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How to write a history of equality

Siep Stuurman

At the present time, intellectual historians, literary critics, political theorists, and scholars working in related fields are inclined to focus on 'difference', heterogeneity and hybridity rather than on 'sameness' or 'equality'. The latter concepts tend to receive a bad press insofar as they are seen to 'silence' the voices of the 'other'. Now, in many cases such criticism may be well deserved, and I have no quarrel with the emphasis on difference and the construction of otherness that has in many ways enriched our understanding of intellectual history.

However, it seems to me that many discussions of difference, otherness, and orientalism tacitly assume the validity of the abstract, universalist concept of equality that is today frequently relegated to the post-modern limbo of 'hegemonic, Western Enlightenment discourse'. One only has to ask innocent questions, such as 'why is colonialism not a good thing?' or 'why is oppression bad?', to expose the tacit assumption. Without a universalist concept of the equality of all human beings, the critique of 'othering' simply loses its moral and political point.

This is of course not to say that we can simply pursue the business of intellectual history as if nothing happened. There may be no good reason to abandon the 'canonized' universalistic concepts, but there are certainly good reasons to re-examine them.¹ The following essay is meant as a contribution to the re-examination of one particular universal concept. It seeks to do this by means of a historical inquiry. Its aim is to delineate the contours of a possible history of concepts and discourses of equality.

Why a historical approach? Because one way to 'deconstruct' seemingly timeless universals such as equality, liberty and reason is to write their history. The simple move of situating an abstract concept in the temporal flux of history divests it of its serene aura of immutability. If it is the historical, intellectual, political and social, context that confers meaning and point on a concept, it is only within that context that a given concept can really mean anything.

¹ Donald R. Kelley, 'What is happening to the history of ideas', *Intellectual news. Review of the International Society for Intellectual History* 1 (1996) 36-50, esp. 49.

Is a history of equality possible?

But there is a snag. The project of a rigorously contextual history of equality conjures up the spectre of historicism (in the old German sense of the term): how do we know that equality-concepts and equality-discourses in different historical periods and contexts are meaningfully related to one another? To steer clear of the historicist trap I propose to make three moves: two conceptual, and one historical. My first conceptual move takes a cue from Wittgenstein. Speaking about the nature of language, Wittgenstein says: *Statt etwas anzugeben, was allem, was wir Sprache nennen, gemeinsam ist, sage ich, es ist diesen Erscheinungen garnicht Eines gemeinsam, weswegen wir für alle das gleiche Wort verwenden, -- sondern sie sind mit einander in vielen verschiedenen Weisen verwandt.*² Likewise, we may postulate a ‘family relationship’ between equality-discourses and concepts in different languages, historical periods and contexts. We can recognize affinities and parallels: these words refer to situations and speech-acts that exhibit meaningful analogies, even if we cannot produce a clear-cut formal definition of equality that is applicable to all of them (wasn’t it Nietzsche who said that one can only define what has no history?).

Nonetheless, and this is my second conceptual move, some sort of a working definition may be useful. In mathematics, equality denotes identity (though, even in mathematics, this is not perfect sameness). In social life identity is obviously a non-starter: no two human beings or categories of human beings are identical. When Homer, in the *Odyssey*, tells us that all men must die, he is saying that they are similar in one respect.³ Moreover, mortality is considered significant by all men. So we can define equality in human society as *culturally significant similarity*. This has the further advantage that the qualifier ‘culturally significant’ takes in the representational nature of equality. However, a working definition is not more than a heuristic device. Stories may suggest similarity and equality without any explicit reference to them. When Herodotus recounts that ‘many cities that were once great have now become small’, he incites the powerful to reflect on the transience of greatness,⁴ one day, they may become just as vulnerable as the backwater towns they now look down on. Such stories, parables, maxims and

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt a.M. 1967) 48 (italics in original).

³ *Odyssey*, III, 236. Translated by: A.T. Murray (Cambridge Mass. and London 1998).

⁴ *Herodotus*, I, 5. Translated by: A.D. Godley (Cambridge Mass. and London 1999).

apophthegms have an ‘equality-effect’. The histories and books of wisdom of human civilizations are replete with such equality-effects.

My third move is historical. It focuses on the significance of traditions and canons. While agreeing with Quentin Skinner’s almost ‘orthodox’ critique of the anachronistic fallacy, inherent in the notion of the forerunner, I propose to focus attention on the other arrow of time: the one that points backward. Homer cannot be treated as a forerunner of Plato, but Plato certainly was an ‘after-runner’ of Homer because the latter stood at the centre of the canonical tradition in which Plato was educated and to which he reacted critically. The upshot is that, in so far as there is a continuity in intellectual history, it is enacted retro-actively. It cannot be otherwise, as Conal Condren has argued, for without some ‘canonical’ tradition we can hardly think at all.⁵ To the extent that later thinkers have consistently drawn on a select company of earlier thinkers, the canon of the history of political thought is self-validating, as Janet Coleman has recently contended.⁶ That does not mean however that it cannot, and should not, be criticized and amended, a point on which Coleman is rather less convincing but that is central to my project to write a history of equality.⁷

A history of equality may enable me to draw on canonical, as well as non-canonical thinkers, and to demonstrate that the non-canonical thinkers were frequently part of the (later forgotten) context of the canonical thinkers, so that their inclusion in the story will in many cases occasion a modification of our understanding of the canonical thinkers. I will use the large family of equality-words and discourses, and the equality-effects of stories, to construct a history that takes in processes of canonization and de-canonization. As a matter of fact, a history of equality cannot be written without including this dimension, for canonization is about inclusion and exclusion in intellectual history and, more importantly, in the practice of thinking and acting politically. To a large extent the canon therefore defines who are the legitimate and recognized political speakers in a given historical context. That is, it determines who are to be counted as ‘equals’ and who are not.

Why equality? I have already supplied a part of the answer above: it is probably the best candidate for subverting and rewriting the canon of political

⁵ Conal Condren, *The status and appraisal of classical texts* (Princeton 1985) 275-285.

⁶ Janet Coleman, *A history of political thought. From ancient Greece to early Christianity* (Oxford and Malden Mass. 2000) 2.

⁷ See my discussion of the canon in Siep Stuurman, ‘The canon of the history of political thought. Its critique and a proposed alternative’, *History and theory* 39 (2000) 147-166.

thought that has traditionally privileged the concept of liberty. Furthermore, it is a notion that is applicable over a remarkably broad range of human activities. In the history of political thought as we (still) know it, equality usually makes its appearance in the setting of the ancient Greek city-state, in the context of the democratic self-government of free, male citizens. Viewed in a broader historical perspective, however, the notion of equality is not necessarily restricted to the arena of the democratic *polis*, or even to the political realm in the strict sense. There are other settings beside the government of the polis in which determinate categories of human persons might come to regard each other as 'equals'. In the course of history people have advanced claims of equality along multiple dimensions and in disparate social settings: warfare, politics, work and the distribution of material goods, gender, 'race', religion, mythology, performance and excellence, to name the most conspicuous.⁸

To frame the following discussion, two further observations on the concept of equality may be useful. In the first place, equality is not an empirical concept. It does not refer directly to 'material' relations of equality among people. A non-theoretical, 'naïve' observer of social reality (assuming, for the sake of argument, that such an observer can exist) will 'see' inequality rather than equality, for inequality is, one might say, the basic stuff of social relations, the raw material of history. Equality is thus an abstract, discursive concept: people are not equal but they can be represented as equal. My leading question is: Under what circumstances, drawing on which available practices and languages, can such representations come about?

Finally, it is useful to distinguish between equality and egalitarianism. Egalitarianism denotes the conscious pursuit of some specific variety of equality, while discourses and concepts of equality refer to specific senses in which certain persons are deemed equal in particular respects. The relation between equality and egalitarianism is one of potentiality: concepts of equality are not necessarily egalitarian. On the other hand it is obvious that ideas of equality can easily spill over into egalitarian discourses. When somebody argues that 'we' are in some relevant sense equal to 'them', the existing hierarchical relationship between 'us' and 'them' is questioned.

⁸ Extant discussions of the history of equality are largely confined to its role in politics *sensu strictu*, see e.g. Sanford A. Lakoff, *Equality in political philosophy* (Cambridge Mass. 1964); R. R. Palmer, 'Equality' in: Philip P. Wiener ed., *Dictionary of the history of ideas*, vol. 2 (New York 1973) 138-148; Otto Dann, 'Gleichheit' in: *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart 1975) 997-1046 and Otto Dann, *Gleichheit und Gleichberechtigung: das Gleichheitspostulat in der alteuropäischen Tradition und in Deutschland bis zum ausgehenden 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin 1980).

Socio-cultural contexts of equality

With this framework in mind we can now distinguish several socio-cultural settings in which discourses of equality can originate. These are defined in the broadest possible manner, so as to be applicable to a wide range of historical contexts, across periods and cultures.

1. *The experience of mutual dependence.* There are socio-political spaces in which people develop an enhanced sense of mutual dependence. This can give rise to weaker or stronger notions of equality among a restricted group of insiders. Examples of such spaces are: bands of warriors or migrants, seafarers, urban freemen, peasant villagers. The 'insiders' often have to carry on their business in a risky or hostile environment occasioning feelings of mutual dependence and solidarity. In such circumstances relations between leaders and followers tend to oscillate between autocratic and democratic solutions to the problems of collective action and leadership.

2. *The frontier experience.* This is in a sense the mirror image of the first case. The primary givens are distance rather than proximity and diffidence and potential conflict rather than collective action and solidarity. Nonetheless, there may develop some mutual concern that not every encounter between strangers shall end in bloodshed, enslavement or robbery. We can reasonably expect such concern to be especially strong among migrants and traders, or, more broadly, among people whose way of life depends on migration or trade. This can, in turn, give rise to the recognition that the 'foreigner' too is human: one can communicate, do business, treat with 'them'. In other words: 'they' are in some relevant sense 'like us'.

3. *The meritocratic experience.* In several areas of human endeavour skilled performance in a given physical or intellectual craft is the primary criterion for judging a person's value. Within the community of practitioners such professional judgements may, and frequently do, override other social and cultural distinctions. In such cases, the inequalities that would otherwise obtain are routinely 'bracketed' in the pursuit of excellence within the professional community. Those who attain a certain level of competence in a field may then acknowledge one another as of equal merit. Depending on the prestige of a particular skill or craft within the wider community such meritocratic judgments may underpin critiques of prevailing standards of inequality.

4. *The experience of friendship and love.* Love and friendship are powerful emotions that can only attain their full bloom in relationships between persons who consider one another as equals. The bonds of love and

friendship uniting two or a small group of persons can give rise to notions of the 'deal' human relationship which contain, among other notions, ideals of reciprocity, mutual trust and equal dignity. At least tendentially such ideals cut across distinctions of rank, gender, 'race' and religion. Ultimately, they can result in models of sociability among equals, which constitute the seedbed of impassionate critiques of politically and culturally sanctioned modes of inequality.

5. *The religious experience.* Religious communities are often tightly knit groups, which have to survive in a hostile environment. In this, they are much like the groups discussed under item 1 above. However, the experiences of religion and mythology are not exhausted by their social embeddedness in definite communities; they are also the locus of highly intensive *imagined experiences* of otherworldly, or temporally and spatially remote, 'realities'. The imaginary worlds conjured up by religious experience frequently encompass various forms of 'imagined equality', such as golden ages, noble savages, independent Amazons, the unity of mankind as created in God's image, the non-materiality of the soul, and the insignificance of human hierarchy in the shadow of an overpowering God. Such religious experiences are as real and causally effective as any other type of experience.

6. *The philosophical experience.* Or perhaps I should say: the opening of the philosophical window on the world. For philosophy is a highly specific type of experience. It represents a new departure insofar as it introduces self-reflection: a way of seeing ways of seeing (in Greek: a theory of theories; *theoria* = contemplation, sight), the emergence of self-reflexive comments on all the experiences mentioned above, and, finally, of comments on such comments. At the same time it denotes the emergence of some sort of intellectual community. Philosophy usually entails debate, agreement as well as controversy. It combines elements of the experience of friendship and love, the meritocratic and the religious experience: the first and the second are obvious; the third may need some clarification. I mean to say that philosophy, like religion, transcends the world of the 'real', and creates a new, imaginary world of the mind. This opens the door to the practice of *critique*. To see its relevance to broader cultural and political processes, we must realize that 'philosophy' is the intensified and specialized (sometimes institutionalised) application of a capacity that is common to all human beings: the ability to reflect on their condition and to look at themselves from a third-person perspective. As Antonio Gramsci said in a different context: 'all men are

intellectuals (...) but not all men have the function of intellectuals in society'.⁹ The human ability to imagine and evaluate a state of affairs different from the empirically given is a condition for the emergence of any concept of equality, because equality, as stipulated above, is an abstract, non-empirical concept.

Available languages

The types of experience enumerated above can only subsist through shared languages. These languages develop over time. It follows that at any moment in time a community can draw on a limited repertoire of available languages. However, even the most limited repertoire provides at least some scope for semantic reshuffling and conceptual innovation. Moreover, not only languages change over time, so do narrative structures and literary genres. What terms and meanings are available and in what narratives and genres they can be put to use are instrumental in shaping the conditions of possibility (and impossibility) of discourse.

It is obvious that the notion of available languages and the notion of canonized discourses and intellectual traditions intersect in manifold ways. Which languages are available to a given community depends, among other things, on the repertoire of intellectual traditions a community can routinely draw upon.

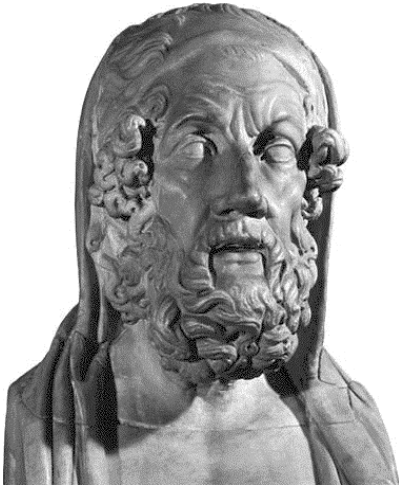
Let me illustrate this with the theme of the frontier experience and the notion of common humanity in Homer and Herodotus. Both the *Odyssey* and the *Histories* discuss cultural difference; both contain numerous stories about exotic people living in remote lands. Both are written in the form of a narrative, and in both narratives the Greek perspective predominates. Herodotus is more critical to extravagant claims about mythical peoples at the ends of the earth, but he does not entirely discount, nor rudely debunk the mythical tradition, witness his treatment of the Ethiopians and the Amazons.¹⁰ Both Homer and Herodotus dazzle their readers with a kaleidoscopic panorama of 'the (known) world'. The awareness of cultural difference is a defining characteristic of Odysseus, who is portrayed as the man who saw 'the cities of many men and got to know their minds', and it is

⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *Gli Intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura* (Rome 1975) 17.

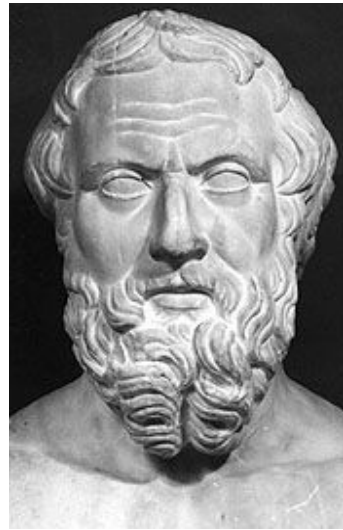
¹⁰ Arnaldo Momigliano, *The classical foundations of modern historiography* (Berkeley etc. 1990) 35 and Paul Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* (Paris 1983).

equally central to Herodotus' treatise, large parts of which are presented as a travelogue.

Yet there are important differences. Homer is bound to the conventions of an epic genre that leaves no space for a meta-narrative perspective by the author. His characters' life stories and speeches make up the text so that the customs of 'others' chiefly appear as part of Odysseus's account of his experiences with them, observations of 'whether they are cruel, and wild, and unjust, or whether they are kind to strangers and fear the gods in their thoughts'.¹¹ By contrast, Herodotus frequently interrupts the narrative, offering analytical descriptions and critical discussions of 'foreign' customs, rituals and beliefs.



Homer



Herodotus (484-432 BC)

Likewise, both authors acknowledge the unity of the human species, but in significantly different ways. All men have need of the gods, Peistratus declares in the *Odyssey*; all men must die, Homer has Athene say to Telemachus, and not even the gods can ward off the death of mortal men. Also, Alcinous recounts, 'there is no one of all mankind who is nameless, be he a base man or of high standing'.¹² The 'kind' treatment of strangers Odysseus refers to, and which is the major 'international virtue' in Homer's

¹¹ *Odyssey*, VIII, 573-576 and IX, 174-176.

¹² *Ibidem*, III, 48, 236-237 and VIII, 552-553.

world, stands for the unwritten bond between all civilized people. In Homer's work, there is a basic bond of equal respect between all humans who are not 'wild'. It is no accident that Homer's exemplary 'savages', the Cyclopes, are depicted as cannibals who have no agriculture, no assemblies, no laws, and who 'have no regard for one another'.¹³ In modern terms the Cyclopes are solitary hunter-gatherers who cannot understand the very idea of a common humanity. François Hartog has observed that the absence of agriculture and sociability is the chief marker of otherness in the *Odyssey's* 'poetic anthropology'.¹⁴

For Herodotus things are more complicated. The Homeric canon provided the backdrop to the emergence of historical inquiry. As François Hartog states: 'historiography presupposed the epic. Herodotus wished to rival Homer; what he became, ultimately, was Herodotus.'¹⁵ The mythical varieties of otherness, represented by Ethiopians, Amazons, Hyperboreans and the like, play a role in Herodotus' work but the elaborate anthropological treatises occupying most of the first four books of the *Histories* are concerned with rather more 'historical' folks: the Persians, the Egyptians and the Scythians, with shorter discussions of other peoples.

Like Homer, Herodotus looks at 'the world' from a Greek perspective, but in a noticeably different manner. The Greek-Persian opposition structures his entire narrative, and some of the commonplaces of modern orientalism, notably the contrast between Greek (European) freedom and Persian (oriental) despotism, can be traced back to him. Herodotus thus puts far more emphasis on the differences between the Greeks and their close neighbours than Homer, for whom the Greeks and the Trojans shared the same culture and the same gods.¹⁶ The Trojan War is not depicted as a 'clash of civilizations', while Herodotus' Persian Wars certainly are. Homer could still assume, as a matter of course, that all 'civilized people' were roughly similar to the Greeks; Herodotus has lost such innocence: his anthropology, like its latter-day successors, is premised on difference.

And yet I would like to submit it also contains a new discourse of equality.¹⁷ Herodotus depicts the nomadic Scythians as 'others', but he does

¹³ *Odyssey*, IX, 104-115.

¹⁴ François Hartog, *Memories of Odysseus. Frontier tales from ancient Greece* (Edinburgh 2001) 23-26.

¹⁵ François Hartog, 'The invention of history. The pre-history of a concept from Homer to Herodotus', *History and theory* 39 (2000) 384-395, at 388.

¹⁶ See e.g. the moving encounter between Achilles and Priam in *Iliad*, XXIV, 468-676.

¹⁷ Herodotus has been portrayed as 'the first orientalist' by François Hartog, *Le miroir d'Hérodote: Essai sur la représentation de l'autre* (Paris 1991); James Romm, *Herodotus* (New Haven and London

so in a positive, and in no way disparaging, anthropology of their culture. Herodotus' lengthy discussion of them is certainly informed by a basic sense of their otherness, but he nonetheless makes it clear that the absence of cities and (partly) agriculture does not imply that Scythian society is devoid of meaningful patterns and practices. Instead, Herodotus considers the Scythian nomadic technology (mobile houses and fast moving mounted archers) 'the cleverest discovery that we know'.¹⁸ In Homer, on the other hand, the 'wild' peoples are described in almost wholly negative terms: they have no agriculture, no laws, no *agora*, and no 'regard for one another'. What is still more important, Herodotus is aware, as Homer is not, that others regard the Greeks as the Greeks regard them: 'The Egyptians', he relates, 'call all men of other languages barbarians'.¹⁹ Darius' famous funeral customs experiment is a generalisation of this observation which is finally summarised in Herodotus' well-known conclusion that all men believe that their own customs are the best.²⁰ Following the terrifying story of the madness of Cambyses the conclusion admonishes all men, but especially rulers, to respect the customs of others, and especially their religious beliefs: to do otherwise would be sheer insanity.²¹ Starting from the visible 'facts' of cultural difference, Herodotus' conclusion in the end affirms sameness on a higher level of abstraction: all men are fundamentally alike in the way they relate to their own customs; as 'anthropological beings' all men are 'equal'.

To sum up: Herodotus and Homer both affirm a common humanity, over and above cultural difference. But Herodotus adds a critical analysis of the representations of cultural identity and difference by which people live, which could not be formulated in Homer's epic language. This gives a critical edge to Herodotus' notion of a common humanity that is lacking in Homer. One of the reasons is undoubtedly that Herodotus is writing against the

1998); James Redfield, 'Herodotus the Tourist' in: Thomas Harrison ed., *Greeks and barbarians* (Edinburgh 2002) 24-49; see also Vivienne Gray, 'Herodotus and the rhetoric of otherness', *American journal of philology* 116 (1995) 185-211; recently, however, a more 'egalitarian' Herodotus has been retrieved by Rosalind Thomas, *Herodotus in context. Ethnography, science and the art of persuasion* (Cambridge 2000) and Rosaria Vignolo Munson, *Telling wonders. Ethnographic and political discourse in the work of Herodotus* (Ann Arbor 2001).

¹⁸ Herodotus, IV, 46; on the, frequently disparaging, treatment of the Scythians by later authors, see James William Johnson, 'The Scythian. His Rise and Fall', *Journal of the history of ideas* 20 (1959) 250-257.

¹⁹ *Herodotus*, II, 158.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, III, 38.

²¹ Rosaria Vignolo Munson, 'The madness of Cambyses', *Arethusa* 24 (1991) 43-65.

background of the Ionian and early Sophistic philosophical tradition which provided him with a meta-language to speak about custom and nature.²²

Modern equality and modern inequality

The above example can yield yet another insight. Homer's utterances on common humanity have to be read against the backdrop of Odysseus' tales of otherness and exoticism. Likewise, Herodotus' emergent theory of the equality of all men, as dwellers in their own culture, is inseparable from his anthropological *tour du monde*, and in the end both are merged in Herodotus' meta-narrative. The dialectic of Herodotus' discussion of *nomoi* turns precisely on the insight that the perspectives of difference and equality presuppose and condition each other. This gives us an important methodological rule: a history of equality cannot be written without a history of inequality. It follows that, in order to outline the contours of a history of equality we need to investigate the major discourses and languages of inequality in a given historical period.

Above all, we must resist the temptation to construct an overly linear modernizing narrative in which 'new' discourses of equality invariably and inevitably win out against 'old' discourses of inequality. The temptation to write such a 'Whig history of equality' is particularly strong in modern European history, which has often been represented as the rise of freedom, equality and democracy. That is, however, only a part of a modern history that is also a history of economic inequality, colonial despotism, racism and women's oppression. Accordingly, what we find in history is a double dialectic in which new discourses of equality are pitted against old as well as new discourses of inequality. The latter frequently arise in the same period as, and sometimes in response to, new discourses of equality. Moreover, in many cases discourses of equality and inequality are articulated as parts of one 'body of knowledge'.

This is especially true of the Enlightenment. In his brilliant panoptic book, *Radical enlightenment*, Jonathan Israel makes a bold claim about the egalitarian thrust of the radical currents in the first phase of the Enlightenment. Beginning with Spinozism and related strands of ideas in the second half of the seventeenth century, Israel argues that the Radical Enlightenment not only secularised institutions and ideas all over Europe, but

²² Thomas, *Herodotus in context*, 6-7.

it also ‘effectively demolished all legitimations of monarchy, aristocracy, woman’s subordination to man, ecclesiastical authority, and slavery, replacing these with the principles of universality, equality, and democracy.’²³ Now Israel is surely right that the Enlightenment produced the first truly universalist concepts of equality. Elsewhere, I have called this ‘modern equality’ an abstract, universalist concept of equality that is not tied to any particular social or cultural context and therefore is applicable to all contexts.²⁴ The egalitarian and democratic potential of such a concept is, it would appear, almost unlimited.

Israel rightly highlights the forces of creative destruction the protagonists of the radical Enlightenment unleashed on all the traditional discourses of inequality. In that field the radical application of the Cartesian call for ‘clear and distinct’ explanations would not leave much standing, as tradition was no longer a valid vehicle of legitimation. But very soon other foes arose to contend with. Alongside and in a continuous dialectical tension with the discourses of ‘modern equality’ the new human science pioneered by

the Enlightenment spawned a number of powerful and impeccably *modern* discourses of inequality. Very soon, the multiple discourses of modern equality were confronted by a whole array of discourses of modern inequality, such as racial classification, political economy, a new psychobiological science of sexual difference, and finally theories of rule by a class of enlightened philosopher-kings (today’s technocracy is one of its offshoots).



Georges Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon (1707-1788)

²³ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical enlightenment. Philosophy and the making of modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford etc. 2001) vi.

²⁴ Siep Stuurman, ‘The invention of modern equality’, *Intellectual news. Review of the International Society for Intellectual History* 6-7 (2000) 41-51 and Siep Stuurman, *Francois Poulain de la Barre and the invention of modern equality* (Cambridge Mass. 2004).

An example may clarify the close intermeshing of modern discourses of equality and inequality. Let us take a look at a famous mid-eighteenth-century text, Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*. The chapter on 'the varieties of the human species' is almost a small book by itself: it ran to a hundred pages in the first edition and was later considerably expanded (Buffon worked on his mighty project from the 1740s to the 1780s). Apart from countless descriptions of particular peoples and tribes, it sets forth the outline of an evolutionary theory of human variation. To begin with, Buffon absolutely dismisses any form of polygenism. All men and women on the earth are members of a single species. This principle is not based on Christian monogenism, but on Buffon's novel definition of a species as the ensemble of individuals who can interbreed and produce fertile offspring.²⁵ How, then, to explain the differences in skin colour, physiognomy and bodily form between the 'races' of humanity? Here, Buffon resorts to an environmentalist explanation, in line with much Enlightenment thinking about psychology, politics and culture. His conclusion deserves to be quoted in extenso:

Tout concourt donc à prouver que le genre humain n'est pas composé d'espèces essentiellement différentes entre elles; qu'au contraire il n'y a eu originairement qu'une seule espèce d'hommes, qui, s'étant multipliée et répandue sur toute la surface de la terre, a subi différents changements par l'influence du climat, par la différence de la nourriture, par celle de la manière de vivre, par les maladies épidémiques, et aussi par le mélange varié à l'infini des individus plus ou moins ressemblants.²⁶

Buffon propounds a proto-Lamarckian theory of human evolution, arguing that the action of the same environmental influences over a long time span will finally produce hereditary traits, such as skin pigmentation and bodily form. He thinks it 'very probable' that such physical features will fade away when the environmental factors responsible for them weaken or cease to exist altogether. Citing the above conclusions, Buffon's modern biographer, Jacques Roger, calls his theory of human variety 'surprisingly close to the

²⁵ Philip Sloan, 'The gaze of natural history' in: Christopher Fox, Roy Porter and Robert Wokler ed., *Inventing human science. Eighteenth-century domains* (Berkeley etc. 1995) 112-151.

²⁶ George-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *De l'homme*, Michèle Duchet ed. (Paris 1971) 320.

thinking of modern anthropology, over and above the racial speculations of the nineteenth century.²⁷

There is an element of truth in Roger's judgment, but a careful reading of Buffon's entire chapter on human variety casts serious doubt on his affinity with the anthropology of the late twentieth century. The chapter abounds in utterances such as the following: 'In Laponia and on the northern coasts of Tartary one encounters a race of men of small stature, a bizarre shape, of which the physiognomy is as savage as their customs. Those men (...) appear to have degenerated from the human species (...) the women are just as ugly as the men, and resemble them so much that one does not distinguish them at first.'²⁸ Generally, Buffon discusses the America's and their inhabitants in terms of 'degeneration'.²⁹ About the Africans he has this to say: 'Although the negroes have little intelligence, they do not lack powerful sentiments; they are happy or downcast, industrious or lazy, friends or enemies, depending on the way in which one treats them.'³⁰ This is followed by an ambiguous comment on the slave trade. Buffon is 'revolted' by the odious practice of slavery, engendered by cruelty and greed, but he does not formulate a wholesale condemnation of it, and the passage ends in a resigned finale: 'Mais laissons ces hommes durs [the slave owners], et revenons à notre objet'.³¹ On the other hand, Buffon is well aware of the relativity of European racial aesthetics. Speaking about the inhabitants of the Cape Verdean islands he observes that they are strong and well built and 'very black'; the Cape Verdeans, he further relates, 'believe that their country is the best and the most beautiful on the earth, and that they themselves are the most beautiful people in the world because they are the blackest'.³² It is not easy to determine if the last utterance is meant ironically or not.

Ultimately, Buffon's text continually navigates between the notion of a common humanity and concrete descriptions of lands and peoples that point in a diametrically opposite direction. In a few sentences he moves from a stereotypical discourse on the low intelligence and naivety of the 'negroes' to censorious observations about the slave trade, only to leave the reader hanging in mid-air. Likewise, Buffon's concept of the human species vacillates

²⁷ Jacques Roger, *Buffon: Un philosophe au jardin du roi* (Paris 1989) 244.

²⁸ Buffon, *De l'homme*, 223-224; my translation.

²⁹ Phillip R. Sloan, 'The idea of racial degeneracy in Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*' in: Harold F. Pagliaro ed., *Racism in the eighteenth century* (Cleveland and London 1973) 293-321.

³⁰ Buffon, *De l'homme*, 283.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 284.

³² Buffon, *De l'homme*, 279.

between a notion of the thinking mind as the hallmark of humanity, philosophically grounded on Cartesian dualism, and a more materialist approach, suggested by the inclusion of humanity in a 'natural history' where it is investigated and classified as a part of the animal kingdom.³³ The Cartesian theorisation of the human person has powerful egalitarian implications, while the natural-historical approach puts the main emphasis on ethnic (racial) classification and physical differences.

Both the science of racial classification ('n'en déplaît Jacques Roger') and the notion of the equality of all human beings as members of the same species are powerfully present in Buffon's text. Or, to put it more generally, both modern equality and modern inequality partake in the making of his argument. To ask 'who is the real Buffon?' makes no sense, for the only possible answer would be: both.

What is demonstrated here through Buffon's work applies to countless other cases and themes: the discourses of modern, universalistic equality are always doubled by equally modern discourses of inequality. And this is not only true of intellectually sophisticated texts, but also of popular stories and pictorial representations of equality and difference. To remain with the classification of humanity for a moment: schoolchildren may be taught the unity of humanity as Christian doctrine and scientific truth, but what of the iconography of difference represented by the countless pictures and displays of 'other peoples' these same children have been confronted with in classrooms, museums and exhibitions during the last two or three centuries?³⁴ Do not these convey a quite different message?

Conclusion: equality as a Janus-faced concept

In all history, but in particular in modern history, equality is a Janus-faced concept. One face bespeaks its overwhelming power. At the present time, it is inscribed in democratic constitutions the world over, as well as in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. In today's world, there seems to be a near-universal consensus that equality is one of the basic values of a good

³³ For the endorsement of Cartesian dualism, see Buffon, *De l'homme*, 39-40.

³⁴ See e.g. Nicolas Bancel et. al. ed., *Zoos humains. De la vénéus hottentote aux reality shows* (Paris 2002).

society.³⁵ The other face of the egalitarian Janus, however, shows us an embattled and contested idea: the everlasting ‘yes-but’ concept of modern history. Whether one discusses ‘races’ and nations, economic, knowledge or gender issues, arguments for and against equality abound, and ever novel and different concepts and images of equality and inequality emerge from the contest. The history of equality is situated in the discursive space between the two faces of the Janus. Much of it, perhaps most of it, remains to be written.

³⁵ See e.g. Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign virtue. The theory and practice of equality* (Cambridge Mass. 2002).