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PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The great leveller: Political and figural ambiguities of equality

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Abstract: If we compare it with the fellow notion of liberty, equality has an ambivalent place in modern political thinking. Whilst it counts as one of the fundamental norms, many think that equality is valuable only as a way to realise some features of liberty. I take a historical perspective on this issue, and try to identify some of the pre-modern roots of such an ambivalent attitude towards equality. I do this by using Jacques Rancière's political model as an analytical framework and by taking a visual route, focusing on classical iconographic representations in which equality was present in the images' subtexts. Ambrogio Lorenzetti's allegory of good government is one iconic exposition of equality as a positive condition of civil peace. Already there, however, the positive value of equality is counterposed to the figure of violent retributive justice. Similarly, in the Christian narrative, equality is endorsed as the original condition of creatures under God, but is also associated with violent death. This signals one pre-modern root behind the ambivalence towards equality, particularly when the latter is understood dynamically, as levelling. Such a reversal of value finds an apotheosis, I suggest, in the revolutionary icon of the guillotine, a dramatic representation of equalisation that had a strong influence on modern political thinking. In J. E. Millais' first painting, of *Jesus in the House of his Parents*, I find a more positive legacy of Christian equality in modern political thinking.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

There has been a marked interest in the rise of social and economic inequality in public discussions recently. Despite that, equality continues to have an ambiguous place in contemporary political discourse. Whilst the importance of equality is not denied, there is often a concern that demanding equality on its own, or demanding too much equality, can have deleterious consequences. As a result, equality is usually subordinated to the other key principle of liberty. The article shows that this ambivalence towards equality has deep historical roots. In the case of Western political thinking, such ambivalence can be traced back to the Christian narrative. The article explores these historical roots by examining visual representations of equality in the tradition of religious painting. The article concludes by focusing on two visual symbols that illustrate two modern legacies, one negative, the other positive, of that long history of equality.

1. Introduction

The contemporary sense of political justice is articulated around two fundamental norms, liberty and equality. Even if other norms, such as solidarity or welfare or personal flourishing, are important, they are thought to be of secondary significance. This is especially the case by comparison with the fundamental norm of liberty. As for equality, even though it continues to be counted as a fundamental norm, its exact place in the modern understanding of justice is contested and uncertain. Kymlica (2002, pp. 3–4) notes that equality is built into the notion of justice in mainstream political liberalism, but of course freedom is the most fundamental norm there. In other traditions, many argue that liberty and equality are "equiprimordial", that is, that the realisation of one norm necessarily implies the realisation of the other (Balibar, 2014). Hardly anyone today makes equality the most fundamental norm, as the one that would by itself articulate the meaning of justice (a recent exception is Nielsen, 1984). A famous exception is the revolutionary figure of Gracchus Babeuf (2010), but very few today would claim him as a valid reference. Indeed many argue that equality is not intrinsically valuable, that it is valuable only to the extent that it articulates dimensions of a norm that is more fundamental, namely liberty (see notably Honneth, 2014).

Even though in the modern context liberty and equality are linked together through some conceptual links, however contested these might be, from a historical point of view each has its own separate genealogy. Claims for liberty and claims for equality have their own separate histories, relate to separate, if often overlapping, literary, religious and philosophical corpuses. Different social struggles were waged in their names at different times, and these moments of social and political upheaval define specific emblematic moments in these separate histories.

This paper focuses specifically on the genealogy of the norm of equality, and the legacy of older visions of equality for our contemporary understanding of justice. The method the paper employs to retrace a few episodes in this complex genealogy is by looking for visual representations of equality in the tradition of Christian iconography. The reasons for taking this surprising visual route are two-fold. The first reason is simply one of intrinsic interest, to document some of the ways in which references to equality made their way into classical paintings whose primary, explicit content were often anything but political; how equality took on figurative form even before it is alleged to have been a recognised norm in social and political life.

A second value inherent in taking this visual route appears gradually as we proceed through the inquiry. It turns out that the focus on iconographic representations of equality has more than just illustrative interest. In fact, these representations contain some informative lessons for political history. The history of representations of equality brings to the fore the ambivalent place the norm has had in the tradition of Western political thinking, an ambivalence that has been rearticulated in revised terms and on the basis of different assumptions in modernity, but which retains some defining elements from previous epochs, or so I will try to show. There is one famous iconic exposition of equality as a positive condition of civil peace in classical Western painting, in Lorenzetti's allegory of good government. In that painting already, however, the positive power of equality is counterposed to the much darker figure of violent retributive justice. Similarly, in what is the framing narrative for Western iconography, namely the Christian narrative, equality is endorsed as the original ontological condition of creatures under God, but also associated with violent death. This signals an inherent ambivalence, the constant possibility of reversal in the meaning of equality, from the condition of civic flourishing to the justification of sacrificial violence.

Such a reversal finds an apotheosis and a new figuration, I will suggest, in the revolutionary icon of the guillotine, which inherits, symbolically and iconographically, indeed scenographically, and reinterprets in new terms, the representation of the death of divine transcendence on the altar of immanence. This dramatic representation of equalisation on the scaffold, in turn, has continued to operate in the background of modern political thinking, as a warning that too much insistence on equality always risks leading to violent erasure of difference and human rights (Arendt, 1990).

The analytical framework helping me to organise these snapshots into an iconographic history of equality is provided by what I call, in reference to the political thought of Jacques Rancière, the "plebeian principle" (Breaugh, 2007; Rancière, 2004). I briefly set up the key terms of that framework in Sections 1 and 2. The basic argument excerpted from Rancière's writings is that, despite ideological attempts to justify hierarchy within social and political orders, inequality cannot be rationally justified. As a result, an undercurrent of equality always mines hierarchical orders from within. From that point of view, the history of social struggles can be read as a series of moments in history, which can be witnessed well before the advent of the modern political revolutions, when the ground of equality ruptured for a time an inegalitarian consensus.

With this basic framework in place, I try to identify some of the ways in which this dialectic of equality within inequality might have played out in the Christian tradition. The reason for such a focus is obvious. The tradition of Christian theology played the defining role in fashioning political concepts in Western societies, by providing political thinking with its basic conceptual and normative language, as well as its constitutive symbols, embedded within a substantive metaphysical view of the individual and society. Within this massive corpus, the central doctrine of the divine becoming human to redeem humanity can be interpreted in terms of the dialectic of equality and inequality. Indeed, at several points in pre-modern history, this is precisely what utopian social movements did to contest the hierarchies of their time.

In Sections 3–5, I suggest that the ambiguous presence of equality within the Christian message can be identified in the iconography of Renaissance and post-Renaissance painting, notably in the representations of the central symbolic spaces occupied by the body of Christ at different stages in the story of his life and passion. I thus propose to follow what I call the "topos of the plane" as a useful signifier to explore this conceptual and figural genealogy. My hypothesis is that the horizontal planes occupied by the body of Christ in the different scenes documenting his life and passion are visual representations of, indeed could be called visual meditations on, the mystery inherent in the apparent contradiction of the most deserving, and therefore the most unequal, becoming equal to the undeserving.

In Section 6, I move to the dynamic logic inherent in equality: equality as a goal to be achieved, which implies processes of equalising or *levelling*. This interpretation of equality as levelling is one that has particular import for political thinking, notably as it lies behind the reversals of equality from a positive to a negatively loaded norm. I try to show this by focusing on two modern examples in Sections 7 and 8. I try to vindicate the claim, which should not seem overly controversial given the well-known legacy of Christian symbols in political modernity, that the revolutionary guillotine, and particular strands of modern socialism, of which I find an illustration in Millais' *Jesus in the House of his Parents*, draw some of their iconic and symbolic impact from their direct connection to classical ideas, narratives, and images. I suggest that these are two modern inheritances of the classical ambivalence towards equality, which had already been explored in numerous visual meditations on the contradictory relations of immanence and transcendence.

2. The plebeian principle as hermeneutic historical principle

It is usually assumed that equality becomes a defining norm of social and political orders only with the advent of post-revolutionary, "modern" society. The history of equality, however, is a lot messier than that. We get a sense of this messiness when we see the knots one of the best experts in discussions on equality gets himself entangled into (Gosepath, 2007), when he tries to provide some historical framework as an introduction to his presentation of contemporary philosophical reflection on the subject:

> Until the eighteenth century, it was assumed that human beings are unequal by nature—i.e. that there was a natural human hierarchy. This postulate collapsed with the advent of the idea of natural right and its assumption of an equality of natural order among all human beings. Against Plato and Aristotle, the classical formula for justice according to which an

action is just when it offers each individual his or her due took on a substantively egalitarian meaning in the course of time, viz. everyone deserved the same dignity and the same respect. This is now the widely held conception of substantive, universal, moral equality. It developed among the Stoics, who emphasized the natural equality of all rational beings, and in early New Testament Christianity, which elevated the equality of human beings before God to a principle. This important idea was also taken up both in the Talmud and in Islam, where it was grounded in both Greek and Hebraic elements in both systems. In the modern period, starting in the seventeenth century, the dominant idea was of natural equality in the tradition of natural law and social contract theory.

This passage is puzzling from a simple chronological viewpoint. It seems right to say that until the late eighteenth century revolutions it was assumed that "human beings are unequal by nature", that "there was a natural human hierarchy", and that the idea of universal equality of status for all human beings is therefore a product of late modernity. However, as the article also says, the idea of natural right is a very old one indeed, one that was already formulated by the Stoics and which finds many expressions in pre-modern texts, for instance in the New Testament. And one might add that history is replete with social struggles in which the demand for justice was already a demand for equality of some kind, as an obvious principle which for the actors of the time demanded no further justification. From Solon's legendary resolution of the conflict between landowners and indebted, poor citizens in sixth century BCE Sparta, to the conflict of the orders in classical Rome, to the peasant rebellions in the fourteenth century France and England, the 1525 Peasant War in Germany, to the different groups of Levelers in seventeenth century England: all included reference to some form of equality as part of their claims. To name just one illustrious example in the history of political thought, recall that Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1516, explicitly equates the just city with substantive economic equality.

This long history of struggles for some form of equality lends historical credence to the conception of politics and society we find in the writings of French political thinker Jacques Rancière. This conception provides a useful reference point to guide the research into the iconography of equality. From the point of view of equality, as Rancière articulates it, the history of many human societies, notably those that we call Western societies, appears to be structured by a double current: an implicit, repressed plebeian undercurrent, which at regular intervals comes to the surface and ruptures the visible, surface current of "natural hierarchy" (Rancière, 2004, pp. 1–42). On this reading, the messiness we just highlighted surrounding the history of equality should no longer be interpreted as an indecision regarding the exact historical moment when equality becomes a founding principle of social and political organisation. Rather, the messiness is a structural one. True, the dialectic of equality and inequality takes on an altogether different shape in modern societies, especially because equality is no longer a revolutionary but an established, expected principle, one against which extant organisations can be measured. But as Rancière insists, even modern societies continue to function according to the twisted logic of inequality/equality.

How does Rancière flesh out this notion that (many) societies are structured by an irreducible tension between equality and inequality? He argues that the everyday operations of social structures rely on divisions between groups of individuals that separate those who have the requisite social qualities (cultural capital, financial capital, the right age, the right sex, the expected education, proper appearance and so on) from those who don't. Rancière formulates such structuring division as the divide between those to whom some parts of the common resources (be they material or symbolic) can be rightfully distributed, and the "no-parts". Inequality rules in fact, on the basis of justifications that rely on properties that serve as norms of distribution and recognition. As Aristotle famously defined it, justice on that count is about giving everyone their exact due in respect of their "deserts", or *axiai* (Aristotle, 2004, book V), with the implicit assumption that not everyone possesses such *axiai*, and thus not everyone deserves to claim a part of the common good. In the end, however, these *axiai* are arbitrary in the sense that, rather than them explaining unequal treatment, it is inequality that explains them. These divisions, these ways of "sharing" the social field, cannot be justified. There is no good reason why the old should rule over the young, the rich over the poor, one

ethnos over another, one gender over another, or the "intelligent" over the "non-intelligent", those who speak a particular language over the "barbarians", and so on. As a result of this lack of justification, any such division, which underpins the political institutions of society, is in fact kept in place only by the tautological logic of power: that the rulers rule because they are the rulers. The alleged principle, the *arkhe* that is supposed to explain and justify the political structure of society, is only an empty one, a tautological assertion of ruling inequality. All societies are ruled by inequality in fact, an inequality justified in terms of a specific principle or *arkhe*, and yet this inequality is based on a principle that is void, the absence in the end of any justifiable *arkhe*.

Politics on that view designates the moments when exclusionary divisions together with their justifying "*axiai*" are questioned. When such ruptures of the inegalitarian order occur, a positive principle comes to the fore, namely the basic equal right of each and every member of society to be considered in the social organisation.

Despite the fact that the struggles against inequality can relate to many different social spaces and can be waged in relation to many different issues, the generic notion of a "*plebeian* principle" can be formally applied to all the struggles waged in the name of equality, since in each case, by rejecting inequality, what the political demand expresses is for *all* to be considered in the organisation of the collective: not just a few groups of individuals, by exclusion of other groups, on the basis of some arbitrary title, but all, that is, the *people*, the *demos* or indeed the *plebs*.

The plebeian principle provides an interesting perspective to consider the political history of particular societies. It assumes that an actual ground of equality is always being repressed in the name of some ideological discourse, which justifies the existent inequality. From this perspective, the specific shape taken by this dialectic of factual inequality and in principle equality would be a crucial factor to explain the social and political language of that particular society. The plebeian principle also predicts that there are likely going to be moments in that society's history when the surface structure of inequality will be ruptured by claims that refer to the repressed plebeian undercurrent, that is, the equality of all.

It should be clear, therefore, how Rancière's basic ontology of human societies provides a useful heuristic guide to approach the particular histories of particular societies from the point of view of equality and its negations. The question we might ask now is the following: how does the plebeian principle, as a principle of historical and political hermeneutic, apply to Western societies, and in particular, how does it apply to the dogma providing the main ideological framework in those societies, the Christian narrative?

3. Christian theology through the lens of the plebeian principle

Applied to Western societies, the plebeian principle lends itself to a specific focus on the ambiguous role played by the Christian dogma in grounding social organisations. For this dogma is itself structured according to the twisted logic of factual inequality/in principle equality. On the one hand, the Christian dogma has functioned as the main ideological framework to justify and entrench hierarchies within and between the estates: first the hierarchies within the clergy and between the clergy and the lay members of society; and second the hierarchies amongst the different layers constituting the lay part of society. Samuel Edgerton in "Icons of Justice" has shown this in striking fashion, citing in particular Raphael's *Disputation of Holy Sacrament* in the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican to illustrate the point (Edgerton, 1980). A good image of the painting can be seen at the following web site; http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/stanze-di-raffaello/stanza-della-segnatura/disputa-del-ss--sacramento.html#&gid=1&pid=1.

Three concentric layers on top of each others are connected by a vertical axis running through the middle of each, thus showing a perfect vertical order of hierarchy. The top circle is occupied by God who sits at its centre, surrounded by angels and blessed souls. Underneath this first circle is the layer that has Jesus at its centre, surrounded by the Disciples, with Mary to his right and John the Baptist

to his left. Jesus shows his wounds and thereby indicates his ultimate role in the story of salvation. Underneath Jesus, the white dove of the Holy Spirit looks down and points its golden rays straight towards the earth below. At that level, an assembly of bishops is in heated discussion over the exact nature and meaning of the host enshrined at the top of a monstrance, which points back up to the sacred beings placed directly above it. At this earthly level, the space situated directly underneath the concatenation of divine beings (God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit's Dove, and the Holy Host) remains vacant. This is the place where a sacerdotal officiant, the Pope being the highest of them, would stand, thereby showing, in direct visual presentation, his anointment from God and thereby his role as the true intercessor between the divine and the human, in other words the holder of true and ultimate power. In turn, the bishops surrounding him derive from their closeness to the scene their own superiority over the lay audience witnessing the scene from the other side of the barrier indicated at the front. As Edgerton shows, the painting offers a clear representation and justification of hierarchy on earth as descending from the all-powerful and just God.

Even a painting such as this one, wholly dedicated to verticality and the justification of hierarchy, in fact harbours the twisted dialectic of equality. For as the art historian remarks, the vanishing point at the intersection of the perspectival lines is not the host, but a place underneath it, at the centre of the altar carrying the monstrance. This makes good sense within the Christian dogma, since the host obviously represents the body of Christ, himself the divine intercessor between humanity and its God, but this body of Christ is expected to lie, in virtual fashion, on the surface of the altar just underneath the host on the monstrance. If we think about it, this vacant place on the altar complicates enormously what appeared to be the clear ideological message conveyed by the painting. For the symbolism of the altar has the exact opposite meaning to the vertical line of authority:

> In the Christian tradition, the altar top is not only the place on which the miraculous transubstantiation of the bread and wine takes place, but also it is the symbolic stone of unction *on which was laid* the body of Christ in His tomb in Jerusalem. (Edgerton, 1980, p. 89)

At the centre of the painting, we find the place at which the ultimate truth of the Christian message is played out: Jesus, the son of God, lying dead so as to redeem the sins of the world. But at this most sacred place where the whole signification of the Christian message is concentrated, the divine being is no longer a vertical figure but a horizontal one.

The plane surface of the altar is not by chance one of the most sacred and symbolic places for Christians: its very horizontality signals the fact that the divine being sacrificed itself in the shape of his own son, thereby made itself wholly human, and through this act of radical self-loss, demonstrated precisely its absolute power and was able to take away the sins of the world. Such essential horizontality messes up the verticality that is also inherent in the Christian message. This means nothing else than that the justification and entrenchment of inequality inherent in religious ideology simultaneously harbours its exact opposite: namely, the assertion of the most radical equality, the equality of the divine and the human, which is figured at the place where the body of Christ is virtually lying (the altar), situated at the same level as the unruly reunion of disparate human beings surrounding it.

On the basis of this fundamental, metaphysical equality, other forms of equality follow on directly. First is asserted what we might call the *ontological equality* of all beings under God, the equality of all creatures simply *qua* creatures of God ("The Lord is the maker of them all", Proverbs 22:2). Similarly, all creatures, except for Mary the mother of God, are equal *in sin*, as creatures equally tainted by original sin ("There is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus", Romans 3:23). The ontological equality in creation and in sin leads to a third ontological equality, equality *in death* ("The fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other", Ecclesiastes 3:19). This establishes an equality under God that undercuts all existing *social* hierarchies ("You call Me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so, because I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example so that

you should do as I have done for you", John 13:13; "Many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first" (Mt 19.30, Mt 20.16, Mk 10.31 & Lk 13.30; see Gnuse, 2006). And finally, despite privilege being explicitly granted to those who are lowest on the social ladder, equality is in fact the ultimate governing principle *in redemption* ("There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus", Galatians 3: 28).

Given all these dimensions of equality within the Christian narrative, and the fact that they relate directly to essential features of the dogma, it is impossible that they would not have made their way into classical iconography. Furthermore, as the succinct list above already makes clear, those metaphysical and ontological forms of equality have direct social and political implications. Indeed, as intimated earlier, this is precisely what earlier social movements picked up on when they rebelled against the hierarchies of their time. This then justifies the attempt to investigate how, in the classical iconography of Western painting, equality has been represented, and how social and political meanings might have made their way, mostly surreptitiously, into visual mediations whose immediate goals were spiritual and religious.

4. The topos of the plane

Given the particular structure of the Christian narrative and the place ontological equality takes within it, it seems that a promising principle of historical and iconographic investigation might be to focus on what might be called the "topos of the plane", as one of the most eminent ways by which pre-modern societies would have dealt, intellectually and figuratively, with the paradox of equality. If we relate it to the argument that has been developed so far, this seems an interesting object of investigation based on the following reasoning. Given the centrality of the Christian narrative for Western societies; given that this narrative is structured by a metaphysical hesitation between equality and inequality, an hesitation that also underpins social structures (on a Rancierian reading of social history); and given that in this narrative, the place of utmost meaning and symbolism is precisely the place where verticality and horizontality meet each other and reciprocally limit each other at the point of a sacred plane,- given all of this, it seems a fruitful exegetical hypothesis to focus on the iconographic treatment of particular planes within this tradition. This might be a fruitful route to take to gain some new historical insights into the iconic genealogy of one of our core political concepts.

My exegetical hypothesis therefore is that in the Christian tradition, the tradition whose key concepts, stories and icons inspire and feed the tradition of Western political thinking, the plane might function as an eminent place of figuration: that is, a particular space within representations that delimits a place of constitutive symbolisms, and a place that is itself a symbol, of the constitutive dialectic of equality and inequality. The plane here is clearly not the plane that is often referred to as the surface of painting (Rancière, 2007). Rather it is the plane located at the heart of the virtual depth of the perspectival space, mostly at the centre of this space. It designates the central space at the intersection of the vertical (inequality, transcendence) and the horizontal (equality, immanence). My suggestion is to read this space as a figuration of equality within inequality.

5. A central symbolic locus in the life and passion of Christ

The most obvious way to retrace the role and the meaning of this topos of the plane in classical Western iconography is to delineate its function in the episodes of the life of Christ. If we go through these episodes and their iconic representations, we come across a multitude of examples in which the body of Christ, or the site at which the body of Christ is situated, present a contradictory representational logic of verticality and horizontality.

In episodes of Nativity, for instance, in scenes relating the adoration of the shepherds, the body of the infant Jesus usually lies naked at the centre, over a piece of white cloth or on a piece of his mother's mantle. In representations of the adoration of the Magi, the child Christ usually sits on his mother's lap and interacts with one of the kings. Beyond important iconographic differences between the two types of scenes, in both of them the white cloth, the blue piece of mantle and the

mother's lap are designated as sacred planes. In most representations, these sacred planes are explicitly contrasted to vertical lines: descending gazes and gestures from supra-terrestrial beings indicating the divine nature of the new-born; metaphorical staffs and crooks signalling his role as the future shepherd of fallen humanity; or sinister signs of his sacrifice to come. For instance, to take a typical example, in Mantegna's 1450 *Adoration of the Shepherds*, an ominous cross-shaped tree rises in the background, in a perspectival line that directly links the newborn to this cross and the mount behind the tree (Figure 1). Alternatively, see the prominent tree in the foreground in Jan Bruegel's *Adoration of the Magi,* at the Hermitage Museum (Figure 2).

Whilst in the iconography surrounding the mystery of the virgin conception, it is obviously Mary's invisible womb that is at the centre of attention, in the imageries of Nativity, of Madonna with child, and in pietas, it is her visible lap, the external space where she holds the infant or adult Jesus, that is at the centre: Mary as blessed throne receiving and supporting the divine child.

Whether in scenes of the Last Supper, in Stations of the Cross, in Crucifixions, in Descents from the Cross, in Pietas, Entombments, Resurrections and Ascensions, in all these scenes the dialectic of verticality and horizontality is in each case compositionally and symbolically decisive. From the table of the last supper, to the tomb in which Jesus is laid down and from which he re-emerges: all are sacred planes in which is played out, each time in a specific temporality and configuration, the dialectic of immanence and transcendence, of radical ontological equality within absolute inequality. Recall for instance that Leonardo's *Last Supper* faces a monumental Crucifixion, painted in 1495 by Giovanni Di Montorfano (see a photograph of the painting hanging at the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Montorfano,_crocifissione,_1497,_con_interventi_di_leonardo_nei_ritratti_dei_duchi.jpg). Or, to cite another striking example, Guercino's 1665 *Entombment of Christ* presents a particularly moving representation of the fallen god being lowered into the tomb, under the looming presence of the crosses far above in the background. All the vertical lines here, bar one, point downwards inside the open plane (Figure 3).

Scenes of crucifixion deserve special attention since they might appear to contradict the hypothesis. These scenes seem to be structured only by verticality and yet of all the iconic Christian spaces, they are the most dramatic ones, since they signal the moment when the divine fully endorses its humanity by dying an ignominious death. But the cross is in fact also a representation of horizontality within verticality. The tragic impact of the image is that a god is made visible there as the most vulnerable of beings. His vulnerability is denoted quite specifically by the horizontal bar: it is the instrument of his torture, and the instrument that prevents the dying god from rising to heaven. In

Figure 1. Andrea Mantegna, *Adoration of the Shepherds* **(1450), Metropolitan Museum of Art.**

Source: www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436966.

Figure 2. Jan Bruegel, *Adoration of the Magi* **(1598–1600), Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.**

Source: https://www. arthermitage.org/I-Jan-Brueghel/Adoration-of-the-Magi.html

Figure 3. Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri), *The Entombment* **(ca. 1656), Art Institute of Chicago.**

Source: www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/86323

most Crucifixions, the scene is viewed front on, with the dying god pinned mid-way in the air, above the soldiers and his crying entourage. There, the Christ's body itself is the most sacred of planes: both utterly human and yet having always been divine and destined to return to divinity; both the highest and the most abject of beings; surging to heaven yet trapped by a horizontal plane that divides the painting and interrupts the surge of transcendence.

6. Equality as levelling

The concept of figuration combines material, spatial and semantic, rhetorical dimensions, but it also entails an important dynamic dimension. This applies directly to equality. For equality is not just a paradoxical structure, it can also designate a process, the process of bringing the unequal into a relation of equality, the process of equalising. When this process takes on figurative form, it becomes *levelling*.

The iconographic examples just cited all contain this dynamic dimension such that the process of levelling is already present in them. In all examples save the Crucifixion, the sacred planes and the sacred body they receive are usually situated at the same level as the crowds of human witnesses. For example, the 1480 *Dead Christ* by Mantegna, gives a most powerful vision of the mystery of the Christian faith: that a divine being could lose all transcendence, could lay flat in front of us, at the

Figure 4. Andrea Mantegna,
The Dead Christ and the Three
***Mourners* (1470–1474), Brera**
Pinacoteca, Milan.

Source: http://pinacotecabrera.
org/en/collezione-online/opere/
the-dead-christ-and-three-
mourners

exact same level as us, showing us his wounds from close up (Figure 4; see Arasse, 2006, pp. 70–73). All the symbols of Christ's future death (the menacing weapons, the dying sheep, and so on) that are scattered throughout those pictures all imply the levelling logic of the divine being proving his divinity by shedding it, that is, by *becoming* mortal, or *being destined to* become mortal. As we noted, the Crucifixion is not really a counter-example, since the sacrificed god hovers over the human crowds at a tragically paradoxical height, both above the human crowd and yet still tied to it through the torturous ties of the cross, the ultimate victim of levelling.

The concrete dynamism involved in the process of levelling becomes particularly manifest in representations of Christ as son of Joseph, the son of a carpenter himself destined to become a carpenter. These images offer acute representations of the ambiguity of transcendence within the Christian creed. They show Jesus and his father, anticipating and creating, literally *making*, the instrument of his own future death. In these images, Jesus pre-empts his own message, by making, or helping to make, the very plane of his future death and redemption. In the George de la Tour's 1642 painting at Le Louvre, for example, Joseph is boring holes in a large beam (see a good image here; http://www.magnificat.com/lifeteen/images/hd/1.jpg). The theme of Joseph boring holes can also be related to the virgin conception, as in Robert Campin's 1425 altarpiece at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Robert Campin,
Annunciation Triptych* (*Merode
***Altarpiece*) (ca. 1427–1432),**
Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Source: http://www.
metmuseum.org/toah/
works-of-art/56.70

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Figure 6. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Allegory of Good Government* **(1338), Palazzo Publico, Siena. Image made available through The Yorck Project:** *10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei.* **DVD-ROM, 2002. ISBN 3936122202. Distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH.**

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ambrogio_Lorenzetti_002.jpg#/media/File:Ambrogio_Lorenzetti_002.jpg.

Beyond religious iconography, another classical symbol of equality as levelling is the figure given to civic harmony, or *concordia*, by Ambrogio Lorenzetti inside his allegorical representation of the just city on the central wall of the Room of War and Peace in the Palazzo Publico at Sienna (Boucheron, 2013; Skinner, 1999; Figure 6). The paradoxical nature of republican equality is well captured there. On the one hand, following the Aristotelian reference, *concordia* demands proportional equality, that is, the just distribution of symbolic and material goods in proportion of the merit of each. The idea of proportionality therefore justifies a principle of inequality. It is represented in the figure of distributive justice, above and to the left of the *Concordia* figure, with the balance designating the weighing of deserts (*axiai*) and the equitable apportioning of goods in proportion of those deserts. And yet as the painting shows explicitly via the carpenter's plane on the lap of *Concordia*, for equity (*aequitas*) to be realised, some form of *aequibilitas* (conformity, level-headedness, isocephaly as a social sign) is also necessary, lest the community be divided and henceforth descend into anarchy (Dahlberg, 2016). In this republican ideal equity is achieved by making every citizen an *aequus*, a term synonymous with *planus*. This time, equity relies on the horizontal equality achieved through the direct intervention of levelling mechanisms that render all the citizens of an equal footing, figuratively equal in height. As Skinner argues (2002, p. 59): "To describe something as *aequus* in Latin is simply to use a synonym for *planus*, and is thus to describe it as flat, or level or smooth. So when Cicero speaks of the need for arrangements between citizens to be *aequus*, his use of the image underlines his demand that—as the *De Officiis* puts it—"private individuals must live on level terms, on a fair and equal footing, with their fellow citizens".

Here, the levelling is no longer proportional but absolute; it is a mechanism for explicitly overlooking and indeed for actively erasing significant differences between individuals. The good citizens on the left, held in civic peace through the allegorical bond of the cord in *con-cordia* are all of the same size. Once again, proportional equality, which is in fact nothing but justified inequality, is in fact possible only on the basis of radical equality.

One link between this icon of justice and the other scenes mentioned before is evident. The allegory of the just city is surrounded by figures from Christian iconography. Political virtues are graphically framed by the theological virtues. Another, more sinister, link however is the link between equality and death. The iconic figure of *Concordia* holding the carpenter plane that erases differences expresses as much an ideal as a threat: both on the left and on the right of the painting, two icons of justice warn of the fate that befalls those who exempt themselves from the civic levelling process. For those who undergo the levelling process willingly, the outcome is civic harmony, *concordia* via *aequitas*, the tie of civil peace which is the condition for justice and flourishing. For those who refuse this civic levelling, however, for instance by refusing to pay their taxes, or by contriving to gain

more power than their equals, the outcome might be a more radical and definitive levelling: equal footing achieved by the levelling of their heads.

Already in this famous icon of equality, the threat of vengeful death looms in the background, in direct connection with the norm itself. Here, the violent death is one that is sanctioned by republican law and demanded by civic peace and justice. Obviously, it will not take very much for this close link to sanctioned violence to become a problematic feature of demands for equality in general, and for it to be seen as a direct implication of the idea of levelling as realisation of equality. Indeed, the iconic power of the modern guillotine can be interpreted as a direct descendant of this violent connection. This, I now want to suggest, is a first significant modern legacy of this ambivalent figurative history of equality.

7. Modern legacies (1): The cross and the guillotine

The great symbolic power of the guillotine, brilliantly reconstructed and analysed by Daniel Arasse (1987), stems from the way in which its political function and meaning were exercised through the theatricality of its use and indeed in the very aesthetic configuration of the instrument. As he writes, "the symbolic force of the guillotine comes from the fact that its very appearance gives it a representative value" (Arasse, 1987, p. 73). What Arasse has in mind in this passage, is the pure geometrical and functional simplicity of the instrument. The guillotine has an abstract quality and simplicity to it. It is made up of the three basic geometrical shapes: a circle within a rectangle, on top of which is hanging the ominous triangle. Arasse cites an amazing passage from the Goncourt brothers, written many decades after the event: "a horizontal plane a few feet above the ground, on top of which two perpendiculars are raised, separated by a rectangular triangle that falls through a circle on a sphere which becomes detached by a bisecting line" (ibid.). The scaffold elevates this pure geometrical form over the spectators' eyes, enhancing its stature. The aesthetic abstraction of the instrument in turn chimes in with its key functional attribute. The old forms of torture and capital punishment were full of contingency: they depended on the skill of the executioner; they maintained, even in the last moments, the differences between classes; and the refinement of the torture practices was reflected in the complex configurations of the instruments used for them. With the modern guillotine, by contrast, death is administered through a mechanical process, which takes away all contingencies and erases all differences between individuals. The simple geometry of the machine reinforces this abstract and radical equality. In death, everyone is now shown performatively (through the whole performance) and aesthetically (through submission to the aesthetics of the deadly machine) to be radically the same as everybody else. This equality in death in turn is the translation, via the execution of ultimate justice, of the universal equality of everyone before the law. The geometrical purity of the machine thus enhances the strict uniformity between citizens demanded by the new times.

The moment when this radical egalitarian treatment reaches its acme, in political terms and for the collective imaginary, is when the King himself is brought to the scaffold. At the moment of the King's death under the egalitarian machine, a crucial inversion takes place: as the king loses his sacredness and sovereignty, the machine itself, by incarnating the universal reach of the Law, itself the expression of popular sovereignty, takes on this sacredness, asserts its own sovereignty. What happens at this moment therefore is what we might call a transference of transcendence, from the king to the people. This transference occurs via the instrument of mechanical death. A clear circle is established then and for posterity, between the new principle of social life (equality), the new principle of political sovereignty (the demos), and the new mode of execution.

The thought arises that the symbolic and aesthetic power of the guillotine so well studied by Arasse might draw from the classical iconography mentioned in the previous sections. Accordingly, the guillotine might derive some of its iconic potency, an iconic potency that has lasted to this day and continues to cast its shadow over any substantive politics of equality, through its citing the symbolism of the sacred planes, notably the most symbolic of those planes, the body of Christ itself, caught midway between earth and heaven at the moment of the crucifixion. On this hypothesis, we should analyse the transference of transcendence in terms of a displacing or transforming of the

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Figure 7. Sir John Everett Millais, Bt (1829–1896) *Christ in the House of his Parents*, **1849–1850 © Tate Gallery, London, Photo © Tate. Image released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported).**

Source: http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-christ-in-the-house-of-his-parents-the-carpenters-shop-n03584.

dialectic of horizontality and verticality; or to say it differently, as the production of a new set of figuration processes in and around a sacred plane that is new, yet also homological in some way, to the Christian ones, notably the altar and cross, the most important of all such planes. In its new figuration sacred death has become a secularised one. Rather than rising up to heaven, the condemned lose their heads, which fall down into a basket. The sacred nature of death by guillotine comes from the fact that it executes a judgement based on the new transcendent Law, the law that ignores all social and other differences, and is the direct expression of the new sovereignty, the sovereignty of all. This law is one that levels down, rather than one that raises up. But it is itself a sacred kind of law: in its very immanence, it points to its own source of transcendence, the sovereignty of the people, who are no longer a flock, or the silent one amongst the three estates, but the entire collective itself as collective of equals.

8. Modern legacies (2): Making the door to the kingdom of God

A second, modern legacy of the classical iconography of levelling might be one that embraces more literally the Christian narrative, and adopts more directly the iconography of immanence within transcendence by explicitly reinterpreting the classical ones. We find this other legacy in nineteenth century republican and socialist writings and in paintings that reinterpret the Christian message through egalitarian lenses. Within this immense corpus, one picture that is particularly suggestive is the one John Everett Millais painted in 1849, at the age of 20, at the height of Chartism, a painting that signalled the start of the pre-Raphaelite movement: *Jesus in the House of his Parents* (Figure 7).

The image references many of the traditional symbols of the story of Christ. The young Jesus shows us the wound he has received in his left hand from working with his father. There are nails behind him, lying on the door that Joseph is making. To the left of Jesus a slightly older boy with the features of John the Baptist is carrying a bowl containing water, both to soothe this particular wound, but also in signage of the future christening. His mother Mary is wearing a veil signalling her grief, both present and future. Another woman, who in scenes of crucifixion would be identified as Mary of Clopas, looks on with sadness. A dove sits on the ladder at the back of the scene, clearly signalling the waiting presence of the Holy Spirit. Through a vacant frame, on the left side, a flock of sheep looks on, ready to follow the Saviour. Behind them, at the top of a hill, an agricultural apparatus shows the geometry of a cross in T.

The full meaning of the painting is established only once the precise configuration of those classical iconic elements is noted. Jesus' stigmata are directly related to what his father Joseph is doing: nailing wooden bars on a flat plank of wood to make a door. The painting's set-up in fact states it explicitly: with his left hand, Joseph holds the bleeding hand of his son, both in comfort and in monstration. But the right hand that holds a hammer sits so close behind the sacred bleeding hand, it is in fact difficult to make out one hand from the other. The painting is literally saying that it is Joseph the carpenter, somehow, with some relation to the workshop (where the timber to make a cross is already visible) who will nail his own son to the Cross.

We could say that this twist on the Christian narrative is not new. It can reference the tradition of paintings showing Jesus with Joseph, in which wood working is depicted as metaphor and anticipation of the Saviour righting the crooked timber of humanity through his own sacrifice on a wooden cross. However, in these classical paintings, Joseph is not shown with a hammer, but with a gimlet, as a metaphor for the mystery of the virgin birth, or with an axe or other instrument used to extract straight shapes (like the poles of a cross) from a rough piece of timber. In the Millais painting, it is the making of a door with a hammer (for the frame on the left?) that causes Jesus' injury, and thus anticipates his fate. This door occupies the centre of the painting and lies between Jesus with his bleeding hand in the foreground and the ladder in the background. This door is typically one of those sacred planes whose presence we have been following. It seems obvious that this plane at the centre of the painting cuts through a vertical plane of transcendence. Once we link this horizontal plane to the symbols attached to it (the hammer, the pincer, the saw and all the other tools, together with all the other signs telling us that we are in a place of work), an obvious hypothesis about the meaning of this modern sacred plane can be advanced.

We must start however by briefly describing the plane of transcendence, the vertical plane that rises through the picture. The picture is structured around a vertical line roughly splitting it through the middle. This line of ascension runs through the outer hem of Mary's dress, her hands, continues between hers and her son's lips, along a line running up against the wall behind them, through the hole in the setsquare and through the top external corner of the saw's blade. A number of important diagonal lines intersect this vertical line. All the other protagonists' gazes intersect this vertical line exactly at the intersection of Mary's and Jesus' lips, indicating the geometrical and symbolic centre of the picture. Indeed, a line runs through the child's stigmata and intersects at this centre. Other diagonal lines intersect the central vertical line above and underneath this focal point. For example, the left border of the table leads a line that intersects the vertical axis at an important point situated outside the upper rim of the painting, whilst the right border defines a line intersecting further down, at the corner of the saw's blade (the table's geometry therefore is incorrect).

A number of other diagonal lines also meet at the point on the vertical that is situated beyond the visible (the point of final ascension, we might call it): the line indicated by the left plank of wood across the table; the line running through the handle in the foreground; the line running through Joseph's hammer, the handle of a non-visible tool and the shadow of the ladder's left pole; the line running through John's hands and Joseph's eyes; the diagonal line cutting across the first square on the ladder, passing through the Holy Spirit's dove.

Another important point sits about midway between Jesus and Mary's heads and this transcendent point beyond the painting's border: it is at the intersection of the vertical axis and the line running through the other Mary's hands and is indicated by the shine of a nail. Note that the head of this nail sits right next to the blade of a gimlet, recalling the traditional representation of Joseph as boring holes in wood.

Another important point is the point at which Mary's hands meet the vertical line. Indeed, a full analysis of all the triangles created by lines converging from the left and the right at intersecting points on the central axis would show that these triangles are mirrored in reverse direction

underneath Jesus and Mary's heads. The descending lines converging towards the bottom of the painting are underlined on both sides by the movements of the wooden planks on the walls.

All these diagonal lines converging towards the central axis highlight this vertical line, the plane of ascension towards the Holy Spirit and beyond. This is the plane leading to the kingdom of God.

These converging lines united by their convergence on the vertical axis only constitute one dimension of the painting. The other dimension, as highlighted already, is the horizontal one. All the flat lines that striate the painting, from the ground to the top, notably the multiple flat lines that delineate the table and run through the rungs of the ladder, indicate this dimension. Of all these flat lines, one is particularly remarkable, the one made up by the right arm of Jesus, which meets his left arm exactly at the perpendicular, and defines a line running through his mother's hands, as well as the holy water carried by John and the clamp to the left, which looks conspicuously like a medieval torture instrument.

Are those graded, horizontal lines to be seen as just another ascending ladder, leading all the way to the top, beyond the ceiling of the painting, into the kingdom of God? The place taken by the door at the centre of the painting speaks against this interpretation. The door, through its sheer size and the position it takes, filling the centre of the picture, separating Jesus from the ladder and the Holy Spirit, quite literally bars his ascension. It fulfils in some way a similar function as the horizontal bar in the cross, namely as a place where Jesus gets hurt and that prevents direct access to heaven. This door might well lead to the kingdom of god, as the flock waiting for the saviour appears to indicate, but only through suffering and death.

But why a door to replace the cross and thereby signify the mediation that is at the heart of the Christian narrative? And why is it presented in this way, as the central, sacred plane in the whole painting?

Clearly, this flat-lying door borrows some of the symbolism and the concrete traits of an altar. Given the anticipations of the Christ' sacrifice present in the painting, this flat surface seems ready to welcome his dead body before he rises again through the ladder. In fact, since it is made of simple wood, it looks not like the rich tomb that Joseph of Arimathea gave to Jesus, but as the casket of a simple person. And this seems to be one of the key points of the painting: a wooden door and a rough ladder in a workshop are different from a rich altar and a cross made from the wood of the tree of original sin, as is supposed to have received Jesus at Golgotha. These are banal objects, made of basic material, produced by simple workers, things that can be found in a humble workshop. Modest human hands this painting tells us make the door to the kingdom of god and the ladder that will lead the flock of the good shepherd there. Jesus himself participates in their making, with his own hands. His sacrifice that saves humanity, in this image, is directly connected to him having had to work at the door and the ladder to heaven. Indeed, as we saw before, in a sense it is his father the humble human carpenter, and not his divine father, who condemns him to suffering on plane of radical immanence. To open the door that leads to the ladder ascending to the kingdom of heaven, human beings will have to make that door, as Jesus did: this is what the painting seems to be saying.

In this painting therefore, the plane that is delimited by the meeting of the horizontal lines of finitude and immanence and the vertical axis of transcendence, this plane can be interpreted as the plane of human work. This painting, let us remember, was realised and unveiled at the height of the Chartist movement. The industrial workers of England through mass mobilisation demanded full political representation, the right to participate in political decisions, as the door to resolving the injustice, suffering and inequality they were suffering from. The painting seems to take sides with them, showing them as those who will be truly redeemed, as those who share Jesus' condition as a young carpenter, or indeed as those who will be the true redeemers. The transference of transcendence in this case consists in shifting the plane of immanence that inhabits the plane of

transcendence. The plane of immanence in this modern image is the plane of those who work with their hands and who make the instruments of their own redemption. They are indeed the poor and the downtrodden, but with the crucial added identity of being also the proletarians. This painting, it seems to me, shows a different shift in the dialectic of equality within inequality, and in the logic of levelling. Levelling is still tied to death here, but this time it is a hopeful, redeeming death, one that occurs via the suffering of work which is also the practice whereby humanity makes the instruments of its own redemption, creates its own door to the Kingdom of God, so to speak. We have here, it seems to me, one potent example of the legacy of the Christian dialectic of equality in inequality, of immanence within transcendence, in modern socialist thinking.

9. Conclusion

We started by noting the ambiguous place the norm of equality has in the contemporary conception of justice. On the one hand, it counts as one of the two most basic norms of justice, alongside liberty. On the other hand, the treatment of equality both from philosophers and in broader public discourse is significantly different from that of liberty. The only two ways by which equality is counted as a fundamental norm that forms a rightful part of the modern sense of justice is if it is paired with liberty (as in Balibar's "egaliberty"), or when it is interpreted as a way to instantiate freedom socially and politically in relation to specific rights (as in Rawls and Honneth). However, hardly anyone equates justice with equality alone, or makes equality the most fundamental norm of justice (as Babeuf did for instance).

One reason for such asymmetrical treatment of the two fundamental norms lies in the ambivalent legacy that equality has left behind. This paper has sought to highlight a few episodes in this ambivalent history. By identifying a specific way in which the Christian tradition operates around the structure of equality and inequality, I have tried to show how generations of classical painters have dealt with the implications of realising equality, or levelling. In this tradition already, levelling is a two-faced process. Levelling on the one hand is what the Christian God does himself, first by bringing himself down into the world of his own creatures, by becoming one of them, and second because from the point of view of his original creation, all creatures are the same. These radical egalitarian features inscribed at the heart of the Christian faith opened up the prospect of a radical social and political realisation of equality on earth. On the other hand, this levelling is inherently tied to violent death, the sacrifice of the sacred being. This, in turn, seems to have been retrieved by the actors of the French revolution, at least partly in deliberate fashion, when they organised the *mise en scène* for the ultimate transference of transcendence, from the King to the People, in the execution of Louis XVI. This is the moment in modern history when the transference of sovereignty from a god-anointed sacred being to a self-anointed demos corresponds also to a program of realising "real equality", of actual social levelling. Since this violent episode, the shadow of the guillotine has continued to tarnish any reference to realising equality in substantial fashion. Nevertheless, the ambivalence of equality was not dissolved in this tragic episode. As Millais' first painting also illustrates, it remains possible in modernity to anticipate a realisation of equality where sacrifice is not violence done to others in the name of a misconstrued ideal, but indicates rather the pains involved in a social movement that is justified by the search for full social justice.

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