

# The New Criterion

Dispatch October 18, 2010 01:07 pm

## The Limits of Equality

by James Bowman

How delightful, I thought, as I read the following passage, written by D.J. Taylor in yesterday's *Independent on Sunday* of London:

The rich have always had their defenders. You sometimes get the feeling that even when Our Lord was expounding the parable of Dives and Lazarus, there would have been somebody at hand to remark that actually Dives was a jolly good chap who gave lots of money to the Lower Hebron Distressed Streetsweepers' Fund but didn't like to brag about it in public. The curious thing about the praetorian guard that assembles around any wealthy person whenever there seems a faint chance that this wealth may be fractionally reduced, is that it tends to consist of people who are not particularly well-heeled themselves: genuinely disinterested forelock-tuggers, like the unemployed Americans featured on last week's BBC *News at Ten* complaining that the jobless get too many hand-outs. This being the case, it hasn't been in the least surprising, amid the banker-baiting clamour for "fairness" and everyone having to make sacrifices, to find a few reedy voices raised in the plutocrats' defence.

Yet the pleasure one takes in Mr Taylor's writing is so complete that it hardly occurs to one to notice what might otherwise appear to be the oddness of the notion that the rich, tendentiously described as "plutocrats," need a "defence" merely on account of being rich. Where does this assumption come from and why is it so pervasive in the media? The British media, to be sure, are much more in thrall to it, but the American media are not that far behind, I fancy.

It may have something to do with the wit of the writing, which is not so common, either there or here. For the undeserving winners of the genetic lottery known as the intelligent have been so flattered and petted and made much of by the official culture of the last half century or so that their natural sense of disdain for other sorts of human excellence than the intellectual has almost been written into the popular culture as legitimate envy of the rich, the strong, the beautiful and the honorable — historically their chief competitors for public esteem. Mr Taylor, to his credit, notices that he might be open to the charge of enviousness, and he attempts to answer it:

But the "politics of envy" tag seems to me to misunderstand the principle on which so much modern life is based. It is not that the majority of the population dislikes rich people being rich: like the last-but-one prime minister, they are immensely relaxed about it, and the old sentimental-socialist theories of redistribution are dead in the water. What irks them is that the "equality of opportunity" that most politicians publicly promote is so conspicuously flawed that it might almost have been designed to deny most of that population any chance of social or economic advancement. To particularise, I was at college with several people who became stockbrokers, and one of the reasons they pursued this no doubt honourable calling was that their fathers were stockbrokers, or that they knew other people who were.

In other words, if I may paraphrase, the fundamental principle of human relations is or ought to be equality. In an ideal world, everyone should have the same chance. What is objectionable about rich people is not that they have more money than the rest of us but that they have more chances. Fair enough.

But I wonder if Mr Taylor would apply the same argument to the gifts of the intellect, which are quite as unevenly distributed as wealth, beauty and power and which also afford far more chances to the well-endowed than to those of more modest capacities. Would he be in favor of stigmatizing high intelligence in the same way that he stigmatizes high incomes? Would he approve of a system of handicapping by which the brighter sort of people, like himself, were held back in order that the dimmer sort should have greater opportunities to shine their light, such as it is, before the world? In a way this is precisely what is happening with the rise of the Internet. Newspaper and TV pundits like Mr Taylor used to be regarded with a certain honor and prestige — and, dare I say it, wealth. But now, in the blogosphere, everyone's a pundit and the market value of opinion-mongers threatens to drop through the floor. No wonder such writers are feeling aggrieved!

---

**James Bowman** is a Resident Scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and the author of *Honor, A History* (Encounter).