

comprehensive framework for understanding egalitarian principles in diverse contemporary societies.

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Advantageous inequality aversion as a motivational component in egalitarian processes

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Abstract

Egalitarian processes may be driven by multiple coexisting motivations, rather than solely by self-interest and disadvantageous inequality aversion. Drawing on behavioral, computational, and neural evidence, we highlight the important role of advantageous inequality aversion and propose that incorporating it would enhance the framework's theoretical completeness, explanatory power, and scope.

The target article offers a novel process-oriented reconceptualization of egalitarian societies, advancing an integrative framework that links individual motivations, socio-ecological conditions, egalitarian processes, and inequality. Despite its theoretical innovation, the framework places primary emphasis on self-interested motivations and disadvantageous inequality aversion while underestimating the extent to which egalitarian behavior may be guided by multiple coexisting motivations. In particular, aversion to advantageous inequality may play an important yet underappreciated role in egalitarian processes, ultimately contributing to the maintenance of relative equality. Below, we explain why incorporating aversion to advantageous inequality would complement and strengthen the proposed framework.

Advantageous inequality aversion as a unique motivation. The target article acknowledges that disadvantageous inequality outcomes can activate both self-interested motives and disadvantageous inequality aversion. However, aversion to advantageous inequality outcomes has also been documented not only in industrialized societies (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Luo et al., 2018) but also in nominally egalitarian societies – for example, among the Au and Gnao of Papua New Guinea, who reject unequal offers in the Ultimatum Game regardless of whether the offers favor or disfavor themselves (Henrich et al., 2005) – and even in non-human

primates (e.g., chimpanzees) (Brosnan & De Waal, 2014). Converging neuroscientific evidence from fMRI studies further shows that advantageous inequality elicits brain activation profiles distinct from those associated with disadvantageous inequality, supporting their motivational distinctiveness (Bellucci et al., 2018; Gao et al., 2018; Li et al., 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest that aversion to advantageous inequality represents a missing yet independent motivational component in the framework proposed by the target article.

Advantageous inequality aversion guides egalitarian processes. Many egalitarian processes highlighted in the target article, including demand-sharing, risk-pooling, prosocial reputation-building, and status-levelling, often manifest as altruistic behaviors involving either direct resource provision or third-party intervention in unequal resource allocation. Extensive research in behavioral economics and social psychology suggests that, beyond self-interest and disadvantageous inequality aversion, advantageous inequality aversion makes a non-redundant contribution to explaining altruistic behaviors in resource distribution contexts, which are central to egalitarian processes (e.g., Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Gao et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2024). Thus, aversion to advantageous inequality constitutes a non-negligible motivation underlying egalitarian processes.

Disentangling advantageous inequality aversion from self-interested reputation seeking. Altruistic behaviors central to egalitarian processes could be motivated by advantageous inequality aversion. However, as the target article also notes, an alternative explanation is that such behaviors reflect self-interested concerns, particularly the pursuit of reputation and social status through prosocial displays. Supporting the first view, prior studies show that even in anonymous contexts where reputational incentives are minimal, individuals remain willing to allocate resources to others (Eckel & Grossman, 1996; Umer, 2023). Supporting the second view, substantial evidence indicates that individuals behave more fairly and altruistically when reputational benefits can be obtained (e.g., Andreoni & Bernheim, 2009; Li et al., 2021; Qu et al., 2019). These findings, largely derived from participants in industrialized societies, suggest that advantageous inequality aversion and self-interested reputation-seeking motivations may coexist within egalitarian processes. Future research would benefit from experimentally manipulating anonymity versus identifiability (e.g., Feng, Tian, & Luo, 2023) and combining such designs with computational modeling approaches to disentangle these motivations across a broad range of social contexts and populations, from nominally egalitarian societies to industrialized societies.

Contexts in which self-interest cannot explain egalitarian processes. When individuals accidentally inflict physical or economic harm on others, an inequality arises between the perpetrator and the victim (Urbanska, McKeown, & Taylor, 2019). Providing compensation in such contexts serves to restore this disrupted equality and can thus be understood as an egalitarian process (e.g., status-levelling). In a recent study, we modeled individuals' compensatory decisions and found that, compared with models incorporating self-interest, models excluding self-interested motivations provided a better account of compensatory behavior (Zhu et al., 2025). These findings suggest that, when determining how much to compensate, individuals primarily focus on delivering an appropriate level of restitution to the victim while largely disregarding considerations of self-interest. Accordingly, a theoretical framework that includes only self-interested motivations has difficulty accounting for such egalitarian behavior. Incorporating additional motivational components – such as aversion to advantageous inequality – is therefore

necessary to enhance the framework's explanatory power. In compensatory contexts, for example, perpetrators' actions can be understood as motivated by a desire to reduce the advantageous inequality created by their harmful behavior.

Relying solely on self-interested motivations has difficulty explaining a broad range of altruistic behaviors central to egalitarian processes (e.g., Henrich et al., 2005). Motivations underlying egalitarian processes are therefore likely to be plural and complex (e.g., Li et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2024). By demonstrating the unique explanatory power of aversion to advantageous inequality and highlighting contexts in which self-interested motivations are insufficient, we suggest that explicitly incorporating aversion to advantageous inequality as an additional motivational component would strengthen the theoretical completeness of the target article's framework.

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A problem facing process-egalitarianism: Why do individuals surrender autonomy to political community?

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Abstract

This comment accepts the distinction that Duncan Stibbard-Hawkes and Chris von Rueden make: the difference between process-egalitarianism and outcome-egalitarianism. It also accepts that most historical societies care more about process- than outcome-egalitarianism. However, a question remains. If people care about process-egalitarianism, how come they are ready to surrender autonomy – i.e., ability to make decisions of their own – to a political community?

This commentary welcomes the main thesis of Duncan Stibbard-Hawkes (DSH) and Chris von Rueden (CvR) (2025). Namely, much of the intellectual output of European thinkers since

Rousseau regarding early, less complex human societies is greatly misguided. DSH and CvR portray this body of thought as outcome-egalitarianism – which supposes that individuals are universally motivated by establishing actual equality in their respective societies. Such a supposition assures egalitarianism in the *outcome* sense, i.e., individuals in early, less complex societies more or less have equal wealth, status, resource access, and autonomy.

According to DSH and CvR, the empirical evidence does not support the supposition that humans are motivated by outcome-egalitarianism. Relying on their work and the work of maverick anthropologists, they show that early, less complex societies are populated by individuals similar to modern contemporary beings: humans *per se* are motivated by self-interest to accumulate more wealth, status, and resource access than their neighbors. “Humans do not tend to rest once they achieve wealth, status, and resource access that are equal to their neighbors.”

This commentary focuses on a sub-thesis of DSH and CvR. They want to redefine egalitarianism to denote process-egalitarianism, i.e., effectively replacing defunct outcome-egalitarianism. They define process-egalitarianism as the motive of individuals to seek, establish, and nurture socio-ecological circumstances that “enable most individuals to successfully secure their own status, autonomy, and resource access.” At first approximation, what matters is not the outcome but rather functional circumstances, i.e., institutions and rules that make ample opportunities for people to seek status, autonomy, and resource access.

While this commentary welcomes the concept “process-egalitarianism,” it is incomplete. DSH and CvR ultimately treat political authority as a power that acts as an external constraint that people attempt to manage to one extent or another. For DSH and CvR, process-egalitarian individuals in all societies make sure that political authority, or what they call “leadership,” does not become overt and excessive to the point of subverting circumstances, i.e., making them dysfunctional.

DSH/CvR’s conception of political authority basically fails to attend to the fact that – as stressed by Graeber and Wengrow (2021), whom DSH and CvR cite extensively – political authority is inevitably associated with violence, oppression, and most notably the loss of autonomy. (Note, however, Graeber and Wengrow unfortunately limit such violence, oppression, and loss of autonomy to post-Pharaoh states; Graeber and Wengrow basically deny that violence, oppression, and loss of autonomy also characterize pre-Pharaoh, less complex political communities (see Khalil, 2023, 2025, 2026)).

An anomaly facing process-egalitarianism à la DSH and CvR. How do they account for the fact that people function in political communities – both pre- and post-Pharaoh – that involve oppression and loss of autonomy to one degree or another? Why would individuals, in the first place, surrender, to one extent or another, their autonomy to political authority? Why would they consent to the oppression that their leaders might exercise at any moment under the excuse of “emergency” or “state of exception”?

The most prominent answer in modern political philosophy is social contract theory à la classical (individual) liberalism of Hobbes and Locke (Macpherson, 2011, (1962)). Basically, people are ready to surrender some autonomy to avoid, for Hobbes, outright war of all-against-all, or to avoid, for Locke, confusion and civil chaos. Smith (1978) waged a serious critique of this theory, namely, it neglects allegiance (see Khalil, 1998, 2005). Allegiance is