Redistribution and recognition from the point of view of real equality

There are two ways to understand “redistribution” in the context of discussions about justice. First, it is simply one of the issues to tackle in relation to justice: What is a fair distribution of the benefits and burdens involved in living together in society, as part of a more encompassing theory of justice? “Redistribution” also signals a particular approach to define justice in general, based on the idea that the central issue about justice just is the issue of fair distribution. That approach, which can be called the “distributive justice” paradigm, has been the main one in Anglo-American political philosophy in the last four decades, following on from the seminal work of John Rawls. In the following, I will aim to tackle the issues related to redistribution through a critical take on the distributive paradigm. I will draw on the writings of two of the most important critics of the distributive paradigm in contemporary political philosophy, Elizabeth Anderson and Axel Honneth, whose arguments overlap in many ways. Anderson’s conception of relational, or democratic equality shares a number of key conceptual elements with Honneth’s theory of recognition and social freedom. The two authors provide eminent, converging reference points to critically elucidate issues of redistribution in relation to issues of recognition.

However, the angle selected to critically study these issues will be more specific. Despite the overlaps, the two thinkers depart from each other, notably because their fundamental inspirations lie in two separate political traditions. Anderson seeks to retrieve the republican, Honneth the socialist tradition. In both traditions, one of the crucial defining features, and key point of departure from mainstream liberalism, was the rejection of formal theories of equality and the attempt to develop theories of “real equality”. In sections 1 and 2, I present the two authors from a triple point of view: how their respective theories of recognition overlap and depart from each other; what the implications are for issues of redistribution; and what their conceptions of “real equality” amount to.

In section 3, I turn the critical gaze on the two authors, by drawing on the very traditions they refer to in order to mount their respective claims. In the aftermath of the American and French revolutions, in the first half of the 19th century, the rejuvenated republican movement and the budding socialist movement were often indiscernible in terms of their main political goals and strategies. One important reference point, whether it was used as inspiration or as unwanted alternative, was the movement associated with the name of Babeuf and the “Manifesto of the Equals”, which advocated a radical plan of redistribution of wealth to
achieve full equality. In her retrieval of “radical republicanism”, Elizabeth Anderson has explicitly contrasted her approach and the strand inspiring her, from this way of framing “real equality”. I contest her reading of Babeuf and I use him as a useful foil to raise several critical questions about hers and Honneth’s versions of egalitarianism.

1. Elizabeth Anderson’s republican conception of “real equality”

   a. Anderson’s critique of “distributive justice” and the “real” concept of equality

The “distributive justice” paradigm includes the most influential authors in mainstream Anglo-American political philosophy, such as Ronald Dworkin, Richard Arneson, G.A. Cohen or John Roemer, who defined issues of justice in terms of fair distribution. The fundamental assumption underlying their approaches is that the vagaries of social life, notably the complexity of modern economic life, as well as the arbitrariness with which natural assets are distributed amongst individuals, combine to breach the basic principle of justice that every individual should get what is due to them. Some receive less than they should due to circumstances for which they are not responsible, while others receive more than others, again for no justifiable reason. From this perspective, the problem of justice becomes centrally a problem of fair distribution. The paradigm goods in this approach are economic goods, but other “goods” are also considered, such as positions of prestige and power, opportunity, or welfare. Indeed, the debates in this paradigm concern precisely which of those “goods” are the correct “currency of egalitarian justice”.¹ Even with goods that are not directly economic, however, the primary measure of distributive inequality is in terms of material resources, in terms of property and income, and fair compensation is discussed in terms of financial redistribution through state-run schemes, notably insurance and taxation. Equality is a central normative standard in this approach, as equality of treatment, but it conceives it in a distributive sense and fair redistribution in turn in a material sense.

Elizabeth Anderson’s seminal work on equality developed to a large extent as a critical response to this influential approach to justice. The “real” concept of equality for her is relational, it refers “not so much to distributions of goods as to relations between people”.² Equality is not first and foremost equality of assets, or opportunities, or welfare, but rather a

² “What is the point of Equality?” Ethics, 109, 1999, 312.
quality of social relations, one in which every person is able “to stand up as an equal before others”. The opposite of justice is not primarily unearned advantage or undeserved disadvantage, but unequal relations, in other words oppression of some by others, which manifests itself in relations of violence, domination, discrimination, or exclusion. The ideal of justice therefore is not a state of society where every individual enjoys precisely what they deserve and nothing more, but a society of equals. “Real” equality therefore can also be defined as “democratic”, since it points to a social ideal where every individual has equal social worth. Full equality means “to live in a democratic community, as opposed to a hierarchical one”.

The central criterion and medium of justice on this model is the quality of interactions between people. Anderson translates this as a shift from a “third-person” perspective on justice, which calculates the fairness of social structures from the outside, to a “second-person” perspective, that looks at the structure of interactions between people: “a person’s due essentially concerns what claims people are entitled to make on others’ conduct, with respect to how they treat claimants and their interests.” As a result, the justice of social arrangements can be specified in communicative terms as universal capacity to ask for and provide reasons: “democratic equality regards two people as equal when each accepts the obligation to justify their actions by principles acceptable to the other, and in which they take mutual consultation, reciprocation and recognition for granted”.

The background model of justice is thus a republican ideal of equal participation in social life. We might say that the republican model specifies the very concept of equality. In turn, Anderson transfers these two elements (the republican model of democracy and the concept of equality that befits it) into a specific philosophical methodology that she thinks is appropriate to them, namely social contract theory, which she inherits from her teacher John Rawls. Accordingly, the conceptual definition of equality reads like a description of a republican political model, and can be interpreted as an application of social contract theory: justice as equality means that “one is entitled to participate, that others recognize an obligation to listen respectfully and respond to one’s arguments, that no one need to bow and scrape before others or represent themselves as inferior to others as a condition of having their claims heard”. There is thus a circular reinforcement between the concept, the method

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3 “What is the point of Equality?”, 313.
5 “What is the point of Equality?”, 313.
and the social ideal. This is captured in the following statement: “what citizens owe one another is the social conditions of the freedoms people need to function as equal citizens.”

This model of relational or democratic equality makes a lot of room for economic inequality. For Anderson the more “talented” and the more industrious should be recompensed for their efforts, within the constraints of the difference principle. She objects to luck egalitarians not just because they show disrespect for rich and poor, talented and untalented, by making the state examine life choices to determine whether individuals were responsible for their social fate. It is also important to maintain the possibility of justified inequality because it is part of justice that the deserving get what they deserve. She remains close to Rawls in that respect: we want to avoid undeserved rewards but we also need to promote talent. This is fair to the better off but for the less well off as well, since they profit from the higher productivity achieved by the former. On this model, distribution matters but is not in itself an intrinsic part of “real” (relational, democratic) equality. Once the less well-off receive the basic resources and opportunities allowing them to “stand as equals amongst others”, and if the more “talented” receive their fair reward and indeed are incentivized to be more productive for the benefit of everyone else, distribution is no longer an issue of justice. Indeed, distributive equality in fact is blind to many other aspects of injustice, notably all those aspects that prevent individuals from functioning as equal citizens in the different spheres of social life.

b. Realising equality

Elizabeth Anderson’s work can also be read as an attempt to rethink justice from the point of view of “real equality” in a second sense, in terms of the actual realisation of justice claims. This is one dimension of her advocating of a second-person approach to justice. That perspective considers what justifiable demands an individual or group can make on other individuals, in relation to a specific good, in the name of equality. One dimension of this justifiability concern is precisely whether the demand can be satisfied or not, in other words whether the demand for equality, the realisation of justice, can actually be fulfilled. This is not just an empirical point but also a conceptual one. It concerns the very notion of justifiability, of what makes a claim a justified claim. As she writes: “it is unreasonable to

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6 “What is the point of Equality?”, 320.
7 “What is the point of Equality?”, 326; “Luck Egalitarians and Relational Egalitarians”, 20-21.
demand of agents that they satisfy a principle they are unable to follow. The demands of justice must therefore be tailored to the general cognitive and behavioural capacities of agents”.

The second sense in which Anderson is concerned about the actual realisation of equality relates simply to her many attempts to specify through elaborate, highly informed discussions, how the fundamental principle of relational equality is to be applied on specific policy issues. She has consistently sought to bridge the gap between pure, normative political philosophy, policy and real politics. For example, her seminal 1999 paper on “the point of equality” entails precise discussions of the policy implications of her relational conception of autonomy for the compensation owed to people with disabilities or support for people who choose to have children. In several articles, she has made the case for social insurance policies, retracing both the historical origins and the conceptual, normative force of these proposals. She also studied the implications of relational equality for the issue of “market risks” in contemporary society, that is, what kinds of constraints should be placed upon markets so that unjust outcomes are mitigated. In her recent work on workplace democracy, she has shown the implications of her critical theory of the firm as a space of governance for management and economic policy.

Finally, a third sense in which Anderson is concerned for equality to become “real” relates to philosophical methodology. She contrasts her approach with those of moral and political philosophers who develop ideal proposals independent of the historical and sociological facts about human societies. In contrast, Anderson has sought to anchor her normative claims in thick descriptions of human societies, drawing on economic theory, to discuss technical aspects of distributive justice, the history of social movements, to show how her conceptual model formalise the actual claims made by individuals and groups seeking justice, and history and sociology to propose an original, republican theory of the firm.

8 “Luck Egalitarians and Relational Egalitarians”, 19.
These references to history and social sciences are used not just to bridge the gap from normative analysis to the application of principles but for the very analysis of normative principles. Anderson describes this approach to political philosophy as a form of pragmatism.\textsuperscript{14} Crucially, the pragmatist method is consistent with the definition of “real equality” and republican political theory. On the pragmatist account also, it is only if equality is conceived as the outcome of free, inter-personal interactions, based notably on the exchange of justifications, that it has a chance of being actually realised. In the 2014 Amherst Lectures Anderson closes the circle performatively by arguing that it is precisely by studying how real social movements have enforced more equality that we can learn how equality can become real. This is a powerful, performative gesture since it relies on a realist, historical account of actual realisation of equality through activities of contestation (and not just moral argumentation), on the basis of which it can be argued precisely what equality as relational entails.

c. “Real equality” as historical demand

Finally, another sense of “real equality” refers to the history of political ideas and the arguments that were raised following the modern revolutions, contrasting merely formal with “real”, or “actual”, or “full”, or “material” equality. Anderson explicitly connects her republican model of justice and equality to the historical tradition of republicanism. Within that tradition, the “radical” strand, with which Anderson aligns herself,\textsuperscript{15} is characterized precisely by the attempt to “make equality real”, against conservative attempts to limit it, and against merely formal, notably liberal, understandings of it.\textsuperscript{16} She also contrast the radical republican understanding of “real equality” with socialist alternatives, despite their common roots, notably because socialists interpret “not just formal” conceptions of equality as warranting encroachments upon private property and tend to make stronger claims than republicans about the ethical dispositions required of individuals.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} For instance in “Equality and Freedom”, 51.
\textsuperscript{17} On the common roots of modern republicanism and socialism in the wake of the American and French Revolutions, see D. Moggach and G. Stedman Jones (eds) \textit{The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought}, in particular chapters 4 and 5.
This historical, republican inspiration behind Anderson’s work is particularly evident in her work on workplace democracy and racial equality. In chapter 5 of The Imperative of Integration for instance, she retraces the long history of the struggle for full racial equality in the US. The central argument she embraces is the one advanced and fought for by Black abolitionists and radical republicans who attempted to ensure “full equality”, notably by arguing that the latter was analytically entailed in the very idea of a republic. In this view, the notion of “real” or “full” equality denotes all the rights individuals have, as citizens, in participating as equals in all the different spheres of social and political life, including at work, on the labour market and in relation to the collective decision-making process.

2. Honneth’s critique of proceduralist political theories

a. Honneth’s social freedom and relational equality

Honneth would endorse many of the features of Anderson’s model of “relational equality” for his own model of recognition. Like her, he thinks of recognition from the second-person perspective, as a fundamental demand individuals make on others, underpinned by the fundamental claim to be able to “stand as an equal before others”. Indeed, Anderson explicitly cites Honneth’s first model to articulate her relational conception of equality. Both of them make the point that demands of recognition apply across the different spheres of society. In “What is the Point of Equality?”, Anderson draws on Sen’s theory of capabilities to extend the demands of equality across all spheres of social life. Demands for equality apply, she claims, to three spheres that map out Honneth’s spheres of recognition: functioning as a human being, as a participant in a system of cooperative production, and as a citizen in a democratic state. Conversely, in his remodelling of recognition in Freedom’s Right, Honneth now presents the model of recognition as a study into “the social foundations of democratic life”. In other words, he interprets the ideal of recognition as a demand for full democratic life, across all spheres of social life, in the spirit of Anderson’s comprehensive model of “democratic equality”. Both thinkers draw on the historical expansion of rights, from civil to political to social rights, as proof for the pervasiveness of demands for recognition and equality across all areas of social life. Both of them make the point that legal
recognition is not sufficient, and ensuring democratic equality in the system of production is also essential for “real” recognition and/or equality. Anderson goes further than Honneth in this respect, as she delves further than him in the structures of domination operating in modern firms. But the general point is shared by both that recognition, or democratic equality, put constraints on economic organisation and that justice requires a lot more in this sphere than just the freedom to contract.21 Finally, both of them connect their theories to real struggles for emancipation. They do this first, as substantial evidence for the conceptual definitions of justice they advocate. Historical social movements simply illuminate what real justice is about for real people: full equality in social relations. And second, the two thinkers expressly devolve a large part of the “realisation”, or application or implementation aspect of their theories to social movements. One dimension of propounding “democratic” theories of justice is to learn from the public how justice was to be realised in the past, and might be in the future.

Despite these strong overlaps, however, the concepts of recognition and relational equality formalise justice differently. These differences in turn can be related to differences between republican and socialist conceptions. In Anderson’s construal of social relations of equality, the social ideal is inherently political: what measures and ensures equality is the fact that individuals “live together in a democratic community”.22 The formula that summarises her conception of real equality clearly captures the republican slant she puts on it: “what citizens owe one another is the social conditions of the freedoms people need to function as equal citizens.”23 By “social conditions of freedom”, Anderson has in mind two specific senses of “social”. First, she means reciprocal interactions between individuals in terms of justified claims each makes upon the other. The question here is: does each agree to the terms of the relationship? Second, “social” also means collective, where the collective is conceptualised as the aggregate of all those fictitious encounters between partners in interaction. As said above, this second-person model of interaction fits with the method of social contract theory she borrows from Rawls and from the republican tradition more broadly.

In this “republican” sense of “social”, the individual is an autonomous agent whose claims on others derive from her inalienable rights as a free being. Recognition in this sense is reciprocal acknowledgement between autonomous beings that is extrinsic to the individuals.

22 “What is the Point of Equality?”, 313.
23 “What is the Point of Equality?”, 320.
They rely on each other instrumentally for the fulfilment of their claims and in that sense depend on relations of recognition, but individuals are what they are independently of the relationship. In Honneth, by contrast, recognition is intrinsic to the very construction of the individual’s identity. In the first model presented in *Struggle for Recognition*, this idea is captured in anthropological and psychological terms: the very process of identity formation relies upon the affirmation of the self by others. The self comes about through the internalisation of the attitudes of others towards it. The spheres of recognition are different areas of social life in which selves are “under the gaze” of others in specific ways. Autonomy in this model is not instrumentally dependent upon others (whether or not they grant me what I need for my freedom to be actually realised), but intrinsically. I can only relate to myself positively, which is Honneth’s initial way of redefining the fundamental norm of freedom as self-determination and self-realisation, if the attitudes towards me allow me to do so, at least minimally.

In *Freedom’s Right*, the same idea is captured in more formal, logical terms, through the idea of “social freedom”. Negative conceptions of freedom are only impoverished versions that do not capture the richer sense of freedom as self-determination and self-realisation, as they only focus on external obstacles and not on the content and structure of autonomy. A richer sense of autonomy relies upon a “thick” understanding, which in turn entails a consideration of the “social” structure of that freedom. This is because the most important ends I might want to achieve to realise myself fully, and thereby achieve full self-determination, only make sense if the others upon whom I relate for the realisation of these ends also realise theirs concomitantly, with me. The realisation of my ends depends intrinsically, not instrumentally, upon others also being able to realise their own ends. Reciprocal recognition by the individuals involved is here a constitutive, logical condition of each individual’s autonomy: “the reciprocal experience of seeing ourselves confirmed in the desires and aims of the other, because the other’s existence represents a condition for fulfilling our own desires and aims”.24 This a “social” conception of freedom because for each particular kind of end realised by each individual, a specific kind of “we”, a specific type of collective is involved: a friendship, a couple, a family, a labour market, a market of commodities, a state, a nation, a culture.

The concept of “social” here goes much deeper, as it were, than in the republican conception. Each individual requires social conditions for her or his freedom means: each has to take into

account the other’s desires and aims in the very formulation of his or her desires and aims, and thereby relates their individual needs, beliefs and desires to the relevant kind of collective involved. In other words, solidarity, taking the other and the collective into account, becomes an intrinsic condition of the autonomy of each self and guides the ordering of the “well-ordered society”. In turn, this requires structures of society, both formal institutions and a public culture, that make this possible and entrench such reciprocal mechanisms. This is no longer a republican but a socialist ideal, one that thinks of the just society as an order of cooperation, or as an association of partners who are not just equal in terms of their right for self-realisation but co-dependent in this pursuit. The collective on this model is not just an aggregate of independent individuals coming together as singular units in the different spheres of civic life. Rather, the collective arises from the logic of reciprocity and collectivity animating each individual in relation to the others. Rather than being external to the singular units, the collective underpins individual actions as these are all intrinsically indexed on the well-being of each and all.

b. Honneth’s critique of “distributive justice”

Given these differences between Honneth’s and Anderson’s models, what are the implications for distribution, both as a problem, and as a paradigm? How does Honneth tackle these issues from the point of view of “real equality”? Since he aims to address these issues from a “socialist” perspective, and given the importance of the concern for real equality in that tradition, it seems that the question is justified, even though, as we will see, Honneth does not make “real equality” a thematic focus of his retrieval of the socialist

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26 To confirm that this is truly a socialist model, we can note that similar ideas about social justice are expressed, albeit via a different methodology, by G.A Cohen, when he seeks to define socialism. This is for example what he calls the “principle of community” in Why Not Socialism? Princeton UP, 2009.

27 This might seem controversial, given Marx’s famous dislike for equality. See for instance A. Wood, “Marx on Equality”, in The Free Development of Each: Studies on Freedom, Right, and Ethics in Classical German Philosophy, OUP, 2014, chapter 11. However, as Wood reminds us, Marx’ and Engels’ rejection of equality was based precisely on the idea that it had become an obsolete goal, one that made sense at the time of the bourgeois (French) revolution, but should be replaced by the goal of the abolition of all classes. As Engels wrote: “The idea of socialist society as the realm of equality is a one-sided French idea resting upon the old ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’—an idea which was justified as stage of development in its own time and place but which, like all the one-sided ideas of the earlier socialist schools, should now be overcome” (cited in Wood, p.254). This shows precisely that the socialist tradition initially shared the goal of “real equality” with the republican one. In fact, notwithstanding Marx’s reservations, many socialists have continuously defended the goals of full equality, G.A. Cohen being one of the most illustrious recent examples. Ironically, Marx’ description of the first stage of socialism in the Critique of the Gotha Programme looks very close to the model described by Babeuf in the manifesto of the plebeians.
Regarding the distributive justice paradigm, the issue is complicated because Anderson and Honneth occupy different positions in relation to it. Anderson looks at it from within the mainstream, Anglo-American field, in which the paradigm is central, and she pits her approach straightforwardly against it. Crucially, she views her “relational” approach in the legacy of Rawls. As we saw, she describes Rawls’ social contract methodology as a way to instantiate her republican conception of “real equality”, since it aims to ensure that the claims each person would want to make on society could be made from the point of view of anybody else. This can be interpreted, she argues, as equivalent to the idea that justice involves “what claims people are allowed to make on others”.

Honneth also criticises the “distributive justice” paradigm, in terms directly echoing Anderson’s. Like her, he makes the point that justice should not be discussed primarily in terms of a fair distribution of goods, but in terms of the quality of social relations. The fundamental issue of justice for him is a thick conception of autonomy, and “what helps us to acquire autonomy is not cut out of the same cloth as a good that can be distributed; it is fashioned out of living relations of reciprocal recognition that are just to the degree that they allow us to reciprocally value our needs, beliefs and capabilities”.

And yet Honneth has primarily Rawls in view in his broad criticism of mainstream political philosophy. Indeed a number of important luck egalitarians, notably Cohen, in fact write against Rawls and reject proceduralist accounts. As a self-confessed disciple of Rawls, Anderson therefore might in fact be a prime target of Honneth’s criticisms of mainstream political philosophy. The source of the disagreement would be social contract theory and would go back to the difference between the two senses of recognition and what is meant by “social conditions of freedom”. Because Honneth has a “thick”, constitutive, interpretation of recognition, that is, a view of recognition as that which makes freedom possible in the first place, the proceduralist view of how justice occurs is logically flawed for him. It assumes precisely what it aims to make possible. Despite her rejection of the distribution paradigm of justice, in her embrace of social contract theory, Anderson treats the “social conditions” making freedom possible precisely as if they were goods that citizens with established identities can raise claims about in relation to each other. From Honneth’s perspective, the “second-person” perspective she advocates is not sufficient to avoid his criticism, because

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28 “The Fabric of Justice”, in *The I in We*, 41.
that perspective thinks of recognition between persons as being external to the very constitution of the personhood of persons.

c. Distribution and real equality in Honneth’s model of “social freedom”

Given these differences, how does Honneth discuss distribution and what would be “real equality” for him?

The contrasting discussion of Honneth’s model of “social freedom” and Anderson’s model of “relational equality” already provides a key element to answer this question. Honneth approaches equality not as an independent norm, but as a dimension of autonomy. Justice for him is the equal right each individual has for her or his full autonomy, understood in a “thick” sense as self-realisation. This doesn’t mean that distributional issues are not part of justice, but they are only implications of the view that justice consists in allowing every individual the social conditions of their self-realisation.29

One key implication of Honneth’s interpretation of the “social conditions of freedom” in terms of recognition is that it leads to a pluralistic approach to the key normative demands individuals can make upon others and the collective. This is because individual self-realisation entails different dimensions. In “The Fabric of Justice” for instance, Honneth mentioned “needs, beliefs and capacities”. These subjective dimensions in turn are developed in different kinds of recognitive relations. The “spheres of recognition” in his first model, the different institutional spheres in Freedom’s Right, correspond precisely to the fundamental types of social relations, through which individuals realise different aspects of their identity, welfare and lifeplans. This means that recognition is only a generic concept, and that it takes on different structures depending on the social spheres in question, and the kinds of subjective dimensions at stake in them. As a consequence of this pluralistic approach, Honneth’s answer to the question of “real equality” would be that it is impossible to specify one “true” meaning of equality, except in the very generic sense of equal right to the conditions of full autonomy. Equality in relation to the conditions of autonomy entails different rights and duties between friends, lovers, family members, in the anonymous relations between consumers and producers who meet through market interactions, or

between citizens engaging with each other in the public sphere. From this pluralistic point of view, Anderson’s equating of “relational” with “democratic” looks hasty and insufficiently differentiated.

In what ways does Honneth concern himself with the actual realisation of “real equality”? As for Anderson, this question bears directly on his approach. In his case, the virtuous circle he tries to put in place is between the definition of freedom as social freedom, the political “ism” that he thinks has historically aimed to realise it (socialism), and an approach to political theory that focuses on “the social conditions of freedom”, as he understands them. Such methodological focus means that a realistic social ontology has to form the foundations for the discussion of how the different normative dimensions of a realisation of true freedom would actually unfold. “Realistic” here means that the social ontology grounding the political theory has to be sufficiently detailed, make the correct distinctions between different social spheres and their respective mechanisms allowing for the different Is to form different Wes. The realist approach also has to be historically sensitive, so that any claim made by the political theorist regarding what people claim against each other and against society actually has a footing in real modern societies, can be shown to emerge from the real history of social movements for instance. All of these methodological requirements explain Honneth’s embrace of his original method of “normative reconstruction”. The aim behind this method is not just practical, to ensure that normative claims can be shown to actually find their roots in real societies, but also theoretical.

The implication of the methodological circularity between the definition of freedom (as “social freedom”), the mode of theory construction (realist social ontology and normative reconstruction) and the favoured political movement (socialism) is that the latter is more than just a subjective preference of the theorist.\(^\text{30}\) The same kind of circularity is evidenced here as in Anderson’s work, in her case around a “republican” understanding of freedom and of equality as socially conditioned.

It is from these historical-conceptual perspectives I now want to raise some criticisms of the two thinkers. They retrieve two traditions of political thinking and of real political movements to ground their favoured approaches to justice. They do so positively, to show that their conceptions of justice have actual footing in modern society, and negatively, to demonstrate the abstractness of the “distributive justice” paradigm. In both the republican and

the socialist tradition, a central concern about justice, for activists and thinkers alike, was “real equality”: what equality actually consists of, and how it might be actually realised, against formal conceptions, or only partial realisations of it. I find this method of grounding normative political theory in historical-conceptual arguments very convincing. But there is a sting in the historical tail. There are strands in the very traditions Anderson and Honneth draw on that reflect critically on their theoretical propositions. From the point of view of “real equality” as a demand of real, historical actors, their theories might miss some crucial considerations.

To make this case, I will refer to the controversial figure of Babeuf. Babeuf was active as a journalist, political thinker and agitator at the time of the French revolution. He and the companions around him who prepared a “Conspiracy for Equality” in 1796, wrote a series of programmatic texts and manifestos which constitute the most radical advocacy in modern times, of equality as the fundamental norm of social and political life. It might seem arbitrary to favour one particular strand of early egalitarian thinking over others to criticise contemporary philosophers, however significant that strand might have been. Two reasons justify the relevance of Babeuf for a critical study of Anderson’s and Honneth’s brands of egalitarianism. The first reason is that Babeuf can be seen as a key representative of the radical tradition of republicanism, directly produced by the French Revolution, which, for the first 50 years of the 19th century, until the revolutions of 1848, shared many ideas and real political aims with the emerging socialist movement, so much so that it is often difficult to disentangle the two traditions in those crucial formative years. The second reason is that Anderson herself sets up Babeuf as an early proponent of modern socialism and a foil against which she propounds her American version of radical, egalitarian republicanism.

3. Relational equality and social freedom from the point of view of radical equality

a. Two versions of radical republican equality

31 This is the title of Philippe Buonarotti’s recount of the thought and actions of the insurgents gathered around Babeuf, leading to the attempted coup, Babeuf’s arrest and execution: History of Babeuf’s Conspiracy for Equality, London, H. Hetherington, 1836.
32 For a clear statement about the place of Babeuf in modern political thinking on equality, see Stephan Gosepath, “Equality”, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
33 For the influence of Babeuf on the young Marx, see Eric Hobsbawn, How to change the world: Reflections on Marx and Marxism, 22-23.
I will assume here that the basic facts about Babeuf and his “conspiracy for equality” are known. Anderson focuses on him for several reasons. She wants to question an account of the history of distributive justice that identifies him as the first author in that modern tradition, in favour of Thomas Paine. This historical point has conceptual and normative significance. Babeuf thought that private property is the root of inequality and thus of injustice. He concluded from this that, in order to achieve justice, private property should be abolished and the common resources produced by individual workers should be redistributed on a purely egalitarian basis, through a centralised state power. Such vision of justice is wrong for Anderson on several grounds: it justifies tyrannical intervention by the state into people’s private affairs; and it leads to an economic levelling that cannot be justified, on efficiency grounds, and because those who work more or are more talented should not be prevented from earning more. Paine, on the other hand, in his proposals for social insurance and stakeholder grants, outlines a realistic and fair programme for “real” equality, ensuring basic support and universal equality of access to material resources. In particular, he offers a realistic proposal to counter the kinds of domination that are based on privilege and market power and their transmission through inheritance.

Anderson’s rendering of the ideas of Babeuf and his companions is ungenerous. It is oblivious of the historical and literary specificity of the texts she reads. She selects passages to construe Babeuf’s doctrine as a direct anticipation of a communist “totalitarian dictatorship”. But most of the points she presents as programmatic measures are in fact ideal descriptions depicting what the Equals hoped society would look like in the long run following the egalitarian revolution.

As a pragmatist, Anderson might have been sensitive to other aspects of the Equals’ writings, notably the method by which they arrived at their claims. Rather than using social contract thought experiments as a procedure of justification, the plans for social and political equality were grounded in basic natural law principles – notably the old idea that “the earth belongs to nobody”-, which were formulated and interpreted through a negativistic lens, namely in opposition to situations of absolute injustice. In such a methodological set up, the normative

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37 To cite just one telling example, when Buonarrotti writes as a general summary: “Nothing in a well-ordered society must stray from the ‘esprit du législateur’”, “esprit” doesn’t mean the prying “mind” of the legislator, as Anderson reads it, but the spirit of the constitution, in direct reference to Montesquieu and Rousseau. See P. Buonarrotti, *Babeuf’s Conspiracy for Equality*, 163.
principles and the programmatic measures directly respond to situations of blatant denials of right.

Anderson reads the Equals’ texts as if they were pure programmatic texts, like Paine’s scheme for social insurance. But they are political texts that directly intervene into and are directly influenced by the political context. These texts mix (sophisticated) philosophical arguments with references to the immediate history of the Revolution, precisely to attempt to fulfil what the authors saw as the promise of that defining moment in modern history. It is crucial to keep all this in mind to gauge the precise valence of the theoretical arguments. The texts might overreach in some of their conclusions, but they were formulated in a situation of extreme political tension, where opposite positions were expressed and acted upon with no less decisiveness.

The political arguments are also directly indexed to the social and economic situation, one characterised by appalling deprivation and humiliation for the great majority. Such a link between description and normative principles applies in particular in Babeuf’s most significant issue of *Le Tribun du Peuple* (number 35, of 30 November 1795), which features the famous “manifesto of the plebeians”. Anderson does not pay attention to the passages full of pathos that precede the pages in which the manifesto of the Equals is summarised. These pages seem utterly outdated today because of their grandiloquent pathos and 18th century flourishes. We struggle to relate to them in any meaningful way. The academic reader is tempted to skip straight to the pages that resemble most arguments of political theory. But skipping these pages would be a mistake. The passages describing the suffering of the proletarian population function as a fundamental argumentative layer for the political arguments. This is the first mode in which a negativistic method is used: the factual situation of extreme misery strikes the existing system as invalid in its very principles, notably the sacred nature of private property that prevents the deprived majority from accessing the goods that a minority has in surplus.

The simple fact of immense inequality is in and of itself an injustice, in a relative and quantitative sense, to the extent namely that it doesn’t seem justifiable that a few could have so much whilst the majority have so little that they can’t even survive. This type of injustice can be translated into a positive normative principle: that “no man can justifiably pretend that

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39 The “Manifesto of the Equals” was a text written by Sylvain Maréchal in 1796, calling the people to rise in the name of “equality or death”, in Buonarrotti, *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, 314-317.
any other of his semblables be less happy than he”. Such a formulation could be read as an argument of social contract theory. Indeed Babeuf formulates it in reference to Rousseau. But attention should be paid to the exact wording. A social contract argument would focus on the first person: no one would rationally agree to put themselves in a position where they would be at a disadvantage in comparison to others. But Babeuf doesn’t refer to self-interested rationality, but to moral justification: that it is impossible for me to justify an order in which I know that I would be at an advantage over others. This is another form of the negativistic method, another argument from injustice. And it is clearly an argument that receives particular force in a situation in which the rich and the powerful are precisely in a situation of extreme advantage, where they enjoy immense wealth whilst the majority starves and sees its children die.

This alerts us to the need to pause and reflect on the normative force of Babeuf’s writings, and what they might teach us today again, at a time when inequality is rising and the gap between rich and poor, notably in Elizabeth Anderson’s own country, takes on extreme proportions again. Rather than anachronistically looking for the premises of dictatorship in Babeuf, we could instead find inspiration in the way in which he connects the description of a situation of utter injustice to normative political principles. The demand for equality can be justified in principle, through natural law and social contract arguments, but it arises first of all as a necessary consequence of the abolition of injustice: if radical inequality is blatantly unjust, then justice demands the suppression of inequality. This is what “real equality” means first of all. Its urgency arises first of all from the fact that its absolute opposite is the case.

Of course Babeuf’s radical inference doesn’t seem to hold at first: the fact that large inequality is unjust only means that it should be reduced, not that perfect equality should be established. Rousseau himself demands only that “all have something, and none has too much”. Anderson herself demands a drastic reduction of economic inequality on the basis that it makes real, social and political equality a fiction.

The negativistic method underpins another set of considerations that truly set apart Babeuf’s approach from Anderson’s. The main theoretical use that Babeuf and the Equals make of the reference to unjust inequality is to identify its social causes and to argue against them. The negative argument is thus not just against inequality but against the causes of inequality. It is

40 Manifeste des Plébéiens, 84.
41 See my “Exploited: Exploitation as a Subjective Category” Southern Journal of Philosophy, 54, 31-43, where I try to show that Marx uses a similar strategy in Book I of Capital.
42 The Social Contract, I, 9; Manifeste des Plébéiens, 102.
in this light that private property is debated. Babeuf doesn’t deduce the lack of normative validity for private property from positive natural law principles alone, but rather in combination with a negative argument, through the reality and history of injustice. The main problem with private property in the Rousseauian tradition, in which Babeuf locates himself, is that it is the root of inequalities that accumulate over time and harden into structures of social domination producing such large differentials in social power that they end up delivering the kind of extreme injustice Babeuf reports about as a journalist. Other sources of social inequality are identified that combine to entrench the inegalitarian effects of private property: the transmission of property through inheritance; how some can acquire property rights over the very person of others through work contracts; how the property of personal attributes, moral or intellectual, that are socially favoured translates into higher social benefits for some; how education entrenches social and cultural hierarchies, particularly those relating to the division between intellectual and manual work, by inculcating the representations underpinning those hierarchies to the younger generations, and by actively selecting individuals so as to reproduce the distinctions between the elite and the plebs. The full phenomenon of injustice thus results for Babeuf from a complex combination of social mechanisms centred around property. What we might call “privatised” wealth (of land, of persons and even of personal attributes), creates situations of social inequality, which translate in the long run into utter destitution for the majority.

Such deprivation is inherently wrong, forms an absolute injustice, simply because it denies the right of individuals to live well and in extreme circumstances to even survive. The wrong, however, also results from the breach of a positive, normative principle, namely that general wealth, as it has been produced by everyone, is in right to be shared by everyone, and that private property from this point of view is social wealth that has been unduly privatised. Such privatisation of social wealth occurs precisely through the mechanisms of social inequality whose main sources have been identified above (inheritance, alienation, meritocracy). The outcome of all these elements (unjustified, domination-inducing privatisation and deprivation-producing inequality) is not just the plain fact that some have too much while others have too little, but that “some manage to have too much only by making others having too little”. The crux is the social dynamic of domination, whose aim is making others have too little so that one can have too much.

43 Manifeste des Plébéiens, 102-104.
This view of injustice is no longer compatible with Anderson’s conception, in which some inequality is defensible on the conditions we have seen above. For Babeuf, any justification of inequality is normatively impossible because inequality by necessity leads to unjust distribution. It inevitably mean that some have too little, as a matter of fact and as history shows, because it is a social law that if some have too much, it is by making others have too little. As soon as inequality is justified, injustice is justified, empirically and logically.

This explains the insistence on full equality, without exception, even for those who are more productive or deserving. Positively, in terms of natural law, it is only fair that if everyone has in right equal access to social wealth, everyone should have the same amount of it, indexed to what they need for their own “happiness”. Here we should note the sophistication of Babeuf’s argument, in a newspaper article written at a time of extreme political emergency. He directly pre-empt an objection raised by contemporary luck egalitarians: what if my happiness requires that I receive more or more valuable goods, so that the principle of equality in “happiness” in fact leads to material inequality in my favour? Babeuf responds by defining happiness in minimalist terms, as “sufficiency” or the avoidance of misery. In a situation of scarcity, there is no third option between sufficiency for all on the basis of equal redistribution and unequal distribution that leads to deprivation for the many. Adding the condition of scarcity to the “sufficientarian” argument forces the conclusion to be radically egalitarian, since only a condition of indefinite social opulence would allow sufficiency for all to translate into unequal parts.

But the more basic argument, stemming from Rousseau and from social history, is the negative one: as soon as you justify inequalities, through the right to privatise wealth and all the other forms of privatised social power, you give up on the attempt to stop the mechanisms that lead to unjust inequality, which end up producing absolute injustice.

The negative argument is particularly powerful because it has the weight of the situation of utter misery as its backdrop. It is also significant for contemporary discussions because it focuses on the many dimensions of inequality that have direct effects on social justice. If the central concern is on the mechanisms by which inequality becomes a social force, leading to situations of injustice, then we have to look at material inequality as well as other forms of inequality as crucial factors of injustice. In particular, inequality in social representations, notably concerning the hierarchy of professions, becomes problematic from the point of view

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44 This speaks directly against Harry Frankfurt’s rejection of equality in favour of sufficiency in Equality as a Moral Ideal.
of social justice. Babeuf explicitly argues that it is wrong to base social and economic inequality on arbitrary representations about the relative values of social contributions.

From the point of view of this link between inequality and injustice through social domination, Anderson’s model falls short. As a republican, she is also worried about the mechanisms of social domination. But she doesn’t sufficiently consider that unequal property is one of the main ways in which positions of privilege and situations of social domination arise and become entrenched. Anderson is too caught up in discussions with luck egalitarians about the justifiability of equality of resources on the one hand, and on the other hand her relational approach makes her focus exclusively on modalities of social interaction, so that she doesn’t seem to consider the historical and sociological links between private property and domination. She doesn’t thematise it as a problem that political theory needs to address specifically. In the context of the immense concentration of power in the elites, and the undermining of political democracy as a result of social inequality, this lack of attention to the disrupting aspects of large economic inequality should be a central concern for her. A more generous reading of Babeuf would alert her to a worry he inherited from the very tradition of radical republicanism she aims to retrieve, that democracy is incompatible with economic inequality.

Moreover, as a follower of Rawls and as she is caught up in the framework of “distributive justice” discussions, Anderson adopts an unproblematic conception of talent, as though there was an objective hierarchy of tasks in terms of complexity and social value, with only those with superior personal qualities or motivation able to perform them. The notion that “talents” are social constructions, that some social activities, some professions might be privileged in arbitrary ways, is not sufficiently taken seriously by her. Indeed, as Babeuf argues, the part of individual merit involved in particular contributions can also be shown to have social conditions. Individual contributions mobilise resources, material and symbolic, which the individual has not produced but relies upon for her or his own activity. Moreover, in cases where some individual performance does appear particularly valuable and the individual

45 See in particular the sophisticated taxonomy she develops in chapter 1 of *The Imperative of Integration*.
46 Obviously she knows about this, she mentions the issue in her seminal 1999 text. “The degree of acceptable income inequality would depend in part on how easy it was to convert income into status inequality – differences in the social bases of self-respect, influence over elections, and the like. The stronger the barriers against commodifying social status, political influence and the like, the more acceptable are significant income inequalities,” “What is the Point of Equality?”, 326.
47 *Manifeste des Plébéiens*, 106: “the productions of industry and genius also become the property of all, the domain of the whole association, as soon as the inventors and workers have given birth to them; this is because they are only a compensation of previous inventions by genius and industry, which benefitted these inventors and workers through social life, and helped them in their discoveries”.
responsible for it therefore worthy of social esteem, if they benefited from a privileged education, it is highly likely that others might have performed the activity just as well if they had had the chance: an “equal distribution of knowledge between all would make the individuals roughly equal in capacity and even in talent”. This is not a consideration of moral arbitrariness or luck, as in the distributive justice paradigm, but a substantial claim about the innate equality of intelligences. Babeuf holds a similar theory as the one propounded by fellow revolutionary republican, Joseph Jacotot, whose forgotten name Jacques Rancière revived in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. But if all intelligences are equal in principle, and only circumstances allow some to fully develop them or make them fructify, then this significantly reduces the value of individual merit and “talent”. Such egalitarian theories of intelligence and education are far from the monstrous “levelling” Anderson reads them as. Asserting the equality of intelligence and the comparable value of social contributions does not translate into bringing down the apparently more deserving individuals, but requires that everyone have access to the knowledge and quality education the privileged individuals enjoyed.

Anderson advocates equality of opportunity and equal access to education, but not on the basis that this would equalise talents, but only to the extent that some deserving, thus far underprivileged individuals would thereby access occupations and social roles which are objectively superior.

We might ask how such meritocratic assumptions fit with an egalitarian ethos. The republican tradition insists on the fact that democracy is more than just an institutional structure, that it should be an ideal for social life as a whole. Anderson fully agrees with this, this is precisely what lies behind her emphasis on equality as a relation. How does such an ideal fit with the unproblematic assumption that some are intrinsically superior, and some social contributions are obviously more valuable than others?

Strikingly, Babeuf’s radical republican claim about the equality of intelligence provides the final plank to his communism: all wealth is socially produced; everyone contributes to social wealth; there is little to distinguish one contribution from another; indeed, even if there are differences in contribution, there is equality in need; therefore everyone should receive equal amounts from the universally produced wealth in proportion to what they need to attain
sufficiency in their circumstances. Rather than a dictatorial dystopia, Babeuf’s communism can be read as a consistent application of radical republican principles.

b. Honneth’s socialism from the point of view of radical equality

What do Babeuf’s challenges entail for Honneth’s brand of socialism?

First we can note that the initial way in which Honneth presented his theory of recognition was amenable to the negative approach delineated above. In The Struggle for Recognition, the overall logic of recognition and the different kinds of recognition claims were established through positive arguments of course, but the ground for these positive descriptions, what provided crucial heuristic orientation for them, was on the one hand the phenomenology of negative reactions demonstrated by individuals and groups exposed to experiences of social suffering and injustice, and on the other hand the history and sociology of social struggles against injustice. The more recent model presented in Freedom’s Right, by contrast, premised upon the institutions of modern society that realise and entrench different spheres of “social freedom” has lost touch with this negative grounding. Honneth in a number of recent texts has heeded Habermas’ methodological edict condemning the genetic fallacy that consists in drawing normative claims from facts about individual and social life.

Regarding the links between social inequality and democratic justice, the same rupture can be highlighted. Because of its strong sociological grounding, the initial model of recognition made room for a theory of social domination. Indeed, the very idea of a struggle for recognition put the focus on the social obstacles to full inclusion and equality in self-realisation. In his early texts, Honneth focused specifically on the obstacles to full social inclusion, including those based on material inequality. This made Honneth’s first political model amenable to the conception of Babeuf. Indeed, despite Honneth’s meritocratic assumptions regarding the value of social contributions in the third sphere of recognition, he applied the “struggle for recognition” directly to the cultural assumptions underpinning value judgements about these contributions. This opened the door for an egalitarian deconstruction of the hierarchy of professions and social activities, notably regarding the division between

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48 This is a close anticipation of the model of “contributive justice” presented by Paul Gomberg in How to make Opportunity equal. Race and Contributive Justice, Blackwell, 2007.
49 The Struggle for Recognition, 92-94, and a good summary statement at 174.
intellectual and manual labour, or indeed between paid and unpaid work. 51 From this point of view, Honneth’s first ideal of universal “self-realisation” could fit well with the radical republican motto according to which “the goal of society is common happiness”.

In the new model of recognition and the recent work on socialism that prolongs it, there is no longer an interest in developing an explicit theory of social domination. The emphasis is on identifying the modern ideal of freedom as social freedom, and how different spheres of modern society have gradually realised that ideal and provided specific content to it. This historical, normative reconstruction does entail the dimension of social struggles, inasmuch as the latter indicate different ways in which modern individuals have sought to extend and realise aspects of their individual freedom. 52 In turn, these references to social struggles indicate in negative fashion the antagonistic forces that were obstacles to freedom and thereby prevented social equality. But these struggles for equality and the social forces defending different kinds of privileges matter only for what they reveal about the content of different aspects of social freedom. They are no longer the focus of the theoretical effort. If extensions of social freedom occurred without struggle, for instance through the sheer force of moral progress, then this is all the same to the new critical model. This, from the point of view of the negativistic approach used by Babeuf, means that the links between forms of social inequality and justice have dropped out of view.

More worryingly still from a radical egalitarian perspective, the focus on the “morality of the market”, the idea that market interactions are underpinned by moral expectations that make the market itself a sphere of social freedom, means that the Equals’ linking of economic inequality with democratic deficit risks being loosened. Honneth would disagree with this, since he claims precisely that those moral expectations with which modern individuals enter into market-mediated economic interactions constrain the latter. On the labour market, for instance, historical progress, spurred on by the labour movement, ensured that principles such as fair wages, the right to a meaningful occupation or the right to have a say in economic organisation, gradually became established. 53 However, in his attempt to make room for market mechanisms as a central plank of a modernised version of socialism, Honneth’s political model is close to Anderson’s republican one. Like her, Honneth would refuse to

51 The Struggle for Recognition, 129-130: “In modern societies, relations of social esteem are subject to a permanent struggle, in which different groups attempt, by means of symbolic force and with reference to general goals, to raise the value of the abilities associated with their way of life”.
52 For example, Freedom’s Right, 208, on social movements relating to issues with the commodity market, 227 about labour rights.
53 Freedom’s Right, chapter 6.2.3.
view private property as incompatible with social freedom. He states this explicitly in relation to what private property allows the individual to do in relation to others, namely provide a secluded sphere separating her from others, and thus allowing her to revise her own life plans. But this is not what is at stake here. Babeuf might well accept this sense of “private” as being part of what “sufficiency” requires. What is at stake rather is the property of socially produced wealth, both in inherent normative terms and from the point of view of injustice.

Babeuf’s egalitarian concern with property is not necessarily as naive or ill-advised as the two thinkers would think. Babeuf focuses on private property because ownership of land in his time was the major source of wealth creation. As suggested before though, it is in the spirit of his proposal to view his concern with privatisation of land as a concern with the privatisation of socially produced wealth. As it happens, many contemporary political thinkers today seek to develop alternative economic models that challenge the idea that a modern economy is necessarily based on the private property of the means of production. For example, in relation to the theory of the firm, Isabelle Ferreras shows the fallacy that consists in collapsing the firm, an institution involving multiple constituencies with diverging rationalities, into the corporation, whose sole interest is the maximisation of return on investment for the shareholders. It is a historically contingent fact that holding shares in the corporation should have translated into property rights over the entire firm that trump any other rights or interests, placing the workers under the near absolute command of the shareholders and their representatives within the firm and sacrificing any interests or goals that might be pursued through the firm to the sole financial rewarding of the investors. On efficiency ground, it is not necessarily the case that market interactions require the private property of the means of production. There might be other ways to integrate the different agents involved in production (workers, managers, customers, communities) than through relations of unilateral obedience backed up by untouchable property rights. From a more basic critical perspective, Honneth, like Anderson, doesn’t consider the link Babeuf had delineated, between the accumulation of private property and the existence of class structures, which makes the social equality, and with it the equality in self-realisation he aims for, impossible.

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54 Freedom’s Right, 73-82.
56 See Benoit Borrits, Au-delà de la Propriété, La Découverte, 2018.