

4-1-2013

No Equality. No Social Justice. Why not Equity?

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Recommended Citation

Marquez, Anthony John '14, "No Equality. No Social Justice. Why not Equity?" (2013). *2013 Spring Semester*. Paper 3.
<http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/spring2013/3>

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Idea of the Individual

Dr. Kotlarczyk

No Equality. No Social Justice. Why not Equity?

In regards to most current and past social discrepancies, such as between races and sexes, people tend to protest in favor of all individuals being treated equally. However, as demonstrated in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*, striving for utter equal treatment in hope of achieving social justice is not necessarily conducive to an uncontested, utopian society. Social justice, as thoroughly defined by the School of Social Welfare at the University of California at Berkeley, categorizes social justice as a process that "empowers all people to exercise self-determination and realize their full potential...and builds social solidarity and community capacity for collaborative action" (School of Social Welfare – UC Berkeley). Therefore, despite the perceived implementation of social equality, the societies in *Brave New World* and *Harrison Bergeron* do not achieve social justice, as its two main components are violated significantly and consistently.

On a broader level, the caste system exercised in *Brave New World* inhibits the prevalence of social solidarity and collaboration, as it emphasizes distinct separation between individuals. In fact, the extent of the emphasis on segregation is exemplified in the society's concept of Elementary Class Consciousness, which is a program that seeks to ensure that all individuals are conscious of their respective caste, its benefits, and the deficiencies of other castes. While the frighteningly malleable individuals may eventually benefit from this practice as a means of being satisfied with their own self, Elementary Class Consciousness breeds more than just personal confidence; it breeds disdain, hatred, and other negative feelings towards members

of different castes. For example, following a quick flip of a switch, a soft, comforting voice began permeating the minds of Betas not yet fully developed as it iterates, “Oh no, I don’t want to play with Delta children. And Epsilons are still worse. They’re too stupid to be able to read or write. Besides they wear black, which is such a beastly colour. I’m *so* glad I’m a Beta” (Huxley 27). Continuing on with the ritual, the voice targets the other castes when stating, “Alpha children wear grey. They work much harder than we do, because they’re so frightfully clever. I’m really awfully glad I’m a Beta, because I don’t work so hard. And then we are much better than the Gammas and Deltas. Gammas are stupid. They all wear green, and Delta children wear khaki” (27).

In the eyes of The Directors of this society, the process of Elementary Class Consciousness intends to be the “greatest moralizing and socializing force of all time” (28). While the process surely builds the morale of the participants through consistent comparative compliments, it does so at the expense of blatantly and hatefully disrespecting the other castes. In this case, the Betas were taught to degrade Epsilons and Gammas as lacking adequate intelligence, while being discouraged to interact with Deltas. Furthermore, the potentially admirable intellect of the Alphas is glossed over in order to emphasize the fact that Betas are better due to their relative lack of work and stress. In order to differentiate the castes and make it possible for individuals to recognize who to interact with and who to avoid, each caste wears a representative color. Therefore, whether it is through visual grouping and subsequent separation through color coded castes, or through the hateful opinions that are preached to young, easily influenced individuals, the society depicted in *Brave New World* seems to devalue integration and collaboration on a larger scale, thereby violating an essential component of social justice.

In *Harrison Bergeron*, the restrictions placed on individuals inherently violate the concept of all being allowed to realize their true potential fully. In the society of *Harrison Bergeron* in 2081, “everyone was finally equal...Nobody was smarter than anyone else. Nobody was better looking than anyone else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else” (Vonnegut). Thus, to achieve this expansive equality without modification before birth, individuals that demonstrate an extreme propensity for physical or mental prowess are handicapped accordingly. In the case of George, he wears a device that “was tuned to a government transmitter. Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains” (Vonnegut). So, the society in *Harrison Bergeron* seeks to achieve equality through maintaining a low intellectual level, presumably to limit any potential threats towards the supreme, ruling Handicapper General. As a consequence of having intelligent constituents, there is a higher probability of disagreements, opposition, and potentially revolt. Therefore, to avoid conflict and institute stability, all constituents are forcibly restricted to low mental functionality.

Additionally, handicaps for those exhibiting potentially threatening or particularly impressive physical abilities are also incorporated. In one case, the ballerinas were so severely physically handicapped that they “weren't really very good -- no better than anybody else would have been, anyway” (Vonnegut). In a more threatening case in *Harrison Bergeron*, the eponymous character possessed incredibly advanced mental and physical attributes, thereby being highlighted as dangerous by the government. In addition to his imposing personal characteristics, Harrison is propelled by a plot to overthrow the government. As a result of such an opposing combination, Harrison is handicapped to an unprecedented extent, totaling to him “carrying three hundred pounds” (Vonnegut). Ultimately, the handicaps, both physical and

mental, surely do push for equality. However, as a result of these attempts, the individuals with outstanding characteristics are punished to the point of mitigating strengths and forming a very robotic, unspectacular society. As individuals are clearly restricted from fulfilling their potential and paving their own path in accordance with their true, unrestricted selves, this aspect of the society in *Harrison Bergeron* violates a key construct of social justice.

The general foundation of the society in *Brave New World* is pitted against the concept of self-determination, and rather hinges upon predetermined lives. The basis of this predetermined lifestyle is evident in the hatcheries, in which children are engineered, rather than naturally born from mothers. More specifically, groups of individuals undergo different treatments and procedures depending on their class. After being physically engineered, either through the Bokanovsky Process of egg division for Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons or the bottling process of Alphas and Betas, the “procession marched slowly on...into the Social Predestination Room” (Huxley 10) In the Social Predestination Room, Mr. Foster, the Director, elaborates on how babies are predestined into one of the aforementioned castes, which as a result also determines their occupation and general future activity. Furthermore, in order to somewhat predetermine the intelligence and responsiveness of individuals, the Directors adopt the philosophy of “the lower the caste...the shorter the oxygen” (14). Furthering conditioning before the fetuses lose tails, all individuals are conditioned to thrive in heat and even enjoy it. The rationale behind such conditioning is to “[make] people like their un-escapable social destiny” (16).

In order to fortify the conditioning, the children are exposed to outlets that could potentially deter them from what they had been conditioned to believe and feel. As a prime example, children are taught to absolute abhor books and other potentially informational sources. Moreover, as a bit of more long-term conditioning, certain phrases, thoughts, and ideas are

implanted into the minds of individuals through ritualistic hypnopaedia, which encompasses repetitively conveying messages and lessons people who are sleeping. By going through this procedure, the elite can instill whatever values they chose into the minds of their constituents, which removes their personal discretion and individuality.

A shared feature between both *Brave New World* and *Harrison Bergeron* is a clear separation between those subject to handicaps, conditioning, and other forms of manipulation, and those in charge of the society as a whole. In *Brave New World*, there are multiple elite Directors that seem to acknowledge the past and all of the true feelings that accompany it, while forcing their constituents into artificial happiness and procedural manipulation. Similarly, the society in *Harrison Bergeron* features the Handicapper General, which, as the governing body, determines the restrictions placed on individuals, thereby dictating their destinies day by day. However, governing bodies of elite individuals is not a surprising feature, as it may very well be necessary in order to maintain the desired social stability. However, it is important to note that, because of the presence of controlling, unaffected governing bodies, true equality between people cannot necessarily be achieved. A case can surely be made for equality within the castes in *Brave New World*, but on a broader scale there is a clear difference between what individuals endure, how they think, and generally how they live their lives. Furthermore, there is a lack of a true sense of equality in *Harrison Bergeron* not only due to the acknowledged governing body, but because all individuals born with naturally elite physical or mental attributes are clearly distinguished and treated significantly differently than those naturally born below the maximum level of intelligence or physical prowess. Therefore, the counterargument claiming that there is social justice because everyone experiences equality is inherently incorrect due to the lack of true equality in both texts.

In conclusion, both *Brave New World* and *Harrison Bergeron* demonstrate clear violations of the social justice components due to their emphasis on predestination, handicapping to limit potential, and the opposition to social solidarity as well as widespread collaboration. All in all, both texts are exemplars for failed attempts at achieving equality and social justice. As a result, their failures indicate that true equality in societies is not necessarily achievable. Rather than societies striving for the elusive, trite concept of equality, an effort towards equity and fair share for those deserving may serve as a more practical approach that is ultimately conducive to social justice.

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