

Equity's Dangerous Echo



by Theodore Dalrymple

Equity is the quality of fairness and impartiality. It can be demanded only in certain defined circumstances, not of human life in general. Only a moment's reflection is necessary to prove that this is so. It isn't fair that some people are born handsome and others are born ugly, or intelligent and unintelligent, or gifted and ungifted, in good homes or in bad. Not until everyone is a clone and brought up in precisely the same circumstances will life be fair: and then it will be horrible. But exam papers can be marked, and sports refereed, fairly.

One might have thought that equity in the choice of scholarly work to publish in learned journals consisted solely of assessment of its scholarly worth: no other criterion should count. That's one of the reasons why submissions to assessors are often anonymized, for it's true that human beings have biases that may resist their efforts to put them aside. People

differ, of course, in their capacity or willingness to be dispassionate.

The more exact the science, no doubt, the more easily truth will out, and the quicker will any bias be exposed. But even in less-exact fields of knowledge, quality is discernible. You might disagree with Edward Gibbon's outlook and conclusions, for example, but you could hardly claim that his "Decline and Fall" was without merit; likewise, Leo Tolstoy's philosophy of history might appear mistaken to you, but you would not therefore assert that his "War and Peace" was no good as a novel.

In present circumstances, however, equity in publication in learned journals has come to mean not the choice of what to publish according to scholarly merit, but according to the racial origins or other demographic characteristics of authors. The proportion of published authors of each racial or demographic group should, according to the "equity" fanatics, mirror that of their proportion in the general population: as if, in a state of fairness, all groups would be represented equally in everything.

Needless to say, the choice of *which* races or demographic groups are to be promoted by equity in this sense is itself arbitrary, or at least a matter of political choice. Moreover, if equity in scholarly publication means the choice of what to publish according to scholarly worth, equity in the demographic sense must result in inequity in the sense of scholarship.

Equity in the sense that it's now commonly used therefore actually means *inequity* in the only sense that has any value. You can't have under-representation without over-representation; they're like horse and carriage in the song in the musical "High Society." And in the field of scholarship, this can only mean the suppression of the good at the expense of the promotion of the less good, or even the bad.

The argument employed by the "equity" fanatics has a long and very undistinguished history. It was the argument employed by

the Nazis—who, however, didn't invent it. The argument was as follows: that Jews in Germany were over-represented in medicine, law, academia and scholarship, politics, science, banking, and large-scale commerce. The only possible explanation for this "inequity" was that they were the beneficiaries of a conspiracy, either by them or by some shadowy organization, the evidence for which was of a kind similar to that for structural racism in America today. It couldn't be that the Jews in Germany of the time had certain qualities that propelled them into social prominence.

I presume we all know what this argument in Germany led to.

The Journal of the American Medical Association (perhaps without quite realizing it) has, in effect, swallowed the argument hook, line, and sinker. In a [series of editorials](#), the latest published on [Feb. 9 on the JAMA Network](#), it has sworn fealty to the idea that the ethnic origin or sexual orientation of authors (and editors) is relevant to the selection of what it publishes. As the Soviets and the Nazis would have put it, down with bourgeois and Jewish science! Up with proletarian and Aryan science!

As for diversity, it means for JAMA not diversity of opinion (perish the thought that any should appear on these matters in the pages of JAMA, the only meaning that diversity should have in this context!), but diversity of race and sexual orientation of editors and authors. Give sadomasochistic and foot fetishist scientists their chance at last! Too long they have remained in the shadows.

The editor-in-chief is nothing if not ambitious. She said in [a 2022 editorial](#) at the time of her appointment, "JAMA has a social responsibility to improve equity and the total human condition." Gosh! To cure or prevent disease is not enough for JAMA; universal happiness and righteousness must be its aim. The grandiosity makes such characters as Lenin and Stalin seem almost modest in their ambitions. Stalin, at least, aimed only for socialism in one country, at least until he was able to impose it on others.

Future generations, if there are any, will wonder how a set of

such obviously gimcrack ideas could have taken over the minds of highly intelligent people in so short a time. Any student of German history will have wondered something similar, how the most technically advanced nation in the world, with an immense culture, could have surrendered itself in so short a time and so completely to the ideas of (at best) semi-educated bar-room demagogues. The surrender wasn't just among ignoramuses: the Nazi share of the vote was higher among university students than among the general population. More than half of those attending the Wannsee Conference, at which the Final Solution was decided, had doctorates. Nazi academics were only too willing to take over high positions in universities.

We're currently seeing a faintly reminiscent process in the whole of the Western world. There's nothing comparable to the brutality of the Nazis occurring, and this is a huge difference, of course. Nevertheless, it's alarming that a way of thinking should now be in common between the Nazis and the Journal of the American Medical Association. History doesn't repeat itself, it has been said, but it rhymes.

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