Challenges to Creating an Egalitarian Society
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Lecture 1: A Dual Equilibrium Model of Psychologically Sustainable Social Contracts

1.1 The Problem

These lectures examine certain psycho-social challenges to creating and maintaining an egalitarian society. By an egalitarian society, I mean a society of people who stand in relations of equality with one another. Such a society is one in which individuals are also free. An unfree society of equals is a contradiction in terms. The unfreedom of some entails that others are dominating them. Domination is a relation of inequality. State communist societies are still grossly inegalitarian, regardless of how equally they distribute resources among their subjects, because Communist Party leaders dominate everyone else. Our focus is therefore on challenges to creating a free society of equals.

Egalitarian social movements have historically defined themselves in opposition to particular forms of social hierarchy, such as racism, slavery, aristocracy, and patriarchy. Egalitarians are astute critics of social hierarchies on every ethical dimension: they are unjust and oppressive; bad for individuals, communities, and the environment; and promote vice and corruption.[1] Yet egalitarians can never simply abolish hierarchy as one might eradicate an infectious disease. Hierarchical institutions coordinate individuals' conduct for socially necessary functions such as material production, raising children, and collective self-defense. Hence, egalitarians must envision replacements for these institutions that will serve these socially necessary functions while upholding the equality and freedom of individuals within them. They need to demonstrate that such replacements are feasible and sustainable, that they promote virtue rather than vice, and that they are just and appealing.

Egalitarians have promoted the appeal—the experienced goodness—of egalitarian replacements by inspiring depictions of how they embody ideals such as freedom, equality, solidarity, and reciprocal respect and sympathy. Millions of couples have been inspired by the feminist ideal of companionate marriage to forge more equal relations with their partners than under patriarchal ideals. Democratic ideals have inspired millions to replace dictatorships with democratic systems of equal citizenship and representation.

Here I distinguish between two types of challenge to egalitarian societies. One type arises from gaps between egalitarian ideals and their proposed institutional embodiments—that is, failures of institutions to adequately realize those ideals or their socially necessary functions at reasonable cost. For example, socialists once supposed that comprehensive centralized economic

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[1] Elizabeth Anderson, "Equality," *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*, Ed. David Estlund (New York: Oxford UP, 2012) 40–57.

planning could replace markets, and thereby ensure that resources were allocated more equitably and efficiently. This project failed in its own terms. Egalitarians face formidable challenges in closing the gaps between ideals and institutions, and in filling out their details so that they effectively serve their socially necessary functions. These lectures focus instead on a second set of challenges: those that arise from people's resistance to egalitarian ideals and their attachment to various forms of social hierarchy.

Why is it so hard to dismantle social hierarchy and prevent its resurgence? As there are multiple reinforcing causes of social hierarchy, there is no simple answer to this question. Charles Tilly argues that a central cause of durable social hierarchy is ethnocentric social group closure by groups that have managed to monopolize control over some good(s) critical to securing social advantage, which they institutionalize through the segregation of outgroups from the advantaged ingroup.[2] In prior work, I applied Tilly's theory to Black/White inequality in the U.S., showing how racial segregation, besides multiplying material inequalities, amplifies numerous cognitive biases that lead to discrimination, stigmatization, and neglect of outgroups, and undermines the democratic institutions needed to sustain a society of equals.[3] Tilly's theory presupposes that people want social advantage—that is, not simply that they have certain goods, but that they enjoy superiority over others. They desire inequality as such. But why do they want superiority over others?

Rousseau offered the most famous answer to this question.[4] He argued that people have a deep need for recognition from others—to be respected, esteemed, and loved. Under certain social conditions, this desire for recognition, which Rousseau calls *amour-propre*, is expressed in a desire for *distinction*—for superior recognition over others. In matters of romantic love, this desire manifests as jealousy. In matters of respect, the desire for distinction manifests as a desire for superior standing and power over others. In matters of esteem, it manifests as a desire to be admired more than others. Hierarchical societies tie respect and esteem together, by varying one's standing and the authority to make claims on others in proportion to the degree that one meets the society's standards of esteem. Hence, the quest for superior esteem plays a pivotal role in Rousseau's account of the origins of social hierarchy. To secure and stabilize superior esteem, and thereby superior standing and authority, those who manage to win it create institutions that cement their superior status, limit it to their ingroup, and enable them to pass it on to their descendants. Under other social conditions, which Rousseau describes in *The Social Contract*,[5]

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[2] Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1999).
[3] Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010).
[4] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," in *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1923) 155–246. Hereafter referred to as the *Second Discourse*.
[5] Ibid., 1-123.

individuals' need for esteem can be satisfied through institutions that ensure equal, reciprocal esteem for all members of society—or at least for all male members.[6]

Rousseau's view implies that it is difficult to sustain a free society of equals under modern conditions. Notoriously, he argued that advancements in science, technology, and the arts are inimical to such conditions, because they are the product of and further stimulate desires for superior esteem.[7] I shall argue below that there are ways to regulate such desires so that we can enjoy these advancements consistently with living in a free society of equals. Nevertheless, I think Rousseau was right to regard vanity—the desire for superior esteem—as a pivotal psycho-social driver of social hierarchy. In these lectures, I shall (1) defend the value of modeling social hierarchies as well as egalitarian societies as different types of social contract, (2) show how recent research in the social sciences supports Rousseau's view that vanity drives the creation and reproduction of social hierarchy, and (3) extend Rousseau's theory by showing how social groups can manifest collective vanity in their pursuit and defense of social hierarchies that elevate themselves over other groups.

My argument has important implications for understanding and addressing the current crisis of democratic backsliding in the U.S. and other countries. What is the appeal of populist authoritarian political movements, which aim to elevate one identity group above all others in the polity? Explanations of the appeal of such movements within formally democratic regimes tend to stress group-based fear or resentment.[8] I shall argue that we need to add group-based vanity to this list. Rousseau argues that the kinds of social contracts that establish social hierarchies—what today's social contract theorists call *domination contracts*[9]—are based on ideological manipulation that appeals to group-based vanity as well as fear. He is right to stress the role of ideology in creating and sustaining hierarchy. Common moral mistakes tied to cognitive and emotional biases play important roles in inegalitarian ideologies. I shall argue that this fact reveals opportunities to defuse the appeal of authoritarian politics and enhance support for democracy.

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[6] See Joshua Cohen, *Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010); John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, Ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2007) Rousseau Lectures 1–3. For the fraught question of the status of women in Rousseau's philosophy, see Elizabeth Rose Wingrove, *Rousseau's Republican Romance* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 2000) .

[7] "A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences," in *Social Contract and Discourses*, 125–54. Hereafter referred to as the *First Discourse*.

[8] On fear, see Karen Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005); Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (Simon & Schuster, 2018); on resentment, see Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: New Press, 2016); Justin Gest, *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* (Oxford UP, 2016).

[9] Charles Mills and Carole Pateman have led the way in contemporary theorizing of social hierarchy in terms of domination contracts. See Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1997); Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988); Carole Pateman and Charles Mills, *Contract and Domination* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

1.2 What is Social Hierarchy?

Social hierarchy refers to durable, group-based inequality that is sustained by institutions such as laws, norms, and habits. The groups in question may be classified along various kinds of identity, including but not limited to class, race, ethnicity, nationality, caste, clan, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.[10] Across societies, gender hierarchies are the most ubiquitous and always favor men, although to widely varying degrees.[11] We may divide hierarchies into three types: power, esteem, and standing. Each type defines a social relation, a mode by which members of superior and inferior groups relate to one another.

In hierarchies of power, superiors dominate inferiors, who must submit. Relations of domination and subjection involve coercion even when they may be voluntary in certain respects. For example, while societies with patriarchal marriage laws endow husbands with great powers to control their wives, many nevertheless accept that a valid marriage requires the bride's consent. Relations of domination and subjection manifest in at least three ways: commands to service, constraints on liberty outside a service relationship, and impositions of harm. All such relations involve exercises of arbitrary power—that is, power unaccountable to those subject to it. (1) Most of the time, we think of relations of domination and subjection in terms of superiors commanding subordinates to perform specific acts of service. Yet such relations may also manifest in more diffuse ways. (2) Each member of a dominant group may deploy their institutional powers to impose possibly modest constraints on the liberty of subordinates, which collectively add up to highly oppressive constraints. For example, homeless people face extreme constraints on their movements and basic bodily functions due to a combination of private property laws, laws prohibiting various activities in public streets and parks, a lack of public facilities such as toilets, and homeless shelter regulations. The power to constrain the liberties of the homeless is diffused across property owners, police officers, and other officials who control the shape, size, and regulations for using publicly provided benefits. Collectively, they dominate

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[10] The focus of these lectures is social hierarchy, not organizational hierarchy. Organizational hierarchy refers to the hierarchies of office within a specific organization such as a firm, government agency, school, church, or club. As organizations scale up, they become less manageable through participatory democracy. To achieve their goals, they erect offices with different powers and responsibilities, with occupants of lower offices reporting to occupants of higher offices. Even workers' cooperatives typically have hierarchies of office once they reach a large scale. While organizational hierarchies are critical sites through which social hierarchies are constructed, and are often oppressive in themselves, egalitarians have developed many tools to prevent such developments. I discuss some of these tools in "Expanding the Egalitarian Toolbox: Equality and Bureaucracy," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 82 (2008): 139–60; *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (And Why We Don't Talk About It)*, Ed. Stephen Macedo, with discussants David Bromwich, Tyler Cowen, Ann Hughes, and Niko Kolodny (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2017).

[11] So-called matriarchies are matrilineal gender egalitarian societies, not patriarchies turned upside down. See Heide Goettner-Abendroth, *Matriarchal Societies of the Past and the Rise of Patriarchy: West Asia and Europe* (New York: Peter Lang, 2022).

the homeless. (3) Finally, superiors may dominate inferiors by exercising unaccountable powers to abuse or otherwise harm them, as in rape culture, racist lynching, and environmental racism.

Hierarchies of esteem are defined by affective relations of group-based exaltation and contempt. Ideologies and myths promote these attitudes by representing high-ranking groups as having admirable qualities, and stigmatized groups as having contemptible, shameful, disgusting, or horrifying qualities. These stereotyped representations support norms for honoring and respecting superiors and humiliating, disdaining, and scorning inferiors. Social psychologists distinguish two dimensions of stereotype content prominent in modern societies: competence and warmth.[12] When subordinate groups are represented as incompetent, they may be derided and infantilized. This mode of denigration rationalizes their subjection to paternalistic control, exclusion from meritocratic positions, dismissal of their perspectives and testimony, and ridicule, especially when they resist inferiorizing treatment. When subordinate groups are represented as unfit for warm relationships through alienating, vilifying, or demonizing narratives, they may be subject to various kinds of antipathy including distrust, envy, fear, and hatred. When they are represented as unfit due to their filth, sickness, or other contaminating qualities, they become objects of disgust. These attitudes support segregation, ostracism, intensive policing, and violence against subordinate groups. These two dimensions of competence and warmth are not exhaustive. Some societies tie esteem to qualities such as holiness and exalted ancestry. Such ideas underwrite obsequious behavior toward the purported bearers of such qualities, sometimes amounting to worship.

Hierarchies of standing are defined by the differential consideration people accord to individuals of higher and lower rank—that is, the differential weight they give to their interests and welfare. Wealth is a primary means by which the rich attain superior standing. Market actors pay far more attention to and exert greater efforts to serve the interests of the rich than the poor, since they can obtain more in return. Wealth enhances individuals' standing even outside of market transactions. Police often treat the rich with greater deference than the poor and forgive even their serious infractions. They often target the poor for innumerable tickets and fines for violating arbitrary ordinances enacted for the sole purpose of raising revenue.[13]

Wealth is not the only basis of higher standing.[14] The powerful, too, enjoy greater consideration. Adam Smith observed that social inferiors are eager to serve them apart from

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[12] Susan Fiske, Amy Cuddy, Peter Glick, and Jun Xu, "A Model of (Often Mixed) Stereotype Content: Competence and Warmth Respectively Follow From Perceived Status and Competition," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82.6 (2002): 878–902.
[13] Radley Balko, "How Municipalities in St. Louis County, Mo., Profit from Poverty," *Washington Post* Sept. 3 2014, Http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2014/09/03/how-st-louis-county-missouri-profits-from-poverty/.
[14] Hence, the conventional division of types of hierarchy into power, esteem, and wealth is underinclusive. This is one reason I have replaced wealth with standing. Another reason is to make more explicit the fact that every type of hierarchy defines a distinctive mode by which superiors and inferiors relate to one another. That mode should be distinguished from the basis by which the groups in question are distinguished (as of class, race, gender, etc.). Note also that in revolutionary situations, wealth may make one a target of all three types of subordination.

being ordered to do so, and even apart from any prospect of material benefit to themselves.[15] Members of nearly any higher-ranked group, on whatever basis they enjoy such rank, receive greater consideration in many social domains. This unequal consideration arises not only in the deliberations of individual agents but is built into social institutions. Unequal consideration is written into laws that accord special privileges and opportunities to the higher-ranked. By contrast, the poor, powerless, and stigmatized frequently suffer from institutionalized neglect outside the market, and from discriminatory and exploitative practices within it.

These three types of hierarchy frequently coincide. The same groups that enjoy more power also often enjoy higher esteem and standing. We nevertheless should distinguish these types for several reasons. First, the logic of esteem resists commodification. This fact somewhat separates many of those with higher standing due to their wealth from those who enjoy high esteem. Financial capital cannot be frictionlessly converted into cultural capital—the manners, tastes, and savoir faire that mark individuals as highly estimable, and enable them to function in elite circles. The rich may be able to buy access to elite schools, personal stylists, accent coaches, elite art dealers, and others who teach them how to behave as elites. But to win the esteem attached to cultural capital, the rich still need to master and apply their lessons.[16] The cultured rich thereby look down their noses not just on the *hoi polloi*, but on the vulgar rich.

Second, because individuals in modern societies possess multiple intersecting social identities, many are highly ranked along some identities, but lower ranked along others. Women married to wealthy men in some patriarchal societies may enjoy significant standing and esteem but are powerless in relation to their husbands. Sometimes minority groups who are stigmatized on account of their ethnicity or religion enjoy high market standing and economic power in virtue of their success in business or the professions, as Jews were in Germany before World War II, or as ethnic Chinese are in the Philippines and Indonesia. Third, as we shall see, some societies take measures to prevent one type of inequality from generating another. In particular, they may recognize individual inequalities in achievement-based esteem but insist on equal political power. In such cases esteem inequality is difficult to stabilize into social hierarchy, which is group-based and reproduced across generations.

Egalitarians have advanced many damning criticisms of social hierarchies. Power hierarchies abuse and exploit subordinates, corrupt members of dominant groups, and often select sociopaths and narcissists for the highest positions. Esteem hierarchies are often based on qualities unworthy of admiration, unjustly fail to recognize the merits of individuals belonging to stigmatized groups, and exaggerate the merits of honored groups. They exaggerate the vices of the stigmatized and overlook the vices of honored groups. Hierarchies of standing unjustly neglect the welfare of most people. More egalitarian systems can make virtually everyone better off. Inegalitarian societies are bad for people's health, have more violence and crime, and spread social distrust, enmity, shame, humiliation, anxiety, arrogance, and other toxic attitudes that

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[15] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 63–64.
[16] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Ed. John Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986) 241–58.

preclude valuable relationships across identity groups.[17] Ultimately, everyone loses from social hierarchy. Yet, as Rousseau complained, "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains."[18] So we must ask: why is equality so hard to achieve and maintain?

1.3 How a Despotic Species Can Become Egalitarian: Morality, Social Norms, and Social Contracts

Let us begin where Rousseau did, with a consideration of human nature. Theorizing about human nature is not in vogue among egalitarians. Such theorizing often invites narrowly deterministic explanations that tend to rationalize observed inequalities. Appeals to evolutionary biology or evolutionary psychology especially pose this danger. We may nevertheless learn from speculation about human nature in a pluralistic spirit, with the aim of accounting for the very wide variations of observed societies along a spectrum from broadly egalitarian to extremely inegalitarian. We shall take as a given that humans share basic faculties and emotions, and consider how their normative regulation varies across different cultural contexts.

Anthropologist and primatologist Christopher Boehm poses a central question for our inquiry.[19] Humans are what biologists call a "despotic species." Members of despotic species exhibit dominant and submissive behavior. They compete with each other over food and mates, sometimes act violently against other species members, and engage in displays of dominance and submission (such as aggressive and cowering postures). They form hierarchies within their social group. In some despotic species, members may form political coalitions that vie for dominance against others within their group. These behaviors are not surprising for humans, given that all African great apes are despotic. It is likely that the common hominid ancestor of humans and other African great apes was also despotic, and that all these species inherited their despotic dispositions from that common ancestor.

Yet anatomically modern humans originally lived in nomadic hunter-gatherer bands. All observed nomadic hunter-gatherer bands are broadly egalitarian at the band level. They make collective decisions concerning the whole band democratically, with all adults, or at least all adult males, entitled to participate.[20] They reject esteem competition and attempts by anyone to claim greater esteem than anyone else. They share their meat. No one is significantly wealthier than anyone else. They extol an explicitly egalitarian ethos against arrogance and in favor of

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[17] Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009).
[18] Rousseau, *Social Contract and Discourses*, 5.
[19] Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999) 1–4.
[20] Boehm notes that men tend to be the most influential members of nomadic hunter-gatherer bands. Nevertheless, he claims that most such bands are "fundamentally egalitarian with respect to gender" because women participate as equals in enforcing the egalitarian ethos against deviants, and typically also in group decisionmaking. Influential men may be "first among equals," but are not entitled to order any other band members to go along with the group actions they advocate. Ibid., 249, 193.

cooperation, generosity, and modesty. We have reason to believe that these egalitarian features of nomadic hunter-gatherers have been shared by all such bands in human history. So we have a puzzle: how can members of a despotic species organize themselves as a society of equals?

Boehm solves this puzzle by arguing that humans suppressed the despotic behaviors of aspiring alphas by agreeing to a social contract to enforce the norms of an egalitarian morality.[21] On his account, morality serves several functions. It enables societies to control individuals who inflict physical harm or psychic distress on others. For hunter-gatherers, the individuals who must be most urgently controlled are the bullies, sociopaths, and narcissists. These are politically ambitious individuals who try to dominate others through violence and manipulation. Morality also enables people to resolve interpersonal conflicts to ensure group harmony. Finally, morality promotes altruism at the level of the political group. Altruism here does not involve unconditional self-sacrifice, but rather adherence to an ethos of reciprocal sharing and mutual aid within the band that functions as a kind of social insurance for group members.[22]

Boehm's solution appeals to philosophical ideas of morality, social norms, and social contract that he does not analyze. I offer the following naturalistic conceptions of these ideas to support his argument. Let us define "morality" as a social practice regulating what people owe to each other and how they should interact. The social practice of morality regulates interpersonal interaction by means of behavioral rules embodied in social norms that are backed by reactive and complementary moral emotions. Suppose, for example, a hunter-gatherer band upholds a moral norm N of meat-sharing, which requires successful hunters to share their kill with everyone else in the band. Suppose H refuses to share his meat with band member B. B publicly complains to H against his exclusion, citing N to justify his claim to his share of meat. This complaint expresses B's resentment of H. Other band members back up B by deriding H's selfishness. They thereby express their contempt for H. Band members also show their esteem for other hunters who share their meat in accordance with N. These moral emotions of resentment, contempt, and esteem are reactions to others' violations of and compliance with N. When expressed, they tend to elicit complementary moral emotions in their targets: guilt in response to resentment, shame in response to contempt, pride in response to esteem.[23] These emotions, in turn, tend to promote compliance with N. For subjects with weak or perverse moral emotions who repeatedly violate the band's moral rules, the band may respond with increasing sanctions, including ostracism, abandonment, and in extreme cases, execution by the group.[24]

This account of interpersonal morality as a social practice depends on the broader idea of a social norm. A social norm is a publicly known rule of behavior that individuals follow when they empirically expect that enough others are following it, and that others normatively expect them to follow it (that is, others believe that they *ought* to follow it). More precisely, Cristina Bicchieri claims that a behavioral rule R applying to a situation S in a population P is a social norm if enough individuals *i* in P (1) know that R applies in S and (2) prefer to follow R in S *on*

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[21] Ibid., 193-4.
[22] Ibid., 66-68, 183-86, 216.
[23] Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1990).
[24] Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, 73–74.

condition that they believe enough others (a) *will* follow R in S, and either (b) *expect i* to follow R in S, or (b') expect and prefer *i* to follow R in S, and may sanction *i* for their (non)compliance. Condition (b) describes the motivational state of those who regard others' normative expectation of themselves to be legitimate, and therefore conform out of a sense of obligation as long as they expect enough others to also conform. Condition (b') describes the motivational state of those who don't regard others' normative expectations of themselves to ground an obligation even if others also follow R, and who thereby need the prospect of reward for compliance and/or punishment for noncompliance to motivate them to follow R.[25] Nearly all behavioral rules, including not just social norms, but also laws and the regulations and customs of specific organizations such as firms, churches, and schools, are also largely sustained by people's willingness to conform to them, conditional on empirical expectations of others' conformity and the widespread belief that others normatively expect one's own conformity and will sanction (non)conformity.

Bicchieri distinguishes social norms from moral rules, compliance with which need not depend on expectations that others will likewise comply. For her, moral emotions such as shame and guilt may reinforce the motive to comply with social norms but "are never the sole or the ultimate determinants of conformity."[26] I am defining rules of interpersonal morality as bound up with moral emotions, to distinguish them from nonmoral rules, as of fashion, conformity to which may also be socially expected although mostly not motivated by guilt. Rules of interpersonal morality are therefore only a subset of social norms. Do any moral rules exist in societies, broad compliance with which is not in fact conditional on belief in enough others' readiness to comply and reciprocal expectations of compliance? We need not settle this empirical question. For our focus here is solely on those moral rules that are instituted by social contracts.

The idea of a social contract has many uses in moral and political theory. Most commonly, it is used as a hypothetical device to identify principles of justice or interpersonal morality for an ideal society. These lectures are concerned with using social contract theory to model social orders. In this social theoretical mode, social contract theory is a way of representing actual and possible social orders as the more or less stable equilibrium outcome of participants' empirical and normative expectations of conditional conformity to the rules of that order, whether those rules are embodied in informal social norms, laws, or the regulations and customs of particular organizations. So understood, social contract theory abstracts from innumerable details about the content of the rules and the causal mechanisms supporting them. It aims to focus our attention on key normatively relevant features of the social order it models—for example, whether the order is egalitarian or hierarchical; based on free choice or coercion; on social trust or distrust; on broadly accurate public understandings of how their social order works or on secrecy, ignorance, or ideological misrepresentation. It does not suppose that the rules of the social order were established by explicit agreement of the participants, although sometimes particular rules are established that way. Social contract theory as a mode of social theorizing is

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[25] Cristina Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006) 11–15.
[26] Bicchieri, *Grammar of Society*, 8.

compatible with other modes such as game theory, evolutionary game theory, and natural selection, as well as less formal social theories that focus on ideologies as key drivers of social change, or that describe institutional change more concretely and historically.

One might question whether social contract theory, which depends on ideas of social norms, is required to explain the emergence and stability of social hierarchy. Cailin O'Connor offers numerous game-theoretic and evolutionary game-theoretic models of how group-based inequality can arise by convention alone, without backing by norms, under surprisingly minimal conditions.[27] Within game theory, conventions, unlike norms, can be sustained by reciprocal empirical expectations alone, because it is in each person's self-interest to conform given how they predict counterparties will behave. O'Connor's evolutionary game-theoretic conception of conventions is even weaker than the game-theoretic one, in making far lower cognitive demands on actors.[28] In addition, many of O'Connor's models show how inequitable conventions arise from unequal bargaining power. These models might seem to undermine the claim that social contracts, which inherently involve normative expectations, are critical to creating inequality. Nevertheless, O'Connor observes that most conventions involving the distribution of resources are also backed by normative expectations. She also stresses how *changing* inequitable conventions often involves social movements that aim to change moral beliefs by persuasion and moral pressure.[29]

Consistently with O'Connor's models, Tilly's social contract model of the origins of group-based inequality allows that such inequality can initially arise from accidental factors. However, stabilizing such inequality requires the accidentally advantaged group to police its boundaries to suppress insider defection and outsider infiltration. Such policing requires norms, laws, and organizational regulations, because insiders sometimes have compelling reasons to defect (for example, love, in cases of interracial marriage), and policing infiltration is a costly public good to the advantaged group. In addition, as I shall discuss below, due to the fact that subordinates tend to resent disrespectful, stigmatizing, and imperious behavior in the absence of legitimating ideologies, such ideologies are needed to stabilize inegalitarian behavioral rules. But adding the normative ideas inherent in ideologies turns behavioral regularities into norms. Normative ideas are not epiphenomenal but important for both social stability and social change.

1.4 An Egalitarian Social Contract

Boehm advances a "political ambivalence model" of how a despotic species can come to regulate its members' interactions by means of a social contract that institutes the norms of an egalitarian ethos.[30] On this model, humans are torn by conflicting motives. They desire to dominate others, but will submit to others' domination out of fear. They also want personal autonomy. This desire leads them to resent having to submit, even if they judge that submission

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[27] Cailin O'Connor, *The Origins of Unfairness: Social Categories and Cultural Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019).
[28] O'Connor, *Origins of Unfairness*, 23–24.
[29] O'Connor, *Origins of Unfairness*, §§1.3, 9.2.
[30] Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, 167–163–171.

is prudent. They recognize that others have the same motives. They are capable of joining forces in political coalitions against common rivals who wish to dominate them. Boehm offers impressive evidence that these motives and capacities are present in our hominid cousins, the chimpanzees and bonobos, and thus were presumably also present in our common ancestor.[31]

Humans differ from our primate cousins in our capacities for language, long-term risk assessment and planning, and coalition-building on the basis of explicit strategic calculation and reciprocal conditional commitment to follow common rules in accord with joint plans. Among nomadic hunter-gatherers, the vast majority foresee that they have little chance to become alphas. They are doomed to a condition of resentful subordination unless they join forces to restrain the aspiring alphas. They are willing to join forces on condition that each retains their personal autonomy and stands as an equal before the others. This is how an egalitarian social contract arises: all the adults, or enough of them to carry the day, agree to jointly support members' personal autonomy and equality by vigilantly controlling the would-be alphas among them. Boehm describes the basic calculation underlying this social contract as follows: "All men seek to rule, but if they cannot rule they prefer to be equal."[32]

The resulting social contract is egalitarian along the three dimensions of power, esteem, and standing. With respect to power, each individual retains their autonomy at the band level. No one is entitled to claim leadership of the band and boss others around. When the band must act collectively, as in deciding where to travel, all adults are entitled to participate in a process of democratic decisionmaking. With respect to esteem, the band adopts norms against boasting and strategies for sharing credit for major achievements. With respect to standing, the band adopts norms of meat-sharing and similar modes of egalitarian resource distribution, and recognizes that all adults are entitled to a voice.[33] We needn't suppose that this social contract arose from explicit agreement. It may have gradually emerged from initially tentative coalitions that began working together on more limited plans to resist the bullies, and gained ambition and scope as the coalitions experienced success.[34]

This social contract is not simply prudential. The rules it institutes are moral, because compliance is motivated by moral sentiments. Victims resent being bullied. People respond to braggarts with contempt, and join with victims in punishing bullies, even at potential cost to

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[31] Is it too much to suppose that apes desire personal autonomy? Each individual ape has a mind of their own and prefers to choose according to their own desires, not the conflicting desires of a dominant ape. That's why dominant apes need to resort to force and intimidation to get their way, as they lack the language to persuade. Boehm argues that chimps sometimes collectively vocalize their rejection of certain bullying behaviors by alphas and even join forces to resist them. Ibid., 167-69.

[32] Ibid., 105, quoting anthropologist Harold Schneider discussing the similar egalitarianism of pastoralist tribes in East Africa.

[33] Ibid., 45-47, 208-209.

[34] Boehm offers a group selection theory to explain how altruism (reciprocity at the group level with suppression of free riders) evolved across all human groups. Ibid., ch. 9. While his adaptationist story is intriguing, it is highly speculative. Nothing in these lectures hangs on it.

themselves. Resentment and contempt express concerns not simply for one's material interests, but for others to recognize one's standing as someone whose interests must count in others' deliberations, and who is entitled to make moral claims on others. Morality is thus fundamentally about how one is valued in the eyes of others. Rousseau agrees. He ties the obligations of civility as well as morality to the concern for standing, which follows from recognition of one's value as a person:

> As soon as men began to value one another, and the idea of consideration had got a footing in the mind, every one put in his claim to it, and it became impossible to refuse it to any with impunity. Hence arose the first obligations of civility . . . every intended injury became an affront because, besides the hurt which might result from it, the party injured was certain to find in it a contempt for his person, which was often more insupportable than the hurt itself. . . . Morality began to appear in human actions.[35]

Note the sequence of concerns implied in the first sentence of this passage. Rousseau argues that the concern for esteem—to be valued by others—leads to a concern for standing—to have one's interests and desires considered in others' deliberations—and thus to a concern for a certain kind of authority—to make claims on others. We shall return to this sequence from esteem, to standing, to authority in considering the development of inequality. For now, keep in mind Rousseau's point that resentment reflects these concerns that others value oneself and hence conduct themselves with regard to one's interests and desires.

On Boehm's account, the egalitarian social contract deploys the same motives already present in hierarchical social orders: the will to dominate, fear and hence submission, and the desires for personal autonomy, esteem, and standing that underlie resentment. Notably absent from this list are the motives commonly highlighted by modern egalitarians: solidarity and sympathy, in John Stuart Mill's sense of "the feeling of unity" with others, which makes each individual "never think of, or desire, any beneficial condition for himself, in the benefits of which they are not included."[36] This sentiment goes well beyond a recognition of the duty to grant standing to others in one's deliberations, and thereby to constrain one's pursuit of one's own desires. It implies that one revise one's conception of the good to include the interests of others, such that one would not even feel the duty as a constraint, but rather as a fulfillment of one's desires. To be sure, Mill thinks this feeling arises only late in human history, after long

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[35] Rousseau, *Social Contract and Discourses*, 213. Compare Adam Smith: "What chiefly enrages us against the man who injures or insults us, is the little account which he seems to make of us, the unreasonable preference which he gives to himself above us, and that absurd self–love, by which he seems to imagine, that other people may be sacrificed at any time, to his conveniency or his humour. The glaring impropriety of this conduct, the gross insolence and injustice which it seems to involve in it, often shock and exasperate us more than all the mischief which we have suffered." Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 112–13.

[36] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1985), vol. 10 of *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* 232.

development of society, and so cannot account for the origins of morality.[37] And Mill agrees with Boehm that humans began with a strong desire for personal autonomy and hence resistance to others' domination. They agree that social equality is needed to secure individual freedom, and that the desire for freedom supports an egalitarian social contract.

The role of resentment of domination in the egalitarian social contract is clear enough. But where do the desires to dominate and fear-based submission figure in the contract? Boehm argues that the social contract establishes a "reverse dominance hierarchy" in which the weak, joining forces, dominate the strong—the aspiring alphas—and force them to submit out of fear of punishment.[38] This is accurate, to the extent that Boehm is merely pointing to the deployment of dominant behaviors to induce submission by deviants to the prevailing moral rules. As Bicchieri argues, inducing conformity to social norms will require sanctions for deviants who are not sufficiently motivated by others' normative expectations. Nevertheless, I have three objections to Boehm's idea that egalitarian societies are just a different form of hierarchy.

First, the concept of a reverse dominance hierarchy confuses the "world turned upside down" with genuine equality. A regime that institutes the vengeful domination of oppressors by the oppressed is just another form of despotism. Revolutionary regimes have sometimes worked that way. Chinese Communists persecuted landlords and other elites of the prior regime by subjecting them to terrifying "struggle sessions" in which peasants humiliated, beat, and tortured them. Their children were banned from public offices. By contrast, egalitarian social orders recognize the equal rights and standing of their members. While securing such equality requires sanctions on those who arrogantly violate egalitarian norms, it also requires that violators be granted a realistic chance to change their ways. They are restored to equal status upon demonstrating a firm disposition to respect others' equal rights and standing. Thus, among nomadic hunter-gatherers, resort to extreme measures such as abandonment and execution is reserved as a collective self-defense measure against sociopaths and other deviants who consistently violate others' rights, after all other sanctions have failed.

Second, we should question Boehm's contrast between the "strong" and the "weak." Strength is not a univocal concept. Primatologist Linda Fedigan argues that different measures of dominance, such as social rank, strength, aggressiveness, winning conflicts, mobilizing cooperation, and directing group movement, do not sort every individual in a troop in the same order.[39] Alphas are not necessarily the physically strongest in a troop of chimps. Some attain their position because they have superior social and strategic skills, by which they can attract allies and mobilize them to help depose a physically stronger bully from the top spot. Among bonobos, males depend on coalitions of females rallied by their mothers to climb the ranks.[40]

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[37] See, for example, Mill's remarks on "savage independence" in *Considerations on Representative Government*, Ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1977), vol. 19 of *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* 394.
[38] Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, 123–28.
[39] Linda Fedigan, *Primate Paradigms: Sex Roles and Social Bonds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) ch. 7.
[40] Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, 135.

In human societies, hierarchical orders exploit the labor of the physically stronger, who are often enslaved. Tyrants are often psychologically weak and stunted due to their narcissistic tendencies. They are stunningly thin-skinned. They need obsequious subordinates who constantly fawn over them, like people continually shoring up a mound of sand that keeps collapsing under its own weight. Many bullies understand only relations of domination and subordination and are unable to relate to others as equals. They thereby make themselves unfit for cooperative relations and miss out on opportunities to gain from positive-sum interactions. When they meet a bigger bully, no one is more slavish, envious, and cowardly. As Plato shrewdly observed, tyrants "are always either masters or slaves, but the tyrannical nature never tastes freedom or true friendship."[41] Because they abuse, manipulate, and exploit others, and bestow favors only on a purely transactional basis, they make innumerable enemies and can't trust anyone. This only increases their isolation and vulnerability, and frequently leads to paranoia and persecution of even their most groveling supporters.

Third and most importantly, the "strength" of those at the top of human social hierarchies is never a matter of their purportedly naturally superior individual attributes. Rousseau rightly mocked this claim as one fit to be spoken only by slaves within earshot of their masters.[42] The distribution of natural talents is always vastly more equal than the distribution of power, esteem, and standing, although this fact is typically masked by a hierarchical society's unequal distribution of educational and other resources, such as food and leisure, needed to develop natural talents.[43] Matters could hardly be otherwise, given the fact that hierarchy is based on arbitrarily defined social groups. That social inequality is not based on differences in natural talents is true even for hierarchies purportedly based on merit. Even if we were to suppose that the successful ones in a newly established meritocracy fairly earned their superior positions on a level playing field, a stable, group-based hierarchy could emerge only if the successful ones manage to rig the game to favor their children, as they invariably try to do. Meritocracies quickly turn into *de facto* inherited class systems, if they aren't already so from the start.

Moreover, most hierarchies are not meritocratic in the sense of basing access to higher positions on a purportedly fair competition to which members of all social groups have equal access. And many hierarchies define superiority in terms other than natural talent. Aristocrats may claim to be the cultured ones, with superior taste and manners. Tyrants frequently claim to be gods, descended from gods, or appointed to their positions by gods. Their families are divine; they are saviors of their people or embodiments of their nation. Some perversely claim vices as

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[41] Plato, "Republic," *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairnes, trans. Paul Shorey (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961) 576a.
[42] *Second Discourse*, 174.
[43] "The difference of natural talents in different men is, in reality, much less than we are aware of; and the very different genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labour." Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Vol. 1*, Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1776) 1.2.4.

virtues. So-called "strongman" dictators and populist authoritarian leaders trumpet their own cruelty, ruthlessness, and unaccountability.

We must understand hierarchies not as due to the innate superiority of those on top, but as the products of their own kind of social contract, by which members of the superordinate group close ranks and join forces to subjugate the rest. They do so by agreeing to monopolize whatever material, social, cultural, and ideological resources are needed to get and stay on top, and spread inegalitarian ideologies to persuade and coerce others to go along with relations of domination and subordination, exaltation and contempt, lavish consideration and neglect. Social contract theorists today call this arrangement a *domination contract*.

1.5 The Domination Contract

Boehm argues that humans lived in egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies for the vast majority of the history of our species. This raises the question: if social hierarchy is established by social contracts, and the original human social contracts were egalitarian, why would people ever have accepted a social contract whereby they were demoted from equals to inferiors? Normative social contract theorists of the 17th and 18th centuries typically included speculative models of how hierarchy arose from an original state of equality via a domination contract. Their theories suppose that the initial state of equality was natural rather than instituted by a social contract. They postulated that an anarchic society of equals cannot establish peace and security. Individuals consent to a domination contract that establishes a state to provide these goods.

Hobbes offers two models of how this might happen. He is rigorously egalitarian about the natural abilities of human beings: there are no politically significant inequalities of intelligence, physical strength, courage, or other qualities across human beings that could explain the emergence of hierarchy. However much natural inequality there may be across individuals, no one is willing to admit that anyone else is naturally superior, and no natural inequality is so great as to enable a more capable individual to subjugate a less capable one by the use of their natural powers alone. Hence, domination contracts are never founded on natural inequalities.[44] Subjection can only be attained by consent of the subjugated.

In the first model, which Hobbes calls a commonwealth by institution, individuals desperate to escape an anarchic state of war make a contract among themselves to appoint a ruler who will impose peace on everyone.[45] They rationally calculate that no other form of government will enable them to escape war, and that the threat that a dictator poses to any individual's well-being falls far short of the threats arising from everyone else. The dictator, not being a party to the contract, owes nothing to the people he rules, although his self-interest lies in promoting the peace and prosperity of his regime, the better to arm it against external enemies.

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[44] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994) ch. 13, par. 1–4, 1651. Hobbes insists on the natural equality of men and women, and explains the subjection of women to their husbands in civil society by claiming that most states are established by men. Ibid., ch. 20, par. 4. He never explains why women rarely participate in state formation.
[45] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 18.

In the second model, which Hobbes calls a commonwealth by acquisition, a warlord becomes the sovereign by force.[46] Confronted with a warlord who offers individuals a choice between death or submission, individuals fearfully and prudently submit in return for the warlord sparing their lives. Hobbes insists on the validity of such coercive contracts in a state of anarchy. Although a commonwealth by institution appears more legitimate, in both cases people consent to the contract out of fear of their counterparty—in the first case, fear of their fellow members of society, in the second, of the warlord. A merit of his view is that we should not assume that the consent of subordinates in domination contracts is freely given. It often amounts to bare submission to extremely unequal and oppressive terms given that one's counterparty has blocked better options. On Hobbes's view, consent marks the difference between coercion and physical force, not between free choice and coercion. Thus, as soon as the enslaved submit to the slaveholder's dominion in return for removal of their chains, they have consented and are bound by their submission.[47]

I offer three objections to Hobbes's explanations of why equals would consent to a domination contract. First, Hobbes mistakenly assumes that the original human state of equality was not itself regulated by a social contract. It's just that the original egalitarian social contract precluded a state, understood as a hierarchical organization of offices whose occupants are empowered to issue top-down commands to its members. Hunter-gatherers are intensely interested in preserving their personal freedom, and will not accept a government that dominates them. But that does not entail that they reject social norms, as these are a product of consensus among equals, and their survival depends on them.

Second, Hobbes's models mistakenly assume that humans cannot control interpersonal conflicts without a state. Anarchic hunter-gatherer societies are fairly effective at suppressing most conflicts between unrelated band members. Their chief flaw lies in their inability to suppress violence against suspected adulterers or between men competing for the same sexual partners.[48] But domination contracts aren't much better. Every despotical regime is patriarchal, and thus tends to be relatively forgiving of male violence arising from jealous rage, especially against their female partners.[49]

Third, Hobbes assumes that people consent to the domination contract out of fear. Although he blames war in part on the quest for glory,[50] he ignores the role of glory in creating and sustaining social hierarchy. Yet domination contracts are often driven by the quest for glory. Napoleon established the Legion of Honor and awarded thousands of medals to his soldiers. He once said,

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[46] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 20.
[47] Ibid., ch. 20, par. 10-11.
[48] Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, 7, 80.
[49] For example, Russia decriminalized most domestic violence in 2017 in the name of preserving patriarchal authority within the family. Kay Rollins, "Putin's Other War: Domestic Violence, Traditional Values, and Masculinity in Modern Russia," *Harvard International Review* Aug. 3 2022, Https://hir.harvard.edu/putins-other-war/.
[50] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 13, par. 6–7.

> You call these baubles, well, it is with baubles that men are led . . . . I do not believe that the French like freedom and equality . . . . They have only one feeling, honor: it is therefore necessary to nourish this feeling; they need distinctions. See how the people prostrate themselves before the decorations of foreigners . . . . The soldier needs glory, distinctions, rewards.[51]

With little more than promises of personal and national glory, Napoleon sent nearly a half million soldiers of his *Grande Armée* to their deaths in the Russian campaign. History has repeatedly shown the willingness of armies drunk on dreams of glory to risk death. Napoleon also saw that they often willingly give up their freedom and claims to equality to submit to a leader who promises them glory. However little they personally share in dominion over their conquests, soldiers fill themselves with pride over the fact that they participated in a grand collective project of subjugating others. The quest for distinction, for superior esteem, thus not only often overrides individuals' interests in their liberty and even their very lives in war (as Hobbes saw), but leads them to endorse a domination contract for a despotical regime.

Rousseau, I think, had deeper insight than Hobbes into the nature of the domination contract that institutes social hierarchy. He saw that the quest for superior esteem can, through several stages, drive people to acquiesce to a domination contract that establishes a tyrannical state. We shall consider the details of Rousseau's view, and the empirical evidence for it, in the next lecture. Here I shall outline the generic form of the domination contract that constitutes the last two stages of Rousseau's theory. In the first (that is, the penultimate) stage, those who have managed to acquire some advantage over others in access to some resource highly valued in their society form a social contract among themselves to cement this advantage by closing ranks to create a monopoly over that resource. In the second (final) stage, they impose exploitative terms of access to that resource or to some of its benefits on those excluded from the first contract. To get the excluded class to acquiesce to this second contract, the monopolists also promulgate an ideology to persuade the excluded that the terms they impose are in their interests, or at least that the advantaged group deserves or is entitled to the powers, distinctions, and resources they claim. For Rousseau, the monopolized resource was land. But landowners' monopoly was not fully secure in the absence of a state. So landowners persuaded the landless to accept a state on misleading terms—a contract that ultimately establishes a despotical state in which privileged groups rule over subject groups. Rousseau's two-stage domination contract broadly corresponds to Tilly's theory of durable social hierarchy, only at a higher level of abstraction.

Thus we arrive at a dual equilibrium model of social possibilities that broadly supports Boehm's view. Humans are capable of forming both egalitarian and domination contracts. Each type of contract mobilizes certain common motivations and dispositions. The desire for esteem and standing motivates dominance behavior: in domination contracts, often as the very substance of superior esteem and standing; in egalitarian contracts, in self-defense against others who try to dominate. Fear motivates submissive behavior: in domination contracts, of all subordinates; in

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[51] Antoine Claire Thibaudeau, *Mémoires sur le Consulat. 1799 à 1804* (Paris: Chez Ponthieu et Cie, 1827) 83–84. Original text in French.

egalitarian contracts, of those who violate the rules of the egalitarian order. The desire for autonomy or personal independence drives resentment of real or imagined submission. Resentment motivates resistance to actual domination contracts. But it can also be activated by deceptive ideologies to motivate resistance by members of advantaged groups to egalitarian social movements, insofar as these are represented as movements to subordinate, insult, or disfavor them. These motives and dispositions are present in all societies. They can be activated for either egalitarian or hierarchical ends. While social contracts establish institutions and practices to stabilize and reproduce themselves, the availability of these motives for opposing ends always poses a potential threat to the status quo.

It follows, as Boehm argues, that egalitarians can never rest easy.[52] Indeed, group-based domination frequently exists even within broadly egalitarian social orders. Nomadic hunter-gatherers, although broadly egalitarian at the band level, often permit patriarchal domination at the level of the family. And sometimes male domination emerges at the band level as well, for groups unusually dependent on big game hunting from which women are excluded.[53] This point generalizes for complex modern societies. which contain intersecting groups with many different types of identity and cross-cutting systems of social norms along a spectrum from less to more egalitarian.[54] Moreover, the scope of equality tends to be limited to acknowledged members of a given society. James C. Scott argues that nomadic "barbarians" existed for thousands of years along with early states in the ancient Near East, sustaining themselves partly by slaves they supplied to those states.[55] However internally egalitarian and free they may have been with respect to each other, they subjected the slaves they traded to extreme domination. Moreover, anthropologist Kent Flannery and archaeologist Joyce Marcus note that among hunter-gatherer societies that recognize different lines of descent from ancestors, junior lineages are expected to defer to senior lineages, and those who arrive later to a place are expected to defer to those who were there first.[56]

I have argued in this lecture that thinking about social orders as based on social contracts is naturalistically respectable and illuminating. In line with both early modern and contemporary theorists, I argue that social contracts offer a way of understanding not just egalitarian but also hierarchical social orders. By abstracting from the innumerable details of different types of social order, we can focus on their key normatively relevant features and consider how various motives and dispositions are activated in support of or resistance to them, with competing ideologies playing key roles in both stabilizing and destabilizing existing orders. Common motives and

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[52] O'Connor, using very different game-theoretic and evolutionary game-theoretic methods, agrees. *Origins of Unfairness*, 209–10.
[53] Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, 87. Boehm notes that among the Agta in the Philippines, where men and women alike hunt big game with dogs, gender inequality is slight. Ibid., 8.
[54] Hence, even talk of a dual equilibrium is a great simplification. We will examine some complexities of intersectionality in Lecture 3.
[55] James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (Yale UP, 2017) 222–26.
[56] Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2012) 55.

dispositions are activated in both egalitarian and domination contracts: the desire for autonomy, resentment, domination, submission, and fear. All of these motives and dispositions express desires for recognition: autonomy, in the desire for respect and standing; resentment, in the sense that others have failed to accord proper respect and standing to oneself; domination, in the quest for glory; submission, in the hope that a dominator will thereby grant one *some* room to maneuver. Even fear very often takes the prospect of some loss of respect, esteem, or love as its object. We shall see in the next two lectures how important ideologies are to activating these motives and dispositions, and to stabilizing a social contract or flipping one type of contract into another. Moreover, I shall show how some very common errors and biases of moral thinking are inherent to domination contracts, and built into inegalitarian ideologies.

Lecture 2: Reconsidering Rousseau's *Second Discourse* in Light of Contemporary Social Science

2.1 Rousseau's Stages of Decline from Natural Equality to the Domination Contract

In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau argues that the central dynamic driving the creation of social hierarchy is competition among individuals for superior esteem. He offers a narrative of the emergence of inequality from an initial natural state of equality. In his story, the different types of inequality emerge in a specific order, but require further institutional development to be stabilized into social hierarchies. Inequalities of esteem arise first. Inequalities of informal property in land follow. This amounts to an unstable institutionalization of unequal standing. Once all land is appropriated, inequalities of power emerge in the form of wage labor and involuntary servitude. The antagonistic social relations created by these inequalities lead to social disorders that threaten existing property rights. Finally, to stabilize property rights, individuals consent to a social contract that establishes a state. The state consolidates existing property inequalities into durable social hierarchy. But the concentration of power in the state has its own dynamics, ultimately leading from oligarchy to despotism. At each point, social inequalities emerge by reciprocal conditional agreements that take the two-stage form of a domination contract. Rousseau argues that the losers under each domination contract consent due to what we would call ideology in the pejorative sense—ideas that amount to some kind of deception or fraud.

How should we understand Rousseau's narrative? Is it a kind of conjectural history, an attempt to narrate how events in the history of our species probably unfolded? On that interpretation, Rousseau's narrative runs aground in at least two ways. First, he imagines original humans—the ones who inhabit his "state of nature"—as asocial beings, each foraging in isolation from the others and not caring about human interaction other than for sex.[57] This is absurd. Second, his frequent references to indigenous peoples as being closer to the original state of nature mix confused and often preposterous contemporary reports with racist contempt and romanticization.[58] Rousseau backs off from some of his speculations, acknowledging that "savages" are "very far" from the original state of nature.[59] In fact, he denies that such a state

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[57] Second Discourse, 185-88, 203, 207-8.
[58] For example, Ibid., 183, 186-7, 202, 237.
[59] Ibid., 213.

ever existed, because God endowed humans with understanding and moral knowledge from the start. He acknowledges that there are many possible routes by which an initial state of equality could have led to inequality. He even writes, "Let us begin then by laying facts aside, as they do not affect the question."[60]

Rousseau claims that his narrative consists of "hypothetical reasonings . . . calculated to explain the nature of things,"[61] like the way physicists reason about causes. This suggests that instead of reading his narrative as conjectural history, we read it as an analytical device. Physicists analytically strip out the effects of friction and other forces in order to discern the fundamental laws of motion. Then they add the other forces back in to determine how particular objects move in specific settings. Similarly, Rousseau strips out various human faculties, emotions, and desires peculiar to social relations to discern what humans would be like apart from the effects of social interaction and social institutions. Then, by stages, he adds these features of social psychology back in, along with the social institutions that express and activate them, to determine how social hierarchy arises.

On this interpretation, each stage of his narrative points to different necessary conditions for the emergence of social hierarchy. We then view Rousseau's original asocial state of nature as a thought experiment in which we imagine how humans would feel and behave if they lacked *amour-propre* along with other faculties such as language. It is evident that humans would never compete with one another for greater esteem, and that therefore no esteem hierarchy could arise, nor hierarchies of standing or power, if people didn't care about how others regard them. Now suppose we introduce a desire for recognition into our thought experiment. Is that sufficient to generate esteem hierarchy? Rousseau suggests not. The problem does not lie with the bare desire for recognition. This desire is critical for our capacity to be moral—to regulate our conduct by standards of right and wrong out of regard for what we owe to each other. It is consistent with equal and reciprocal recognition of each person's rights.[62]

Rather, Rousseau suggests that what generates esteem inequality, and from there hierarchies of standing and power, is the *economy of esteem* in society—the social norms that regulate esteem competition.[63] Two types of norm regarding esteem are critical. One regulates what things are socially recognized as admirable. The second regulates the structure of opportunities for gaining esteem. Rousseau's argument is embedded in a larger narrative of

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[60] Ibid., 175.
[61] Ibid., 175-76.
[62] Here I follow John Rawls, *Lectures on History*, 198–200 who in turn acknowledges debts to N. J. H. Dent and Frederick Neuhouser, in claiming that *amour-propre* has both egalitarian and inegalitarian expressions. See especially Frederick Neuhouser, "Freedom, Dependence, and the General Will," *Philosophical Review* 102.3 (1993): 390. Rawls defends this broad interpretation of *amour-propre*, rather than the narrow one that views it as vanity only, on the ground that only so can Rousseau's *Social Contract* cohere with the *Second Discourse*, in offering a solution to the problem raised in the latter work.
[63] On the idea of an economy of esteem, see Geoffrey Brennan and Philip Pettit, *The Economy of Esteem: An Essay on Civil and Political Society* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2004).

social development, told in five stages. At each new stage, Rousseau adds new social capacities to human beings. These desires go along with new technologies, economic systems, and social relations. At each stage, he considers whether the new configuration of social capacities, technology, and economic systems is consistent with or fatal for egalitarian social relations. At what point do ephemeral individual inequalities in esteem turn into entrenched, heritable, group-based social hierarchies of esteem, standing, and power?

The first stage is the state of nature.[64] Rousseau invites us to imagine humans without any social desires, social awareness, or even language. They have no *amour-propre* and don't even desire companionship. They have only two motives: self-interest (*amour de soi*) and compassion or pity for the suffering, whether human or animal.[65] Because they lack social desires, their self-interest is concerned only with the self as an isolated being, innocently seeking self-preservation. Each individual is a self-sufficient nomadic vegetable gatherer, whose only tools are found objects—sticks and stones. Because they are self-sufficient, they have no need to cooperate with others. Adults interact only for fleeting and instinctual sexual intercourse. Children leave their mothers as soon as they can fend for themselves. Since there are no social relations in the state of nature, there is no social hierarchy. Natural inequalities cannot generate social inequality, since there is no advantage to beauty without love, to wit without conversation, to cunning without exchange.[66] Even greater strength, while it may be used to seize resources gathered by another, cannot generate inequalities of command over others, since obedience cannot be exacted from a self-sufficient gatherer who can simply move away.

At the second stage, Rousseau adds primitive language, a crude awareness of other minds, and pride to humans.[67] He also adds technologies for hunting, cooking, and making clothes. Humans become nomadic hunter-gatherers. Individuals ascribe intentions to others by projecting their own desire for self-preservation onto them. They thereby acquire a "mechanical prudence" by which they can discern when transient acts of cooperation, as in hunting big game, may be to mutual advantage, and are able to gesture their willingness to cooperate to each other. But they are unable to bind each other through reciprocal promises, and so will abandon a large-game hunt as soon as they see an opportunity to catch small game for themselves. When they reflect on their ability to catch prey, they feel the first glimmerings pride in their felt superiority over their catch. Yet no social inequality emerges from this pride, because they compare themselves only to animals and ground their admiration of themselves in self-appraisal rather than seeking it from others. Although they also compare the qualities of individual humans to select hunting partners, this use of reason is purely prudential and does not stimulate a desire for social distinction. Hence, even adding pride to humans is insufficient to generate social hierarchy.

At the third stage, Rousseau adds conjugal love, paternal affection, and desires for conveniences beyond what is necessary for self-preservation.[68] Love leads people to form

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[64] Second Discourse, 207-8.
[65] Ibid., 197.
[66] Second Discourse, 204.
[67] Ibid., 208-210.
[68] Ibid., 210-14.

families. Desires for conveniences make them more industrious. People invent tools for building huts for their families, thereby introducing the first property into society. They become settled hunter-gatherers. A gendered division of labor arises, in which women specialize in child-rearing, while men hunt and fish. As they are now living together in small villages, they assemble in their leisure time for singing and dancing, and compete for partners by showing off their merits—strength, beauty, eloquence, dancing and singing skills. Only now does *amour-propre* emerge, generating jealousy, vanity, contempt, shame, and envy. But, as everyone demands consideration and respect from others, which cannot be denied without violent conflict, and as language is more sophisticated, they establish norms of civility and morality under which everyone agrees to treat each other as equals. *Amour-propre* is thereby institutionalized in its egalitarian form.

Thus, on Rousseau's account, a free society of equals can exist even where individuals have unequal and diverse merits, compete with one another for esteem and love, make limited claims to private property, and desire material objects beyond what they need for self-preservation. A social contract instituting egalitarian norms of civility and morality prevents esteem competition from generating social hierarchy. Even unequal property in huts is not sufficient to generate conflict, as those without huts judge that it is easier and less risky for them to build their own than to fight over possession of the huts others have built.[69] Such slight inequality cannot generate power hierarchies, because property in huts cannot be converted into command over others. It can't generate hierarchies of standing, since families are self-sufficient and markets therefore don't exist. It doesn't even ground an esteem hierarchy, because people admire only real personal merits, not mere possession. Rousseau claims that people in this society are "free, healthy, honest and happy," and indeed that their condition is "the very best man could experience."[70] This is true despite the fact that, in the absence of a state, Rousseau imagines that it is up to each victim to punish their aggressor according to their own judgment, and that their vengeance is violent and cruel.

Hierarchy emerges only at the fourth stage, that of commercial society.[71] Here, Rousseau adds not simply desires for more than necessities, but for more things than can be acquired by individuals' own labor alone. People invent agriculture and metallurgy. This creates a division of labor among men in different industries (not just between men and women within the family). As families now need things—food or metal objects—that they can't produce themselves, commerce arises. People lay claim not simply to property in what they have built, but in land for cultivation and mining.

The combination of property in land, the extra-familial division of labor, and commerce leads to spiralling economic inequality. Natural inequalities in strength, skill, and inventiveness lead to unequal possessions for equally hard work. Due to arbitrary factors, the market eventually rewards work in different industries unequally. One might think this would induce people to move to better-paying industries. But Rousseau suggests that specialization

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[69] Ibid., 210-11.
[70] Ibid., 214.
[71] Ibid., 215-220.

irreversibly narrows workers' skills,[72] which may consign them to occupations that pay less for equally hard work.

Commerce, arising from economic interdependence, leads to the corruption of the economy of esteem and ultimately to esteem hierarchy. Rousseau introduces this theme as follows:

> Behold all the natural qualities in action, the rank and condition of every man assigned him; not merely his share of property and his power to serve or injure others, but also his wit, beauty, strength or skill, merit or talents: and these being the only qualities capable of commanding respect, it soon became necessary to possess or to affect them. It now became the interest of men to appear what they really were not. To be and to seem became two totally different things; and from this distinction sprang insolent pomp and cheating trickery. . . .[73]

Rousseau expresses two objections to the economy of esteem in commercial society here. First, as Rousseau goes on to explain, once people must acquire what they want from others through the market, a man must persuade others to "find their advantage in promoting his own."[74] This gives people an interest in "cheating trickery"—in feigning merits that they don't really have. Second, they get people to admire things that are unworthy of admiration. In an uncorrupted economy of esteem, wit, beauty, strength, skill, virtue and talents—the only qualities that genuinely merit respect—are the only qualities that are admired. These are the only qualities esteemed in the third stage, the best form of society. In *Emile*, Rousseau describes an ideal education in a corrupt society. He devotes much of the education of his imagined student Emile to sheltering him from artificial—that is, socially instituted—norms for esteem, and to teaching the difference between genuine ("natural") and pretended or artificial merit.[75] But at the fourth stage, people admire individuals' social rank, wealth, power, ancestral lineage, and "insolent pomp." Rousseau condemns such socially instituted inequalities as contrary to natural right to

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[72] "Natural inequality . . . and the difference between men, developed by their different circumstances, becomes more sensible and permanent in its effects." Ibid., 217.
[73] Ibid., 217-18.
[74] Ibid., 218.
[75] To this end, Rousseau displays Emile's bad drawings in gilt frames and good ones in plain frames. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: A Treatise on Education*, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (Musaicum Books. Kindle edition., 2018) 66. I thank Sarah Buss for drawing my attention to this passage.

the extent that they are not proportionate to "physical" inequalities—that is, "natural" inequalities in wit, strength, etc.[76] And if they are unjust, it is corrupt to admire them.

Commercial society leads people to compete for wealth, "not so much from real want as from the desire to surpass others."[77] This entails much more than a mere desire for conveniences, which usually don't become less convenient just because others also have them. It indicates that wealth has become an object of esteem in itself, not valued simply for the consumption possibilities it affords. The quest for distinction thus leads to a scramble for superior wealth, and hence to essentially antagonistic social relations. Under the guise of mutual advantage, the pretense of all commercial transactions, people secretly try to profit at others' expense.

Eventually, wealth competition under increasing inequality enables a few to appropriate all the land. At this point, competition becomes zero-sum: one person can acquire more land only at the expense of those who lose it. The losers, lacking the capital needed to enable them to work for themselves, are forced to work for others as wage laborers or even slaves. The rich "taste the pleasure of command" for the first time.[78]

What makes command so pleasurable? In the U.S., many who could afford a personal servant would feel embarrassed to have one at one's beck and call. Such embarrassment reflects the hold of egalitarian norms in some subcultures of America. Nevertheless, the pleasures of command are fully intact in the American workplace. The pleasure of getting what one wants by *commanding* others—rather than by mechanical means or arms-length market transactions with workers over whom one lacks direct authority—consists in the feeling of superiority and impunity over someone reduced to fawning and groveling over oneself. It is a way to gain esteem by putting others in awe of one's power. Rousseau claims that this way of getting esteem is so pleasurable that the rich come to despise every other pleasure and obsessively seek to enslave everyone around them.

Thus, esteem competition in commercial society generates an esteem hierarchy based on who has greater wealth. This, in turn, generates a hierarchy of standing, in which individuals' interests count in the eyes of others in proportion to their wealth. Once competition for land leads to its complete appropriation, a hierarchy of power emerges. All of these hierarchies are upheld by informal social norms, because a state does not yet exist. These social norms are the product of domination contracts. The poor obviously have no interest in instituting norms to treat

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[76] Ibid., 238. Rousseau's distinction between "natural" and socially instituted inequalities in the bases of esteem cannot be sustained. All *social* bases of esteem are instituted by social norms. Flannery and Marcus contrast "achievement-based" societies, which limit esteem to those who demonstrate superior skill, expertise, and virtue, with societies that recognize hereditary rank, which may be based on lineage or anything else inherited from ancestors, including wealth and political or religious office. *Creation of Inequality*, 229. Their distinction better captures what is normatively relevant about the bases of esteem that Rousseau endorses and condemns than does Rousseau's distinction between natural and artificial qualities.

[77] Second Discourse, 218.

[78] Ibid., 219.

the wealthy and powerful as more admirable than themselves—that is, to obey norms of civility by which they must approach their social superiors with deference and awe, and flatter, stoop, and fawn over the vicious, stupid, and ugly merely on account of their wealth and power. These norms reflect how the rich and powerful want to be treated. The rich exploit subordinates' economic dependence to exact obedience to these norms. Soon enough, subordinates envy the rich and powerful—a feeling that mixes resentment with a desire to switch places with them. In this way, even the poor and powerless come to really admire the possession of wealth and power.[79] All thereby give up the pride of independence of both mind and conduct that marks truly admirable individuals, as Rousseau sees them.[80]

The rich, having created a zero-sum society in which one person can gain only at others' expense, discover that it is inherently unstable.[81] Every commercial transaction masks an intent to exploit with a show of benevolence. The rich seize others' property just because they have the power. The poor resent the fact that they have been shut out of opportunities to acquire property and must submit to the domination of the rich to survive. Even those who acquired their property legitimately by laboring on it have no good answer to the complaint of the poor that their

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[79] I think something like this envy dynamic bridges the gap between norms for *showing* esteem and real admiration in Rousseau's account. Norms concern conduct, which can be exacted from others. Real admiration is a feeling that cannot be mustered up simply through others' commands. There are other ways to bridge the gap. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith argues that our need to be in sympathy (emotional concord) with others deeply shapes our attitudes. We feel a kind of emotional pressure to adopt the attitudes of approval and disapproval of our associates. I suggest that this profound dependence on others' feelings can generate esteem bubbles detached from any defensible basis of esteem in much the same way that markets can generate stock bubbles due to people's expectations of what other market actors demand, independent of the stock's fundamentals. This dynamic underlies the phenomenon of cultural cognition discussed below in §3.2. Finally, we should consider that the truly spiteful may glory even in exacting insincere shows of admiration, for the Hobbesian reason discussed below in §3.4. For such people, the gap between showing and feeling admiration need not be bridged.

[80] Rousseau grants two exceptions to the independence of mind and conduct that are otherwise critical to his system of education in *Emile* and his system of politics in *The Social Contract.* In romantic relationships, besotted men adore their lovers, lovingly submit to their wishes, and bind themselves in marriage, even as their loving and beloved wives devotedly obey their husbands' commands. As citizens, patriotic men adore their republic and lovingly submit to its laws, even as their wills jointly constitute the general will to which the government submits. Wingrove, *Rousseau's Republican Romance* explains how to reconcile these seeming contradictions in Rousseau's thought through a close reading of his gender politics. Neuhouser, "Freedom, Dependence, and the General Will," 390, skipping over Rousseau's gender politics, argues that the critical issue for Rousseau is not independence but freedom, which the state secures in the social contract by mediating our interdependence through generally applicable laws that are the objects of the general will. "By ensuring that individuals enjoy an equality of respect as citizens," the law "transforms personal dependence into dependence on the republic . . . by making the community itself into a source of the esteem" people seek.

[81] Second Discourse, 218-220.

appropriation, far in excess of what they need, leaves the masses starving. They had asserted their title unilaterally, and had fooled others to acquiesce in such assertions. Now that the poor have wised up, they reject any title not acquired by unanimous consent, and think their need establishes a just title to the property of the rich. So they steal with impunity.

To end this war of all against all, the rich devise a final contract—the only one that Rousseau calls a social contract—to create a state. This, too, is a domination contract, the terms of which are devised by the rich among themselves, and foisted on the poor by ideological trickery. The contract establishes a state to enforce laws ostensibly designed to protect the weak against the ambitious, and to enforce reciprocal obligations on rich and poor alike. This ideological justification for the state is deceptive: the poor don't anticipate that the state will subordinate them even more deeply. So they unwittingly consent to a contract by which they get nothing in return for giving up their freedom.[82]

The domination contract into the state further corrupts the economy of esteem. Magistrates get honors on top of their power, as well as the superior standing of special privileges. Even if they were originally elected, they eventually manage to make their offices hereditary.[83] Now nobles gain esteem simply by birth, however lacking in real merit they are. All merits get reduced to wealth, because the rich can buy "every other distinction."[84] Finally, they boast even of their vices, and turn idleness into a ground of esteem.[85] In the end, despotism reins, even most of the rich suffer the impunity of tyrants, and the few rich and powerful people remaining "prize what they enjoy only in so far as others are destitute of it."[86] They can't feel good about themselves unless they see others suffering.

2.2 Stopping the Slide Down the Slippery Slope

Rousseau offers a grim narrative of a slippery slope to despotism. The first fatal error arises when people, following the opinions of the rich, come to admire qualities that are socially instituted—wealth, power, sophisticated manners, pomp, noble birth—instead of only "natural" qualities. Then, the rules for acquiring these admired qualities successively narrow individuals' opportunities for gaining esteem. The wealthy come to dominate and eventually monopolize esteem, because they are able to buy access to all the other bases of esteem. Once land acquisition becomes a zero-sum game, so does esteem competition. Finally, once property and political offices become heritable, all three types of social hierarchy become entrenched across generations, completely detached from genuine merit, and even attached to vice.

How can we stop this slippery slope? Let us now step out of the realm of thought experiments to examine how two different types of society have attempted to do so: nomadic hunter-gatherer societies and tribal societies. Each attempts to stop the slippery slope at a

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[82] Ibid., 220-221.
[83] Ibid., 228, 230.
[84] Ibid., 233.
[85] Ibid., 232.
[86] Ibid., 234.

different point. Nomadic hunter-gatherers take measures to suppress esteem competition. Tribal societies enforce a pluralist, equal-opportunity regime of esteem competition.

We have seen that nomadic hunter-gatherer social contracts are broadly egalitarian at the band level, with respect to both authority and standing, although some of them fail to achieve gender equality at this level, and most perhaps at the level of family relations. Recent research challenges the long-prevailing assumption of a strongly gendered division of labor among such groups, with evidence that women engaged in hunting and warfare in all periods in the Holocene archaeological record, and even throughout the last century.[87] As these activities are primary sources of prestige among nomadic hunter-gatherers, even the prevalence of superior male esteem across human history is questionable. Hunter-gatherers prize their personal independence and hence resist attempts by others to order them around. On this point, Rousseau's view was broadly correct. But he was wrong to suppose that nomadic hunter-gatherers don't differentially admire individuals according to their skills and virtues. Rather, they observe norms against boasting. They keep more successful hunters from thinking too much of themselves by disparaging the quality of their catch. Of course, everyone knows how valuable the meat is to the group. But by refusing to publicly acknowledge this, they seek to prevent more successful hunters from supposing that they are so superior that they are entitled to command others. In addition, various nomadic hunter-gatherers have devised strategies to ensure that credit for a successful hunt is shared. For example, they may require every hunter to hunt with a weapon that was crafted by someone else, so that the craftsman can also take some credit.[88]

Some settled communities today, such as the Amish, also repress esteem competition among their members. Given the availability of means for conspicuous consumption in the wider society, such repression requires these communities to practice substantial self-segregation, much as Rousseau called for Emile to be raised in the country, apart from the corruptions of city life. Repression also requires enforcement of ascetic norms, including bans on much modern technology and suppression of the performing arts. The Amish even discourage high school and higher education, not just to prevent mixing with the wider society, but also out of suspicion that the pursuit of such learning is merely an exercise of vanity, a desire to show oneself off as a know-it-all.[89] Rousseau shared their suspicion and endlessly criticized book learning and purely theoretical investigations in *Emile*. He also shared their suspicion of the performing arts and supported a ban on the theater in Geneva.[90]

One might think that repression of esteem competition altogether stops the approach to the slippery slope too early. After all, Rousseau's best form of society in the *Second Discourse*,

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[87] Abigail Anderson, et al., "The Myth of Man the Hunter: Women's Contribution to the Hunt Across Ethnographic Contexts," *PLOS ONE* (2023), Https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0287101.
[88] Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, 45–46.
[89] Donald Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001) 173–74.
[90] Rousseau, *Emile: A Treatise on Education*, 47–55, 79, 79, 127, 158; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Letter from M. Rousseau, of Geneva, to M. D'Alembert, of Paris, Concerning the Effects of Theatrical Entertainments on the Manners of Mankind.* (London: Printed for J. Nourse at the Lamb opposite Katherine-Street in the Strand, 1759).

at the third stage, permits esteem competition on the basis of real merits, which in his account includes skill in singing and dancing. But there is no going back to the third stage for we moderns. Just as the Amish adopt norms for living in a wider corrupt society that ancestral nomadic hunter-gatherers didn't need, because they were originally the only form of society, Rousseau resorts to repression to protect virtue in modern society. There is the rub: a society that represses science, technology, and the liberal and performing arts is not a free society at all, and hence cannot be a free society of equals. These pursuits are not merely exercises in esteem competition. They express deep human motives of curiosity, creativity, imagination, and individuality. They also bring enormous benefits, in the technological advances that have led to vastly longer life expectancies and health across the life course, in vast increases in knowledge and positive freedom (effectively accessible options), and in the expansion of our imaginations for possibilities for living well and in capacities for empathy and cooperation across parochial boundaries.

Perhaps, then, we can learn something about an egalitarian regulation of esteem competition from tribal societies. Boehm defines tribal societies as autonomous groups with domesticated plants or animals, without writing, and with an egalitarian ethos.[91] With respect to authority, they prize personal independence and resist others' attempts to control what they do. Decisions about what the tribe should do are made democratically. With respect to standing, while they allow unequal accumulation of animals and harvests, they also practice redistribution. Those who are more economically successful are expected to hold feasts for the tribe, pay for public works, or otherwise give away much of their wealth. With respect to esteem, they permit competition within egalitarian constraints.

Tribal societies have devised various egalitarian constraints on esteem competition that merit close examination. Putting them together, we can construct a normative ideal of an economy of esteem that permits esteem competition while blocking social hierarchy. Each of the following rules is followed by some tribal societies. Most such societies follow several. First, the society recognize multiple bases for esteem and paths for attaining it. In tribal societies, paths to renown typically include several of the following: success in warfare, raiding, trading, endurance trials, generous gift-giving, mediation of conflicts, rituals, sponsorship of rituals, providing public works (building ritual houses), healing, and persuasive public speaking.[92] Second, the bases of esteem are achievement—reflections of what Rousseau would count as "natural" or genuine talents and virtues of the individual—rather than "artificial" or socially instituted qualities such as noble birth or mere possession (as of wealth or rank). Hence, competitions are

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[91] Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, 91. In addition, the egalitarianism of tribes must be qualified by gender. Male dominance tends to be stronger in tribal societies than among nomadic hunter-gatherers at both the family and tribal levels. However, there is wide variation across tribes in the strength of male dominance, and there are important exceptions. For example, Haudenosaunee women have long held substantial political power in their tribes. In the 19th century, they influenced the U.S. feminist movement. Sally Roesch Wagner, *Sisters in Spirit: The Iroquois Influence on Early American Feminists* (Summertown, TN: Native Voices, 2001).
[92] Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, 108, 110; Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, 96–7, 179.

meritocratic: all honors must be earned, not inherited or ascribed.[93] Third, competitions are open to all, although there may be separate competitions for men and women. Fourth, members enjoy equal access to the training required to effectively compete.[94] Fifth, competition is not zero-sum: honor may go to everyone who earns it.[95] Sixth, the honors of economic success are tied to redistributive acts that help the community, such as hosting feasts and contributing to public works. Finally, no one is permitted to convert their success in esteem competition into authority over other people. Even those who are exceptionally good public speakers in democratic deliberation still must persuade others to go along; they do not command.

This set of rules for an economy of esteem bars every step in Rousseau's slippery slope to social hierarchy. Because esteem is achievement-based, and the means of developing talent are distributed equally, even the most talented will lose some competitions. Esteem competition is individualistic, not translated into group-based esteem inequality. Due to the great number and variety of competitions, losers in one competition have innumerable chances to win in others. Nor can we expect high correlations between success in different types of competition, given the diversity of talents and equal access to the means for their development. The diversity of different types of achievement makes it difficult to resolve them into a single coherent pecking order. Because esteem is achievement-based, parents cannot pass their superior esteem to their children. Success in one meritocratic competition cannot accumulate into overwhelming, durable advantage even for the most talented individuals, because no success is convertible into stable inequalities of wealth. Without significant class inequality, there are no rich who can buy the bases of esteem or monopolize access to the training needed to excel. These individualistic rules prevent esteem competition from generating group-based claims to superior esteem. Nor is there any way to convert esteem into power over others. The rejection of zero-sum logic not only allows innumerable winners, but also prevents esteem competition from turning into an essentially antagonistic game that promotes spite and envy. In all of these respects, tribal esteem competition resembles Rousseau's third stage of society.

The great exception to the lack of group-based esteem hierarchy in most tribal societies concerns gender. Nearly all of them grant higher prestige to men than to women. Differences in gender-based prestige across tribal societies appear to be tied to how important success in warfare and raiding is to the society, and to the monopolization by men of these arenas of esteem competition.[96] This supports the importance of fully open access to all competitions and to the

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[93] Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, 160, 551.
[94] Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, 110–13.
[95] Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, 96.
[96] Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, 5–6. Boehm also stresses the importance of patrifocal family organization. Where women must join their husband's extended family or clan when they marry, their position is extremely weak, because the men in such clans, holding a monopoly on property, band together in their own male domination contract, which is licensed by the patrifocal ideology of the whole society. By contrast, in matrilineal societies, where property is inherited through the mother's line, women stay with their extended family. The social ideology is matrifocal. This arrangement does not create a world turned upside down, however, because men play an important role in supporting their sisters' children. It comes much closer to gender equality.

means of developing all talents. It may also suggest the importance of an eighth rule: to not weight the different domains of achievement so unequally that success in one or two dominates all the others.

Flannery and Marcus, who argue that the anthropological and archaeological record supports Rousseau's view that social hierarchy arises from the desire to be superior to others, think we can learn from hunter-gatherer and tribal norms for regulating esteem. They suggest that the critical rules needed to stop hierarchy are to limit esteem to virtues and skills, to bar advantages based on heredity, and to resist those who attempt to institute hierarchy.[97] I would add to their list all of the other rules I have distilled from various tribal practices, along with hunter-gatherer strategies for sharing esteem. I will argue in lecture three that rejecting a zero-sum logic of esteem competition is especially important in pluralistic societies.

2.3 Moral Perversions of Esteem Competition (1): Turning Egalitarian Virtue into its Opposite

Every economy of esteem is supported by an ideology that legitimates it. Rousseau suggests—and Flannery and Marcus agree—that ideological change is necessary to move from an egalitarian to an inegalitarian society. Given that people resent domination and that members of egalitarian societies rightly suspect that people who boast of their superiority are liable to attempt to dominate others,[98] why would they accept any ideological change that leads to hierarchy? Rousseau suggests that some combination of deception and lack of foresight is needed to get the consent or acquiescence of people to the second stage of a domination contract.[99] I shall argue that another factor is in play. Given that people *do* seek distinction, humans are liable to a moral error or bias that tends to destabilize egalitarian social contracts: they can even turn activities regarded as expressions of egalitarian virtue into objects of esteem competition.

The story of St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) illustrates this error. St. Catherine nursed patients at the Hospital of Santa Maria della Scala. Disgusted by the stench of a suppurating tumor of a patient, she vomited and felt that she had thereby failed a test of humility. She took to drinking her patients' pus in order to overcome this vice. This was an extreme version of the Catholic Church's call to mortify the flesh as a discipline of self-abnegation. However, the Church also honored such mortification as a step on the path toward sanctification. Following this perverse logic, St. Catherine turned an act of deliberate self-abasement into an instrument of esteem competition, over who was more humble and hence more holy. She was rewarded with disciples and opportunities to lecture popes. Her patients, repulsed by her obsession with their noxious bodily fluids, rightly suspected that she was motivated by vanity.[100]

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[97] *Creation of Inequality*, 563.
[98] Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*, 45.
[99] Second Discourse, 207, 220-21.
[100] William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1997) 158–61 St. Catherine came to recognize her error in mistaking an external performance of suffering for a virtuous motive. I think Christina Van Dyke for enlightening me on this point.

In turning the performance of egalitarian virtue into an object of esteem competition, St. Catherine won adulation and influence. Others have done so to win power over others. Marcel Mauss's classic discussion of gift-giving illustrates this dynamic.[101] The virtues implicated in gift-giving are generosity and reciprocity. The immediate effect of generosity is material leveling. However, because generosity is honored, gift-giving elevates the prestige of donors over their recipients. Reciprocation is a way of restoring the status equality of the parties to an exchange. But if recipients fail to reciprocate, or are unable to do so from relative poverty, they suffer social degradation. Add to these norms a strict duty to *accept* gifts, and the practice of gift-giving is easily turned into an antagonistic competition for prestige and power.

Among the Enga tribe of New Guinea, "Big Men" acquired esteem through individual achievement, including mediation of disputes, public speaking, and sharp trading. Their wives would grow sweet potatoes to feed pigs. The Enga constrained generosity-based esteem competition by enforcing a norm that participants in a ritual circular exchange were obligated to give and receive exactly one pig and no more. Hence, no one could give a gift that could not be reciprocated. But among a nearby tribe, the Melpa, this egalitarian norm did not exist. Big Men therefore competed over who could overwhelm others with such great generosity that their rivals could not reciprocate. They thereby created a hierarchy of esteem. They could not convert their prestige into authority over the tribe as a whole. However, the Melpa demeaned those too poor to reciprocate as "rubbish men," whom Big Men could command as their menial servants. Moreover, Big Men grabbed all the credit for giving away pigs, even though their wives raised them.[102] In this way, small shifts in ideology (understood as expressed in norms) can move societies from egalitarian to inegalitarian social orderings. Norms of sharing and reciprocity, originally instituted among nomadic hunter-gatherers as means of enforcing equal standing, can generate hierarchy once private property is recognized, wealth can be accumulated, and constraints on esteem competition are removed.

The ideological shifts at stake in the creation of hierarchy through the practice of ostensibly egalitarian virtues involve a kind of moral error or bias. Genuine virtue does not aim at itself, but at some external good. Truly generous people aim to help others, not to humiliate them or exalt themselves. The external performance of giving is virtuous only if it is done out of generosity. To make one's primary aim the display of one's own virtue for the purpose of gaining superior esteem by shaming others is to undermine that virtue. (Hunter-gatherers appear to be more astute moral thinkers than members of Big Man societies on this point.[103])Yet people do admire virtue, and the desire to gain admiration is a deep human motive. So it seems that egalitarian norms are inherently vulnerable to corruption due to the desire to be admired for one's virtue.

Against this critique of ostensibly virtue-based esteem competition, one might argue that such competition affords a useful incentive to practice virtue. Most athletes who perform for an audience compete for honor. Audiences enjoy and admire not only displays of athletic skill but

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[101] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, trans. I. Cunnison (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967).
[102] Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, 101–03.
[103] Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, 34.

also of virtues such as courage, grit, discipline, and sportsmanship. Yet sports are a special case in which the performance of virtue is for the pleasure of appreciating it. These pleasures are merely derivative and would have no value if the virtues in question did not tend to generate or express goods external to themselves outside of sporting contexts. When people adopt the performative logic of games to the contexts where the practice of virtue independently matters in these ways, we have gamified the activities in question. Gamification substitutes a proxy goal for whatever external good the virtue is supposed to aim at. For example, when a person starts off in social media with the goal of communicating thoughtful commentary on policy but ends up trying to maximize the number of likes and followers they get by posting whatever gets more favorable attention, even if it is misleading or pernicious, they have gamified their activity. Gamification of activities that have external goals threatens the underlying values of those activities.[104] Rather than incentivizing the genuine practice of virtue and thereby promoting and expressing the goods toward which that virtue is directed, gamification hijacks practices of virtue to slake people's vanity. As Rousseau argued, it substitutes for actual virtue the proxy goal of appearing to be virtuous so as to gain esteem.

2.4 Moral Perversions of Esteem Competition (2): Ideologies and the Monopolization of Honor in Domination Contracts

Flannery and Marcus argue that, by correlating anthropological evidence about egalitarian and hierarchical societies with archaeological evidence, we can make plausible inferences about the organization of past societies that left no written records. For example, the anthropological record indicates that, in societies where esteem is hereditary, high-ranking parents whose young children have died typically bury them with honor goods unavailable to low-ranking parents. Hence, if archaeologists find an infant's grave laden with gold jewelry while most other child graves at the same site are bare, this is evidence that the site is of a society in which social esteem is hereditary.[105]

Archaeologists use similar reasoning to determine whether some type of honor has been monopolized by a subgroup of a society. For example, tribal agricultural villages often build a men's house for the training and initiation of all the young men of the village. Upon completing this process, young men acquire the prestige and standing accorded to adult men. Men's houses in such villages typically have one entrance through which all the young men as well as the elders who are initiating them enter. This architecture reflects the relative social equality of men in such societies.[106] Hence, when archaeologists dig up similar houses at sites of ancient agricultural villages, they take this as evidence that such villages also recognized a basic equality among men.[107] In many societies where a priestly class has monopolized ritual knowledge, the

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[104] C. Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency as Art* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2020) ch. 9.
[105] Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, xi-xiii, 265–66.
[106] Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, 111–12, fig. 11.
[107] Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, 121–22. Flannery and Marcus acknowledge that such evidence is not conclusive. Achievement-based societies that grant Big Men special recognition and include a class of "rubbish men" may simply bar the latter from entering the single-entrance men's houses. Flannery and Marcus consider such societies as potentially transitioning to temple-based societies in which a small group of leading men not only

buildings where rituals take place ("temples") have separate entrances for priests and common people. The priests' entrance leads to sacred spaces from which laypersons are barred. Hence, when archaeologists discover a building suitable for rituals that has at least two entrances leading to different interior spaces, they take this as evidence that the society that built it contained a class that managed to monopolize ritual knowledge and accordingly attained higher esteem than others.[108] Temples are also associated with societies with hereditary ranks.

The rise of temples illustrates a two-stage domination contract. First, a relatively small group may acquire, or find themselves having, exclusive access to some good deemed critical to the society's flourishing. For the rise of a priestly class, the good is ritual knowledge. The concentration of ritual knowledge in a small group may happen by accident. For example, suppose a society has many levels of ritual knowledge that takes two decades for a man to fully acquire in the course of multiple initiations. If many of the fully initiated die before transmitting their knowledge to younger men, the few remaining have the opportunity to change the rituals and legitimating cosmologies so as to justify their maintaining a monopoly on this knowledge. They thereby turn themselves into a priestly class, which can condition everyone else's access to ritual benefits on their submission to exploitative terms.[109] The priests may then become rich by charging laypersons for their services.

This case illustrates the importance of ideology for creating and sustaining inequality. Material goods such as land are not the only goods that, when monopolized, create group inequality. If people believe that spiritual goods—rituals, sacraments, sacrifices, blessings, God's absolution, and so forth—are important for their well-being in this or the next life, priests' monopolization of access to these goods can create group inequality. It can even be the basis for material inequality, if priests make money from their services. Intellectual property is a powerful source of inequality even in the absence of laws. In the New Guinea village of Avatip, the Maliyaw subclan attempted to monopolize intellectual property over all names in the 1970s, seizing from other subclans the right to bestow the names of mythical ancestors on newborns. In Maliyaw society, everyone needed to be named after an ancestor. A monopoly on names amounted to a monopoly over ritual powers. To settle their property claim over the names possessed by the rival Nanggwundaw subclan, the Maliyaw deployed their best debaters to argue that they had a senior lineage to the Nanggwundaw and hence owned the names of the junior lineage. Colonial authorities intervened before they could complete their plan.[110] The fact that their strategy was possible illustrates the enormous hold of ideology over people. In this case, beliefs in the magical power of names, the legitimating power of mythical genealogies, the superiority of senior over junior lineages, and the very idea that a group could own names made it possible for one group to concede subjection to another group even in the absence of physical force, threats, or unequal power over material resources.

monopolize ritual knowledge but make it hereditary. Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, 111–16.

[108] See Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, 285–86, fig. 43, Temple 7 for a persuasive illustration. Flannery and Marcus discuss the complexities and uncertainties of such inferences at different sites in ch. 12 and 14.

[109] Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, 116.

[110] Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, 188–91.

The great power of ideas in human societies undermines materialist determinism about inequality. The same productive technology can be consistent with a wide spectrum of possibilities between highly egalitarian and highly inegalitarian. Although in most cases, hierarchy emerged with agriculture (as Rousseau speculated), some settled hunter-gatherer societies of the Pacific coast of North America were very hierarchical, living beside egalitarian societies using the same subsistence strategies.[111] Some societies, such as among the Kachin of the Burmese highlands, cycled between egalitarian and hierarchical social systems depending on changes in cosmology and social logic, without changing their mode of production.[112] Even in modern capitalist societies, rapid peaceful change from extreme hierarchy to a much more egalitarian society is possible without material changes in production. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sweden was one of the most inegalitarian states in Europe. It awarded votes to individuals roughly in proportion to their wealth, and even permitted corporations to vote in municipal elections. Yet ideological and electoral mobilization by the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) led to a massive expansion and equalization of the franchise. The SAP, then successfully campaigned for the adoption of a social democratic economic agenda that turned Sweden into one of the most egalitarian modern states in the world.[113]

I have argued in this lecture that Rousseau denies that natural inequalities in talents and virtues, the bare desire for recognition, esteem competition, desires for conveniences beyond necessities, or even all of these factors paired with the establishment of private property, are sufficient to generate social hierarchy. Rather, he argues that esteem competition generates social hierarchy in the context of commercial society, which has a fine-grained division of labor and market dynamics that generate a class monopoly in land. These conditions corrupt the economy of esteem in ways that activate desires to dominate others and foment antagonistic social relations across society. Critical changes to the economy of esteem include competition on the basis of heritable wealth and social identities rather than achievement, and the rise of zero-sum esteem competition. These changes also foster social hierarchies of standing and power by way of several domination contracts. Despite the fact that Rousseau got many things wrong, contemporary social science provides substantial support for the broad outlines of his view: (1) that esteem competition is a key driver of social hierarchy under certain conditions; (2) that social hierarchy is established by domination contracts; and (3) that ideologies, not just physical force or *de facto* coercive control over material resources, play a pivotal role in persuading people to submit to hierarchy in the second stage of a domination contract.

Rousseau thought that, once social hierarchy is established, eliminating it would require suppression of achievement-based esteem competition by discouraging advanced arts and sciences. I argued that this strategy undermines individual freedom and human flourishing, and is inconsistent with the egalitarian aim of creating a free society of equals. Rather than suppressing esteem competition, as hunter-gatherers and modern groups such as the Amish do,

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[111] Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, ch. 5.
[112] Flannery and Marcus, *Creation of Inequality*, ch. 10.
[113] Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2020) 185–95.

we can learn from egalitarian constraints on esteem competition devised by achievement-based, equal-opportunity tribal societies. Taken together, these constraints block every step in Rousseau's analytical slippery slope from equality to social hierarchy. Yet egalitarians cannot rest easy even with a morally sound economy of esteem. For esteem competition is liable to corruption by ideologies that play on our cognitive, emotional, and moral biases. Ideologies are a central site of contestation over social hierarchy. For changes in ideas can change how egalitarian or hierarchical a society is, even when productive technologies do not change.

Lecture 3: Ideology, Fantasy, Myth: Inspiration and Cognitive Bias in Hierarchical and Egalitarian Ideologies

3.1 Ideologies and the Role of Cognitive and Emotional Biases

Rousseau's account of the role of ideologies in domination contracts raises three questions. First, how can people be so easily fooled by inegalitarian ideologies? Why are they so ready to give up their (relative) freedom and equality to those who want to lord over them, even apart from coercion? Second, how does the pursuit of esteem become group-based? So far, Rousseau's account focuses on individual vanity as a cause of hierarchy. Yet social hierarchy makes esteem competition a group phenomenon: social groups classified by gender, class, race, and so forth claim superiority over other groups who are disdained and stigmatized. Third, what is the hold of inegalitarian, zero-sum ideology on people in subordinate positions? Even if they are initially fooled into accepting hierarchy, once they see the results for themselves, what keeps so many of them either acquiesce to their subjection, or even become enthusiastic supporters of those who dominate them and of the social order that puts those people on top?

Consider some answers to the first question, of how inegalitarian ideologies can appear persuasive to participants in general. Rousseau supposed that the consent of the propertyless to private property in land, and to the social contract establishing a state for the protection of private property, was largely due to a failure to foresee the negative consequences of these domination contracts. Then, once the poor have consented, these contracts can be maintained through coercion due to the monopolization of power and the means of subsistence by the rich. Rather than focusing on a lack of foresight, I suggest that better answers to the question of consent point to systematic human biases in fear, sympathy, and admiration.

To the extent that ideologies that legitimate hierarchy depend on religion, Hobbes offers some useful insights about the role of fear. Hobbes argues that people have a systematic bias in favor of explaining good and bad events as caused by the benevolent or malevolent intentions of others. If they do not see human beings directly causing these events, they will attribute them to invisible spirits, possibly conjured by witches. This superstition is the ground of religious belief. Bad events inspire great fear and a desperate desire to appease powerful spirits or gods. Priests are able to manipulate this fear by making up laws, rituals, and prophecies, by which they hold laypersons in their thrall. By promising means of allaying the anger of spirits, they gain great esteem and authority.[114]

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[114] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 19, par. 23–27, ch. 20, par. 2–12.

Adam Smith argued that people's sympathies are biased toward the rich and powerful, and that this bias in sympathy was critical to maintaining social hierarchy. He offered a simulation account of sympathy: we imagine what it is like to be the other person in their situation, and thereby come to feel the same pain or joy as they feel, although with less intensity.[115] This simulation is biased, however. Smith thought that our fantasies about the lives of the rich and powerful exaggerate how happy they are. But that fact makes us sympathize with them even more, because it is pleasant to dwell on such fantasies. We even want to help the rich and powerful independently of any hope that they will reciprocate, simply from "the vanity or the honor of obliging them."[116] By contrast, imagining the suffering of the poor and wretched is so painful that we are disturbed by the sight of them. So, even though we might sympathize with them, if contempt or hard-heartedness do not get in the way, we would rather not do so, but prefer that they hide out of sight.[117] We might flatter ourselves today with the thought that we are not so biased. Yet, judging by media and social media coverage, we lavish rapturous attention on the lives of top CEOs and celebrities, while ignoring the poor and powerless (unless they are committing crimes or being demonized). And judging by our conduct toward the homeless, we are far more concerned to get them out of sight than to address their real needs.

Smith also argued that people admire the rich and powerful far more than the poor and powerless, even to the point of nearly worshipping them. This disposition is "the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments."[118] Wealth and power might be "natural" objects of esteem, but they do not merit it as wisdom and virtue do. People also hold the poor and weak in contempt, although only folly and vice merit it. Wealth and power greatly bias the esteem people give to the genuine merits of others: we admire the merits of the rich and powerful far more than the equal merits of their social inferiors.[119] And we allow the rich and powerful to make even their frivolous manners and tastes—their cultural capital—set the standards of esteem in society. Smith held that these biases in esteem, like our biases in sympathy, are critical to establishing and maintaining social hierarchy.[120]

On all of these points, Smith agrees with Rousseau. However, by adding our biases in sympathy to our biases in admiration, Smith suggests that the affective burdens of social hierarchy on subordinates are lower than in Rousseau's analysis. People are far less envious of the rich and powerful, and far more *willingly* obsequious to them, than Rousseau supposes. These biases stabilize social hierarchy by making it less reliant on coercion. In the next two sections, I will build on Smith's analysis by considering the ways ideologies, fantasies, and myths can activate our biases, make them group-based, and thereby reinforce the appeal of inegalitarian social orders, even to those in subordinate positions. These reflections will help us recognize some strategies needed to direct our desires for esteem in more egalitarian directions.

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[115] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 11–12.
[116] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 64.
[117] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 56, 62.
[118] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 72.
[119] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 73.
[120] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 75, 72.

3.2 Fantasies vs. Ideals in Inegalitarian Ideologies, and Biases that Support Them

In August 2020, 17 year-old Kyle Rittenhouse arrived at a Black Lives Matter protest in Kenosha, Wisconsin, equipped with a first-aid kit and a rifle styled after an AR-15. He was trained neither in first aid nor in proper use of a weapon, and he was too young to legally own one. Like the many members of illegal far-right militias who also showed up, Rittenhouse saw himself as a righteous protector of lives and property against rioters who had been setting fire to vehicles and buildings. He ended up shooting three people, killing two and grievously wounding a third. The first had just been released from a psychiatric hospital. Apparently disturbed by Rittenhouse's weapon, he had hit and lunged at Rittenhouse. The other two, viewing Rittenhouse as a killer, were shot as they attempted to subdue him. Far-right agitators and White supremacist militias hailed Rittenhouse as a hero.[121]

Rittenhouse's story and its uptake by authoritarian agitators illustrates the contrast between ideals and fantasies. Ideals are ways of being and doing that their followers deem worthy of esteem. Aspirants measure themselves against their ideals. When they see themselves falling short of their ideals' demanding standards, they undertake further disciplined striving so they can measure up. When people indulge in fantasies, they imagine themselves as achieving their ideals without critical self-scrutiny or reality-testing, and often without serious effort.

Gun culture in the United States offers a case study in the ways fantasies power inegalitarian social movements. The most recent global arms survey found that the United States had 120.5 civilian firearms per 100 persons in 2017. (The next closest country was Yemen, with 52.8 civilian firearms per 100 persons.)[122] Gender ideology supports the popularity of gun ownership in the U.S. In the wake of the decline of breadwinner jobs that established men as the heads of their households, many men have acquired guns to enact a masculine role as protectors of themselves and their families against criminals.[123] Yet such protective uses of guns are rare.[124] They are also rarely more successful than less violent measures. Self-defensive gun use is less effective in avoiding injury from criminals than running away, hiding, or calling the police.[125] However, many men disdain the latter measures because they are considered unmanly. Most people who view themselves as having legally used a gun in self-defense have actually acted

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[121] Paige Williams, "Kyle Rittenhouse, American Vigilante," *New Yorker* June 28 2021: ., Https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/07/05/kyle-rittenhouse-american-vigilante.
[122] Aaron Karp, *Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers, Annexe* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2018) 7, Https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-Civilian-held-firearms-annexe.pdf.
[123] Jennifer Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2015) ch. 4.
[124] Samantha Raphelson, "How Often Do People Use Guns In Self-Defense?" *NPR* Apr. 13 2018, Https://www.npr.org/2018/04/13/602143823/how-often-do-people-use-guns-in-self-defense.
[125] David Hemenway and Sara Solnick, "The Epidemiology of Self-Defense Gun Use: Evidence from the National Crime Victimization Surveys 2007–2011," *Preventive Medicine* 79 (2015): 22–27.

illegally, usually by escalating threats in response to heated arguments.[126] When guns are used at home, they are more often used to intimidate intimates than to protect them.[127] But most of the time, when people kill someone with a gun, they kill themselves.[128] The U.S. death rate due to guns was 18 times higher than the average in other developed countries, and its gun homicide rate was 6.8 times higher than the next-highest developed country (Bulgaria).[129] A meta-analysis of studies found that the odds of a person committing suicide were 3.24 times greater, and of suffering homicide 2 times greater, if they had access to a gun, compared to those who lacked access.[130]

Despite such information, White men are far less likely than other race/gender groups to judge that gun proliferation, guns in the home, and expansive gun rights pose dangers. Dan Kahan and colleagues explain these group differences in terms of motivated reasoning oriented to protecting the esteem of groups to which they belong.[131] Their theory of "cultural cognition" synthesizes the "cultural theory of risk" with a theory of "identity-protective cognition." The cultural theory of risk claims that individuals process information about the riskiness of activities in conformity with their cultural evaluations of these activities. The theory characterizes people's worldviews along two dimensions, each describing a way of organizing society. The communitarianism-individualism scale measures how much one thinks individuals should depend on each other to cooperate and provide shared goods collectively, or rather have to rely on themselves in a competitive market system. The egalitarianism-hierarchical scale measures one's preferences for an egalitarian or hierarchical society. Specifically, it asks how much one thinks discrimination against women, Blacks, and homosexuals exists, is unjust, and should end, and whether gender, race, and class inequalities should be reduced, as opposed to thinking that such measures have gone too far and are unfair to men and people who aren't poor, and that

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[126] David Hemenway, et al., "Gun Use in the United States: Results from Two National Surveys," *Injury Prevention* 6 (2000): 263–67. Arguments are the most common single occasion for homicide in the U.S. FBI Criminal Justice Information Services Division, *Murder Circumstances by Weapon, 2017* (2017), Https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2017/crime-in-the-u.s.-2017/tables/expanded-homicide-data-table-11.xls.

[127] Deborah R Azrael, Hemenway, and David, "In the Safety of Your Own Home: Results from a National Survey of Gun Use at Home," *Social Science and Medicine* 50 (2000): 285–91.

[128] John Gramlich, "What the Data Says About Gun Deaths in the U.S," *Pew Research Center* Apr. 26 2023, Https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/26/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/.

[129] Kara Fox, Krystina Shveda, Natalie Croker, and Marco Chacon, "How US Gun Culture Stacks up with the World," *CNN* Apr. 10 2023, Https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/26/world/us-gun-culture-world-comparison-intl-cmd/index.html.

[130] Andrew Anglemyer, Tara Horvath, and George Rutherford, "The Accessibility of Firearms and Risk for Suicide and Homicide Victimization Among Household Members: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 160.2 (2014): 105, Https://doi.org/10.7326/M13–1301.

[131] Dan Kahan, et al., "Culture and Identity-Protective Cognition: Explaining the White Male Effect in Risk Perception," *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies* 4.3 (2007): 465–505, Https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=995634.

society should support traditional gender roles in which men head the family and boys are raised to be tough. The cultural theory of risk predicts that hierarchical individualists will discount information that guns are dangerous, since they see guns as enabling individuals to defend themselves without having to rely on the government, and male gun possession in particular as strengthening patriarchal families.

The theory of identity-protective cognition claims that individuals process information in ways that support the social esteem of groups to which they belong, as well as the esteem with which they are held within these groups. It predicts that people tend to discount information that threatens the social esteem of their groups, and increase the credence they give to information that upholds this esteem. They do so both to uphold the status of their identity groups in the wider society, and to secure their personal acceptance and status within their identity groups. Not surprisingly, given how the scales are constructed, White men stand apart from other groups in their commitment to hierarchical individualism. Kahan and colleagues find that most of the difference between White men and other groups in their discounting of gun risks is due to their disproportionate support for hierarchical individualism. White men are also more likely than other groups to endorse claims that claims that gun regulation risks exposing innocents to criminal victimization. Cultural cognition theory explains this difference in terms of the threat such regulation poses to the esteem White men claim as patriarchs deserving recognition as competent protectors of their families.[132]

Kahan and colleagues have developed a mountain of evidence that cultural cognition affects people's assessments of the riskiness of a wide variety of activities tied to their group identities and worldviews.[133] They show that these biases are found among individuals in all groups. To the extent that people's beliefs about the dangers and benefits of activities tied to group self-esteem are detached from an impartial assessment of the evidence, they are indulging in fantasy. The theory of cultural cognition offers a useful way to measure how far different groups are immersed in fantasy.

We can deploy the distinction between ideals and fantasies to distinguish between ideologies in the generic and the pejorative senses. Here I am regarding ideologies narrowly, as claims and discursive frames that legitimate actual or imagined social orders.[134] In the generic

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[132] Their paper leaves implicit the connection between white racial identity and gun culture, which is deeply rooted in white settler colonialism, representations of nonwhites as criminals, and racist fears related to Black civil rights. See, e.g., Alexandra Filindra and Noah Kaplan, "Racial Resentment and Whites' Gun Policy Preferences in Contemporary America," *Political Behavior* 38 (2016): 255–75.

[133] Dan Kahan, "The Politically Motivated Reasoning Paradigm, Part 1: What Politically Motivated Reasoning Is and How to Measure It," *Emerging Trends in Social & Behavioral Sciences: An Interdisciplinary, Searchable, and Linkable Resource* (2016)*Emerging Trends in Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Ed. Robert Scott and Stephen Kosslyn (Wiley), Http://www.culturalcognition.net/storage/etrds0417.pdf.

[134] In the broad sense, ideologies consist of the full range of practices, laws, organizations, norms, emotions, beliefs, and desires by which participants realize and reproduce their idealized social orders in the world.

sense, an ideology represents an actual or aspired social order as realizing certain *collective ideals*—as of freedom, honor, holiness, etc.—by enabling its members to realize *individual ideals* that fit their proper and/or chosen role in society. In the pejorative sense, an ideology represents an actual or aspired social order in ways that mask or discount its problematic features, misrepresents itself in a positive light, and obscures the possibilities and merits of alternatives, while enabling its members to indulge in *fantasies* of their personal merits and of the ideals they claim to realize, in accordance with their *social identities*. Inegalitarian ideologies enable exalted members to indulge in fantasies of their superior merit on the basis of the identity groups to which they belong, and even make room for most others to obtain some limited esteem for serving their assigned functions in reproducing that order. This characterization of ideologies makes explicit the connection between the legitimation of social orders and individual desires for esteem. To the extent that ideologies can satisfy such desires, they not only persuade participants to consent to or acquiesce in the social order, but to find participation in that social order positively appealing.

The appeal of ideologies in the pejorative sense to highly ranked members of inegalitarian societies is evident. Smith provides insight into this appeal by pointing to the tension between the desire to be admirable and to be admired. Conceptions of admirability or merit are tied to ideals of talent and virtue. Due to biases in our dispositions to esteem others, the things that deserve esteem are different from the things that naturally attract it. Because esteem is attached to things that don't merit it, people often pursue being admired over being genuinely admirable.[135] Those who pursue esteem without deserving it can't admit this to themselves, however. Ideologies in the pejorative sense function partly to cover over this embarrassing fact, by claiming that the things actually admired really merit it, or are good proxies for what merits it. Through such ideologies, the frivolous tastes and manners of the rich and powerful, and even their vices, become admired. More generally, socially superior identity groups enjoy higher esteem in virtue of perverse ideologies that claim that they inherently possess genuine merits to a greater degree than members of other groups—for example, that men are more courageous than women, and that the rich are more hardworking than the poor. Indulging in group-based fantasies is a lot easier than actually having to measure up as an individual.

This account of perverse ideologies in terms of group fantasies still leaves unanswered the question of how the pursuit of esteem becomes group-based. Before we answer this question, we should understand why such "groupness" of esteem is necessary for ideologies to legitimate social hierarchy. In tribal societies, members compete with each other for esteem, and thereby produce many esteem inequalities among the competitors. But recall that purely individualistic, achievement-based, pluralistic, non zero-sum, esteem competitions under equal opportunity for developing talents cannot consolidate into stable group inequalities where esteem is not convertible into wealth or authority. Three paths are available for raising the esteem of superordinate social groups above others. First, these groups can legitimate their superiority on a purportedly meritocratic basis, by claiming that their members dominate those in subordinate groups in talent or virtue. Second, they can invent "artificial" virtues, such as refined taste, manners, accent, and dress, and monopolize the means of acquiring such cultural capital. Third,

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[135] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 72–73.

they can insist that their group identity as such somehow merits esteem, on account of such things as senior lineage, noble "blood," "purity," "beauty," descent from or closeness to gods or revered ancestors, exclusively possessed mystical or spiritual powers, or a pivotal role in history (as in claims of manifest destiny).

Each of these paths must resort to fantasy to underwrite and stabilize the superior esteem of a dominant group. This is obvious in the third case, where there is either no empirical basis for such claims, and/or no normative justification for admiring claimed features such as ancient lineage or group purity, or for thinking that arbitrary physical characteristics typical of the group (e.g., skin color or hair texture) are more beautiful. The same normative point applies to cultural capital, which is either founded on frivolous differences invented for the sole purpose of making up normatively arbitrary distinctions, or amounts to mastery of useful norms that would increase equity and social welfare if everyone had equal access to training in them. In our meritocratic age, however, some still cling to notions that particular social groups, as of race, ethnicity, gender, or class, are innately superior to others in intelligence, talent, or virtue. All such claims fail on the facts that within-group inequalities swamp between-group inequalities, that existing hierarchies invariably limit opportunities of subordinate groups to acquire the means for developing talents, and that discrimination against subordinate group members who have managed to develop their talents persists.

Despite the baselessness of these paths to claiming superior group esteem, that members of superordinate groups so easily fall for them is due in significant part to ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is a pervasive feature of human groups. It consists in dispositions of ingroup members to favor one another—in sympathy, trust, cooperation, sharing of benefits, and evaluating and admiring their merits—over outgroup members, along with relative antipathy toward outgroup members.[136] Famously, ethnocentrism can be activated even in "minimal groups"—groups constituted on the spot by laboratory experimenters, who sort subjects into different groups on overtly arbitrary grounds.[137] Minimal groups have no history, future, or cultural meaning; members are strangers who will likely not encounter one another again. Yet people in minimal as well as socially salient groups favor ingroup members over outgroup members in evaluating individuals and resource allocation. In some circumstances they are even willing to sacrifice absolute gains to their group if doing so enables them to increase their relative gains over other groups.[138] That is, some circumstances activate a preference for group inequality as such. Protracted ingroup cooperation, shored up by ideologies that spread fantasies of superior group merit, reinforces and stabilizes dominant group ethnocentrism. As Rousseau understood, human desires for esteem are so strong that people fall even for self-flattery, especially if they can get outsiders to believe them.

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[136] See the informative survey of theories of ethnocentrism in Donald Kinder and Cindy Kam, *Us Against Them: Ethnocentric Foundations of American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) ch. 1. Kinder and Kam argue that ethnocentric dispositions vary across individuals and that authoritarians (as defined by Stenner) are more ethnocentric. p. 34.

[137] Henri Tajfel, "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination," *Scientific American* 223 (1970): 96–102.

[138] Marilynn Brewer and Madelyn Silver, "Ingroup Bias as a Function of Task Characteristics," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 8 (1978): 393–400.

3.3 How Inegalitarian Ideologies Secure the Consent or Acquiescence of Subordinate Groups

Thus we arrive at the third and most critical question for Rousseau's model. Perhaps it is plausible enough that ingroup members can activate each other's narcissism by way of baseless flattery. But why would subordinate groups defer to such absurdities, when they are the losers from them, despised and stigmatized while their superiors are exalted on the basis of vicious fantasies? Three feelings play key roles in securing the consent or acquiescence of subordinates to the domination contracts and legitimating ideologies that denigrate them: humiliation, shame, and compensatory exaltation over others even more despised than they are.

Humiliation. Humiliation is a characteristic response to being treated as an inferior. It is humiliating to suffer others' domination, contempt, or trampling on or flagrant neglect of one's vital interests. Such treatment makes one feel small and weak. No wonder, then, in line with Boehm's account, people often submit to humiliating treatment. Submission is not simply based on a rational calculation of one's interests or a response to fear that leaves intact one's sense of one's capacities and rights. It often diminishes one's conception of oneself. Boehm notes that another characteristic response to humiliation is resentment. These two feelings are in some tension with each other. They may be expressed in contrary behaviors: submission and defiance. "Getting even" captures an egalitarian logic of defiant retaliation—an attempt to establish or restore a relation of equality between victim and victimizer by simultaneously uplifting the victim through their own act of domination, and downgrading the victimizer by forcing their submission. As often noted by social contract theorists, retaliation tends to go overboard. Then the demand for equality may degenerate into a world turned upside-down.

People can, of course, express their angry resentment and desire for equality in defiant modes that repudiate vengeance, as in democratic social movements.[139] Defiance, however, requires some degree of self-confidence. Humiliating treatment, compounded by submission, tends to drain one's confidence, not just in one's chances for successful defiance, but in the normative judgments that ground the attempt. People sometimes take the bare fact of having submitted as evidence of their inherent inferiority, in line with inegalitarian ideologies that urge them to think so. This is one reason why social hierarchies always incorporate humiliating treatment of subordinates into their practices, and why they require perverse ideologies to rationalize such treatment.

Shame. Smith thought that the desire for sympathy from others, for others to be in emotional concord with oneself, to share one's feelings, is even more fundamental than to be admired by them. When we fear that others will not share our feelings, we hide our feelings rather than suffer their disdain. In other words, we feel ashamed. We feel ashamed by the bare expectation of others' contempt for our feelings, even if our feelings are entirely innocent and proper. We feel shame even if we know that others' disdain is callous, arrogant, bigoted, or

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[139] Myisha Cherry, *The Case for Rage: Why Anger is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2021).

otherwise vicious. Smith blamed the "hard-heartedness of mankind," not any defects in the wretched, for the latter's shame over revealing their afflictions.[140]

All forms of bigotry exploit the human vulnerability to feeling shame over innocent and proper feelings. Patriarchal norms exploit it in shaming men for feeling compassion for others, branding them as effeminate for shedding tears over others' suffering.[141] In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison portrays his Black protagonist as once feeling shame for eating a yam on the street in the face of White disdain.[142] Shame is also a central motive for LGBT people to stay in the closet.

I stress, with Smith, that individuals often feel shame simply from the awareness or expectation of others being out of sympathy with oneself, of being subject to their derision, even if they do not believe the ideologies that rationalize their contempt. Yet, in the face of an overwhelming contrary opinion, many are unable to resist those ideologies, and come to internalize them. Who am I, one may think, to reject the opinions of those around me? This is not an irrational thought, although it is often mistaken. All social contracts, whether just or unjust, involve some degree of deference to the normative expectations and opinions of others. Few have the resources and motivation to critically examine the merits of the social contracts they comply with, or their underlying rationales. Moreover, open questioning often exposes one to further scorn. It is much easier in most cases to go along to get along, even when the social contract puts one in a subordinate position. In addition, shame, by forcing one to hide, isolates one from others who share one's predicament. Such isolation impedes the collective discussion from which powerful critiques of oppressive norms are developed, as well as the cooperation needed to challenge prevailing norms and the ideologies that underwrite them.[143]

Compensatory Exaltation. Ideologies offer various ways to symbolically compensate subordinates for their submission, thereby making it willing and sometimes even enthusiastic. Myths may enable subordinates to vicariously enjoy the esteem of the most exalted members of society. Each member of society may bask in the glory of its most powerful, wealthy, and renowned members. Dictatorial regimes founded on a cult of personality work this way, focusing

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[140] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 56.

[141] Ibid. Note that Smith's account of shame is more expansive than standard accounts that connect shame to a failure to measure up to some standard of merit. Smith departs from the standard account because he is especially interested in exploring biases in our moral sentiments due to social inequality. These biases detach our feelings from what could genuinely merit them.

[142] "You could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked." Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952) 253. Even today, racists taunt Black people for liking watermelons and fried chicken, notwithstanding their immense popularity among Whites as well.

[143] This is a central theme of Marxist, feminist, and antiracist standpoint epistemology. See Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1964); Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," *Feminism and Methodology*, Ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 157–80; Charles Mills, "Alternative Epistemologies," *Social Theory and Practice* 14 (1988): 237–63.

everyone's attention and excitement on their leader, who is credited with fantastical achievements and sanctified lineage. Dictators may also promise subordinates shared glory in a collective project of conquest and domination in foreign wars, as Napoleon, Hitler, and countless other warmongers have. Alternatively, the most powerful may offer middling groups compensation in the form of a domination contract over even more subordinate groups within their own society. In a multi-caste society, as in the Hindu Varna system or American slave society, almost everyone has someone beneath them to whom they may feel superior, except for the most degraded—Dalits or enslaved people, respectively.

The latter strategy is also available to compensate intersectional groups that may rank low on one dimension but are offered a higher status on another. Senator John C. Calhoun explained this strategy in his 1848 speech on the Oregon Bill. The Oregon Bill established a government in the Oregon Territory that prohibited slavery. Antislavery advocates of the prohibition argued that slavery not only unjustly degraded the enslaved, but also stigmatized White agricultural laborers by degrading anyone engaged in the same tasks. Calhoun replied that racialized slavery uplifted poor White laborers by raising all Whites above all Blacks. Slaveholders exalted poor Whites over Blacks by exempting the former from certain even lower occupations (domestic and body service) reserved for Black slaves, and by offering them a distinction above Blacks: eligibility to sit at the same table as their employers. Hence, he claimed,

> With us the two great divisions of society are not rich and poor, but White and Black; and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals . . . and hence have a position and pride of character of which neither poverty nor misfortune can deprive them.[144]

Calhoun characterizes the South's domination contract as offering compensation to a group of losers in one zero-sum game by making them winners in another. The existence of racialized slavery reconciled poor Whites to their subordination under the class-based domination contract by elevating them over Blacks in a race-based domination contract. One can hardly find a better example of how little it takes to make a degraded group accept their lowly status, and how zero-sum esteem competition activates spite against the most abject. In return for accepting brutal exploitation, poor Whites got the chance to gloat over their exemption from the even deeper and wholly gratuitous degradation imposed on Blacks.

Calhoun's claim that slavery put poor Whites on a plain of equality with White slaveholders was false. Slavery deeply impoverished Southern White laborers. They could not compete with enslaved people who were paid no wages. Suffering from high rates of unemployment, they were "masterless men" regarded as a disorderly rabble by the slaveholding ruling class. The latter deployed criminal laws against vagrancy, drunkenness, failure to pay small debts, and socializing with enslaved people to secure the subordination of poor Whites

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[144] John C. Calhoun, *Speech of Mr. Calhoun, of South Carolina, on the Oregon Bill. Delivered in the Senate of the United States, June 27, 1848.* (Washington, D.C.: Towers, printer, 1848) 13, Https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=yale.39002087601150;view=1up;seq=1.

through threats of imprisonment. Southern jails were filled with poor Whites, while enslaved Blacks were rarely jailed, because slaveholders preferred to exploit their labor.[145] Slaveholders regarded them not as racial equals, but as failed Whites.

Nevertheless, Calhoun correctly calculated that the racial domination contract, which created a group even more degraded than poor Whites, gave the latter a stake in the entire system of race-class hierarchy. After emancipation, Whites lost a distinction over Blacks they had formerly enjoyed—namely, a *racialized* exemption from slavery. Because the post-emancipation sharecropping system was tailored to racist stereotypes about Blacks' abilities, White sharecroppers suffered from many of the same severe economic disadvantages and stigmatization as their Black counterparts.[146] But this made many of them insist even more strongly on the racialized esteem advantage they still had over Blacks—what W. E. B. Du Bois called the "psychological wage" of Whites.[147] This disposition, known as "last-place aversion," leads those in second-to-last place to oppose anything that would reduce the distance between themselves and those in last place.[148]

3.4 Compensatory Exaltation in Contemporary Populist Politics

The rise of populist politics in the 21st century has threatened or undermined many democratic regimes worldwide, including the U.S., India, Brazil, the Philippines, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. Populist leaders and parties claim to represent "the people" against "elites." Populism is a form of inegalitarian identity politics, because populists cast "the people" as only a subset of the country's citizens, the only ones entitled to authority, recognition, and standing. It is essentially undemocratic and authoritarian, because it rejects the legitimacy of opposition and legal constraints on populist leaders. Populists demonize those excluded from "the people." They refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of elections that opposing parties win. They attack criticism from opponents as defamation or "fake news." They attack the non-aligned press as "enemies of the people," strive for exclusive control of the media, and attempt to suppress critical perspectives. They promote a zero-sum, us-against-them framing of political issues, in which enemies within are conspiring to destroy the people, and any policy that benefits them necessarily comes at the expense of the people.[149]

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[145] Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017).
[146] Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001) 170–80.
[147] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*, Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Introd. by David Levering Lewis (Cary: Oxford UP, 2007) 722.
[148] Ilyana Kuziemko, Ryan Buell, Taly Reich, and Michael Norton, "'Last-Place Aversion': Evidence and Redistributive Implications," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129.1 (2014): 105–49. The authors point to survey data indicating that the most likely opponents of a minimum wage increase are those making just above the minimum wage.
[149] Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2016).

Populism is not an ideology. It is a style of politics that demagogues deploy to mobilize voter support. It has both left-wing and right-wing versions. Left-wing populists cast elites as the rich, who are enemies of the real people, the poor. Left-wing populist demagogues such as Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela advance a socialist agenda that in practice amounts to a world-turned-upside-down politics. Right-wing populists, who are more common in the 21st century, represent social conflict in terms of three groups: cultural elites (urban, highly educated professional, managerial, finance, knowledge, and culture workers), various despised minority groups (for example, people of color, immigrants, feminist women, LGBT people, disabled people, Jews, Muslims, the poor, etc.), and the "real people" in the middle, typically members of the working class and small business owners who are members of the nation's largest racial, ethnic, or religious group and hold conservative values, especially with respect to the family. In the right-wing populist narrative, cosmopolitan cultural elites are betraying the real people by lifting purportedly undeserving, morally deviant, criminal minority groups above the virtuous middle. The populist leader promises to raise the real people above elites and the minority groups they favor by waging an unrelenting culture war against the latter two groups.

Scholars of the political psychology of authoritarian movements tend to focus on fear and resentment as primary motives of those who support populist politicians. According to Martha Nussbaum, individuals' fear of others leads them to support authoritarian leaders who promise to forcefully control and suppress the objects of their fear.[150] Karen Stenner traces authoritarian tendencies to a fear of difference, whether manifested as dissenting opinions, deviant lifestyles, or diverse social identities.[151] In the U.S., the populist demonization of Muslims as terrorists, migrants as members of violent drug gangs, LGBT people as "groomers" and sex criminals, and (implicitly Jewish) cultural elites as conspiring to "replace" the real people with diverse and despised others fits these fear-based accounts.

Other scholars who study the appeal of populist politics among White working-class voters stress the ways resentment motivates their support for populist politics. Populist narratives of welfare cheats and lazy bureaucrats in welfare agencies living off hard-working Americans' tax dollars, unqualified Blacks and feminist women using affirmative action to leap ahead of more competent men in the competition for jobs, environmentalists and government regulators crushing economic opportunities for rural workers, and globalists sending Americans' jobs to China and Mexico or hiring immigrants over Americans fit these resentment-based accounts.[152]

No doubt, fear and resentment motivate support for populist authoritarian leaders and parties. But theories of populism that focus on these motives overlook the importance of esteem competition in driving populist politics. Donald Trump's campaign slogan was Make America Great Again. It wasn't Make America Safe Again or Make America Fair Again. By "America," Trump invoked a nostalgic social imaginary in which White Christian Americans, especially the

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[150] Nussbaum, *Monarchy of Fear*.
[151] Stenner, *Authoritarian Dynamic*.
[152] Hochschild, *Strangers*; Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Gest, *New Minority*.

men among them, were the only people who once counted, and who should exclusively count again.[153] Trump promised to restore their glory through cultural warfare against liberal cosmopolitan cultural elites who promote norms against open expressions of racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry, and who engage in their own forms of esteem competition by which people without elite educational credentials and cosmopolitan sophistication rank low.

Viewing populist politics through the lens of esteem competition helps us understand phenomena overlooked by other theories of the political psychology of populism. Trump's devoted fans felt joy in what they experienced as hugely entertaining campaign rallies. One would not expect such giddiness in response to politicians who are only stoking fear and resentment. Trump's validation of every bigotry of his followers, even against disabled people, and his relentless insults of liberal cultural elites, stimulated laughter as Hobbes defined it: "sudden glory . . . caused by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves."[154] Populists favor trolling and bullying discursive styles over sober policy discussion. This preference indicates how much populist politics provides their adherents with pleasure through the symbolic performance of domination over enemies. Getting one's rivals upset and outraged, even driving them off social media platforms through harassment, offers immediate gratification in the form of an alternative way to gain esteem besides meritocratic achievement.[155] Populist politicians and their staffs often assert bald-faced lies that cast off responsibility and blame, while dismissing as fake news overwhelming counterevidence to those assertions brought forward by journalists, scientists, and other knowledge workers. Such behavior amounts to a performance of unaccountability to despised knowledge workers. Populist voters get vicarious pleasure from seeing the leaders they support reject accountability to elites who are thereby disempowered.

Some commentators have suggested that populist culture war appeals are a kind of trickery designed to distract voters from the ways conservative economic policies undermine their material interests.[156] Yet people are sometimes willing to sacrifice their material interests to secure superior social esteem. The latter is a kind of compensatory exaltation offered to middling groups—a characteristic of right-wing populism. Psychiatrist and sociologist Jonathan Metzl found that, among White men participating in focus groups in Tennessee, every income group opposed the Affordable Care Act because they saw it as disproportionately benefiting Blacks, whom they disdained as lazy and undeserving. This was despite the fact that many of these

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[153] As he once said in a campaign speech, "the only important thing is the unification of the people—because the other people don't mean anything." Müller, *What is Populism?* 22.
[154] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 6, par. 42.
[155] Michael Petersen, Mathias Osmundsen, and Alexander Bor, "Beyond Populism: The Psychology of Status-Seeking and Extreme Political Discontent," *The Psychology of Populism: The Tribal Challenge to Liberal Democracy*, Ed. Joseph Forgas, Klaus Fiedler, and William Crano (Taylor & Francis, 2021).
[156] Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

White men would personally benefit from the ACA's expansion of Medicaid coverage. They were willing to sacrifice their health to spite those whom they viewed as their inferiors.[157]

Populist politics focuses intently on how history should be remembered. From Poland's 2018 law censoring claims that Polish officials were complicit in the Holocaust, to state laws in the U.S. barring frank treatment in public schools of the history of White supremacist violence and discrimination in the U.S., populist politicians resist historical facts that imply that national majorities were less than morally honorable. Such laws amount to domination contracts to ensure White ignorance of facts embarrassing to their presumptions of racial innocence and myths of White superiority.[158]

Such attempts to control historical memory replace history with myth. Myths are specious historical narratives that purport to explain and justify the actual or aspired relations between salient social groups. When devised to rationalize hierarchy, they systematically distort actual history by omitting any facts embarrassing to the (would-be) dominant group, stressing facts embarrassing to subordinate groups, misrepresenting causal responsibility for important events, and telling lies to glorify the dominant group. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote the canonical critique of the racist mythology of Reconstruction devised by White historians of his day, which was used to justify the successor White supremacist regime. He argued that to use history "for inflating our national ego, and giving us a false but pleasurable sense of accomplishment" defeats the scientific aim of "accuracy . . . which will allow its use as a guidepost for the future of nations."[159] To use history as a pedestal is inconsistent with using it as a guide for building a better future. It is another way to reduce professed ideals to mere fantasies, and to protect those fantasies from critiques from below.

3.5 How Can Egalitarians Respond to the Challenges of Esteem Competition?

We have seen that powerful biases attract people to ideologies that underlie domination contracts. Biases in sympathy and admiration lead people to despise, shun, and shame their social inferiors, and to unjustly discount their real merits. Individuals' desperate desire for esteem leads them to pretend to have admirable qualities they lack, to admire things that don't merit admiration, to corrupt virtue by turning purportedly virtuous performances into objects of esteem competition, to exact flattery and obsequiousness from others, to glory in dominating and humiliating others, to spite those with lower status just to keep ahead of them. Ethnocentrism leads people to disdain outgroups and to claim and seek distinction for and from groups they belong to. This bias underlies cultural cognition as well as indulgence in group-based fantasies and myths of group superiority. How can egalitarians limit the ways these biases reinforce hierarchy, and mobilize support for more egalitarian social contracts?

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[157] Jonathan M. Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland* (Basic, 2019) 148–55, 166, 175–6. This is a case of last-place aversion.
[158] Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007) 11–38.
[159] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 736.

One strategy is to unmask the fraud at the heart of ideologies of compensatory exaltation. Calhoun claimed that poor Whites stand as equals with other Whites, in being exalted above all Blacks. Patriarchal ideologies promise a similar egalitarianism among men, that they are exalted above all women. Such compensatory ideologies concede the powerful appeal of some form of equality, only they limit this equality to an ingroup.

Yet inegalitarian esteem competition never works completely categorically. As individuals jockey for position, they claim that some individuals within the exalted group are "more equal than others," by better exemplifying the qualities by which that group claims categorical superiority over subordinate groups. Wealthy Whites, congratulating themselves for having whiter skin due to their exemption from manual labor, have, since the beginnings of racialized slavery, derided poor rural Whites as "rednecks" and otherwise less than White, thereby expressing class snobbery in a racist vernacular. The "White trash" slur performs a similar function, in deriding poor Whites with the same stigmatizing stereotypes applied to Blacks, on the presumption that their poverty shows that they lack a work ethic and are probably criminal. In the antebellum era, slaveholders, far from treating poor Whites as equals, subjected them to a terroristic police state in an increasingly hysterical attempt to enforce an illusory color line.[160] In the post-Reconstruction era, wealthy Southern Whites persuaded some poor, illiterate Whites to vote for literacy tests, property qualifications, and poll taxes ostensibly designed to disenfranchise Blacks alone. Yet "Grandfather clauses," which promised the franchise to anyone whose grandfather could vote before the Civil War, only temporarily exempted poor Whites from disenfranchisement measures. Anti-Black voting restrictions thus led to increasing suppression of poor White voters over time, and thereby to the creation of single-party planter-industrialist authoritarian enclaves across the South.[161]

The same point—that esteem competition turns every purportedly categorical hierarchy into a graded system within the purportedly superior group—undermines the claim by advocates of patriarchy that this system puts men on a plane of equality in elevating them above all women. In reality, as Robin Dembroff has argued, patriarchy puts "real men"—the men deemed to be

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[160] Merritt, *Masterless Men*, ch. 8. Merritt explains that pervasive slaveholder rape of enslaved women, and interracial sex between free Whites and Blacks, led to a large mixed-race quasi-free population that made it impossible to maintain the strict separation of races the slave system simultaneously required and undermined. Poor landless Whites, considered a subversive class due to their lack of a fixed place beneath a permanent employer in the slave economy, and to their attraction to the Republican Party free labor and agrarian reform ideology, were subject to surveillance, suppression of free speech, and lynching—particularly if they were suspected of associating with Blacks.

[161] Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944–1972* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 2015) ch. 1, 2. In the most extreme case, South Carolina moved from nearly 100% turnout of the voting-age population in 1876 (the last year of Reconstruction) to well under 10% in 1924. Ibid., p. 27. Mickey therefore contests the common view that the post-Reconstruction Southern states were "Herrenvolk democracies." They did not respect democratic procedures even for Whites.

most masculine—above everyone else.[162] Those who uphold patriarchal norms of esteem denigrate men who are viewed as not measuring up to masculine standards, such as men who are gay, disabled, poor, or perceived as effeminate. Judgments of masculinity are based not only on individual features that can exist independently of patriarchy, such as being tall, muscular, aggressive, and sexually interested in women, but also in socially instituted attributes, such as occupying powerful positions, that patriarchal systems already exclusively or preferentially award to men. Moreover, the same features may be judged differently depending on a person's other social identities. In racist societies, Black men who are tall, muscular, aggressive, and display sexual interest in women are often animalized and placed beneath many White women in esteem, power, and standing.

Dembroff argues that these complexities arise due to the intersection of inegalitarian ideological systems, such as patriarchy and White supremacy, which co-constitute each other.[163] I would add that many such systems, including capitalism and patriarchy, explicitly include competing for position as constitutive norms. Thus, men partly constitute themselves as more masculine than other men through masculinity contests, which include such activities as duels, boxing matches, games of "chicken," bullying, and heterosexual male-on-male sexual harassment.[164] Men also do so by competing with each other over who can accumulate more wealth by whatever means they can, including highly exploitative ones. As these examples indicate, such contests are often highly damaging to other men—physically, psychologically, socially, economically, and morally. Even the "winners" of such contests damage themselves in the same ways.

Rousseau argued that, once property in land became scarce due to complete appropriation, the dynamics of esteem competition would inevitably resolve into a zero-sum positional contest. And once people agreed to establish a state for the protection of property, competition for political power would ultimately resolve into despotism. At that point, everyone but the despot becomes a loser under the system.[165] To stay in power, dictators need to cultivate support from others, including the military, police, and crony oligarchs. Yet the advantages any individual gains from offering support are always precarious, because they are subject to the dictator's whims. As tyrants' plans fail, or as they become paranoid—a common eventuality, given their inability to live as an equal with and hence to trust anyone else—their supporters are liable to be blamed and punished, and live under the terror of this prospect.[166]

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[162] Robin Dembroff, *Real Men on Top: How Patriarchy Weaponizes Gender*, book manuscript, under contract with Oxford University Press (2023).
[163] Robin Dembroff, "Intersection is Not Identity, or How to Distinguish Overlapping Systems of Injustice," *Conversations in Philosophy, Law, and Politics*, Ed. Ruth Chang and Amia Srinivasan (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2023).
[164] Elizabeth Anderson, "Recent Thinking About Sexual Harassment: A Review Essay," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 34 (2006): 307–08.
[165] Second Discourse, 235.
[166] See, for a classic case, Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2017).

Rousseau's model of runaway inequality under class-based positional competition implies that, as inequality increases under resource scarcity and rising authoritarianism, more and more people in the middle will recognize that they are losers under the system that claims to exalt them. They may then seek more egalitarian social orders. Erik Olin Wright theorizes this possibility in terms of "contradictory class locations." Lower-level managers of small firms, for example, might exercise some authority over workers while also being exploited by their superiors and without owning shares. Due to their contradictory class interests, they could plausibly join either more pro-capitalist or more pro-worker coalitions. He demonstrates this empirically, showing how coalitions differ in class composition across capitalist societies.[167]

This theoretical point generalizes to other types of social identity besides class, and to all kinds of intersectional political work. It opens up critical opportunities for egalitarians to build bottom-middle coalitions by envisioning and promoting positive-sum economies of esteem and standing. From W. E. B. Du Bois to Heather McGhee,[168] anti-racist thinkers have stressed how it is virtually always possible to arrange economic and educational institutions so that the full development of everyone's talents, fair opportunities, and fair systems of distribution and public goods provision redound to nearly everyone's benefit. Poor White laborers received higher wages, better employment prospects, access to land, and lower liability to imprisonment due to the abolition of slavery and its slaveholder oligarchy.[169] They gained again from Black enfranchisement under Reconstruction, which led to the election of Black representatives and democratic, racially egalitarian state constitutions across the South. As Du Bois argues, the crowning achievement of Reconstruction was the establishment of publicly-funded school systems for Blacks and Whites alike. Prior to Reconstruction, most poor White laborers had lacked any schools, because slaveholders wanted to keep them degraded and powerless. By contrast, the Reconstruction Republican Party coalition, mainly composed of Black and White workers, expressed their respect for Blacks and poor Whites alike in raising their standing through education. Du Bois notes that, before abolition, White workers had accepted "without murmur their subordination to the slaveholders," and had not agitated for their own intellectual emancipation.[170] But education raises people closer to a plane of equality with their social superiors. As Adam Smith argued, "an instructed . . . people . . . feel themselves, each individually, more respectable, and more likely to obtain the respect of their lawful superiors."[171]

White Southern workers also gained dramatically from policies that aimed to raise Blacks to equal standing with Whites in the 20th century. Southern Black workers took advantage of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act by applying for better-paying jobs from which they had

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[167] Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997).
[168] Heather C. McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021).
[169] Merritt, *Masterless Men*, 326–33.
[170] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 663.
[171] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Vol. 2*, Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1776) V.1.f.61.

formerly been barred. To the surprise of racist employers, they proved to be harder working and better qualified than the typical White worker. The influx of ambitious, highly motivated Black workers into Southern industries spurred productivity gains, outside business investment, and economic growth. These developments dramatically improved White workers' employment and wages as well, and reduced income inequality between the North and the South.[172] The 1964 Civil Rights Act also compelled the desegregation of hotels, restaurants, buses, and other public accommodations. Desegregation increased retail sales, which led to further economic growth. White business owners and customers learned that desegregation carried none of the costs they had feared.[173]

Egalitarian social movements play an indispensable role in prompting "middle majorities" to reconsider their allegiances. Inegalitarian social contracts rely on fraud and coercion. Their legitimating ideologies depend on false claims about group differences in virtue, talent, and other estimable qualities, and about the feasibility and merits of alternative social orders. However much they purport to secure freedom and equality for superior groups, they repress even exalted group members. For domination contracts require the policing of categorical group boundaries to enforce the segregation of superordinate from subordinate groups. White supremacists used terroristic violence against White as well as Black Republicans to destroy the party they had built together.[174]

During the Civil Rights Movement, Federal power leaned against White supremacy. In 1960, U.S. marshals escorted 6 year-old Ruby Bridges through a gauntlet of screaming White parents to the all-White Frantz elementary school in New Orleans, in vindication of her constitutional rights. Most White parents boycotted the school. A few refused, mostly not because they were antiracist, but because they wanted their own children to be educated. To enforce the boycott, White parents resorted to systematic harassment, vandalism, and death threats against the dissenters. Some dissenters were evicted or fired from their jobs. Others were so outraged at the coercion that they became "accidental radicals," turning against the system of racial segregation itself. Their rejection of the racial domination contract led to further defections that ultimately broke the boycott.[175]

Thus, a vital step toward undermining domination contracts is to recruit defectors from it by exposing the damage these contracts inflict even on the people they claim to exalt. This is not only an appeal to potential defectors' self-interest, but to their sense of moral integrity. James Baldwin, the keenest observer of the twisted moral psychology of White racism, argued that "Whoever debases others is debasing himself. That is not a mystical statement but a most realistic one, which is proved by the eyes of any Alabama sheriff."[176] Every person with

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[172] Gavin Wright, *Sharing the Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the American South* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013) ch. 4.
[173] Wright, *Sharing the Prize*, ch. 3.
[174] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989) 425–43.
[175] Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945–1975* (New York: Vintage, 2007) 125–41.
[176] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage International. Kindle edition., 1993) 83.

normally constituted moral sentiments is capable of responding appropriately to the proper objects of respect, esteem, and sympathy, independent of whatever perverse ideology they may have absorbed. The contradictions between these moral apprehensions and the conduct and feelings licensed or aroused by fraudulent and coercive domination contracts cause nagging guilt, shame, anxiety, and other psychic tensions that can only finally be resolved by repudiating these contracts.[177] Those who stick with them ultimately find themselves in the thrall of sociopaths, narcissists, and bullies—the very sorts of people the original egalitarian social contract aimed to restrain.

Yet to recognize the oppressiveness and fraudulence of a domination contract is far from sufficient to move people who felt some measure of esteem under it to accept an alternative egalitarian social contract. Given the universal desire for recognition, every egalitarian contract must be grounded in a hopeful vision of an alternative social order that realizes collective ideals by enabling its participants to realize individual ideals through which they can gain esteem. People cannot be hectored, guilt-tripped, or shamed into wholeheartedly supporting an egalitarian contract. A respectable place must be found for all, lest the result be just another domination contract, although with the world turned upside down.

Thus, to meet the challenge of winning adherents to an egalitarian social contract, social movements must offer an inspiring depiction of a better possible world that can be achieved through the joint striving of all of society's members, relating to one another as equals. The economy of esteem in the journey as well as the destination must be rewritten in positive-sum terms, enabling all to bask in the glory of collective achievement of that better world. That, in the end, is not the work of philosophers. It is the work of poets, dramatists, and other artists of hopes and dreams, working with egalitarian social movements striving to make them a reality.[178]

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[177] Elizabeth Anderson, "Moral Apprehension and Cognition as a Social Skill," *Australasian Philosophical Review* 3.1 (2020): 26–34. Jason Sokol discusses the feelings of moral emancipation among Whites who rejected the racist domination contract during the Civil Rights Movement in *There Goes My Everything*, ch. 6. Their feelings were genuine, but often failed to grasp the vast moral repair that remained to be done as a collective project, to forge a racially just social contract.

[178] As Michele Moody-Adams has argued, in *Making Space for Justice: Social Movements, Collective Imagination, and Political Hope* (New York: Columbia UP, 2022).