

Steven Durlauf: Hello and welcome to The Inequality Podcast, I'm Steven Durlauf. The University is currently closed for its winter recess, so today we are sharing a recording from our archive. It is one of our team's favorites. It is a live panel discussion of a book by Darrin McMahon who is a professor at Dartmouth College and one of the world's leading intellectual historians. The book is *Equality: The History of an Elusive Idea*. As you will hear in our discussion, the book contains a wealth of ideas and historical detail, and very much speaks to not just historians, intellectual historians, but to social sciences.

The panel itself, I hope, has particular value because of its interdisciplinarity. And so what you will hear is a presentation by Darrin McMahon and then it will be followed by three people from very different disciplines. It will be myself as an economist, Jenny Trinitapoli, who is a sociologist here at the University of Chicago, and Jonathan Levy, a former professor of History, I'm sorry to say, at the University of Chicago and currently a professor at Sciences Po. And I should mention that Jonathan will be joining me in a future episode of the podcast series.

So the next voice you're going to hear is my colleague at the Harris School and the events moderator Scott Ashworth. And so thanks for joining us.

Scott Ashworth: I'd like to welcome you all to this event of the Stone Center for Research on Wealth Inequality and Mobility. The events about Darren McMahon's new book, *Equality: The History of an Elusive Idea*. So I'm Scott Ashworth, professor at the Harris School. I will be sort of directing traffic up here this afternoon. So the book to read, *Equality: The History of Elusive Idea* is to be guided through a sequence of images—what equality looked like to people of a really broad span of time, from prehistory to now. And the first thing that really struck me about that journey is just how much diversity there is in what equality looks like. So as you move from classical Greece to the early modern Atlantic world to now, or if you move from Karl Marx to Karl Schmidt, you see this one idea, equality, which actually is much more complicated than that.

There are some commonalities underlying equality in the story. Equality is always the equality of some particular group and in some particular respect. But those dimensions of difference actually span an incredibly rich space of possibility for thinking about equality. It's much more than you would think from just thinking about today's debates. For example, the debates over inequality that are so much a part of places like the Stone Center, or debates that are going on around us about whether equality's time has passed, with something called equity waiting in the wings to replace it. So I think that's just a fascinating story. But I've been on this side of the midway for 15 years and so I know it's also good to have sort of a more practical spin on why you should be the book. And I think in this case, I would say that having that kind of picture laid out for you to see that diversity of thinking is

really important and valuable if you want to be thinking about those contemporary debates. You know, when you do so, it is unsettling in the best possible way in that it upsets sort of the ingrained ways of thinking about equality that you come to realize are historically contingent and not natural to actually the way things have to be. And so I really am glad I've read the book and I encourage all of you to read it as well.

So I'm very pleased to welcome Darrin McMahon here to the Keller Center for this event. Darren is the David W. Little class of 1944 Professor of History at Dartmouth. Before that, he was the Mary Brinsmead Wheelock Professor and at Florida State, the Ben Weider Professor and Distinguished Research Professor. He's the author of—I'm not going to read the entire list—of many, many, many scholarly and public-facing articles, as well as four books and editor of *Seven More*, the intellectual historian of the Enlightenment, which is a central chapter in this book. Thank you. And, and off to you, Darrin.

Darrin McMahon: All right. Well, thank you so much, Scott. And thank you to my fellow panelists for taking time out. I know it's the end of the semester and it's a busy time and I really appreciate this. I was actually having dinner last night with a friend and I mentioned that really one of my great joys as a scholar is the opportunity to talk cross-discipline with fellow scholars around a topic of common interest. So I was really particularly pleased to get the invitation to come here and I'm grateful to the Stone Center for the opportunity.

I'm not going to try to summarize a rather long book in 15 minutes, I think that would end badly. But I do want to make a couple points that may well not come up in the discussion, but I think serve well to defamiliarize the concept of equality. And that's really one of the things that I'm up to in this book. I'm trying to take an idea which seems familiar in many ways and make it make it strange. I think it's clear that we here in the contemporary United States and in many other parts of the world besides are currently experiencing a crisis of equality. You will have seen the disturbing statistics that almost half the world's wealth is owned by just 1% of the world's population, that the three richest individuals in America command more than the bottom 50%, that structural inequalities bound up with issues of race and sex remain stubborn and recalcitrant. Such headline-making figures though tend only to reaffirm an intuitive sense that we've somehow lost our way. We see inequality almost everywhere, but equality itself can be difficult even to imagine.

Well, I like to joke that I'm a pessimist by temperament, but that I believe optimism to be a virtue. And so the optimistic scenario here or the virtuous one, if you will, is that crises present opportunities. And this opportunity is an idea to rethink an idea that we thought we knew. Equality, after all, has played a central role in Western political discussions since at least the 18th century. In my own lifetime—I was born in California in 1965—it was still very much a part of a collective horizon of expectations. Equality was what we were moving

toward, however, slowly, however, fitfully. Equality of race, of sex, of prospect and opportunity, of possession, and of power. The arc of humanity bent toward equality, bent towards justice. An idea, of course, famously articulated by Martin Luther King, but which traces to the coinage of the 19th century abolitionist theologian, Theodore Parker. Before him to the progressive ideals and visions of the 18th century enlightenment and farther back still to Christian providential thought.

Yet as a curious thing about equality, we've tended not to treat it historically. We haven't written its history, particularly its intellectual history, with the kind of energy or attention devoted to, say, subjects like liberty or freedom. It's my colleague and friend, the historian David Armitage, who pointed out a number of years ago, the conceptual history of equality remains almost entirely unwritten. And it might be interesting to talk about why that's a case. Well, fortunately, that is beginning to change. We're starting to see the emergence of a new historiography devoted to the study of equality. And one of the lessons of that collective research is that equality is not an exclusively modern idea, but in fact, a very old one with roots in myriad, religious and cultural traditions that has been put, as Scott said, to a surprising variety of uses in different contexts and different times. And so very briefly, I just want to give you a sense of some of that variety, and to share with you a couple of the insights that doing this kind of history of equality over the long duree can yield. And I've purposely here chosen examples that go against the grain of how we tend to think of equality today. So these may well seem somewhat strange.

But one of the things that emerges very clearly is that many of the uses to which equality has been put are scarcely egalitarian at all. Equality rather has functioned time and again, not only as a liberating ideal, but as a hierarchical premise, the basis on which distinctions between equals and unequals are drawn. There's no shortage of examples, but this one is fairly close to home. That's the third century Roman jurist Domitius Ulpianus Ulpian: "And so far as the law of nature is concerned, all men are created equal." Or this one, that's Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century: "All men are created equal" or "all men are birthed equal" depending on how you translate. The assertion by that point, by the sixth century, was in fact a common place. It's a widely shared dictum of both Stoic jurists and the patristic fathers. Really something of a cliché, as it was, frankly, when Thomas Jefferson employed the very same phrase over a millennium later.

The point to note here is that despite the equal creation of humanity, neither Ulpian nor Gregory, both of whom like Jefferson were owners of enslaved people, saw any conflict whatsoever between natural equality and the very real inequalities of their worlds. For Ulpian, positive law and the dictates of the emperor took precedence over natural law. And for Christians like Gregory, original sin had blotted out the possibility of equal treatment in

this world, where sacred order and hierarchy—both of those are Christian terms—was very much the norm. Equality for the true equals—the saints—would be measured in the life to come. Now that's by no means the end of the story. The Christian tradition, like so many of the world's religious traditions, has more to say on the subject of equality. And in fact, I have a whole chapter on the book on Christian ideas of equality, as well as on some of the ideas of equality of the major axial phase. And this is just one example of many from the fourth century BCE, Taoist Sage Zhuangzi, who in his collection of writings by that same name has a chapter, the *Qiwulun*, which is a discussion of the equality of all things. What he means by equality is different from what we mean, but what's interesting is that later activists for wealth equality or for animal rights or for feminist values can go back and look at that document and use it as a touchstone and draw things out of it. And that's really true, I would argue, of all the major religious traditions.

And yet what should be clear from the example that I gave from Upan and Pope Gregory is that the articulation of the phrase, all men are created equal, or all human beings are created equal if you prefer, is not a magic formula with its own inherent logic that somehow naturally erodes standing inequalities. Equality and inequality, equality and exclusion rather are perfectly compatible, the one often serving as the foundation of the other. And that would remain true through the great revolutionary era of the 18th and 19th centuries when a world in which all men were created equal was of course a world in which some of its inhabitants and others served, some ruled and others served, a world in which men prevailed over women, the rich over the poor, white over black, and Europe, the new Europes, over most everyone else.

It was in part for that reason, I think, that Marx and Engels were so contemptuous of equality, not only in its liberal democratic guise, as you might expect, but in its socialist and social democratic permutations. That's a fact that is not always appreciated, and yet both men were consistent in deriding equality as what they described in the German ideology as the illusion of the era. Dismissing the fantasies of radical French revolutionaries like Babeuf, or there would be socialist heirs as so much Nivellierung or Gleichmachery crude leveling, they similarly dismissed the stated aim of the German social democratic workers party to abolish, “all social and political inequality as so much nonsense and confusion, a prejudice of the past.” And that phrase abolishing all social and political inequalities in the famous Guter program of the social democratic workers party that Marx critiques in 1875. The goal of true economists was not equality as this slide from Engels makes clear, but the abolition of class conflict. And so when Lenin, like Stalin later, dismissed the concept of equality as, “a most absurd and stupid prejudice” both men were on unimpeachable Marxist grounds. Indeed there's no evidence whatsoever in the corpus of Marx and Engels

writings to suggest that either man considered equality, material or political or social to be the consequence of communism.

Well, if equality doesn't figure where you thought it might in the Marxist tradition, it does figure where you may have least expected—in fascism. A devoted chapter to that unlikely subject in the book pointing out, for example, that the central fascist symbol, the Roman fascist, is a venerable symbol of unity and indeed equality above all for Republicans in the 18th and 19th centuries in both France and the United States. In co-opting it, Italian and German fascists style themselves the defenders of real equality, which they juxtapose with what they regarded as the weakness and hypocrisy of liberal and social democratic equality talk with its appeals to the universal rights of humankind. Equality was only for those who shared a common substance—fascists insisted—concrete similarities of common history, language, religion and race that bound together the circle of true equals and set the others apart. As arguably the most trenchant of those critics, the Nazi crown jurist Carl Schmitt observed, every actual democracy in history had operated in precisely this way—establishing equality on the principle that, “not only are equals equal, but then unequals will not be treated equally.” In Schmitt's view, the Nazi regime had what he called the courage to embrace what liberals denied to themselves.

Now, I won't give Schmitt the last word and rest assured that the book itself pays ample heed to stories that you might more readily expect to find in a book about equality in the way that we think about it since the second half of the 20th century. Stories about the struggle against empire or patriarchy or white supremacy or economic injustice. And yet the equality talk of people like Schmitt is worth heeding, if only because it's being revived self-consciously in many parts of the world today, not least here in the United States. But I don't mean with these counter examples, these counterintuitive examples, to dilute the power of equality in a relativist bath. My purpose is not to undermine the pursuit of equality, rather it's to emphasize that we haven't yet fully come to terms with its complicated history. Only by doing so I would argue by telling the history of how equality has been imagined in the past, can we begin the vital work of beginning to imagine it anew.

Ashworth: And now from our panel, Jonathan.

Jonathan Levy: Pleasure to be here. Thank you for the invitation and thank you to the organizers of the event. Thanks to Darrin. I, like Darrin, am a historian. I think this book, you know, really does convey the contribution that history can make to social scientific debates, including the contemporary debate about inequality. That this is a remarkably rich book, rich in its scope, rich in its analysis. I challenge anyone to read the book and not to learn a great deal from it. And, you know, history is very much, in my opinion, a mess. It's a complete mess. You know, it's not the responsibility of the historian to say it's all a mess.

That's not really doing the job right. You still need to find patterns and residences and even mechanisms, but not at the expense of it obscuring the richness and the surprising variety of the past, which this book does. In part, because it does not fall back on standard narratives about the history of equality, whether those set on a distinction between ancient and modern notions of politics, or even those that go as far to argue that equality is a recent secular enlightenment era notion.

Darrin breaks from those narratives. He tells a much more interesting and a much less teleological story, but he also finds new patterns. I think the emphasis that we already heard on equality actually often marching hand in hand with hierarchy, if not domination, is certainly notable. But I think to me the most striking finding in the book is the long persistence of these actual, axial age commitments to fellowship. It's an egalitarian thread that runs through the book, through the last chapter on decolonization and civil rights. It's really fascinating. And I think historians will engage with and debate these ideas, these arguments. But with any luck, the book will provoke a debate and map out a new kind of historical research agenda on the history of equality. That's no small feat, so congratulations to the author.

Let me now switch gears. And well, first let me affirm another important intervention of the book, that the contemporary discourse on inequality that shockingly absent from it is an informed understanding of equality. And that strikes me as correct. Now this term here in the college at Chicago, I teach you a course called The United States 2000 to 2008. And just stay with me here for a second. I mean, we begin the course on day one, as we should, with visions of the millennium. And we read an address that Bill Clinton gave at the Lincoln Memorial just before the clock struck midnight on January 1st, 2000. Let me quote at some length from Clinton's speech:

“The great story of the 20th century is the tribe of freedom. A story told of the drama of new immigrants, the struggle for equal rights of the victories over totalitarianism. The building of a world in which more than half the people now live under governments of their own free choosing for the first time in all history. We must never forget the meeting of the 20th century, the triumph of freedom. And so as we ring in this new year, we must now and always echo Dr. King in the words of the old American hymn, let freedom ring. If the story of the 20th century is the triumph of freedom, let the 21st century be the story of freedom wisely used.”

Well, that was an optimistic speech. I mean, unfortunately, arguably the 21st century, the dominant theme is not freedom, but rather inequality. And this has been a rather surprising turn of events. I think the period after the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, through Clinton's presidency, the millennium, I think through 2008, and I think Derrin's right here, is

a turning point. That period, the central keyword in US, I think global English public discourse, was not equality—it was freedom. I could go on at length here, and I won't. But this is not just a kind of ideological phenomenon. I mean, if you look at George W. Bush's speeches during the war on terror, he's always talking about freedom. He never talks about equality. I mean, he never talks about equality, as in, never. But even on the left end of the political spectrum, if you read such a landmark, kind of Supreme Court cases like *Lawrence v. Texas*. The court, you know, reasons through it and says, we're going to root this decision in liberty and in due process this, 14th amendment decision. We're not going to root this decision in equal protection. And if you even read Obama's speeches during the 2008 campaign, which I've been doing a lot lately, he talks about freedom a lot. He rarely mentions equality or inequality.

OK, so my point here is not that Darrin should have written a book about freedom instead of equality, not at all. It's just to note that in rather recent times, the overriding ideological emphasis in our culture has been freedom, but that the absence of a discourse on equality or inequality, I think it's striking. That doesn't really happen until the second decade of 21st century. And in my view, the outbreak, the veritable explosion of inequality discourse since 2008, I think might best be best interpreted as a disenchantment with the post-cold war of freedom agenda of the 1990s and 2000s. Right, so it failed. And our era of inequality very much occurs only in its aftermath. I think here you have to start with the war in Iraq. You have to talk about the global financial crisis. That's a different history. But this is my sense of how we ended up talking about inequality in our own times.

OK so, so what then? To sort of think about freedom alongside equality and inequality. Let me make two points. I guess I wonder if outbreaks of fears over inequality have often occurred when there have been disillusionments with particular freedom agendas. As opposed to fear of inequality or concern for inequality as such, which might be the reason why the notion of equality often remains so vague. So our era of a kind of, if you will, neoliberal freedom giving way to concerns over inequality. But I think there's other moments which do appear in the book. Aristotle laments a lack of concern with equality in the Hellenistic period very much after arguably a kind of dissatisfaction or disenchantment with the practice of democracy tied to an ideal of freedom in the Greek classical period. And likewise, I think a 19th century discourse of fear or concerns about inequality followed in the wake of dissatisfactions with an era of slave emancipation in which freedom was, I think, the keyword or concerns about unfreedom rather than inequality. That's kind of one point. Second, I mean, I would like to ask, Darrin if you might sort of expand upon moments in the book when freedom does appear. I mean, if I read it, if I didn't miss it, it comes first in the chapter on justice on the ancient Greeks, which gave birth to the notion that runs through our own times, in which freedom demanded equality and went together. You could

only be truly free in a community of equals, although as the book shows, often that community of equals has placed itself above other human groups in a hierarchy.

Then there's the chapter on the French Revolution. We get the—first we get the idea that freedom and equality, in fact, pull against one another—their intention. So equality involves constraining if not diminishing freedom. So there's these kind of two couplings between freedom and equality in the book. But it's a soft note, and I'd be curious, you know, for Darrin to elaborate that a bit.

My third and final point, and then I'll conclude, I really like the first two chapters of the book on the deep evolutionary past of our species. And the shift to kind of an egalitarian hut, usually what historians write, it gets kind of annoying. I don't know why. Not here. Right? It's sort of right touch, right, pitch. It sets the seed for the axial age, and especially Christianity, which I think that's the central chapter in the book, as I read it. In which you get a vision of equality and fellowship, it was completely delict from any notion of freedom, but also any notion of domination. So here I think Darrin made the right choice, set freedom aside, and focus on the book on equality. So it's highly illuminating to read a history of equality standing on its own independent from its relationship to freedom. But I wonder if Darrin might be willing kind of normatively, and here I will add, kind of double down on this choice, and to suggest that the Greek fusion of equality and freedom was a trap that we can't think our way out of, or at least I can't think my way out of clearly. It was a mistake that inevitably mixed equality with domination. A trap enlightenment thinkers fell into, and their obsessive joining of freedom and equality, in that order. And that perhaps we've fallen to as well. And that perhaps the central sort of normative takeaway of the book might be the need to create in the future a new egalitarian tradition that like the axial age traditions, critiques domination, critiques hierarchy, critiques inequality by divorcing visions of equality from visions of freedom altogether. So I'll stop there, and again, congratulations Darrin on writing such a great book.

Ashworth: Thanks John. Jenny?

Jenny Trinitapoli: Thank you. Well, I want to thank Steven for putting this book on my radar. I would have read it, but this event allowed it to rise to the top of my pile a little more quickly. And thanks to the Stone Center for putting on this event and inviting me to participate in the discussion.

Before reading this book, I had really thought about equality as a clear concept, a clear concept by which I mean something that scholars and ordinary people like routinely express in words, even though we've never observed it as an empirical reality in the world. Darre=in's book has really convinced me, in fact, right from the title in the first couple of

pages that this is an elusive concept. And I'm coming at this as a person who's trained as a social demographer, and this is a tradition that the historian Daniel Scott Smith described without much admiration as relentlessly and routinely analytical. Others refer to us as the bean counting branch of the social sciences. We're not especially fluent in philosophy, but are concerned with the size, territorial distribution and composition of populations. So with respect to conversations about equality, demographers are well positioned to speak about the possibility of and the trends in arithmetic or numerical equality. Now, arithmetic equality is a thin version of equality. The simple tally by numbers, accounting by lots of heads. The thicker concept of equality in McMahon's words is always about feeling, about passions and emotion. It's also about status and power and very often about domination and exclusion.

I want to suggest that the simple counting of lots by heads may not be so simple. Demography is relevant for the intellectual history of equality because it forces us to think about this problem of restless denominators. I take that phrase, restless denominators from the anthropological demographer, Jennifer Johnson-Hanks. Populations and groups are theoretical objects. They're not naturally bounded in any way that we should take for granted. And this is true whether we're talking about nation states or about small groups. So translated into classically demographic terms, McMahon provides us with many examples of restless denominators where social relationships are altered by exclusion. There are a variety of processes that can remove certain people from the whole, reducing the denominator or by expansion where the circle of equals is enlarged through processes of incorporation, expanding the denominator.

I want to frame, the rest of my remarks, around three things I found especially valuable in this book and add some thought about what a population perspective adds to how we might think about, measure, and imagine equality. My first takeaway from the book is really similar to John's first takeaway, which is that the serious treatment of equality has been a casualty of the reigning inequality paradigm. I've seen this up close. I study population dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa in some of the poorest parts of the world with the focus on the causes and consequences of the HIV crisis. And this work puts me in conversation with scholars and policymakers committed to things like improving health and education, reducing inequality, and spurring economic growth. These commitments have become sacralized through the sustainable development goals and in my circle this goal of reducing inequality in particular has become almost totemic, proceeding without an ongoing robust examination of what equality means or its concrete relationship to inequality. McMahon's text names this as a problem and gives us some tools for doing better.

Quoting Martin Luther King Jr. from 1967, McMahon reminds us that readers may not even be speaking a common language when the word equality is evoked. King said that black Americans proceeded from the premise that equality means what it says while white Americans, including many persons of goodwill, proceeded from a premise that equality is a loose expression for improvement. This articulation that equality is not just a loose expression for improvement hit me really hard. It pinpoints a decades-long discomfort I've had with certain conversation partners, especially as it relates to converse to work on topics such as pandemics and excess mortality. When the head of UNAIDS, for example, talks about eliminating inequalities, surely she isn't suggesting that we elevate levels of HIV prevalence and redistribute the burden that currently characterizes South Saharan Africa, evening things out across the globe. When the US-Surgeon General bemoans maternal mortality inequalities in the United States, he is not seeking to spread out deaths among pregnant and postpartum women evenly across the whole country. What he means is we should be working to reduce suffering, reduce misery, and ensure survival. McMahon writes forcefully about the blinders of the new inequality paradigm even as teams of social scientists labored to measure inequalities of every kind, especially inequality of outcomes. He is very convincing when he argues that this focus has stifled our ability to engage with equality without resorting to seductive vagueness. McMahon urges us to reset some intellectual habits that have gotten a little bit sloppy, and I find this correction to be an important one.

The second point I want to suggest is that we have more to learn about how demographic shifts and perceptions of them can shape dispositions towards equality. Foremost in my mind while reading this book was whether the historical moments McMahon used to craft his argument were set against a backdrop of population growth, stability, or decline. Were the denominator shifting? How? I'll highlight two examples from the book that were really generative for me. McMahon shows us that the ancient Greeks thought about equality in mathematical terms. The notions of equality were manifest in emergent understandings of the universe, of the body in medicine, and the official weights and measures used in the city. This general interest in measurement took on political and moral salience when applied to the police. These are the conditions under which the strong principle of equality first emerged, as Athenians also sought to achieve more harmonious balance and greater justice in their city. He describes reforms to expand the circle of citizens and efforts to reorganize the tribes, incorporating local villages and wards towards equality. For demographers this is a clear example of a restless denominator in this case, an expanding one. And mortality rates are usually put in the technical and dry column, but it's not worthy to me that this period was characterized by acute population decline, specifically the measurable and palpable loss of men ages 20 to 49, as measured by military enrollments

and censuses. So we might consider how awareness of this shrinking denominator could allow for the expansion that formed communities of equals without precedent. In contrast to ancient Greece, in light in many Europe was a time of rapid population growth, the likes of which had never been experienced in world history. The decades leading up to the front revolution have been characterized by many scholars as a classic Malthusian regime.

What's also noteworthy is the puzzling fact that the period following the French Revolution was characterized by an acute preoccupation about sluggish population growth in France relative to neighboring countries. These concerns are present in the text of many French teachers. Godwin and Condorcet in particular believed that there could be a state of perfect equality with equal abundance rather than equal poverty. As with the Athenians, these arguments for equality were paired with a bona fide preoccupation about losing people. Infamously, Malthus had a different take. Concerned about rapid population growth and its consequences, he believed that equality could only be manifest in equality and poverty, equality and misery. Malthus had the numerator wrong but the denominator right and with respect to arithmetic equality, Godwin and Condorcet wrote about equality with optimism about the numerator and pessimism about the denominator.

My third remark is a question to Darrin about the role of formalism for treating equality seriously. He tells us that equality is always an invariably imaginary, emphasizing that this does not mean that it's an illusion. Equality is first and foremost a relationship that we conjure in our minds in order to draw comparisons between dissimilar things. So what tools do we work with when we imagine equality? We can rely on history, engage philosophy, imagine utopias. But are mathematical models another tool and the toolkit scholars could use to think clearly about equality? On the one hand, from McMahon's account, I came away with the sense that quantification, especially in ancient Greece, was indispensable to human's ability to conceive of and pursue equality as an ideal. On the other hand, I had the sense that McMahon is impatient with or uninterested in quantification, especially contemporary efforts to measure equality and inequality in the empirical world. Congratulations, Darrin, on this valuable contribution which gave me a bouquet of interesting things to think about much more than I have had time to unpack in these few minutes, but I'll end here.

Ashworth: Steven?

Steven Durlauf: Somebody first of all thank everybody for participating. I realize that the invitation may have sounded like a joke where you say you get two historians in economists, the sociologist and the political scientist in a room and see what happens. But the serious point is that this is a wonderful book and I think is an exemplar of how interdisciplinary interactions are enriched by, uh, by the book and hopefully will be

engaging. So my main thing to say about the book is that from my perspective, it really was a movable feast. Every time I read a chapter, I went back and forth, I learned something new. My postdocs can tell you I was knocking on their door every day for two weeks and telling them, do you know this? I thought about this the following way. So I have evidence of my enthusiasm for it and it really was the depths of details or just the levels that are honestly breathtaking and I'm grateful for the opportunity to read the book.

So what might an economist add? I want to talk about two dimensions of the book. First is kind of what axes that I perceive might organize some of the themes in the book. Now in doing that, there's going to be a disciplinary difference because I'm going to over simplify here, here, here, here, here in order to say there's some commonalities that we're going to extract from this. And implicit in those simplifications I will be focused really on thinking about a tradition that goes from lock to Gerald Cohen in terms of thinking about equalities. And the second thing I want to say something about teleology. And there I want to touch base with formal models, at least in economics and in social sciences to how it thinks about the long run.

So it seemed to me that there was a way to think about this is to use a phrase, as do Sen and Cohen, that really this is the evolution of the idea of equality evolves the currency of a egalitarian justice. And what I mean by that is that in understanding the ideas of equality as they go from Locke to Rousseau to Mill remarks to Rawls, what I perceive is a couple of axes along which you have changes in what the domain is of the consideration of equality in terms of both its definition and who it applies to. And so what I mean by that is the following and that is that if you sort of step back and actually I was surprised that Mill doesn't appear in the index, so I'll tease you about that. I basically want to focus on that point. There's reading chapters in socialism and this is where I want to say it's kind of this key nexus. And that is the freedom libertarian meritocrat makes the remarkable statement that the very idea of descriptive justice or any proportionality between success and merit, between success and exertion in the presence of society is so manifestly numerical as to be relegated to the regions of romance. And this is actually the answer I want to give on the freedom equality issue.

My perception is that one way to think about the process by which ideas about equality were evolving was that there was a hope which turned out to be false and that is that freedom, in other words that there was reducing political inequalities, what is a corollary produced greater economic equality and that's the distinction between reading Adam Smith, where the discussions of monopolies, etc. Versus reading Marx in which you argue the system itself independent of what the political equality was being imposed was consistent with growing and massive inequalities. And so that's why seriously took the

Mill's chapters on socialism to me was very mentally influential because that to me is a nexus, is a point in which the notion that economic equalities would be derivative from politically equalities gets called into question. And so I emphasize that because in thinking about contemporary notions of equality which ultimately have to do with the equality of opportunity in some very broad sense, the quality of outcomes is a different, it's somewhat distinct, but most of the debates have to do with the quality of opportunity. Cohen I thought had a very important distinction and that was what he called bourgeois equality of opportunity, which basically said that impediments, or unjust impediments should be removed. Differentials and political, who has the right to vote for so on and so forth, they did the privileges of the aristocracy so on and so forth. The second is he defined left liberal equality of opportunity, which was, and this is where the Mill quotations seem to me have purchase and that is it says something beyond injustices that the society is collectively implemented, but saying that there are simply circumstances that are unjust regardless of their origins. They're unjust either because people don't deserve them or because they're not responsible for them if I were to go down those two roots in political philosophy. And then what he calls socialist equality of opportunity was simply to say that inequality doesn't matter where they came from. In other words, that the merit slash desert slash responsibility nexus really isn't the point. The point is that people don't deserve the differentials.

So I put all of that on the table because I think that's where social science becomes relevant. In other words, the contributions to the evolution of the ideas have to do number one with understanding the interconnectedness of the domains. In other words, if I were to go through a set of arguments as to how I see contemporary egalitarian discussions today influenced by social science, I would give pride of place to two studies from the 60s and 70s. One of them is the Coleman report. The most, you know, this very extensive study of educational inequalities in the United States. We suddenly said something. It wasn't resources. They were deep persistent roots to the history of racial discrimination in the United States that were not self-correcting. There's really a game changer in terms of the ways in which one has to think about policy. The second, I would actually say it was Christopher Jenks book on inequality, which basically made an argument, the contingency in arbitrariness were fundamental to the actual distributions. And so the upshot is I think that where I see contemporary social science making serious contributions is integrating the social, political, and economic domains. And by implication showing there's no teleology. In other words, there's going to be something in the process that we call the dynamics that is not self-correcting.

Second comment I want to make is that there's other dimension, which is who is the community of equals. And there, I'm not sure, social science does not have a glorious

history. It has an inglorious history. Where social science has contemporaneously made a contribution. If I were to go to Franz Boas, to Arthur Golberg, or Ned Block, what did they all do? They basically demonstrated the empirical falsity of claims about group differences. In other words, the essentialism associated with race or associated with genetics. And so where I see social science having spoken to many of these issues is by actually saying that there's an arbitrariness to the historical communities that has no scientific justification. So I think that some credits do there.

This was a word I wish I hadn't used, which is a criticism. I meant to say something else, and I apologize for that. And that is one thing I think would be useful is in thinking about these ideas as whether or not, and this is where formal models in my mind have a play, is that suppose I was going to restrict the domain of the evolution of the ideas of equality. And that's why I said, it's not fair to say it's criticism. Your talking about all this stuff and I'm saying do this. And that is, I wanted to move from Locke to Mills to Rawls just to be concrete about it. How might one proceed? It seems to me that one could do the following, and that is to say that we have certain au priori assumptions about the moral equality of individuals that set up who's equal, that evolves over time, partially for scientific reasons. And partially simply because social science tells about the arbitrariness of distinctions. Then the second question is to ask, how does that factor one interact with positive findings from social science? And so one goes down those routes, and I think by implication one has a distribution of positions on just versus unjust inequalities, inequalities, and by implication how to think about equality as a social dimension.

So in that sense, I guess what I'm saying is that it seemed to me that there's kind of an analogy between moral ideas and the way that we would formally model scientific progress. And so there the idea would be that there's a set of epistemic factors, non-epistemic factors that you put into the system. You have evidence that's flowing in from research, and then you ask how communities tip from one consensus to another. I think there's actually analogies here that could be drawn if one pushes this combination of what I'm saying as the logical entailment of certain egalitarian assumptions along with the way that social science knowledge has evolved. So that's kind of the first thing I want to put on the table. In other words, it seemed to me that this is actually a case—I honestly think formal models should be inspired by a book like this because it said, you know, think of this rich set of facts. Perhaps there's some way that a formal model can not just organize things, but maybe has a surprise, has a surprising outcome. And that's, you know, often how you judge a formal model is did they explain the thing you wanted to explain and does have other implications that are in fact empirically salient and, you know, have this aesthetic of surprise, which is a meaningful evaluation standard for theories, as I hope Scott would agree with me. All right. That's the first point.

The second point I wanted to say something about teleology. And I thought this was really a fascinating part of the book, the discussion of how it seemed to the thinking of inequality was so intrinsically linked to the idea that the arc of history is leading to that. Here I guess I want to say a couple of things. One of them is there are, of course, theories of persistent inequality. In other words, it would be the challenge to the claim that history is moving towards greater equality. And the two names that are probably one of them is matters in the history of the world. The other is in contemporary social science. I do want to say with respect to Piketty, this is not really a satisfactory theory of inequality. And what I mean by that is that the Piketty theory actually is literally one equation. And then that is the assumption that societies have a steady state of the capital output ratio that has to have some relationship between the growth rate of the economy and the savings rate of individuals.

Now, I say that's not a theory. First of all, it's not a theory because those are endog- both of those are endogenous variables. And I can give you any set of dynamics that's consistent with it. They actually don't entail any of the claims that there's something about the past eating the present or r being greater than g . The second problem is that the claim that something like r is greater than g actually has strange micro foundations. In other words, it derives from an environment that assumes that capitalists have a savings rate of 100 percent, workers have a savings rate of zero. You work out the dynamics of that system and you get these types of phenomena. And of course, this is missing everything in terms of politics, in terms of the complications and thinking about the actual evolution of the polity, et cetera. So I think it's a fair statement that economists by and large have very little sympathy to the theory of inequality in the book. That's different from the empirical work, which is enormously important to have generated these datasets. But the actual argumentation on the theory, I think, is widely rejected.

In my judgment it's more helpful to ask the following, a different question. And that is, what are the circumstances in a society in which we have what I'm going to call distributional instabilities? In other words, configurations tend to grow, inequalities increase. And there, I think we do have robust theories that explain these things. One idea would simply be the role of indivisibilities, non-convexities and systems. Nonlinear systems can have extremely slow adjustment rates. They create very large first-player advantages. It mattered that Bill Gates was the one that I agree that IBM signs the contract with so on and so forth. So in other words, in thinking about environments in which you have network externalities, you have various different times of what are we called non-convexities, those become generative mechanisms for periods of increasing inequality.

The second argument I would make is that we have to, and this is really taking history more seriously. And I think economists often do talk about the relation between inequality, equality, and growth. In other words, in growing societies, there's more scope for persistent differences between people. The mechanisms that are pushing towards equality are actually attenuated by the fact that you have a larger support through which you have individuals, communities moving. And the third thing is simply to say that segregation is a very powerful mechanism to work against equalities. There's all these incentives for universities to try to sort by test scores, firms to sort by skills. I could go on. And the point is to say that in thinking about inequalities, a fundamental dimension, I think, for the persistence of inequality, and hence the failure of the teleological goal to occur, is the self-organization that comes from various forms of segregation, be it non-ordered things such as race, ordered things such as income and neighborhoods, skills and the like. So that's really what I want to put on the table.

I will finally take one more minute. I guess is the last person I get to do that. I think there are deep implications of this book. And for me, and as I'm actually going to start a book on meritocracy, this is part of why the book was so exciting to me. I've had to rethink a lot of stuff. And that is that the reason I emphasize this seems to be an important axis because that's has to do with deserved equalities versus not, and thinking about prospective dynamics of equality and the like. And so I just simply want, and of course, what are the nice ideas in the book are, is as I've been teasing people, Marx was a meritocrat. And at the very end, the whole point was the focus was not on equality. It was on the flourishing of individuals. And so the free development of each. And so I, you really made me think a lot of issues, and that for me, I'm very grateful. So final comment is Bertrand Russell said there's two motives to read a book. One, you enjoy it, I did. The other is I can boast about it. I don't think I boasted. I told people about it. But the others makes you think differently, and so I really thank you so much.

Scott: Thank you, Stephen. Thank you. Now we have some time for discussion. I've seen you taking the sense of notes. You want to see some of the other notes?

Darrin: Yeah, well, so I've learned from Jonathan that history is a mess. From Jenny, that sociology is the bean counting science. And we already knew that economics was a dismal science. So we're getting to know that. I'm probably more comfortable with the mess than the other domains. But as I say, I really love this kind of interdisciplinary discussion. And I'm just tremendously grateful to all of you. And I have to say I was blushing. Whenever anyone pays me a compliment, I hear my father's—my late father's voice in my head. Don't get too big for your britches. So I make sure that I keep that quelled. I won't be able to respond to everything, of course, and that's not the point. But let me just say a few things. And again,

thanking the panels for these really rich and generative comments. I was frantically writing things down.

So Jonathan's absolutely right that freedom is central to equality. And it could be more central in another book. I think as he gleaned, I purposely sort of doubled down on equality. In part, because if there are any intellectual historians in the room, they'll know that equality is rather a—freedom and liberty has been the real focus of intellectual history from the 70s forward. So the so-called Cambridge School of Intellectual History has really focused on liberty and devoted very little time or attention to equality at all. So it was a conscious choice on my part. But I do try to bring the subject up at a several crucial points in the book. And one of them is the French Revolution. Because it's the time of the front revolution that what Hither too had been conceived as a dyad, equality and freedom, get separated. And I think if you talk—if I talk to my friends in the economics department, they'll say that economics and liberty, economics and freedom are always at logger heads. And of course, the French Revolution made that very clear in an egalitarian effort to make society more equal, you started chopping off heads. And so the French Revolutionary is actually referred to the guillotine, as the scythe of equality. And after the revolution, commentators and famously Alexis de Toteville, and Mill too and I had a chapter on liberalism that got cut from the book and Mill appeared in that. But Alexis de Toteville famously says, the rise of modern politics leads to equality. And he sees this as something faded. It's another teleological view that equality is on the horizon. But what he worries about is the threat to freedom. And he sees equality as the great enemy of freedom. And that plays out in liberal democratic rhetoric through the 19th and 20th century, that liberty and equality are always opposed. I don't want to throw freedom out of the window, Jonathan, not at all. But I think it needs to be reconnected to equality. Those two need to be seen together in the way they were for the ancients, in the way they were, as you mentioned, for the enlightenment, as the way they were for Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other people up until the time of the French Revolution. So that would be my main point about freedom.

I absolutely endorse the point that Jenny made and that I make in the book that just removing inequality doesn't get you to equality. I wrote a book a number of years ago on happiness, and I deal with psychologists a lot. And the positive psychologists will tell you that just getting rid of unhappiness doesn't make you happy, right? You've got to work on both sides of the equation. And I think this is true of equality and inequality. And the fact is that we've thought a lot about inequality lately, but not so much about what we're going to put in its place. And so at the end of my book, I cite literally hundreds of titles with very good works of history that focus on movements, the struggle for this or the pursuit of this—always equality at the end of the horizon. But folks don't look at what happens when you

get here there. They focus on the struggle itself. And I think we need to focus on equality too.

I completely agree that mathematics and empirical data is important. You know, it's not my forte. And I'm hoping that the social scientists will come in and have a dialogue with the humanities. And that's on us and it's on you to, I think, meet in the middle. Absolutely. I mean, following the same point, Steven, the social sciences can be relevant. They are relevant. They will be relevant. And I wouldn't want to deny that for a moment. I also take very strongly your point about Boas and others who demonstrate, in fact, I discuss Boas in the book, that the group identities are always based on fictions to some degree, right? And so the declared superiority of this group, I don't know, New York Knick supporters over the Chicago Bull—Well, that one actually is grounded in reality—but there are other ones that may be not so much. But these are always fictional. And yet people are very, very good at drawing arbitrary distinctions. And this is, of course, a kind of central thread in group dynamics.

I don't want to hijack things. But yes, meritocracy hugely important. I think we've had some really good studies pointing out at shortcomings in recent years. The question becomes what you put in its place? And I hope you'll have an answer for us when you finish the book.

Steven: Of course.

Darrin: You know, on Piketty just very quickly, I'll note, because his work has been important to mine, even if we disagree on a lot of things. His little book, *A Short History of Equality*, actually has a teleological view. In fact, he sees a kind of movement towards social, material, and political equality embedded in the historical process. I don't. But I, you know, I grant him the sort of courage of his conviction. I sometimes say to people that we don't have enough optimism on the left these days, you know, a kind of robust version, vision, rather, of what the world can be and can become. We've grown very pessimistic for probably good reasons. But nonetheless, I applaud that optimism on his part, even if I don't fully agree with it. So let me stop there. And again, thank you all for these wonderful comments.

The Inequality Podcast is a production of the Stone Center for Research and Wealth Inequality and Mobility at the University of Chicago. I want to end the podcast with thanks to the people who really make it happen. I want to express deep appreciation to our producer and engineer Shane McKeon, who oversees every aspect of the process of creating these podcasts and really does just a splendid job. Second, I'd like to thank our assistant director Nina Gray for production oversight and the role she plays in bringing the podcast to fruition. And finally, I'd like to thank Grace Kolovo, who's the executive director

of the Stone Center, who basically does everything in terms of making the center work. You may get in a touch with us at StoneCenter@uChicago.edu. Thank you so much for listening.

This transcript was produced with the assistance of AI