

**Against Inequality: The Practical and Ethical Case for Abolishing the Superrich.** By Tom Malleson.

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In this ambitious book, Tom Malleson sets himself three main tasks. First, he aims to show that there are policies that Western democracies could feasibly adopt that would drastically reduce the current scale of (domestic) economic inequality. Second, he sets out the reasons, in terms of individual welfare and social cohesion, why we should aim for such a reduction. Third, he seeks to demolish the main arguments that are conventionally given to defend economic inequality – arguments that appeal either to individual desert or to property rights. Malleson, then, is making the case for radical social change, and doing so with a passionate voice. Moreover the book proceeds in the order just described, contrary to usual practice, with policy proposals considered first, and their normative justification postponed until later.

Malleson's reason for taking this approach is that he wants to avoid 'ideal theory', and to show that he is operating within reasonable feasibility constraints. He thinks that people are deterred from pursuing egalitarian policies by fear that they will prove ineffective, or worse still backfire. This does, though, have the disadvantage that the underlying aim of such policies remains unspecified until later in the book, and indeed is never made fully clear. Is it to provide a sufficiently good standard of living for those who are now poor? To prevent the rich from enjoying wealth that they don't deserve? To compress the scale of income inequality? To promote equality of opportunity? Malleson would no doubt say that these are all valuable objectives, but their policy implications are rather different.

Nonetheless the first part of the book provides a valuable and comprehensive survey of the measures that have been, and might in future be, used to reduce inequalities of income and wealth in capitalist societies. Much of Malleson's attention is devoted to forms of taxation, and he is fully alive to the potential problems that redistributive tax policies may encounter: evasion by the rich, shifting of assets from high-tax to low-tax hidey-holes, and so forth. There is an extensive discussion

of tax havens and what to do about them. He is keen on third-party reporting of income and wealth as an enforcement measure, though I was left puzzled about how banks, for example, were supposed to distinguish between payments into someone's account that should be counted as income, as against, say, the sale of an asset, the return of a loan, or a successful insurance claim.

Malleson cites past examples of such policies being pursued with apparent success – Scandinavia in the 1960s and 1970s is the golden age – but he fails to ask why they were so often later abandoned (Sweden now levies no inheritance tax, for example). Might it be that there is no strong public appetite for reducing inequality? When asked, most people will assent to propositions like 'it is the responsibility of the government to reduce differences of income'. However they are also remarkably tolerant of such inequalities when they are seen as deserved on grounds such as hard work and ambition, and paradoxically perhaps, the greater the extent of income inequality in their society, the more strongly people tend to believe in its meritocratic character (see Jonathan Mijs, "The Paradox of Inequality: Income Inequality and Belief in Meritocracy go Hand in Hand," *Socio-Economic Review*, 19, 2021). The inequalities that rankle most are local ones: the person in the next office being paid more than you for doing the same job, as sociologists have long recognized (see W.G. Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*, 1966).

Malleson's main aim, in the later parts of the book, is to show that these beliefs in desert and meritocracy are fundamentally mistaken and (full disclosure) I am the author mainly singled out for criticism. He is not always sufficiently careful to distinguish between meritocracy as a justificatory claim about existing capitalist societies, and meritocracy as a template for a society not yet achieved, and so fails to see that the idea might have radical potential, for example in opposing sexism, racism, and inherited material advantage (leftists like Thomas Piketty and John Roemer are chided for holding on to it). His position is one of root-and-branch opposition to the very idea of 'moral desert' and his chapter on the subject might be seen as an extended riff on John Rawls's claim that not only a person's natural talents but also 'the superior character that enables him to make the effort to

cultivate his abilities' are undeserved, and therefore (so Rawls thinks) inadmissible as grounds for claiming material rewards (John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 1971). The assumption made here – that for a person to be deserving they must also deserve to have the capacities that allow them to do what is necessary to earn rewards – was challenged by several critics soon after Rawls's book was published, but Malleon does not dig more deeply here (George Sher's book *Desert*, 1987, for example, is listed in the bibliography but not discussed in the text).

The indiscriminate character of Malleon's attack on desert can be brought out through a couple of examples. The first is that he appears to see no relevant difference between gaining advantage through the inheritance of wealth and gaining advantage through deploying (inherited) natural talent – both are viewed as equally 'morally arbitrary' sources of inequality. The second is that he attaches great importance to what he calls the 'understructure' – the set of physical, social and cultural assets that we inherit collectively from previous generations – in explaining what any given person is able to achieve. The idea here is that if some individual claims credit for an innovation – a new design of vacuum cleaner, let's say – this was only made possible by centuries-long development of all the ideas, techniques, and so forth that make the production of the new machine feasible. So the understructure, not the inventor, should be given nearly all of the credit. But this misunderstands the kind of desert claim that our inventor might make. It is a comparative claim made in relation to others who share the same background infrastructure. She, and she alone, saw that all of the intellectual and physical resources she (undeservedly) shared with her contemporaries could be put to this new, slightly different, use.

Towards the end of the book, Malleon provides a sketch of the society he seeks to create. It proves to be less radically egalitarian than one might have expected from what has gone before. It could be described as strong social democracy: still a recognizably capitalist society, but with high marginal rates of taxation on income and wealth used to fund a generous welfare state and an income guarantee to provide everyone with 'sufficiency'. Inequality persists because work incentives are

needed, but the ratio between top and bottom incomes should be reduced to between 10 and 20 to 1. It is not then clear how, from a theoretical perspective, Malleon departs from John Rawls's 'difference principle' which holds that economic inequalities can be justified only if they work to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged by acting as incentives to productivity. Malleon says that 'Rawls is insufficiently attentive to the existence of the superrich' (p. 256), but this is true only in the sense that Rawls does not identify the superrich as a separate class. His principle scoops them in: if, as Malleon believes, no disincentive effects would follow from taxing very high incomes at up to 100%, then that is what the difference principle would mandate.

It would be churlish to end the review by suggesting that Malleon is just Rawls *réchauffé*, because his level of engagement with public policy is far deeper than the latter's. Anyone looking to explore the range of feasible policy options available to egalitarians in capitalist societies today will learn much from his clear, thoroughly researched, and generally balanced overview.

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