

Book Review: Equality and the British Left

Jennifer Hugh looks to the vigorous debate amongst the Left on equality, of which this text provides a much needed nuanced view.

Equality and the British Left. Ben Jackson. [Manchester University Press](#).

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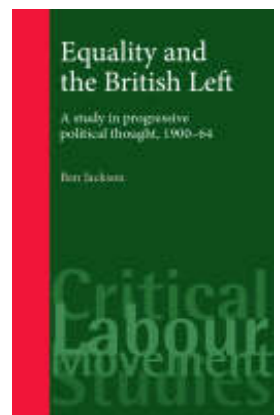
Equality and the British Left is a fascinating book exploring the debate around equality within the Left in British politics between 1900 and 1964. Ben Jackson's definition of the Left is a broad one drawing in mainstream Labour voices, those on the far-left, as well as those aligned with the Liberal Party, but his critique of the equality debate is narrow, being limited to class. Whilst some might see this as weakness, it does allow for a detailed and comprehensive examination of this one central issue. The range of views examined is impressive and enlightening from the well-known intellectual power-houses of the Left such as Hobhouse, Tawney and Crosland, to other figures such as Henry George and GDH Cole who, whilst lesser known, have also proved influential in developing the Left's understanding of equality. The book is split up into three chronological sections: 1900-31; 1931-45; and 1945-64 and these sections mirror key points in the development of the theory of equality for the progressive left.

The earliest section, 'Foundations', discusses initial ideas of equality and explores the arguments over 'need' and 'want', the dangers of 'free-loading' and 'moral hazard', the effective use of incentives, and the impact of equality on conceptions of 'freedom'. It sets up two key themes that run through both this text and indeed through the debates: egalitarianism and communitarianism. Despite their differences, Jackson argues that progressives tended to accept both the egalitarian aim of social justice and the communitarian aim of a society based on social co-operation. Nevertheless, there remained tensions and ambiguities over the policy implications of these ideas, for example, in employment, education, public ownership and indeed over the nature and shape of the egalitarian society that was sought.

These tensions come more to the fore in the middle section, 'Economics', which examines the period following the collapse of the Macdonald's Labour government, described by the author as a battle between Marx and Keynes for Labour's soul. The Great Depression had a profound effect on thinkers of the Left. To Marxists, the capitulation of the Labour government in agreeing to spending cuts showed the ultimate paucity of the attempt to introduce egalitarianism into a capitalist market state, whilst for social democrats, Keynes' critique of laissez-faire economic policies provided them with the intellectual tools to argue for greater egalitarianism within the capitalist state. Although Keynes was no egalitarian, his economic theories could be used to argue that inequality was economically inefficient as well as morally and socially undesirable; an important counter-weight to the argument that promoting equality would damage economic growth. At the same time the Left was able to harness the 'egalitarian populism' and 'solidarity' advanced during wartime; public good trounced private interests. However, Jackson shows that this success which culminated in the 1945 election victory for Labour obscured underlying tensions which the Left would have to confront in the post-war period.

The final section, 'Revisions', examines the period between 1945 and 1964, when equality, in the age of a comprehensive welfare state, was necessarily re-examined and re-defined. The Labour party's success at the 1945 general election and the establishment of the comprehensive welfare state, followed by the party's subsequent failures to win the elections of 1951, 1955 and 1959, created a philosophical challenge to the progressive Left. Jackson rejects the idea that the revisionists were meritocrats only, but agrees with the 'New Left' view that they emphasised the egalitarian strand of equality over the communitarian one. Nevertheless, he argues that they advanced a more radical set of policies to change society than they are commonly given credit for.

The debate on equality, in this period and since, has been a vigorous one and this text provides a much needed nuanced view of what was meant by different strands on the Left to counter simplistic and often cartoonish representations of the drive for equality. Jackson states that this is the key aim of the book and in this he is successful. Whilst clearly structured, this is a dense read but this is necessary in order to do justice to the complexity of the debates.



As the Labour Party seeks to rebuild itself after suffering its worst defeat for 80 years at the 2010 election, the debates about what is meant by equality, the role of the state and how this goal could be achieved are still relevant. The last Labour administration declared itself “intensely relaxed” about the growth of wealth at the top of society and despite measures, such as the Minimum Wage and Working Tax Credits, the gap between the rich and the poor grew. Inequalities in wealth, income, educational opportunities, and health outcomes remain and it is certain that the ‘Refounding Labour’ debate will need to formulate strategies to deal with these issues; as Jackson concludes, if the Left does not tackle social and economic inequality then it begs the question: ‘What is the Left for?’. Whilst the beginning of the twenty first century offers new challenges to those posed at the beginning of the last, those charged with the task of answering this question could learn much from examining the debates on equality that the progressive Left has grappled with over the last hundred years; this book will serve as a useful reminder and introduction to these.

Jennifer Hugh recently completed a PhD in Politics, research interests, public policy and the welfare system.