

## Envy and Egalitarianism

*Equality at the start may be demanded  
in the name of justice, equality at the end  
only in the name of envy.*

*"To each according to his need"  
encourages justice;*

*"To each the same" promotes envy.*

*. . . Rather everyone equally poor,  
than all rich but some even richer.*

(Alexander Rüstow)

Long before modern political correctness led to the complete suppression of certain subjects from public debate on economic and social policy, the idea of envy as an engine of the economy was largely overlooked and the concept of envy as political inspiration almost totally taboo. That is largely because, first, economics pays little attention to the psychological causes of human behavior, and second, many people regard it as unrefined and polemical to explain political movements by envy and to suspect less-than-noble motives behind noble labels. Furthermore, envy is an emotion of which people are not proud, one which they suppress and hide. Envy is condemned in the proverbs, fairytales and myths of virtually all cultures.

Yet envy, as Helmut Schoeck has shown brilliantly in his classic work "Envy: A Social Theory" and Gonzalo Fernandez de la Mora with equal penetration in "Egalitarian Envy," is unquestionably a universal human trait - at least, whenever things are in short supply - and plays a central role in every society, as it indeed must do. Psychologist Verena Kast even suggests that progress would cease in a society in which envy was excessively avoided; everything would be leveled and people would not dare to stand out in any way. Yet many proposals for the ordering of human coexistence aim at overcoming envy - especially the envy of material ownership, the inclination to see greater prosperity in others as negative even when it in no way reduces one's own - and at constructing a more or less envy-free society.

Undoubtedly the most devastating form of the attempt to eliminate envy is egalitarianism - i.e., the effort to overcome envy by reducing or totally eliminating differences in wealth and income. Even Marx once characterized the initial phase of communism as an expression of envy. Such collective envy is usually given the label of "social justice." But ultimately, behind it is the hope that, by means of redistribution, societies can be so structured that people will no longer feel envy.

Because envy produces bad feelings not only in the envier but also in the envied, in the form of a guilty conscience, there is a concomitantly strong willingness to implement the redistribution of wealth by means of all manner of punitive taxes. This strategy for overcoming envy, however, is counterproductive to the extent that, as experience has shown, small differences tend to generate more envy than large discrepancies. As a

general rule, envy is directed at what is achievable. Not surprisingly, studies show that competitors who end up in second place are more dissatisfied than those who hold third place. For the former, victory was almost within their grasp, for the latter it was somewhat more remote. It is also worth noting that envy seems to increase as the level of prosperity rises. As long as concern is focused on satisfying fundamental needs, one's own well-being is in the foreground. Envy, on the other hand, is concerned that the next fellow should not be better off than I am. Thus the strategy of redistributing wealth becomes a labor of Sisyphus.

It seems a bit paradoxical that precisely those who most want to do away with envy - that is, the ideologues and parties of egalitarianism - also turn out to be the greatest agitators of envy and the most vehement opponents of any tolerance for inequality. The permanent preoccupation with differences, the equating of inequality with injustice, thundering against "rotten capital" - all that stirs up the emotion of envy. These days, envy is probably based less on direct experience with people in one's immediate proximity than it was formerly, and more on ideological prejudices, abstractions such as "the rich," "capitalists" or "speculators," and on distortions delivered to our doorstep by the media. Schoeck refers, among other things, to studies which show that the average voter feels little concrete envy of those with truly huge incomes. But advertising too, with its glorification of luxury consumption, doubtless involuntarily arouses envy in some respects.

If one is determined to reduce and overcome envy - whether natural or artificially generated - there are certainly less problematical and less economically harmful ways to minimize it than redistribution. For centuries, religion served that purpose; today, other value systems could serve a similar function. And, when it is possible, turning envy into admiration is naturally far more fruitful than raw, unchanneled envy or its ostensible conquest by egalitarianism. Also worth keeping in mind is the very Swiss virtue of understatement, the attempt to make one's life style invisible and to avoid the kind of consumer behavior that provokes envy. Another way for a society to moderate envy is to make sure that chances for advancement in different areas are not too strongly tied to one another - in other words, that political, economic and social success do not go excessively hand in hand. "Real existing socialism" could never achieve that, because it was totalitarian. But in societies that are largely decentralized and pluralistic, there are countless ways to advance, to gain position.

By far the most sensible way to deal with envy, and the way most appropriate for an open society, is to make it the motor of progress. Envy usually aims at bringing the other fellow down. That is its destructive side. But it can also lead to emulation of those who are better off. That is the constructive face of envy. Various authors prefer to label this positive aspect of the same behavior "competitiveness," but that in no way alters the fact that envy, where it serves as a spur to greater effort rather than to destruction of the envied, can have an ultimately positive impact.

So a society's treatment of envy should aim not in the direction of egalitarianism but rather toward openness and advancement. The emotion of envy should be allayed not by punitive taxes but by the promise that, with equal effort and equal luck, everyone can "make it" in a similar fashion. Then envy, in the words of the great liberal Bernard Mandeville, would be transformed from a "private vice" to a "public benefit."

It is often asserted that envy is not present in all cultures and all parts of the world. On closer examination, though, it would appear that envy is equally present everywhere but is dealt with differently by different societies. The same applies to real, existing economic systems. Eliminating envy by economic leveling remains a strategy that is based on an unrealistic picture of human nature and is ultimately damaging. By contrast, using envy as an economic engine is a realistic response for a liberal society.

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