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EGALITARIANISM AND ITS METAMORPHOSIS INTO 'EASY MORALITY'

ABSTRACT This article addresses a critique of contemporary egalitarianism that, while certainly present, has not been prominent in the relevant literature on equality. Rather than examining internal flaws in the concept of equality itself, it asks whether the dominant form of egalitarianism in current political discourse – particularly within liberal and left-liberal agendas – has become selectively applied in ways that undermine its foundational aims. Specifically, in the paper the claim is made that this contemporary form of egalitarianism: (a) foregrounds peripheral issues over core egalitarian concerns; (b) does so at the expense of addressing the condition of the worst-off; and (c) can be best understood through the lens of 'easy morality' – a normative posture marked by minimal personal cost, misaligned ethical priorities (*ordo amoris*), and broad social approval that masks its limitations. It argues that central egalitarian concerns – such as wealth concentration, global poverty, and middle-class decline – have been sidelined in favour of less demanding but more culturally salient causes. Finally, the paper proposes several hypotheses regarding the socio-cultural and political factors contributing to this shift.

Keywords: egalitarianism, inequalities, easy morality, axiological blindness, democracy, elites.

1. INTRODUCTION

Even though egalitarianism is a respectable socio-political doctrine and movement – having played a pivotal role in securing many of the human rights enshrined in legal frameworks and embedded within contemporary social morality – it remains open to critique, particularly regarding the form it has assumed over the past two decades. At least two distinct lines of critique can be identified.

The *first line* involves demonstrating that there is something 'inherently problematic' in the very content of this value, making it dangerous as a social or political ideal. To make this line of critique plausible, one would have to first draw necessary distinctions regarding the meaning of equality. For it is clear that some forms of this value – such as formal equality (equality before the law), equality of formal opportunity, or fundamental equality (equal respect for all human beings as such) – are not problematic in themselves. These are basic moral and legal principles that should be realised at any cost; it is hard to imagine how they could be abused, as there is nothing in them that could justify immoral actions. However, there is an important aspect of the value of equality that is open to such abuse: social justice, when understood as equality of outcome, or equality of opportunity, when conceived as *equalized probabilities of achieving given results, whether in education, employment or the courtroom*,[1] or, more generally, as a fight against any form of discrimination (even reasonable ones), can all too easily lead to infringements on liberty and to endeavours to equalise what is unequal; the abuse can be succinctly and generally described in the Aristotelian terms as substituting arithmetic equality for geometric equality, i.e., strict equality for proportionality.[2] It should be noted that these abuses are tied to one of the standard interpretations of the value of equality – specifically, social justice. They do not stem from assigning an arbitrary new meaning to the value. Therefore, the common objection that all values can be similarly abused is not plausible in this case. Such an objection might hold with regard to concepts like economic efficiency, but not with values like liberty or solidarity (the abuse of liberty, for example, such as conceiving it in the Marxist sense as the recognised necessity, always involves assigning it an arbitrary new meaning).

[1] T. Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions, Ideological Origins of Political Struggles*, London 2007 (1987), p. 135.

[2] I set aside more radical criticisms of the value of equality put forth by strongly conservative thinkers. These critics, who emphasise the value of hierarchy, view equality – especially as it might be applied in various contexts such as religion, family, university, and the state – as a threat, a force that erodes tradition. They recognise as justifiable only one form of equality – the fundamental, metaphysical equality of human beings, who are created by God. From this, they argue, follow equal rights to life, respect, property, the founding of a family, and the right to profess religion. For a 20th-century defence of this view, one could refer, e.g. to the works of Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira (see especially his: *Rewolucja i kontrrewolucja*, transl. S. Olejniczak, Kraków 1998). It is also worth noting that in his writings, Oliveira presents a different form of criticism: he traces the psychological source of the demand for equality to pride (*superbia*) – the inability to tolerate being subordinate to someone (such as God, parents, teachers, kings, etc.). This is an interesting (and highly controversial) claim, but addressing it would go beyond the scope of this paper.

However, this paper does not engage with the aforementioned line of critique – namely, one that focuses on inherent features of the value of equality that may render it susceptible to transformation into an anti-value. Instead, it poses a distinct set of research questions centred on the selective application of the principle of equality by its advocates. Specifically, the paper proposes to defend the following theses:

a) The dominant form of egalitarianism in contemporary public discourse tend to emphasise issues that are peripheral or tangential to its foundational aims.
b) This emphasis come at the expense of egalitarianism's core historical concern – namely, the condition of the worst-off.
c) This transformation can be gainfully interpreted through the lens of what might be called *'easy morality'* – a normative framework that facilitates moral self-assurance at low personal or political cost.

In addition to addressing these points, the paper also advances several hypotheses concerning the socio-cultural and political causes underlying this shift in egalitarian focus.

It is important to note, however, that although this second line of critique – which constitutes the primary focus of this paper – differs in nature from the first, it is not entirely disconnected from it. The connection lies in the fact that this metamorphosis has been facilitated by the particular vulnerability of the concept of equality (understood in terms of social justice) to misuse. To reiterate, my critique of contemporary egalitarians is not that their conception of equality is fundamentally flawed – that is, that they promote an erroneous or pernicious vision of social justice (although, in a brief digression on postmodern social justice, I will argue that such errors do occasionally occur). Rather, my concern is that their egalitarianism is highly selective, and that this selectivity constitutes a specific manifestation of what I call 'easy morality'.

2. EGALITARIANISM AS AN 'EASY MORALITY'

I will treat the term 'easy morality' as a quasi-technical concept, designating a particular kind of moral orientation characterised by three defining features:

1) *Low cost to the moral agent:* This form of morality can be upheld or enacted with minimal sacrifice or self-denial on the part of the agent, whether an individual or a collective entity such as the state. Because it requires little self-renunciation or personal risk, adherence to this morality entails relatively low demands on one's commitments or behaviours.
2) *Violation of ordo amoris*: The concept of *ordo amoris* – the hierarchical ordering of ethical priorities – serves as a normative framework for evaluating moral commitments. Easy morality transgresses this order by elevating concerns that are comparatively less urgent or fundamental, thereby neglecting or subordinating higher-priority moral obligations. This misalignment explains why easy morality remains low-cost, as it avoids confronting the more difficult and demanding ethical imperatives.
3) *Social legitimacy and acceptance*: Despite its low demands and misalignment within the ethical hierarchy, easy morality enjoys widespread social endorsement

and approval – at least from influential social groups. This cultural legitimation obscures its nature as 'easy', leading to a lack of critical scrutiny or recognition. Consequently, espousing this form of morality requires little moral courage or risk, as it aligns with prevailing social norms and expectations rather than challenging them.

Together, these features render easy morality an ethically problematic stance: it provides a comfortable moral posture that appeals broadly, yet it may divert attention and energy from more substantial, pressing ethical concerns that demand greater sacrifice and resolve.

As previously noted, the thesis I seek to defend is that, within contemporary liberal democracies, egalitarianism – particularly as it manifests in public and political discourse (and to a somewhat lesser extent in academia, though this transformation is increasingly evident there as well) – has evolved into a form of morality that departs from its historically respectable origins. Historically, egalitarian activists exhibited two defining characteristics that stood in opposition to what I term 'easy morality': first, a focus on the genuinely worst-off members of society, namely the poorest and most disadvantaged; and second, a demonstration of moral courage, as their advocacy on behalf of these groups required confronting the entrenched interests of the 'strong' and 'powerful'. Today, however, this landscape has shifted markedly. A survey of the core tenets of the contemporary egalitarian agenda reveals not only a neglect of these urgent issues – often relegating them to the periphery – but, in some instances, an exacerbation of the very inequalities they once sought to remedy.[3] So, what are the key items on this agenda? There seems to be little disagreement that the agenda embraces the following four central postulates: (1) Radical ecologism – the postulate of 'Green Capitalism' and the fight against the climate change; (2) The spreading and institutionalisation of reproductive rights (e.g., the right to abortion as a fundamental right, the right to sterilisation); (3) The protection of the agenda of LGBTQ minorities; (4) Multiculturalism and the protection of immigrants.[4]

[3] Needless to say, I am not the first to write about – let alone notice – this shift in values; it has been critically examined by many thinkers, e.g., Nancy Fraser, who distinguishes between 'redistribution' (economic justice) and 'recognition' (cultural and identity-based justice), arguing that the left's overemphasis on the latter has weakened its capacity to confront systemic inequality (cf. N. Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," *New Left Review*, vol. 212 (1995), pp. 68-93; N. Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond*, London 2019). Similarly, Walter Benn Michaels has argued that contemporary progressivism often substitutes symbolic gestures and identity-based claims for material redistribution, effectively abandoning the working class (cf. W.B. Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, New York 2016). However, I hope that my approach to examining this shift – particularly the framing in terms of 'easy morality', the illustrative examples drawn from the contemporary (liberal) left's egalitarian agenda, and my analysis of specific causes of this transformation – offers a degree of originality and contributes meaningfully to the ongoing discourse.

[4] The fifth postulate – the separation of state and religion, often referred to as 'neutrality' – while central to the agenda of the left and left-liberal movements, is only indirectly related to their egalitarian commitments. For this reason, it will not be addressed in this paper.

What is omitted or given only symbolic attention are the glaring inequalities in the contemporary world – such as the rise of what Joel Kotkin calls in *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class* the 'new aristocracy' – and their bleak consequences. More needs to be said about this crucial issue.

3. DIAGNOSIS: THE GLARING INEQUALITIES AND THE 'OLIGARCHISATION' OF POLITICS (THE 'ELITISATION' OF DEMOCRACY)

In the contemporary world, we witness the ruthless exploitation of the most disadvantaged populations across various regions, alongside the concentration of wealth, declining opportunities for upward mobility, and the impoverishment of large segments of the global population. These developments have contributed to the significant erosion of the middle class – a traditional pillar of democratic stability – and, consequently, to a broader crisis of democracy. More broadly, as Kotkin argues, we are witnessing the emergence of a form of 'neo-feudalism', characterised by the growing dominance of large corporations that employ various mechanisms, including radical environmentalism, to suppress competition from small and medium-sized enterprises that constitute the middle class. To substantiate this assertion, I will present data from Kotkin's work that vividly illustrates the dramatic escalation of socioeconomic inequalities.[5]

The share of global wealth held by the top 0.1% of the population increased from 7% in 1978 to 22% in 2021. By 2030, the top 1% of the global population is expected to control two-thirds of the world's wealth. The combined wealth of the richest 400 Americans now exceeds the total wealth of 185 million of their fellow citizens. And globally, fewer than 100 billionaires together now own as much as half of the world's assets. In China, e.g., the top 1% hold about one-third of the country's wealth, and roughly 1,300 individuals control around 20%. A similarly unequal concentration of wealth is evident in land ownership: in Great Britain, less than 1% of the population owns half of all the land. Furthermore, in the last decade, cost-adjusted wages dropped for middle-class workers, including Latinos and African Americans in Silicon Valley. One contributing factor has been the shift in employment from manufacturing to software, with 160,000 manufacturing jobs lost. All this has led to what Kotkin calls the 'urban bifurcation' – a growing divide between the wealthiest urban centers and the rest of the population: *the forces of globalization and deindustrialization have transformed many big cities around the world from centers of opportunity in places that are starkly divided between rich and poor (...) If New York City were a country, it would have the fifteenth highest inequality level out of 132 countries, landing between Chile and Honduras; roughly 25 percent of children live in poverty*[6]. There also decreased land and homeownership:

[5] See J. Kotkin, *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism. A Warning to the Global Middle Class*, New York–London 2020, pp. 5, 44.

[6] Ibid., p. 130.

more and more people are being pushed into living in rented apartments or house, with little chance of gaining financial independence.[7] These disquieting data can be supplemented by many others. For instance, as regards the access to education, and the resulting upward mobility, *in 2016 "working class" (less educated) parents had to work four times as long to pay for college for their children compared to 1976. This means that the ability to move from the less educated to the more educated class has dramatically eroded in just a few decades*.[8] Furthermore, as demonstrated by Anne Case and Angus Deaton in their landmark 2020 book *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*, deaths of despair – from suicide, drug overdoses, and alcoholism – have risen dramatically in the U.S. over the past two decades. These authors highlight the weakening position of labour, the growing power of corporations, and a predatory healthcare sector that redistributes working-class wages into the pockets of the wealthy. These trends are global in nature. In Poland, the dramatic rise in inequality has been meticulously documented, for example, in the 2024 Human Poverty Watch report, which notes that the number of Polish citizens living in extreme poverty in 2023 reached 2.5 million, an increase of 0.8 million compared to 2022. Given this rise in social and economics inequalities, some scholars assert that we have imperceptibly entered the new economic era – that of 'technofeudalism'. For instance, in his book *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism*, the Greek economist and politician Yaris Varoufakis offers a meticulous analysis of capitalism's transformation – or, in his view, its death – replaced by a quasi-feudal system. In this system, a small number of plutocratic 'cloud overlords' own vast internet-space latifundia and extract enormous rents from 'cloud vassals' (various firms dependent on 'terrestrial capital'), 'cloud proles' (people who maintain internet infrastructure), and 'cloud serfs' (all of us who, by using the internet, provide valuable data to the overlords). Despite this bleak view, Varoufakis does not lose hope that this system can be changed. However, his solutions sound somewhat utopian – he envisions a 'cloud rebellion' led by internet users, resulting in the collectivisation of the internet through a massive exit from the virtual reality.[9]

[7] Ibid., p. 150.

[8] P. Turchin, *End Times. Elites, Counter-Elites and the Path to Political Disintegration*, London 2024, p. 67. See also data from the Oxfam report "Survival of the Richest" (16 January 2023): *the richest are key contributors to climate breakdown: a billionaire emits a million times more carbon than the average person, and billionaires are twice as likely as the average investor to invest in polluting industries like fossil fuels. The very existence of booming billionaires and record profits, while most people face austerity, rising poverty and a cost-of-living crisis, is evidence of an economic system that fails to deliver for humanity*.

[9] It should be noted that Varoufakis is not entirely original in his analysis. The idea that capitalism has transformed into a modern version of feudalism was also explored by other thinkers, such as Cédric Durand in his 2020 book *Techno-féodalisme: Critique de l'économie numérique*. Durand argues that the digitalisation of the world is ushering in a great regression, characterized by the return of monopolies, increasing dependence on platforms, and the blurring of the line between economics and politics. These changes are fundamentally altering the nature of social processes and revitalising elements of feudalism. Durand begins by tracing the genealogy of the Silicon Valley consensus, highlighting paradoxes that undermine it. The central thesis is developed further with a focus on companies like GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon), global value chains, and even the Chinese social credit system. Large firms are competing for control of cyberspace and the data it generates,

As we have seen, inequalities have grown dramatically, with the social pyramid becoming top-heavy, characterised by a large number of millionaires wielding significant influence over political life. As a result, democracies are increasingly being transformed into plutocracies. However, public immiseration is not the only issue facing contemporary democracies, though, from an ethical perspective, it is certainly the most crucial. As Peter Turchin emphasises, another significant factor contributing to the instability of democracies is an exacerbation of the phenomenon of intra-elite competition.[10] The growing number of ultra-rich individuals leads to a situation where the number of aspirants for politically and socially privileged positions exceeds the supply of such positions. Democracies are thus torn by two main conflicts: first, between the elites and the 'people' (the impoverished middle class), and second, between different factions of the elites (or, more specifically, between incumbent elites and the aspiring 'counter-elites'). These conflicts are, of course, interconnected, as counter-elites often present themselves as protectors and representatives of the people; while some, perhaps many, members of the counter-elites are genuinely concerned with the interests of ordinary citizens, this is not the norm.

The broader sociopolitical trend appears to be the *elitisation of democracy* – a process whereby democratic discourse and decision-making are increasingly shaped by the interests, values, and perspectives of elite groups, often to the detriment of wider popular participation and genuine representation.[11] The normative assessment of this trend, however, depends on how one conceives of the role of elites: it may be viewed positively if elites are enlightened stewards genuinely committed to the well-being of all citizens, or negatively if they prove to be detached from, indifferent to, or even contemptuous of the so-called 'common man'. The possibility that this process has taken the latter, more insidious form was perceptively identified by Christopher Lasch nearly four decades ago, when the phenomenon was still in its early stages. Lasch observed a reversal of the dynamic that had characterised the first half of the twentieth century – what José

while individuals become tethered to a digital 'glebe'. In this emerging economic order, capital shifts its focus from production to predation. As a result, the productivity-enhancing effects of market competition are abandoned. Those who control digital data can appropriate value without engaging in traditional production, echoing the situation in feudalism. Moreover, as in feudalism, the key factors of production – labour, technology, and commodities – have merged and become less mobile. As Evgeny Morozow put it in his review article about techno-feudalism: *While workers are still being exploited in all the old capitalist ways, it is the new digital giants, armed with sophisticated means of predation, who benefit most. Analogously to the feudal lords, they manage to appropriate huge chunks of the global productive forces. 'The 'Big Other' of Big Data (...) enjoys an effective monopoly due to network effects and impressive economies of scale: it will benefit more from any new data sets than a start-up could, making competition much harder* (E. Morozov, "Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason", *New Left Review*, no. 133-134 (2022), p. 116).

[10] Cf. P. Turchin, *End Times. Elites, Counter-Elites...*, Ch. 1.

[11] See on this issue, e.g., J.A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, New York 1942; T.J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States*, New York 1979; W.R. Nylen, *Participatory Democracy versus Elitist Democracy: Lessons from Brazil*, New York 2003; H. Best, J. Higley (eds), *Democratic Elitism: New Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*. Leiden 2010; T. Frank, *Listen, Liberal: Or, what Ever Happened to the Party of the People?*, New York 2016.

Ortega y Gasset described as the 'revolt of the masses', in which unrefined popular forces rose up against rational and disinterested elites. In Lasch's (highly plausible) view, the roles have since inverted: today, it is arguably the masses who defend democracy, tradition, and moral self-restraint, while the elites have become increasingly self-interested, technocratic, and undemocratic – frequently dismissing the aspirations of ordinary people under the pejorative label of 'populism'.[12] Let me invoke a lengthy but suggestive quote from Lasch's insightful – though unfortunately not widely known – book:

From Ortega's point of view, one that was widely shared at the time, the value of cultural elites lay in their willingness to assume responsibility for the exacting standards without which civilisation is impossible. They lived in the service of demanding ideals. Nobility is defined by the demands it makes on us – by obligations, not by rights. The mass man, on the other hand, had no use for obligations and no understanding of what they implied, no feeling for [the] great historical duties. Instead, he asserted the 'rights of the commonplace.' At once resentful and self-satisfied, he rejected everything that is excellent, individual, qualified, and select. He was incapable of submitting to direction of any kind. Lacking any comprehension of the fragility of civilisation or the tragic character of history, he lived unthinkingly in the assurance that tomorrow [the world] will be still richer, ampler, more perfect, as if it enjoyed a spontaneous, inexhaustible power of increase. He was concerned only with his own well-being and looked forward to a future of 'limitless possibilities' and 'complete freedom'. His many failings included a lack of romance in his dealings with women. Erotic love, a demanding ideal in its own right, had no attraction for him. His attitude toward the body was severely practical: He made a cult of physical fitness and submitted to hygienic regimens that promised to keep it in good repair and to extend its longevity. It was, above all, however, the deadly hatred of all that is not itself that characterised the mass mind, as Ortega described it. Incapable of wonder or respect, the mass man was the spoiled child of human history. All these habits of mind, I submit, are now more characteristic of the upper levels of society than of the lower or middle levels. It can hardly be said that ordinary people today look forward to a world of 'limitless possibility'. Any sense that the masses are riding the wave of history has long since departed.

[12] It is worth noting that the meaning of the term 'populism' has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades. Today, it is often used pejoratively to describe an emotion-driven, xenophobic, and divisive political approach, frequently regarded as antithetical to the principles of liberal democracy. However, its original meaning – endorsed by self-identified populists such as G.K. Chesterton and H. Belloc – was markedly different. Originally, populism denoted a political stance characterised by two key components. The first was a broad, anthropological assumption that the so-called 'common' or 'ordinary' people deserve intellectual trust. Populists rejected the distinction between 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' individuals as fundamentally flawed, asserting that all people are equal – not only in terms of inherent dignity but also in their capacity for reason. Regardless of education or social status, they argued, every individual possesses sufficient rational ability to engage meaningfully in political life. The second component, closely related to the first, was a practical call for the establishment of social and economic conditions conducive to enabling all citizens to exercise their roughly equal capacities for political participation. In this original sense, populism is synonymous with a form of genuine egalitarianism – one that, arguably, has been 'lost' by the contemporary left. For further discussion on this topic, see T. Frank, *The People, No. A Brief History of Anti-Populism*, New York 2021, and C. Delsol, *Populisme. Les demeurés de l'histoire*, Paris 2015.

The radical movements that disturbed the peace of the twentieth century have failed one by one, and no successors have appeared on the horizon. The industrial working class, once the mainstay of the socialist movement, has become a pitiful remnant of itself. The hope that 'new social movements' would take its place in the struggle against capitalism, which briefly sustained the left in the late seventies and early eighties, has come to nothing. Not only do the new social movements – feminism, gay rights, welfare rights, agitation against racial discrimination – have nothing in common, but their only coherent demand aims at inclusion in the dominant structures rather than at a revolutionary transformation of social relations.[13]

One may also speak of the contemporary 'betrayal of the intellectuals' – a phrase first coined by Julien Benda in his 1927 work *La Trahison des Clercs*. Benda used the term to describe how intellectuals – whether aligned with the political right or left – failed to properly diagnose and critically assess the dangers posed by the dominant political movements of their time. Rather than maintaining the stance of impartial observers committed to truth and moral clarity, they abandoned this role and became ideologically aligned partisans. A similar pattern can be observed today. Contemporary elites often embrace reductive narratives that deflect responsibility for the deteriorating conditions of society's most disadvantaged. They routinely assert that the worst-off have merely been seduced by so-called 'populists' – depicted as relentless, authoritarian enemies of liberal democracy and its core values of liberty and equality.

This narrative is not only dramatically oversimplified but also demonstrably false. It reveals a refusal – or inability – to acknowledge a basic reality: the worst-off support these so-called populists (or *aspiring counter-elites*, to use Peter Turchin's term) not out of ignorance or authoritarian impulse, but because they have been materially and socially harmed by the very 'egalitarian' policies implemented by incumbent elites over the past two or three decades. These policies will be examined in detail in the following section. One of the most serious consequences of the resulting social and economic inequalities has been a steady erosion of democratic legitimacy and the weakening of democratic institutions themselves.[14] This also shows that Alexis de Tocqueville's famous thesis, put forward in *De la démocratie en Amérique*, that the fundamental weakness of democracy lies in its potential to devolve into the tyranny of the majority, is not entirely applicable to contemporary democracies. Their malaise now stems to a much larger degree from the alienation of the incumbent elites, who have lost touch with

[13] C. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, New York,–London 1996, pp. 26-27.

[14] Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page uncovered compelling findings by examining the years 1981-2002 to determine whether the political preferences of the average voter influenced what was passed by the American Congress. They analysed 1,779 policy issues where there was a discrepancy between the median voter and the corporate and administrative elite. Their research revealed that, in these instances, the median voter had no impact on policy outcomes at all. This highlights the powerful role of the elites in the contemporary democracy. This role has only increased relative to the period analysed by the authors. Cf. M. Gilens, B.I. Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizen," *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2014), pp. 564-581. This phenomenon illustrates the already mentioned, broader trend identified by scholars as the *elitisation of democracy*.

the people and impose their minority convictions upon them (thus, democracy, as it is nowadays, suffers from, and is dramatically weakened *as a democracy*, from the tyranny of *minority*); as Lasch put it:

The trouble with our society is not just that the rich have too much money but that their money insulates them, much more than it used to, from the common life (...) The cultural wars that have convulsed America since the sixties are best understood as a form of class warfare, in which an enlightened elite (as it thinks of itself) seeks not so much to impose its values in the majority (a majority perceived as incorrigibly racist, sexist, provincial, and xenophobic), much less to persuade the majority by means of rational public debate, as to create parallel or "alternative" institutions in which it will no longer be necessary to confront the unenlightened at all.[15]

Thus, we have a situation succinctly summarised by Turchin: *Popular discontent coupled with a large pool of elite aspirants makes for a very combustible combination*.[16]

4. 'EASY MORALITY' IN ACTION

So, what does the contemporary egalitarians do to address all these dramatic problems? Very little. In fact, they exacerbate them with its postulates, enumerated in section 2 of the present article. Let me discuss at some length the effects of the implementation of some of these postulates.

It is hard to contest that one of the central points on the egalitarian agenda – radical ecologism (as opposed to traditional environmentalism) – is directly at odds with the interests of the worst-off and serves large corporations by suppressing competition from small businesses (i.e., the middle class). Even if we concede that some people may suffer from climate change, their numbers are undoubtedly small compared to those

[15] Ibid., pp. 19-21. Similarly, the great theologian, philosopher and political thinker Richard J. Neuhaus, building upon Lasch's insight, writes about the dominance of the 'overclass', which, rather than being deferential to the voice of the people (as the true elites in the past were), has nothing but contempt for them. This overclass takes all measures, even in contravention of democracy, to impose new cultural patterns, breaking with the age-old wisdom of culture, religion, and tradition (cf. R.J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, New York 1998, pp. 79-83). In Poland, the crisis of elites was examined, e.g., by Anna Pawełczyńska, in her book *Głowy hydry. O przewrotności współczesnego zła* (Łomianki 2012), who noted the distinctive characteristic of contemporary elites (whom she calls 'lumpen-elites') in their moral relativism, which they both profess and use to disintegrate the traditional structures of society. This relativism also serves as a tool of mental violence in the form of political correctness, imposing constraints on what can be expressed and even thought. She claimed that these trends result in the introduction of a new model of citizen: one who is no longer integrated around an unchangeable and stable system of values, but rather, a person without qualities, without roots, conformist, and susceptible to manipulation by the lumpen-elites. These new elites (lumpen-elites) are therefore indifferent to the distinction between truth and falsity, good and evil; the highest place in their value hierarchy is occupied by money and power. They lack a sense of responsibility for the common good and the rule of law and are ready to take any measures to retain their privileged position.

[16] P. Turchin, *End Times. Elites, Counter-Elites...*, p. 13.

who suffer as a result of the implementation of 'Green Capitalism'.[17] As Kotkin and others persuasively argue, climate policies are directly harmful to the middle and working classes by inflating energy and housing prices, while having a lesser impact on the ultra-rich and the 'clerisy' (those cloistered in institutions such as academia and the media). Since working-class people are often employed in resource-based industries, manufacturing, agriculture, and construction, the drastic reductions in carbon-based energy use by 2050 pose a direct threat to them. These policies lead to higher electricity and energy bills and the closure of manufacturing plants. Kotkin aptly notes that promoting, as the 'clerisy' does, radically ecological ideas – such as reducing carbon emissions – despite the fact that it leads to people losing their jobs and homes, is simply immoral (I will set aside another issue here: whether radical ecology truly helps the natural environment[18]).

Furthermore, contemporary egalitarians increasingly concentrate on issues such as reproductive rights and the rights of LGBTQ minorities, despite the fact that these rights are largely secured within established liberal-democratic societies. In countries where these groups face genuine persecution, however, egalitarians have often been notably reticent. Conversely, in contexts where such rights are already enshrined, there is a tendency to advocate for a more radical reinterpretation of these rights. Additionally, one of the central tenets of the LGBTQ movement – the dissolution of traditional distinctions between men and women – frequently conflicts with foundational feminist principles and achievements. More broadly, elements of the contemporary egalitarian agenda have come to resemble what Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay characterise as 'postmodern social justice' in their incisive and balanced work *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody*. Given its relevance, this concept merits closer examination.

Postmodern social justice is based on two key principles: the postmodern knowledge principle and the postmodern political principle. The first principle, postmodern knowledge, involves radical scepticism about whether objective knowledge or truth can be obtained, paired with a commitment to cultural constructivism. The second, the postmodern political principle, asserts that society is composed of systems of power and hierarchies that determine what can be known and how. These principles are closely intertwined: *Knowledge is a construct of power perpetuated by discourses: powerful groups in society get to dictate discourse and this defines what is knowledge*[19]. The four

[17] 'Green Capitalism' is one face of 'technofeudalism', a new emerging economic and social system, which amounts to nothing less than the demise of genuine capitalism, which is based on free competition. More on this will be said in the further part of this paper.

[18] But it suffices to read books like *Unsettled* by Steven Koonin, *La guerre des métaux rares* by Guillaume Pitron, or *Cobalt Red* by Siddharth Kara to seriously question this. These works shed light, e.g., on the exploitation of children in rare metal mines in the Congo for green technologies – known as 'artisanal miner'.

[19] H. Pluckrose, J. Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender, and Identity – and why This Harms Everybody*, Durham 2020, p. 70.

major themes of postmodern social justice theories are: the blurring of boundaries, the power of language, cultural relativism, and intersectionality – understood as the overlapping membership in multiple 'oppressed' groups. This variant of social justice is subject to various critiques. For example, as Pluckrose and Lindsay note, it stands in tension with liberalism, which emphasises the autonomy of the individual, universal rights, and the de-emphasis of particularistic identity categories. Postmodern social justice proponents challenge the liberal notion of the autonomous individual, viewing individuals instead as products of prevailing discourses. Furthermore, these approaches have been criticised for unintentionally reinforcing negative stereotypes about women and racial or sexual minorities through the theoretical frameworks they employ. They are also said to foster tribalism and social fragmentation by relying on a reductive form of identity politics that ascribes collective blame to dominant social groups – for instance, by presuming that all white people are racist, all men are sexist, or all heterosexuals are homophobic. Such sweeping generalisations directly contradict core liberal-democratic norms that caution against judging individuals based on race, gender, or sexuality. Given these dynamics, it is arguably naïve to expect that this mode of political engagement will not provoke a reactive resurgence of right-wing identity politics.[20]

As regards the contemporary egalitarians' pro-immigration policy, it is also highly controversial: it can be plausibly argued that, if this policy takes an uncritical or 'undifferentiated' form (as it took in Western Europe in recent decades), it worsens the situation for the middle class, weakening their bargaining power on the market (large corporations, thanks to immigration, obtain a large number of 'cheap' employees), and undermining the sense of security of 'an average citizen' (for, many immigrants fail to adapt to the guest country).[21] It may be worth noting that because many egalitarians activists live in affluent, safe neighbourhoods, and do not have to conduct private businesses because they often belong to 'clerisy' (or some other group who makes its living outside of free market) they can afford to promote an uncritical stance toward immigration. All this shows that Joel Kotkin may be right writing about the *gentrification of the Left*.[22] By this he meant that activists (politicians, politically engaged intellectuals) from the broadly understood 'left' (including 'left-liberals') are increasingly disconnected from the concerns of the non-elite classes; they have become indifferent and contemptuous of the poor and search for new 'progressive' banners (like radical ecologism, multiculturalism, or LGBTQ movement). Kotkin writes even about 'class racism' in the elite intellectual circles: *those in today's intellectual left are concerned about the planet and about international migrants but not so much about their compatriots in the working class.*[23]

[20] See ibid., p. 260.

[21] See on this issue, e.g., J.L., Harouel, *Les droits de l'homme contre le peuple*, Paris 2016; A. Nagle, "The Left Case against Open Borders," *Current Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2018), pp. 17-30.

[22] J. Kotkin, *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism...*, p. 113.

[23] Ibid., p. 115.

At the end of this section, I would like to stress that my critique of contemporary egalitarianism consists of three parts or layers, which should be carefully distinguished. The first layer is a critique of a number of contemporary egalitarians' normative postulates, aiming to show that their realisation leads (more or less directly) to the worsening of the situation for the worst-off members of society and to the undermining of democracy (political freedom); thus, it is clearly inconsistent with the traditional concerns of egalitarians. The second part has a normative-psychological character: that these postulates constitute, in practice, an 'easy morality', as compared with the traditional egalitarian agenda (focused on the worst-off). The third part has a sociological/political-scientific character and boils down to the claim that, paradoxically enough, those who term themselves 'egalitarians' (people defining themselves as 'left' or 'left-liberal') today endorse these postulates. Clearly, one could argue that the thesis in its third part is overly sweeping, since the 'left' or 'left-liberal' group is highly heterogeneous, and not all of them accept all of the mentioned postulates. I agree, but only to a certain extent: indeed, there are quite a few 'left' or 'left-liberal' thinkers who are appalled by the rising inequalities and are working to provide both diagnoses and potential remedies. However, having made this concession, I still maintain that the majority of left-wing or left-liberal activists fit the description I've provided: their political agenda is defined in the first place by these postulates, and the crucial point from the egalitarian agenda – concern with the worst-off – is at the background (if at all present). Yet, as mentioned, there are notable exceptions, and one example is the (already invoked in this paper) economist Yanis Varoufakis, who describes himself as a 'libertarian Marxist'. But while Varoufakis is truly concerned about the rising inequalities, his voice does not seem to representative of the 'left' and 'left-liberal' active in the public sphere today: their attention is fixed on other issues.

5. THE CAUSES OF THE METAMORPHOSIS OF EGALITARIANISM INTO 'EASY MORALITY'

How is it possible that contemporary egalitarian movements often prioritise issues that may appear marginal or secondary when compared to the fundamental problem of persistent and widening social and economic inequalities? Several explanations can be proposed to account for this shift in focus.

The *first explanation* posits a basic lack of awareness. According to this view, egalitarian activists may simply be uninformed about the full extent of socioeconomic disparities. In this case, the underlying cause is ignorance – though this provides limited justification, as even minimal engagement with social science literature or basic statistical data would reveal the structural dimensions of inequality. This condition can be described as *factual blindness*: a failure to recognise or acknowledge the material conditions and class hierarchies that continue to shape contemporary societies. Since, as already argued, many scholars have extensively documented the growing concentration of wealth and the erosion of economic mobility in both global and

national contexts, the existence and depth of these inequalities are, therefore, difficult to plausibly deny.[24]

The *second explanation* points to a form of *axiological blindness* – that is, a misjudgment or neglect of the normative weight of economic and social inequality. Here, it is assumed that activists are aware of these disparities but consider other issues – such as reproductive rights, environmental concerns, multiculturalism, or LGBTQ rights – to hold greater moral or political urgency. In this view, the relative neglect of class-based inequality is not an oversight, but the result of a deliberate prioritisation rooted in competing axiological frameworks.

It is important to note that both the first and second explanations assume that activists are ultimately acting in good faith. Whether due to epistemic limitations or the adoption of alternative normative frameworks, their emphasis on identity-based or environmental issues is understood as a sincere – albeit arguably misguided – effort to advance justice in the contemporary world. By contrast, the *third explanation* identifies opportunism as the primary impetus behind the shift in the focus of egalitarian activists. From this perspective, the demands of these activists align with the 'moral agenda' of the wealthy elite – whom Kotkin terms 'the new aristocracy', comprising major corporate owners, the politicians they influence, and their affiliates. In this regard, egalitarian activists have effectively become part of the privileged class. By concentrating on these secondary demands, they avoid confrontation with the 'powerful' and, in some cases, benefit from grants and programs sponsored by the incumbent elite. This support serves to divert their attention away from the escalating inequalities that the powerful seek to minimise. Put plainly, this explanation contends that the 'powerful' have, more or less directly – through funding, manipulation, or propaganda – co-opted the egalitarian activists. Whereas two or three decades ago these activists posed a significant challenge, engaging in anti-globalisation movements or traditional environmentalism, they now no longer represent a genuine threat.[25] It should also be noted that powerful actors derive financial benefits from this arrangement. As previously mentioned, the rise of 'green capitalism' serves their interests by providing opportunities to generate profit in an oversaturated market and by eliminating competition from middle-class entrepreneurs unable to absorb the costs of green transformation. Similarly, it may be argued that the LGBTQ agenda aligns with the interests of large corporations, insofar as the erosion of traditional family structures fosters a more individualised, atomised social fabric – an ideal context for consumer behaviour advantageous to big business. According to this line of reasoning, this alignment helps explain why the LGBTQ rights movement receives strong support from influential corporate actors, such as the Business Coalition for the Equality Act. This third explanation casts

[24] Let me also mention several other works that illustrate the extent and magnitude of economic inequalities in the contemporary world: T. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge 2014; B. Atkinson, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?*, Cambridge 2015; B. Milanović, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*, Cambridge 2016.

[25] This hypothesis is put forward by the Polish political journalist Rafał Ziemkiewicz in his insightful and intellectually provocative essay *Strollowana rewolucja* (Warszawa 2021).

a critical light on egalitarian activists: although they are presumably aware of the dramatic social inequalities and their moral implications, they are portrayed as prioritising private interests over ethical commitments.

The *fourth explanation* attributes their actions primarily to the pursuit of moral self-elevation or the psychological gratification derived from a perceived sense of ethical superiority. As Thomas Sowell writes, for self-anointed visionaries – among whom egalitarians are often counted – *the fate of the ostensible beneficiaries was never an overriding consideration*.[26] What ultimately matters is not the tangible outcomes for those they claim to help, but rather the psychological gratification derived from a sense of moral superiority. This moral exaltation is rooted in the belief that they are engaged in the pursuit of a 'higher idea', a cause that ostensibly transcends ordinary political or social concerns. In this framework, the intended beneficiaries are frequently portrayed as passive, helpless victims in need of rescue, thereby reinforcing the activists' self-image as heroic agents of justice and compassion: *This is only one of the ways in which the vision of morally anointed ministers to the egos of the anointed rather than the well-being of the ostensible beneficiaries of their efforts*.[27] This explanation can be further elaborated: it may be persuasively argued that many proponents of what contemporary egalitarianism has become – namely, a form of *easy morality* – adopt their views, whether consciously or unconsciously, through a cognitive and social mechanism known as *luxury beliefs*. This concept was introduced by Rob Henderson in his 2024 book *Troubled: A Memoir of Foster Care, Family, and Social Class*. It refers to beliefs that function as status symbols – they serve to signal one's elevated social position or aspirations toward it, much like luxury goods once did. As material goods have become more widely accessible and therefore less effective as markers of status, elites have increasingly turned to immaterial forms of prestige – namely, luxury beliefs. Individuals from higher social classes adopt such ideas to assert their distinctiveness and perceived moral or intellectual superiority over lower classes. These beliefs are effective status signals precisely because only the privileged can afford to bear the consequences of acting on them. Examples of luxury beliefs include the notion that the traditional nuclear family is not essential for raising children, even though members of the upper classes themselves often live in stable family structures. Another example is the slogan 'defund the police', which may resonate in affluent neighbourhoods with low crime rates but can lead to increased violence and insecurity in poorer areas. The advocacy of completely open borders is yet another instance, which typically does not affect the day-to-day lives of the elite but may have significant consequences for economically vulnerable communities. It is worth noting that, unlike *conspicuous consumption* – a concept introduced by Thorstein Veblen in his classic work *The Theory of the Leisure Class* – which involves the ostentatious consumption of material goods and leisure as a means of signalling status, *luxury beliefs* are immaterial. They are ideas that serve a similar function. Both concepts concern the signaling of social position, though they differ in form: Veblen described the

[26] T. Sowell, *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*, New York–London 2002, p. 138.

[27] Ibid.

material expressions of the leisure class, while Henderson focuses on ideological expressions. What unites both is that luxury goods and luxury beliefs alike are primarily accessible to elites and serve to distinguish them from lower social strata.

Depending on which interpretation holds in a given case, the notion of *easy morality* acquires a slightly different character. Under the first two explanations, egalitarianism remains an authentic – albeit less demanding – moral stance, reflecting sincere if perhaps misdirected commitments. In contrast, the fourth explanation frames egalitarianism as little more than *virtue signaling*: a strategic performance aimed at projecting (often exaggerated) moral and class superiority, rather than expressing genuine ethical concern. The third explanation, which casts egalitarian actors in the most negative light, carries a conspiratorial undertone; yet, it cannot be entirely dismissed. It remains plausible that, in some instances, this interpretation may accurately capture the motivations or behaviors of certain individuals operating under the banner of egalitarianism.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I advanced three main, interrelated theses concerning the priorities and consequences of contemporary egalitarian activism, particularly as expressed by the dominant left-liberal intellectual and political currents in Western societies:

A) Politically active egalitarians – primarily left-liberal thinkers and activists – frequently misdirect their efforts by prioritising the concerns of groups that are either relatively privileged or not in urgent need of assistance, while neglecting those who face the most severe forms of socio-economic hardship. This misalignment results in a failure to meaningfully address the structural inequalities that continue to affect disadvantaged populations, such as the economically marginalised working class and the increasingly precarious lower middle class. I argued that this shift in priorities represents a transformation of egalitarianism from a *demanding* moral stance – one concerned with the complex and politically sensitive issues of economic inequality and deepening poverty – into a form of *easy morality*. This latter form is characterised by its focus on symbolic or culturally resonant causes that do not require significant personal sacrifice or material commitment from those who advocate them.

B) While activists often act under the banner of protecting historically marginalised or currently stigmatised groups (including women, racial minorities, and sexual minorities in Western contexts), the methods they employ can have counterproductive effects. In particular, the confrontational, exclusionary, and at times patronising rhetoric common in activist discourse can generate social polarisation and provoke backlash from broader segments of the population. Rather than fostering greater solidarity or empathy, such activism can lead to increased resentment, thereby exacerbating the very hostilities it aims to resolve and unintentionally reinforcing the social isolation of the groups it seeks to champion.

C) Moreover, certain key tenets of contemporary activist agendas – particularly those associated with radical environmentalism – have disproportionately negative

consequences for the very populations most in need of support. Policies associated with 'Green capitalism' and climate reform often impose economic burdens on the working poor and the downwardly mobile middle class, who are least equipped to absorb them. In this way, even well-intentioned ecological initiatives can inadvertently deepen social inequality, contributing to heightened economic precarity and political discontent.

These dynamics may be understood as a modern manifestation of what Christopher Lasch termed 'the revolt of the elites'. As mentioned, Lasch used this phrase to describe the growing alienation between an increasingly technocratic, cosmopolitan elite and the broader public. In the contemporary context, this disconnect is reflected in the way many influential activists and policy-makers focus on abstract or ideologically fashionable causes, often aligned with elite cultural preferences or institutional incentives, while overlooking the concrete material needs of large segments of the population. The moral agenda advanced by such elites – though often framed as progressive or emancipatory – frequently fails to resonate with, or even acknowledge, the lived experiences of those facing economic disempowerment and social dislocation. As a result, political activism that purports to be egalitarian may unwittingly reinforce the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle.

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