

A
QUESTION
OF
INEQUALITY

The Politics of
Equal Worth

CHRISTOPHER STEED

I.B. TAURIS

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‘We want to bring a message from the people in the poorest countries in the world to the forum of the most powerful business and political leaders. The message is that rising inequality is dangerous. It’s bad for growth and it’s bad for governance. We see a concentration of wealth capturing power and leaving ordinary people voiceless and their interests uncared for.’

– Oxfam International¹

‘Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?’

– *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 3 Scene 1, Shakespeare

‘Does it really matter that we have more than others? If they worked as hard as me then they too could have what I have.’

– Anon²

‘History says, don’t hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.’

– *The Cure at Troy*, Seamus Heaney³

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Introduction: Setting the Scene

Paraded across the divides of modern times, inequality is both wide and widening.

In parallel, the very concept of 'equality' is becoming wider. Egalitarianism is a social and political agenda that has varying fortunes on the contemporary scene. Does the embrace of a market society necessarily involve repudiation of 'cradle to grave', or state interventions to level things up? How should societies respond to pervasive concentrations of power that surges through the very language we use about ethnicity, gender, age and intact bodies? Is the trend towards equal identities leading anywhere – should we not just abolish all social categories as oppressive? And what do we do about the obscene disparities of health as well as wealth, among those who live in the same city (let alone the same country)?

What is inequality? When you drill down into it, the term 'equality' is somewhat meaningless. People live such radically different lives. Maybe it is another way of talking about disparities that will inevitably exist in the aggregate, rather than at an individual level, and rather than being a call to arms against social injustice. Does it matter if people in different social locations live different lives and labour under far greater disadvantages? Is 'equality' the ultimate value anyway? This book argues that 'equal worth', open to debate though it is in philosophical circles, nevertheless functions as a social dynamic, and seeks to show how. However problematic a concept, inequality gets under the skin; it provokes a reaction much to do with our own sense of value and worth.

The experience of living with racism is well documented in an unlikely context; that of growing up black in white Australia. Maxine Benebe Clark documents life in Sydney in the 1980s and 1990s where racism was commonplace. Anything unfamiliar was hidden from view and scorned. All the culture was about white people doing white things. A Cabbage Patch Kids doll given her by her mother evoked being overcome with disappointment. The doll had brown skin and would not carry the same social value in the playground.¹ That epitomises the central message of this book. It is about what happens

when the externally conferred social value meets with an internal sense of value and the pattern of role-switching that ensues in such transactions.

Discrimination – whether in criminal justice, health care, education or the slog of everyday life – dents people's understanding of themselves and their identities and this is such a huge factor and force today. An overwhelming sense of powerlessness often flows from stereotypes. Being given to understand that you are no good in the classroom and have few prospects in the workplace erodes self-value.

That will be the journey of exploration in this book. Inequality matters precisely because it gets under the skin. Discussion about social anxiety and status syndrome become core issues, not just because of what people experience relative to everyone else but because they dig into the role that our own sense of value and worth plays in human action. How do people build a good life filled with meaning and feel they are worthwhile when, for some, the odds are stacked so heavily against them? How does a young Dalit man do that if his job is to scrape human excrement and clean toilets with his bare hands?

For many, money is the goal of a good life but the flashy confident have opportunities denied others. Or some will not progress very far and be disadvantaged due to the constraints of parental background. People will never be at the same starting point and while the message of aspiration is vital to make a break from imposed limitations – the ideal of 'be who you are' rings hollow. The world over, lives are constrained. Inequality is detrimental and often lethal because, instead of limits coming from inside, someone else gets to define the limits within which life must be lived. As we will explore, refusal to be bound by the definitions of others is the essence of the Protest – 'I am me!'

This is the lure, the demand, but also the challenge of equal identities. Perhaps now it is stagnant living standards for the broad middle of society and accumulation of unusable wealth by the rich that has pushed fairness up the agenda.² There is certainly something fundamentally wrong with the way wealth is distributed. The strength of the reception to Thomas Piketty's magnum opus, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*,³ demonstrated the interest in this.

The world is changing more quickly than anyone can keep up with. From one breathless headline to the next, we are seeing faster and more disruptive change of global consequence than ever before. Unevenly spread global wealth is a pressing issue. Many social rifts are closing; fresh ones are opening up. On the whole, inequality is rising and wealth more concentrated than

ever. The simplest way of measuring income inequality, Gini coefficients, have risen everywhere. The top one per cent has increased their share of the pie dramatically. Oxfam reported that the top one per cent has more than 50 per cent of total global wealth. Just eight men own the same wealth as half the world. One of the six co-chairs at the 2017 World Economic Forum said the increased concentration of wealth seen since the deep recession of 2008–9 was dangerous and needed to be reversed.⁴ If there's one theme that dominated discussions in Davos that year, it was inequality. By 2009, as the financial crash was kicking in, researchers were already drawing attention to the link between inequality and a range of social ills. Addressing the World Economic Forum in 2013, the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Christine Lagarde, quoted an American President to warn of the dangers of rising inequality. 'Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "The test of our progress is not if we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it's whether we provide enough for those who have too little."'”⁵

Few had listened, she said four years later, despite many IMF researchers reaching the same conclusion. 'I don't know why people didn't listen, but certainly I got a strong backlash, in particular from economists saying that it was not really any of their business to worry about these things.' Inequality was feeding the rise of nationalism and populism: 'You can be absolutely sure that nations will revert to their natural tendency of hiding behind their borders, of moving towards protectionism, of listening to vested interests, and they'll forget about transcending those national priorities.'⁶

Were those economists right to say that unequal distribution of income does not matter too much in itself? It could perhaps be that the lived experience of most people is focused more on poverty and that the struggle to make ends meet is their daily concern. Where they are positioned on the income distribution curve could be a profound outrage to those looking on rather than those trying to feed their families. But is this right? Is inequality bad for individuals and societies?

Walter Scheidel argued in his history of inequality, *The Great Leveller*, that it is the natural state for society, or as the Nobel Prize-winner in Economics Edmund Phelps had said, it is a mistake to rail against inequality at the top. Economic cycles will come and go: nothing can be done to prevent inequality.⁷

It is not just about chronic disparity of income between rich and poor. Elites do not just possess greater wealth. They have more power. The disadvantaged are excluded through a variety of means. Elsewhere, I try to show

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that the economic and social system works for those who can pay up and keep up, who look good and who stay young. There are massive divides in educational attainment whereby regimes of testing and assessment are used to sort out different levels of ability.⁸ In October 2017, the British prime minister, Theresa May, announced initial findings from a Racial Disparity Audit. 'My most fundamental political belief is that how far you go in life should be based on your talent and how hard you work – and nothing else,' she declared. The audit looked at how people of different backgrounds are treated across various areas of the state, including health, education, employment and the criminal justice system. Huge differences showed up in outcomes for ethnicities in different parts of the country, as well as significant disparities between different ethnic minority groups. Employment rates were far higher for white people – 75.7 per cent – than for black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups – 63.9 per cent – across the country as a whole. White pupils from state schools had the lowest university entry rate. More than nine in ten head teachers were white British.⁹

Inequality is as old as human societies. Differences persist everywhere. As Jesus said, the poor are always with you. Reaction against it is nothing new. The oppressed have always chafed against oppressors. Slave and peasant revolts were rare. The medieval world did not think of social class in the way we do. Their emphasis was on layers and ordained orders commanding loyalty and fealty. It was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that a tradition of radical politics began to emerge that brought a daring idea into the world. The new idea began to resonate both with strong strands of Christian tradition and also the Enlightenment. People could change things. The social order did not have to be this way. Transformation was possible. Socialist politics in the nineteenth century made this daring idea take hold and become a vibrant force. Communism was fundamentally an equality project: Lenin's own father had been influential in trying to ensure equal opportunities for ethnic minorities in the area school district. Driven by hatred, Vladimir Lenin then emerged preaching class war and violent overthrow of society. His motivation was to create an alternative world. Twentieth-century chaos was aflame with those who had such fire in their minds.

Unfortunately, there was a snake in paradise. It is power that creates inequalities. Communism had little conception of power, beyond the general proposition that bourgeois oppressors held the cards. The idea that proletariat revolutionaries could seize the reins of state power and become a viciously

oppressive force was not foreseen. Its advocates did not foresee that although capitalism was mired in interests, the state also took on strong interests that did not serve the people in whose name it purported to act. Communism turned out to be only a pseudo equality project. The dream turned into nightmare. What did the emancipation of women count for if so many would languish in the Gulag? To the end of their days, unreconstructed adherents of the far-left could see no flaws in communist regimes beyond a few mistakes made. Class war or violence clothed in anti-imperialism was justified; it was not on the same moral footing as the incarnations of fascism. This blind spot has warped how generations of activists have seen the world. Yet anyone alive to the evil that men do should not have been surprised by Stalin or a Mao. The failure of suspicion about power was terrifyingly naive. Marx argued that capitalism was on the wrong side of history – often an ominous phrase – and that society should be organised in a different way; that a communist society should be set up in which equality is universal. How human beings should live in the world would be radically new. But communist autocracy led to terrifying abuses of human rights and great loss of life. All too quickly, high-minded Bolshevik ideals were betrayed by propensity to violence. All that mattered was achieving an equal society. The masses of people were raw material of social engineering. As Stalin said, ‘one death is a tragedy; one million a statistic.’¹⁰ The individual did not count in Soviet Russia.

The convulsions of class war have moved on; the idea perished after 1989 when the Berlin wall came down and the communist nightmare was over. What started out as a project to establish equality among the masses rapidly led to Russia becoming the most unequal of the richer economies (in the Russia of 2017, the Revolution was hardly celebrated). Cuba and North Korea were isolated enclaves and even the One Party State that is modern China became transformed into a market economy despite the Tiananmen Square protest being crushed that year. Western politics had changed out of all recognition. Thatcher, a grocer’s daughter, did not have long to run as the UK prime minister but Theresa May, who was often compared to Thatcher, could take power in the summer of 2016 professing to govern on behalf of those at the bottom at the pile, against all discrimination. Thus revived a tradition of the ‘one nation’ Tory. Theresa May’s main protagonist, Jeremy Corbyn, made clear that the UK Labour Party was a movement of social justice ‘for the many, not the few’, holding a vision of hope where the poor have sufficient to live on and workers are fairly paid.

Forms of inequality had moved on to other locations. Gender inequality, disability, sexual identity, race and ethnicity, ageing – all came under the spotlight in the last decades of the twentieth century as profound questions were asked about the way society worked. These have not gone away: far from it. In *Toxic Inequality*, Professor Tom Shapiro reveals how ingrained, systemic racism is responsible for the widening gap between the wealth of white and African American households in the United States.¹¹ In Australia, an investigation by the country's sex discrimination commissioner, Kate Jenkins, found that incorrect assumptions are being made that gender equality has been achieved despite disturbing and comprehensive evidence to the contrary. There was 'surprising and concerning' prevalence of opposition to advancing gender equality.

They're not actively working against equality but there is a sense in the broader community that gender equality has been achieved, which means there is no real motivation for people to do things differently or to promote women or highlight their stories.¹²

It is all very well basing advances in gender equality assuming Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual, able-bodied people, many who feel they are breaking down some of those barriers. Yet women with disabilities are 40 per cent more likely than women without disabilities to be the victims of domestic violence; and Aboriginal women are 32 times more likely to be admitted to hospital as a result of family violence-related assault than non-indigenous women.

New divides were opening up to take the place of the previous divisions in society. Internet media brought an intensified social comparison. Technology is making the world more unequal as a large gap yawns between elites favoured by an automated future and those who will serve in low-paid jobs and wait at tables.

Globalisation – by turns bogeyman and cause of celebration – was blamed or lauded for many situations where jobs were being sucked east. But the real culprit was not the Chinese economy hoovering them up: it was automation. Capital follows cost savings. If jobs in America's rust belt can be done more cheaply by an army of robots, what stops this happening? As Stephen Hawking warned, technology's role in growing levels of income inequality means that this is 'the most dangerous time for our planet'.¹³ Inequalities will rise – and fall but technology makes the world more unequal.

If humans cannot do jobs, artificial intelligence can. The diffusion of technology takes time to filter through. What is the future of low-paid, low-productivity work?

I write these words on a day when leaders of the 20 most powerful and rich countries on the planet had concluded their meeting at the G20 in Hamburg. In the shadows of global elites, the anti-capitalist movement erupted into action. At least 40,000 people had gathered and police in riot gear lined the streets. The anti-globalisation ATTAC movement, organising the march, said that about 100,000 people attended. ATTAC coordinator Thomas Eberhardt-Koester said the movement wanted to ‘bring our criticism of the G20 and our alternatives for fair global policies onto the streets’. More than 200 police officers were injured in three days of rioting. After a night of rioting in which radicals looted shops, hurled objects and set alight street barricades, the city centre was in lock down with luxury shops along main streets barricaded, protected by security guards.¹⁴ The same day – 8 July 2017 – saw the world’s largest Pride festival on the streets of London. More than 26,000 people took part in the parade, watched by a crowd of one million. This came after 100 other similar events in the preceding fortnight. Things had moved on in so many countries. The social landscape was unrecognisable compared to 50 years before, when the Sexual Offences Act 1967 decriminalised homosexuality in England and Wales.¹⁵ All this coincided with a report published by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) and Her Majesty’s Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI). The report pointed out that in a recent study of 358 homicides of women in the United Kingdom, 71 per cent were identified as involving a past or current relationship. Stalking behaviours were present in 94 per cent of cases.¹⁶

Inequality did not make people angry in the Middle Ages. You accepted you were a peasant and someone else was a king. But in a twenty-first-century capitalist society, it is a major problem. You compare yourself with others. You believe *you* can have it too. This could be because of social envy. But there is a darker side. Economic inequality means people say ‘I don’t have a stake in this society’.

Inequality has come to be an industry; studies on how to break up concentrations of wealth and power have been at the top of the bestseller charts. Marx’s iconic flagship volume *Das Kapital* had an heir for our times. Thomas Piketty’s *Capital* went to the top of the New York Times bestseller lists – much hailed and much criticised. Unequal societies were argued to be dangerous

for cohesion. A raft of social ills were linked to it. Methodologically, this does not prove the point. Correlation is not the same as causation. There is a curious bifurcation at work. Keen interest among politicians and social scientist in the lack of equality that weighs on society is matched by a general lack of interest among most people in their findings, whose concerns are, primarily, on paying the common round of bills.

Why then is inequality such a problem? Could societies not resign themselves to a lack of equality being inevitable? An unequal social system is here to stay. There will always be winners and losers. After all, the granting of privilege by some to some is deeply ingrained. One person's advantage is another person's disadvantage. In the writings of that paradigmatic Enlightenment figure Jean Jacques Rousseau, equality is an ambiguous concept. 'Man is born free but is everywhere in chains'. Civilisation creates and perpetuates inequality – but we are all equal in misery and equally in chains.

I will argue that inequality does matter. It matters because of the way that equal worth is not merely a philosophical construct but a social dynamic. To set the stall out, inequality may not worry people if by that we mean their perception of where they sit on the income distribution curve. It might not be uneven rewards in abstract terms so much as their reality of having to make ends meet and pay that electricity bill hanging over them or find the money to get out of overcrowded housing. Very likely, being pinched or ground down by sheer lack of resources, in other words poverty, might be what is far more of a pressing issue. As an interviewee said on radio news during the UK election of 2017 when asked about what affects them most in everyday life, 'it is the struggle of living. I have got a job. Yet everything is expensive.' 'It is the cost of living,' said another, 'having to buy food.'¹⁷ Though referred to a great deal by political parties, inequality came up only sporadically among voters, who seemed to have intuitive respect for existential complexities politicians often lacked.

Yet lack of equality matters when it affects people personally. As another interviewee said during the UK election, recounting her experiences, 'social inequality is a huge problem. I face it every day. I will never be able to catch up with people I went to university with. Just because I went to Oxford University does not guarantee the same job opportunities. I will never keep up.'¹⁸

For so many, even in relatively affluent Britain, sub-standard housing and often hunger map on to other social divides such as the widening gap between

north and south or situations when zero hours contracts become exploitative. It is when discrimination and other forms of inequality connect with the daily reality of lived experience that lack of fairness in society becomes an issue. It could well be that the average person is far less interested in economic inequality than the politician. Is it primarily social scientists that link the issue of inequality to the issue of poverty?

Nevertheless, inequality is integral to discriminatory or exploitative treatment. It is fundamental to groups in society being handled differently. It matters because of the lack of respect with which it is inexorably associated. We will never be equal; the starting point, the advantages or variation in social circumstances are too profound to militate against full equality of opportunity. Few can grasp opportunity with an equal hand. Systemic inequalities whereby we are not in practice equal human beings should be challenged for at least five reasons:

- 1 **Religious and philosophical argument.** Social injustice is a moral outrage. To have an inbuilt division between the haves and have-nots has to be wrong if it means some have the dice loaded against them by reason of their circumstances. This is socially corrosive.
- 2 **The economic argument** – that wealth is sucked up from the bottom to the top. People need to have a stake in the system or they will feel disenfranchised. It is incongruous to observe an economic system in a democracy which channels the spoils to the richest.
- 3 **The practical argument** – that inequality has a very real impact on people's lives from day to day. The practical effects of inequality could take the form of unequal access by those with disability, preference shown to 'people like us' (PLU) or the glass ceiling.
- 4 **The argument from intensified social comparison** in an age of anxiety, is harmful to those who cannot keep up. Social status has always been a feature of competitive societies where participants do not simply accept the status quo. It is internet social media that has extended comparative status to such issues of looks and body image where people do not only go third class but are trashed.
- 5 **The psychodynamic argument: inequality impacts the person.** Consciousness of relative position engenders a counter-reaction that will manifest in various ways. It is this awareness of inferior status relative to others that makes inequality socially corrosive.

Persistently high rates of income or wealth inequality are bad for social cohesion, political inclusion and crime. The evidence for this is overwhelming. Or is it? **The argument is that growing economic inequality exacerbates social problems** such as youth unemployment, gender-based violence and many others. Inequality denies people both their dignity and their voice. It feeds social frustration and the lack of cohesion. Islamic fundamentalism is exacerbated by its appeal to those who feel on the margins. It feeds on broken homes, abusive relationships and petty criminality.¹⁹

Affective inequality matters. People feel disadvantaged for various reasons. A news piece about social mobility and grammar schools told the story of a young woman who left school with ten good GCSEs. Then her dad died and her nan and her auntie. It was all too much. She got work in a fish factory.²⁰

These are the arguments we will rehearse in this essay. Accounts of inequality surely fall short if there is no theory of relativity. As with Einstein's 1905 landmark work in theoretical physics, a theory of social relativity is contingent upon local frames of reference. Relative position needs to be proximate to be felt. Global inequality is a massive issue of our times as the gap between many areas of the world and rich world countries is so stark. It is, though, when people are brought into close relation with each other – such as in a family or between neighbours and neighbourhoods – that relative effects kick in.

We will consider this against the landscapes of our times where inequality is a pressing issue:

- Social worlds moving apart (Chapter 1)
- New class divides such as being due to age and automation (Chapter 2)
- Inequality on a global scale (Chapter 3)
- Gender (Chapter 4)
- War on the skin – racial profiling (Chapter 5)
- Intact bodies and wounded history (Chapter 6)

Behind the entrenched inequalities that are reproduced in these arenas of our times lie fundamental issues about how human beings are valued. Whether it is those who are excluded from social norms, either just-about-managing ('jams') or not able to keep their heads above water financially; whether it is those who experience lack or outright deprivation; whether the focus is on everyday sexism and gender stereotyping, racial profiling or whatever, there is a set of beliefs and attitudes.

A century ago, Gandhi responded to the 1919 Amritsar massacre in his newspaper *Young India* that the Hunter Report ‘furnishes overwhelming testimony of British officialdom’s conception of Indian rights as of little importance and Indian life as very cheap’. It would no longer be subject to colonial power. Such is hidden psychology of politics and of unequal status.²¹ The caged bird was now free.

The Infamous Second Verse

A personal word. In the Parish, the most commonly requested hymn at markers of births, marriages and deaths remains the nineteenth-century favourite ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’. Most can still remember it but not the infamous second verse that came up at the time of writing: ‘The rich man in his castle, the poor man at the gate. God made them high and lowly and ordered their estate’.

To modern tastes this is a relic of a reprehensible antiquity, reflective of ideas about the social order long since consigned to history (consigned one might add, by the triumphant success of the equality agenda as well as Christian socialism, strong when the hymn was written). It is now obvious in a way that it was not before consciousness-raising became so powerful that this was power in thin disguise.

De-personalisation’s disavowal and re-assertion of the worth of social participants who had felt relegated lay behind Brexit, Trump and the populist surge of 2016. It reflects the societal shift we are witnessing towards ‘voice and choice.’ This contemporary mood is a universe away from the kind of spirituality expressed in the writings of the seventeenth-century mystic and cleric Jeremy Taylor, for example, where people are exhorted to feel undervalued, unnoticed and esteemed of little worth.²² My own perspective is shaped by a rather different theology plus its practical application in setting up an environment where people do count and they do matter. I have worked on the old council estates where it was pretty clear, pretty quickly that there was a healthy reaction against those who sought to ‘do’ for people; what was important instead was to value the contributions put forward so people knew they are listened to.

I believe strongly in a society of equals, where it is vitally important to treat people the same, where it is important to mount radical assault to the barriers in a deeply unfair society that prevent them reaching their potential

and where society should make it its business to look out for those that have weaker voices. I believe strongly that we must find ways at local level of recreating community that really does allow for participation and reward on equal terms. Recreating communities of equals where social relationships are non-oppressive is vital for human flourishing.

Yet there is a faux reaction often in evidence that mires the progressive left in moral confusion. Banning speakers from a university campus where their words are likely to be disturbing to some is not an expression of the equality principle. Putting trigger words on actions and statements that will evoke predictable cries of protest is not an expression of the equality principle. Questioning misogynistic practices among Muslim communities only to risk accusations of Islamophobia or racism is not an expression of the equality principle. These things should continue to be challenged.

Equality is not the ultimate principle. In overall terms, the value of persons is paramount. That underlies equality in that human beings could be said to have equal value (though that is disputed among moral philosophers). As a Christian theologian, the claim I would make is that the value and worth human beings have is undergirded by God. The Creator – who, as the American Declaration of Independence stated, created us equal and endowed us with certain unalienable rights – alone holds ultimacy. An impersonal, atheistically perceived universe can never be the source of validation for personal human beings of incredibly high value. That is not, and can never be, a licence for human oppression. Quite the contrary, it challenges it at every turn.

The problem with inequality is that we are never at the same starting point. There are plenty who will never progress far because their upbringing and the lack of opportunities constrain them. Inevitably, we are a product of the experiences that shape us – and those experiences are completely unequal. In affirming equal value it is important to allow and encourage everyone to rise to their own level and be who they are. This will vary within societies but also over time.

Part One

Landscapes of Inequality

1

A Tale of Two Cities

‘The Labour Party is the party of equality and seeks to build a society and world free from all forms of racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Labour has a strong record on progressing women’s rights and freedoms that we can be proud of.’ – Labour Party Manifesto, UK General Election 2017

‘We pass through this world but once. Few tragedies can be more extensive than the stunting of life, few injustices deeper than the denial of opportunity to strive or even to hope, by a limit imposed from without but falsely identified as lying within.’ – *The Mismeasure of Man*, Stephen Jay Gould¹

‘All the time they kept screaming. The screams moved with the fire.’ Far, far too quickly a tower block in West London containing 120 homes and 200 people became a raging inferno. ‘It went up,’ remarked a survivor, ‘like a matchstick.’²

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Social rifts in London and Paris had evolved beyond recognition from the eighteenth-century urban underworld charted by Dickens when, in France, a revolution dedicated to *égalité* was about to sweep the old order of things away. In the twenty-first century, the banlieues of Paris are present in all their social distress; framed by modernist architecture, they are places where alienation and violence are rife.

It was from the alienated banlieues that terror erupted in 2005.³ Distressed London is represented by social housing estates and tower-blocks that pierce the sky, built to house the poor and which are crammed with human beings. It was in an area like this that the towering inferno was lifted from a Hollywood disaster movie to become horrific reality one June night in 2017.

Outside cladding that was put on Grenfell House in North Kensington for insulation had become a combustible fire blanket. It seemed as if a dysfunctional relationship between housing standards between the rich and the poor lay at the heart of the horror. With more money, greater protection could have been bought. Do rich lives count for more? Was an inferior quality material being used and is it worth spending more on more important lives? Rapidly, the Grenfell fire became a story about class, ethnicity and poverty. One of the capital's richest councils that had huge reserves of public money had failed to look after its poorest residents. Or so it seemed. Yet on the website, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea had proclaimed that 'Grenfell Tower in North Kensington, has been undergoing major refurbishment [...]. The large-scale works included the installation of insulated exterior cladding, new double glazed windows and a new communal heating system'.⁴

In North Kensington, contrasting social worlds lived side by side. 'I do feel that poor people have been gated off from this community,' said a local resident.⁵ '[Visually] there's no comparison, you've got a Rolls Royce to your right and the slum to the left. It's not a good contrast. There's half a road separating the wealth and the poverty.' A short distance away from the disaster, rich mansions lay empty while BMWs, Jaguars and Audis were parked along tree-lined streets. Some of the wealthiest streets in the country nestle near cramped housing. In the shadows of classy delicatessens for the wealthy lay supermarkets offering inexpensive food for the poor, the migrants and the 'just-about-managings' that have become a slogan in the circles of government.

Those with lower incomes face a housing crisis; they are being evicted by private landlords as a consequence, mainly, of welfare cuts and capping of benefits.⁶ In the United Kingdom, 120,000 children are forced to sleep in emergency accommodation, mixing with drug addicts and those with mental health problems. Particularly in London, those on housing benefit face huge problems in obtaining jobs or other accommodation.

Inequality is usually measured by comparing incomes across households within a country. But there is also a different kind of inequality: the affordability of homes across cities. The flight of lower-income people from our

cities does not bode well. In many of the world's urban centres, homes are becoming prohibitively expensive for people with moderate incomes. As the 2017 Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey showed, around the world it is highly variable, ranging from Hong Kong (a price to income ratio of 18:1) to Chicago (3.8:1). In London it is 8.5:1.⁷

'This would never have happened in a mansion,' remarked one angry protester about the Grenfell disaster. There was a sense among many others that elites just don't listen; the familiar refrain of our times. The fire revealed the divides of social London. The political morality tale not only highlighted the gap in mortality rates between North and South Kensington, it also revealed the litany against impersonal faces and impersonal forces. Theresa May, prime minister, visited the disaster but received strong criticism for not going among the traumatised survivors.⁸

Conditions are cramped. 'I have lived in a one-bedroom flat with my daughter for ten years,' said one survivor. 'What alternative was there? The Battersea Power Station development is not for the likes of me – riff raff or scroungers or whatever they call us.'⁹ This was not housing the less well-off people. Generally, a commitment to affordable homes helps to get planning applications through. Developers often then alter the number of affordable homes they offer. The needs of communities are ignored. In places like these and the old tower block country the author is used to, social worlds are moving apart. In rich societies, the poor have shorter lives and suffer more from every social problem. Malign circuits, characteristic of societies at every level, are greatly exacerbated where you have low educational attainment, poor housing and poor health.

On the same day as the Grenfell fire, the leader of the Liberal Democrat Party in the United Kingdom, Tim Farron, resigned his position. Against the backcloth of his views on gay sex during the 2017 General Election campaign, it would, he said, have been impossible for him to be a Liberal Democrat leader and 'remain faithful to Christ'.¹⁰ In his eyes, this was a moral issue. In the eyes of his detractors, it was an *equality* issue to do with the acceptability of gay relationships as contrasted with heterosexual relationships. Are questions of equality the defining moral issues of our time?

It certainly seems that to go against an equality issue is the ultimate sin.

The UK general election was fought initially on the vexed issue of garnering sufficient support for the right negotiating stance to withdraw the United Kingdom from membership of the European Union (EU).

‘Everyone is equal before the law’. So says Article 20 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. The Charter subsumed all the rights found in the case law of the Court of Justice of the EU as well as the rights and freedoms enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights – two contentious institutions to those clamouring to withdraw.

It is today’s single most important political principle. Diversity is now to be valued not assimilated. The equality principle is included in all European constitutions. It has been recognised by the Court of Justice as a basic principle of European Community law.¹¹ Article 21 follows – the principle of ‘Non-discrimination’. Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation or nationality is prohibited. In turn, Article 22 proclaims that the EU shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. The principle of equality extends further into Article 23 – ‘Equality between women and men must be ensured in all areas, including employment, work and pay.’

Though poorly understood by Western liberalism, fragmentation into different identities based on nationalism has become the hallelujah (or political menace) of our times. What liberals did grasp was a different sort of identity politics. The classic oppositional movements of the second half of the twentieth century – civil rights, women’s liberation, ethnic, de-colonisation, disability, sexual orientation and ageing – represented enormous social changes that were advancing at broadly the same time. The triumph of the principle (though not the practice), has been all but complete among richer countries. Many critics argue that the ideology of equality and diversity has hardened into a dogma which excludes minority views of those who see it as a juggernaut.

As Tepperman notes in *The Fix*, an identity of being on the left has been a way of feeling morally superior; an identity of being on the right of politics of feeling intellectually superior.¹² Nevertheless, an enduring feature of the movements which blossomed in the 1960s – for women’s, gay and black liberation – was not their support for but their hostility to the emerging market state. Equality used to be a matter of class and positioning in society. Now it is about culture and identity. If you discriminate against the poor or sections of society, it becomes an equality issue. The voices of alleged victims are entitled to their day in court as much as abusers. To deny that would also be an