

There Is No Such Thing as Equality, and Thank Goodness

Typically, Hayek's chapter titles leave nothing to the imagination. But as I encountered the "Who, Whom" title of chapter eight in *The Road to Serfdom*, I had to do a doubletake.

Having the modern luxury of Google at my fingertips, I soon learned that Hayek's title was actually a Bolshevik slogan made popular by Lenin in the 1920s. It was later shortened by Leon Trotsky who used it in his article titled [Towards Capitalism or Towards Socialism?](#)

"Who, Whom" refers to the overall question of who will overtake whom. Or, put differently, which ideology will survive: socialism or capitalism.

But what was most unfortunate about this slogan was the corresponding propaganda campaign that was used by these socialists to entice followers to join their ranks; it all became about class struggle and equality. But what socialists view as equality and what equality really means in the marketplace are two entirely different beliefs.

There Is No Equality

Those who believe in the power of markets believe that true equality comes from each individual's ability to equally pursue his or her dreams without fear of intervention from a governing authority.

But the socialists have distorted this term into something that can never exist, no matter how much they may wish it. The socialists would like to see everyone made equal through some planned economy directed to a specific end. That end being equal pay and status.

Unfortunately, no two people are born the same. Each person has unique skills and experiences that set him apart from all others. The only way in which two people can be made to be the same is through a complete government takeover of every aspect of our lives. Or, in other words, nothing short of ultimate force would bring about this goal. Which is exactly what Hayek warns about in chapter eight of *The Road to Serfdom*.

What socialists forget, or perhaps never understood to begin with, is that the free market is the only vessel from which equal access to our ambitions can be achieved without trampling on the ambitions or rights of others.

Under free market capitalism, a man is not prescribed his destiny at birth. The child born in the streets and swaddled in rags can grow up to be an entrepreneur, creating value, jobs, and driving the economy. So long as he has the ambition and will to do so, of course.

But this ability to change one's stars belittles this notion of class warfare because in true capitalism one can move from one station to the next, making socialism completely irrelevant to the equation.

As Hayek says:

Under competition the probability that a man who starts poor will reach great wealth is much smaller than is true of the man who has inherited property, it is not only possible for the former, but the competitive system is the only one where it depends solely on him and not on the favors of the mighty, and where nobody can prevent a man from attempting to achieve this result.

Resentment

But through socialist doctrine, it was instilled in many that each of us deserves equal success just by simply existing. And

even worse still was this underlying resentment that led many prominent socialists to believe that those born in lower classes are somehow more deserving of this success than someone born into "privilege."

Hayek attributes much of this line of thinking to compulsory education.

Textbooks assigned during the course of government-forced education tell of greed and oppression at the hand of wealthy. And of course, the heroes are the working class underdogs who have managed, in spite of capitalism, to form labor unions and pass regulations all intended to make us all more equal.

As Hayek writes:

The resentment of the lower middle class, from which fascism and National Socialism recruited so large a proportion of their supporters, was intensified by the fact that their education and training had in many instances made them aspire to directing positions and that they regarded themselves as entitled to be members of the directing class.

Instead of seeking to change their situations through their own efforts, an entire generation now believed it was owed to them.

While the younger generation, out of that contempt for profit-making fostered by socialist teaching, spurned independent positions which involved risk and flocked in ever increasing numbers into salaried positions which promised security, they demanded a place yielding them the income and power to which in their opinion their training entitled them.

But what is neglected here is a clear definition of who will be in charge of bringing about this great utopia where all things are equal. Such a system would have to be controlled by some all-powerful entity.

Arbiter of Fairness

For forced equality to occur, some entity has to be responsible for directing resources to make it so. And as history has shown us, this is always a role given to the state, by the state. As Hayek says, "In so far as government does anything at all, its action will always have some effect on "who gets what, when, and how."

But somehow, socialists have convinced themselves that the state is a neutral source of redistribution, immune to succumbing to its own ends over the "common good" of the people. But this gives the state complete control over just about everything imaginable, as Hayek also warns:

What these people forget is that, in transferring all property in the means of production to the state, they put the state in a position whereby its action must in effect decide all other incomes.

He further adds, "That a government which undertakes to direct economic activity will have to use its power to realize somebody's ideal of distributive justice is certain."

Fight for Fifteen

We are seeing this play out today in our modern world with the "fight for fifteen" minimum wage movement. Desperate to achieve "fair" pay for all, many entry-level workers have demanded that the government take complete control of setting wage rates. But in reality, all this does is take the power to control one's destiny out of the hands of individuals and into the hands of government.

Instead of working to earn this success, it is demanded that the government simply give it to us. Entry-level positions that were once seen as stepping stones to greater career ambitions are now seen as the ends themselves.

The young man flipping burgers desires to make as much as his supervisor because he feels it is owed to him. But that supervisor was once a flipping burgers himself. It was his own ambition for something more that led him to want a higher status in life. And that drive resulted in him picking up extra shifts and proving himself until he reached an elevated position. This ability in itself is true freedom.

As Hayek says:

It is only because we have forgotten what unfreedom means that we often overlook the patent fact that in every real sense a badly paid unskilled worker in this country has more freedom to shape his life than many a small entrepreneur in Germany [1944] or a much better paid engineer or manager in Russia.

No human being can ever eradicate the differences that exist among individuals. And no one should want to. These differences have given us the robust marketplace we have today. Our different abilities and skills are proof that we live in a society where individuals determine their destiny and not some arbitrary authority.

As Hayek says:

There will always exist inequalities which will appear unjust to those who suffer from them, disappointments which will appear unmerited, and strokes of misfortune which those hit have not deserved. But when these things occur in a society which is consciously directed, the way in which people will react will be very different from what it is when they are nobody's conscious choice.

So, the question of "who, whom" is rather important because what this slogan really makes one reflect on is who is control of whom. For the socialists, they believe the government

should control one's status in life. For the capitalist, it is the individual and only the individual who is in charge of determining his own destiny.

—

Brittany Hunter is an associate editor at FEE. Brittany studied political science at Utah Valley University with a minor in Constitutional studies.

This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the [original article](#).



[Image Credit: Public Domain Pictures]