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# REVIEW OF *ON POLITICAL EQUALITY* BY ROBERT A. DAHL

Patricia Cochran\*

*On Political Equality* by Robert A. Dahl (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 160 pp.

*On Political Equality* is a meditation on the themes that have concerned Robert Dahl throughout his academic work. In this short book, Dahl pauses to reflect on how his broader democratic theory speaks to the current moment in the political and cultural history of the United States. Dahl asks: “Is the goal of political equality so far beyond our human limits that we should seek more easily attainable ends and ideals? Or are there changes within our limited human reach that would greatly reduce the gap between the ideal and our present reality?”<sup>1</sup>

In the first part of the book, Dahl outlines some general insights into the nature of political equality, drawing on his past work in democratic theory.<sup>2</sup> Dahl’s approach to political equality is based on a core ethical assumption about the inherent moral equality of all human beings.<sup>3</sup> He concludes that political equality can only be achieved in the context of a democratic political system.<sup>4</sup> In the analysis that follows in the rest of the book, Dahl measures the strength of political equality in a given society, with reference to the degree to which that society’s political system approaches democratic ideals. Following this overview of democratic political institutions and their connection to political equality, he proceeds to the questions that form the heart of the

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1 Robert A. Dahl, *On Political Equality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006) at 1-2 [*On Political Equality*].

2 Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); and Robert A. Dahl, *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

3 *On Political Equality*, *supra* note 1 at 4.

4 *Ibid.* at 6.

book. In essence, Dahl seeks to measure the feasibility of political equality as a goal in current Western societies.<sup>5</sup>

Dahl begins by conceding the major gaps between the “rhetoric and reality of political equality.”<sup>6</sup> By reviewing the histories of “democratic” countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, he points to evidence of significant political inequality such as suffrage limited by race and sex. Dahl also notes the violent histories of slavery and colonialism that informed the establishment of democratic institutions in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

However, in spite of these historical gaps between the rhetoric of equality and social realities, Dahl stresses that there has nevertheless been significant movement towards political equality in these societies. In the face of extensive inequality and the superior resources of the privileged, important advances in political equality have occurred. Dahl asserts that in order to understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to understand what motivates people, both privileged and unprivileged, to make demands in favour of political equality.<sup>8</sup> Dahl asks: “what drives people to act in ways that will help to bring about changes that will actually enhance political equality? Reason? Egoism? Altruism? Compassion? Empathy? Envy? Anger? Hatred? Any or all of these?”<sup>9</sup>

Dahl uses the idea of motivation to explain how social change has occurred in the past. Perhaps even more importantly, he maintains that we need to understand what motivates actions towards equality so that we can better identify the conditions under which equality might flourish. Dahl stresses a pragmatic need to link moral obligations to the actual conditions and tendencies of human beings, in order to make moral and political goals relevant and attainable.<sup>10</sup>

## Reason and Reasons Why

In addressing why people in unequal societies might take actions that lead to greater political equality, Dahl rejects the views of democratic and moral theorists who focus purely on human capacity for reason. Dahl argues that

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5 *Ibid.* at 18.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.* at 20.

8 *Ibid.* at 30.

9 *Ibid.* at 30-31 [emphasis in original].

10 *Ibid.* at 31-32.

these theorists, including Immanuel Kant and John Rawls, fail to account for the motivating force of emotions in generating human actions.<sup>11</sup> He believes that we cannot understand why people struggle against resistance (or against their own self interest) to work towards equality unless we understand human emotions. The goal of political equality may be justified by reason, but this does not explain why people actually take action to achieve it.<sup>12</sup>

Drawing on insights from the sciences about animal behaviour and human neurology, Dahl concludes that emotions are indeed an essential part of being human, and that we need a “respectable role for emotions” in order to understand what is necessary for political equality.<sup>13</sup> Empathy plays an important role, but other less noble emotions can be critical as well. For example, Dahl points to the passage of the *U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964*<sup>14</sup> as a political action that occurred in part due to the political ambition of individual politicians.<sup>15</sup>

By referencing the inadequacy of “reason” to fully explain political relations between human beings, Dahl generates a possible point of engagement between his theory of political equality and the work of feminist and critical theorists who have articulated how Western philosophy’s focus on the idea of “reason” has oppressive consequences for women and other marginalized groups.<sup>16</sup> For example, Dahl references the work of neurologist Antonio Damasio, who argues that studies of the human brain reveal that emotions are an essential part of reasoning.<sup>17</sup> Dahl advocates a “respectable role for emotions” in political theory primarily because emotions can help explain why people are motivated to act in certain ways. That is, we need to take emotions seriously because they may be central to understanding how we can achieve political equality.<sup>18</sup>

Damasio’s neurological studies have also inspired political and legal theorist Jennifer Nedelsky in her exploration of practices of judgment.<sup>19</sup> Nedelsky’s approach to theorizing about justice requires understanding of

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11 *Ibid.* at 36.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.* at 37.

14 Pub.L. No. 88-352, 78 Stat. 241 (1964).

15 *Supra* note 1 at 46.

16 See, e.g., Iris Marion Young, “Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critiques of Moral and Political Theory” in Seyla Benhabib & Drucilla Cornell, eds., *Feminism as Critique: On the Politics of Gender* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 57.

17 *Supra* note 1 at 40-41.

18 *Ibid.* at 43-44.

19 Jennifer Nedelsky, “Embodied Diversity and the Challenges to Law” (1997) 42 McGill Law J. 91.

full human beings, including embodiment and emotions. Nedelsky takes this insight further, and argues that emotions not only motivate human action, but also structure practices of judgment. Moreover, taking bodies into account necessarily involves attention to difference, such as gender, age, and ability. According to Nedelsky, these differences are essential to theorizing about concepts such as justice and equality, and the institutions needed to support them.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, in contrast to approaches such as Nedelsky's, what Dahl proposes is actually a very modest role for emotions in a theory of equality. For Dahl, emotions do not necessarily contribute to the theoretical meaning of political equality itself or the institutions needed to achieve it. Rather, emotions simply carry the potential to motivate individual human beings to make certain political demands. Arguably, *On Political Equality* does not fully account for the radical challenges posed by any attempt to take emotions seriously. However, by recognizing the need to understand the emotional qualities of political action, Dahl opens the range of options for change in the future, as becomes evident in the latter parts of the book.

## Thresholds of Economic Inequality

Following the discussion of emotions and the issue of motivation, Dahl moves next to a discussion about the obstacles to political equality. These obstacles include the distribution of political resources, and the inevitability of severe crises.<sup>21</sup> To some degree or other, Dahl views these obstacles as inevitable in every political unit.<sup>22</sup> These challenges to political equality have created a "threshold" of inequality that even the most democratic countries have been so far unable to cross.<sup>23</sup>

In the second part of *On Political Equality*, Dahl applies these reflections about barriers to equality to the current cultural and political reality in the United States. Dahl presents two scenarios, each of which he views as a plausible future. In the first scenario, Dahl describes how political inequality might continue to increase to such an extent that the United States political system would no longer meaningfully count as a democracy. In the second scenario, certain cultural shifts allow political inequality to decrease, strengthening the quality of American democracy.

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20 *Ibid.* at 103.

21 *On Political Equality*, *supra* note 1 at 50-51.

22 *Ibid.* at 75.

23 *Ibid.* at 50.

When addressing the first, more pessimistic scenario, Dahl describes the ways in which the barriers to political equality outlined earlier are currently at work in the United States. Here Dahl points to political, cultural, and economic reasons why political equality is under threat, and his treatment of resource inequality as a barrier to political inequality is particularly useful. Dahl notes the well-documented fact that economic inequality helps produce political inequality. By setting this fact beside the extent of income and educational inequalities in the United States, Dahl reaches the disturbing conclusion that:

[t]he unequal accumulation of political resources points to an ominous possibility: political inequalities may be ratcheted up, so to speak, to a level from which they cannot be ratcheted down. The cumulative advantages in power, influence, and authority of the more privileged strata may become so great that even if less privileged Americans compose a majority of citizens they are simply unable, and perhaps even unwilling, to make the effort it would require to overcome the forces of inequality arrayed against them.<sup>24</sup>

The challenges posed by resource-rich entrenched political elites are also troubling realities in the Canadian political community. For example, Dahl refers to the income inequality index that is published by the United Nations to measure relative income inequality around the world.<sup>25</sup> He points out that income inequality is much greater in the United States than in other democracies such as Norway or Denmark.<sup>26</sup> In an ordinal ranking of income equality in the world, while Denmark and Norway rank 1st and 6th respectively, and the United States ranks 92nd, Canada also falls behind many democracies, ranking 36th.<sup>27</sup> If Dahl is correct that resource inequalities make an unequal future more likely, Canada also has much to learn from this warning.

## The “War on Terror” and Executive Government

Just as the controversies surrounding the election of George W. Bush to the United States presidency in 2000 loomed large in the background

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24 *Ibid.* at 85-86.

25 *Ibid.* at 86.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Recent income inequality data, as measured by the GINI coefficient, can be found in United Nations, *Human Development Report 2006 – Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2006) at 335-38 (Table 15), online: <<http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/pdfs/report/HDR06-complete.pdf>>; it is used to construct global rankings in “List of countries by income equality,” *Wikipedia*, online: <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_income\\_inequality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_income_inequality)>.

to How Democratic is the American Constitution?,<sup>28</sup> *On Political Equality* is set against the “war on terror,” and the increasing power of the United States executive that has developed in this context. In this regard, Dahl is unflinching in his critique of the state of American democracy:

It seems to me no great exaggeration to say that for several years following the attacks of September 11, 2001, ordinary American citizens exercised virtually no influence over the specific actions taken by the American government in response to these attacks, beyond showing their approval and thus conferring a measure of “democratic” legitimacy on presidential decisions.<sup>29</sup>

Here, the normative core of Dahl’s conception of political equality – that no person is inherently more qualified to rule than another – rises once again to the surface of the analysis. It is clear that Dahl is primarily concerned, not about inequalities between social groups as such, but about the inequalities that have arisen between the tiny group of people who currently have a significant impact on the decisions of the United States government, and the vast majority of American citizens. The kind of “executive government” that has emerged, particularly the notion that the government may be justified in misleading the public to achieve some higher goal, is clearly a direct affront to Dahl’s idea of equality. However, by focusing solely on the imbalance between the rulers and the ruled, Dahl turns his analytical attention away from the ways that the “war on terror” has manifested political inequality unevenly across the democratic policy. Indeed, theorists have noted that in Canada, Muslims and Arab Canadians are distinctly impacted in ways that directly affect their political equality along the axes with which Dahl is concerned, including participation in democratic processes and exercise of fundamental rights.<sup>30</sup>

## Consumerism and Civic Engagement

In the second, more optimistic scenario, Dahl describes a “large but by no means improbable change in American culture and values.”<sup>31</sup> Here, he argues that the barriers to political equality in the United States are primarily a matter of political will.<sup>32</sup> Ironically, it is this fact that leads Dahl to have

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28 *Supra* note 3.

29 *Supra* note 1 at 92-93.

30 See, e.g., Reem Bahdi, “No Exit: Racial Profiling and Canada’s War Against Terrorism” (2003) 41 *Osgoode Hall Law J.* 293.

31 *Supra* note 1 at 99.

32 *Ibid.* at 104.

some greater hope about the possibility of change. Because Dahl locates the source of political apathy in a culture of consumerism, he also associates the possibility of increased political equality with the overthrow of consumer mentality in American culture:

It is by no means unlikely that advanced capitalism will foster a revolt against our worship of consumption and our focus on ever-increasing gains for consumers. For a growing number of persons, the goals of consumer satisfaction may yield to the goal of civic participation. The now dominant culture of consumerism may then give way to a culture of citizenship that would promote, among other ends, greater political equality among Americans.<sup>33</sup>

That Dahl's hopes for political equality rest with a shift in political culture is interesting given the strong focus on institutions in his analysis.<sup>34</sup> Dahl argues that although Americans know how political equality could be increased in their country,<sup>35</sup> the dominance of the culture of consumerism removes the political will to make those changes.<sup>36</sup> He points to empirical studies showing that increased income or consumption past a certain level does not contribute to quality of life or experiences of satisfaction, and he wonders whether people in a wealthy country such as the United States may turn to civic engagement for self-fulfillment.<sup>37</sup>

Combining Dahl's concerns with emotional motivations and political culture with his focus on institutions may help us see another way to strive towards the more optimistic scenario Dahl proposes. That is, rather than relying entirely on individuals to experience the emotional and cultural motivation to shift their priorities, perhaps we can use our institutions to help facilitate this shift. For example, proposals about campaign finance reform and access to higher education may actually assist people who do feel strongly about civic engagement to solidify that practice in their communities. In this way, the relationship between the "how" and the "why" could be mutually reinforcing in favour of political equality.

## Conclusion

*On Political Equality* contributes to debates about equality in Western countries by bringing broad philosophical themes to bear on a contemporary

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33 *Ibid.* at 104-105.

34 For example, see *ibid.* at 48.

35 See the list of concrete proposals, *ibid.* at 100-103.

36 *Ibid.* at 104.

37 *Ibid.* at 113, 119.

political and cultural moment in the United States. Dahl's accessible account makes very clear exactly what is at stake for the American political community, and the significant consequences that will flow from political, social, and individual choices that are happening at this crossroads. The book will interest a broad range of readers, both philosophers and non-philosophers, because of its strong focus on concrete and contemporary examples to draw out philosophical themes.

Dahl succeeds in illustrating that it is necessary to look beyond a rational justification of political equality in order to understand the fate of equality as a political or cultural project. *On Political Equality* is a short meditation on these themes, and it does not contain all of the analysis needed to understand the implications of this approach. In particular, Dahl does not fully explore the consequences of taking emotions seriously, or of acknowledging the significance of consumerism in our culture. Arguably, these issues pose more fundamental challenges to a liberal individualist approach to political equality. However, *On Political Equality* brings many of these issues together in a clear and concrete way that can only benefit conversations across disciplinary and theoretical boundaries. Whichever of Dahl's pessimistic or optimistic scenarios seems the more likely future of political equality in the United States, *On Political Equality* is an excellent reminder of the role that equality theory can play in facilitating political debate, among theorists and more broadly.