

Liberty: The Other Equality

Written by Roderick Long, as published at the Center for a Stateless Society.

Equality is an ideal upheld by a number of ideologies, but nowadays it is seldom associated with libertarianism or classical liberalism. Indeed, both libertarians and their critics typically think of equality as an ideal in tension with the ideal of liberty as libertarians understand it.

But what is meant by “equality”? Some thinkers draw a distinction between formal equality and substantive equality, where formal equality means something like mere equality before the law—the same laws applying equally to everyone—while substantive equality requires abolishing, or at least greatly reducing, differences in wealth, opportunity, or influence.

The latter sort of equality—we might also call it socioeconomic equality—is obviously incompatible with libertarianism, at least if such equality is sought through coercive legislation. Legislation aiming at socioeconomic equality is rejected by libertarians as an unwarranted and socialistic interference with the property rights of individuals.

Equality before the law, by contrast, is generally embraced by libertarians. But by itself there is nothing especially libertarian about it. Anatole France once wryly remarked that the law in its majestic equality forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, a line often invoked by socioeconomic egalitarians scornful of merely formal equality. But libertarians have equal reason to find such formal equality inadequate. As economist Murray Rothbard noted: “[T]he justice of equality of treatment depends first of all on the justice of the treatment itself. Suppose, for example, that Jones, with his retinue, proposes to enslave a group of people. Are we to maintain that justice requires that each be enslaved equally? And suppose that someone has the good fortune to escape. Are we to condemn him for evading the equality of justice meted out to his fellows?”

If neither substantive socioeconomic equality nor formal equality before the law captures what libertarians think matters in politics, it’s tempting to conclude that equality is not a central libertarian value at all.

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