”, more compatible with his vocabulary than “egalitarian principle”. This “sociologist” is the political scientist who wants to avoid stridency in public debate.

III. Comparisons

Can the perennial appeal of the egalitarian formula serve as a guide, or model, for rulers of democratic societies? Or is there an irremediable contradiction with that other ideal of a free society? Isaiah Berlin considers that there is indeed an intrinsic contradiction between these ideals, when taken to the extreme and elevated to supreme ends:

If this ideal [the egalitarian ideal] is rejected overall in current political doctrine, this appears to be due principally to the fact that it is in conflict with other ideals with which it cannot be entirely reconciled; in fact the majority of ethical and political proposals are forms of lesser or greater uncomfortable compromises between principles that, in their extreme forms, cannot coexist. (Berlin , 1981: 102)

Aron does not disagree. Nevertheless one of the aspects that distinguish Aron's pluralism is that he does not restrict himself to declaring multiple, inconsistent and sometimes contradictory values, but strives to unravel the precise circumstances in which these multiple values can at times collide and the concrete social mechanisms in which they are expressed. This worries him more than the inner anguish of a man torn by incompatible values.

For him, values are not foreign to rational arguments or empirical research. But nor can they be detached from their normal historical and psychological context under pain of their being transformed into ideologies or ending up deprived of content.

Nevertheless, both take the egalitarian appeal very seriously. The difficulty they feel is in reconciling equality as a supreme end with liberty or the liberties they are fond of. Isaiah Berlin places himself expressly among those for whom equality, only a subordinate value, has to make way for other ends. Raymond Aron prefers to show that there are always *trade offs* and that a radical equality would require an absolute authority and it is impossible to bend human nature or the inclinations of modern social life to this ideal.

We would do well to start our reflection with this.

Because there is a very significant difference in accepting, like them, that economic and social inequality are a lesser evil, one of those, a little crude, facts of life that it is not worth covering up with stories about storks, and upholding that large social inequalities are morally justifiable.

The most recent theories about justice all express opinions on the subject but swing between opposite poles. Some uphold that merit does not exist but merely a genetic and social lottery, others that an interference in others' rights can never be justified, and finally others that there are multiple points of view, that of a flutist, of the maker of the flute or of his boss.

The clarification of the role of merit and inequality from the start seems to be one of those problems without a solution, which would require exhaustive empirical research to reach scanty conclusions. It would be difficult for such exhaustive empirical research, in which the Gini coefficient receives the favours of the moment, to be more than provisional and dated.

Perhaps only Hayek with his well-known crudeness expressly acknowledges that there is no juxtaposition of moral merit and the merit rewarded by the market. The most that can be upheld is that in the view of the *dismal science* merit is morally unimportant but works. It may produce results leaving everyone better off; it does not divide the cake equitably but makes it grow. There is much truth in this: weakening incentives for entrepreneurs leads to less stimulus. Except that it is clear that the decreasing marginal utility of remunerations superimposes itself and produces the contrary effect. All this sounds like the rationalisation of something that one wants to justify.

But perhaps these facts of life, or “social mechanisms” to use Aron’s expression, and a sordid view of man like that of an economist, which does away with the debate about human excellence and reduces everything to questions of optimisation of means, are not enough for deciding the moral and political problem of inequality. Should we (will we need to trust in the state?) concern ourselves only with avoiding poverty and ensuring a minimum floor?

Not according to Aristotle, whom nobody considers an egalitarian or fervent democrat, because “great men” are a problem for city constitutional life.

With so many criteria and classifications being proposed to substitute the difference between left and right and, after some time, being abandoned, equality, or at least the refusal of wide social inequalities, and social justice still remain the most common reference point, fortunately. Equality is

something more serious than the Gini coefficient, or other forms of measurement, and in a certain sense so is justice.

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