

# In Conversation with Professor Elizabeth Anderson

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*John Dewey Distinguished University Professor and Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Elizabeth Anderson is famously redefining egalitarianism in the field of political philosophy. Conventionally, philosophical debate has imagined the two concepts of equality and freedom to be polar opposites. Anderson has sought to challenge this perception by subordinating the popular egalitarian notion of distributive equality to that of democratic equality, which brings the concepts of freedom and equality together. Anderson's groundbreaking work extends beyond political philosophy and engages in interdisciplinary research across fields and topics such as racial integration, the philosophy of economics, theories of value and rational choice, and the history and philosophy of the work ethic. In this interview, Anderson reveals the importance of empirical analysis within philosophy, what we can learn through an analysis of the history of egalitarianism and the role of social movements within its discourse, and how present inequalities have come about.*

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**CJLPA: Could you perhaps tell us a bit about your trajectory to becoming a philosopher?**

**Professor Elizabeth Anderson:** I started off in college studying economics, but there I noticed issues that I had at a very foundational level. These were questions like: should we assume that preferences are all in the person's self-interest? We often choose to observe social norms: for example, out of norms of etiquette, you don't take the last roll in the basket. But if the host offers it to you, you would prefer that to not having it. I thought economics wasn't sorting out the distinctions well, and that was leading to mistakes in welfare economics. If people are declining to do things just out of social norms, it doesn't necessarily mean that their welfare is being advanced, even though they're doing what they want in the sense that they are choosing to do it. Such foundational questions moved me into philosophy, because philosophers want to put pressure on concepts that are used in the social sciences that maybe haven't been probed adequately, and to think about introducing other ideas that could call into question some of the normative conclusions that people are drawing from their social scientific research. So that moved me into philosophy, but I have always been engaged in the social sciences. I think economics would be enriched if it drew distinctions that better tracked normatively important ideas.

**CJLPA: Your current research interest is in the history of egalitarianism. What was your motivation behind this recent research interest?**

**EA:** If you look in contemporary political philosophy, you see that much is written about freedom, and what freedom means, and why it is important. Equality is there, but I found it to be under-theorised. In particular, there's the dominance of a certain distributive notion of equality that is kind of cosmic, which I think makes no sense. It applies to situations like this: imagine there is a

distant world out there with beings just like us, only they have half the welfare levels that we do. Some conclude that there would be this unfairness in the universe because there's an inequality. I think this notion of inequality has nothing to do with the inequality that people care about in real society. What people care about is not just some abstract difference between what I have and what you have. It's all about social relations and social processes. How did those rich people get all that money? Did they get it at others' expense? And are they using that wealth to dominate others? Does society turn wealth disparities into grounds for stigmatising the less advantaged? If it's just some cosmic inequality with some distant planet, there's no causal connection between our well-being and their well-being, and there is no injustice in that.

What we care about in real societies—and it's not just distribution—are things like: the quality of social relations; who's ordering who around; who gets stigmatised and who is esteemed; who is expected to beg for mercy; and who gets to dish out punishment arbitrarily. Those are things we care about: the structure of social relations, how we interact, and the norms through which we interact. I thought that a lot of discussion in political philosophy about inequality had this very abstract cosmic notion going on that really wasn't picking up on the concerns of egalitarian social movements, on the concerns of real people who suffer from inequality, and that's what I wanted to get at. My work has been trying to help people understand what egalitarian social movements are after and ground political philosophy in the experience of inequality and what makes *that* so bad.

**CJLPA: Was there something perhaps shocking that you found in the history of egalitarian discourse that relates to today's inequality or equality?**

**EA:** One lesson you learn is that we have seen all this before. It's

a funny thing about human beings, but we do really repeat the past. The way we think today is part of a whole history of thinking and we haven't been able to get outside those ways of thought to critically examine them. My latest book—which I just submitted to Cambridge University Press—looks at the history of the Protestant work ethic, which was created by Puritan theologians in the seventeenth century. I'm tracing its influence through the history of classical political economy—figures like Locke, Smith, Mill, and Marx—up to the present. I argue that contemporary neoliberalism—an ideology that says that firms should maximise profits, that we should expand the domain of the market to cover most things and shrink the domain of the state, that we should outsource public services to for-profit corporations and shrink the welfare state, a whole collection of policies behind bolstering the power of property—can be traced back to the Protestant work ethic as it developed in the late eighteenth century. We've lost this other tradition of developing the seventeenth-century work ethic, which is very progressive and pro-worker. I am recovering this egalitarian tradition of thinking about the work ethic that has been overlooked, even though you can trace it straight through from Locke, Smith, and Mill, to Marx and social democracy.

Why did the work ethic split into two radically different ideas, one pro-worker and one all about empowering the rich? I argue that, from the start, the Puritans who created the work ethic had contradictory attitudes towards work. On the one hand, they saw work as a kind of ascetic discipline: workers have to keep their noses to the grindstone to prevent them from being distracted by temptation. So, that can rationalise consigning workers to all kinds of drudgery to suppress sin. But then there's this other idea that work is carrying out God's will for human beings on Earth, which is for us to promote the welfare of our fellow human beings. Work is meaningful because it helps other people. This is a utilitarian ethic. I have wonderful quotes from some of these Puritans which are pure utilitarian doctrine: if you have a choice between doing more good or less good, you have to do more good. Richard Baxter, a very influential Puritan theologian, said that you should sacrifice your children's beautiful clothing if that is needed so that you can give money to relieve the suffering of the poor. Peter Singer, our most influential contemporary utilitarian, wrote a great essay back in the 1970s saying that if a child was drowning in a pond, you should be willing to ruin your shoes to wade in there and rescue the child. So if a child in Bangladesh is starving, you should also give up spending on your fancy clothes so that you can send money. He is channelling this seventeenth-century Puritan minister! Puritans reasoned that if work is performing God's will on Earth that means that ordinary labour is sacred activity. This raises the status of workers, because they're doing sacred and honourable things. Puritans couldn't stand the monks: all that ritual is not doing anybody any good. Puritans famously had very sparse churches and were not spending a lot of time on art and finery. They were very practical minded. Puritan theologians argued that because workers are doing God's will, that means you've got to respect them, pay them a living wage, give them safe conditions, and not just boss them around tyrannically, but treat them with love and respect. You can trace that tradition, which is very pro-worker, all the way through the history of classical political economy right up to social democracy. Everybody should have a decent life, and everyone should do their part to make that so. It's a very egalitarian idea. It means that just as Baxter thought that you should give up your fancy clothes to help the poor, the rich don't need all this fancy stuff. Institutions should be arranged to ensure that everybody's needs are fulfilled and that everyone can fully participate in society as an equal.

***CJLPA: Why do you think the neoliberal work ethic lasted so long? Has it been embedded within society, or are we seeing a change nowadays?***

EA: I do think workers are rethinking work. The pandemic, to a certain extent, has sparked this. In the United States, the pandemic generated sharply contrasting outcomes for different workers. Privileged workers, white collar workers, could generally take their work home and we're Zooming: we can fulfil our duties without meeting face to face. But it's different for working-class people. They have to be at work in person, to deliver personal services, manufacture things, and perform other tasks in contact with other people. They're exposed to danger as a result. Early in the pandemic, people were saying that grocery workers and other essential workers who have to be face to face should get hazard pay, and a few corporations actually acceded to that demand. But then they started cutting back and they started abusing workers. It's like, 'Oh, well, this is an opportunity, given their desperation, to increase profits by making life even worse for them'. So in the United States, workers in the meatpacking plants were crowded closer together so they could speed up the lines. That meant that these places became COVID hotspots, because they're more crowded together and not provided with personal protective equipment. These workers, and others such as Amazon warehouse workers, are treated as disposable even though they are called essential workers. So, we still have these contradictory attitudes: should workers be given higher pay for risking their lives, or should you just treat them as disposable? 'Well, we can always replace them; that's what the market says; the market dictates the wage and it's low enough they're willing to take it at this horrible wage with high risk, so go right ahead, exploit them.' And both ideas are there. But many people are thinking there's no justification for treating workers so horribly. They're supporting and supplying the means of life for everyone else! Shouldn't *they* be allowed to live? The National Health Service in the UK, for example: only a one percent raise for nurses?! It's appalling! They've been risking their lives. They're totally stressed out and exhausted. Especially in the wake of the fact that in the UK nurses' pay has been declining over time. It's shocking. The same thing is happening in the United States. We have nurses on strike against inadequate staffing levels. They're overwhelmed and unable to provide necessary care because staffing has been cut in many hospitals. That means patients can't get tended to when they need it.

***CJLPA: Is this a wake-up call to change the work ethic, or will things go back to normal?***

EA: Part of my work is on social movements. Without a social movement, nothing will change. Change doesn't happen just because people have the idea that something is wrong. People have to be in the streets, they have to make demands and take political action to change the system.

***CJLPA: Talking about social movements, I was wondering if we could talk about the recent Black Lives Matter protests—it has been a year since the death of George Floyd. You have heavily researched racial segregation, as well as integration, and I wanted to ask: is there a difference between the Black Lives Matter movement of the last year and the civil rights movement of the 1960s, or even the abolitionist movement?***

EA: I think they all are part of the social movement tradition. Movements against racial inequality have been a powerful source of egalitarian thought. Feminism and workers' movements came out of the abolitionist movement. It's a very rich tradition. I do think that

there's something of a difference with Black Lives Matter today. If you look at abolition, there were very precise demands: first, abolish the slave trade; then, abolish slavery. Similarly, the US Civil Rights Movement made specific legislative demands: to stop the segregation of public accommodations like restaurants and public transport like buses and trains, stop the segregation of schools, stop employment and housing discrimination, protect the right to vote. Whereas with Black Lives Matter, 'defund the police' is very inchoate. For the vast majority of participants, it doesn't literally mean abolishing the police immediately. People know you can't do that immediately without alternatives ready to deal with crime. It's more of a long-term aspiration to figure out how we could replace the militarised policing that we have with a variety of other institutions, and eventually shrink the police until it's vestigial. Then if we have creative enough alternatives, maybe we could eventually abolish it. It's more a call for a very intensive exploration of alternative institutions for dealing with crime or preventing crime, as well as dealing with the many other things we ask police now to do, including helping people with mental health crises, traffic control, loud parties, and wild animals. But it's not as clear as, 'Here's a bill that has to be passed', the way previous movements demanded.

**CJLPA: Has egalitarian discourse been able to capture the inequalities faced in reality, or is it its own discourse? Is the discourse in line with or parallel to the movements that are happening at the same time?**

EA: There has long been a very rich interchange between how social movement activists are thinking about equality and what theorists are saying. Indeed, a lot of my work has been to try to bring those back together. However, with the rise of academic philosophy, there is a bit of an ivory tower effect where theorists' ideas can run independently of what's happening in society and fail to engage with the problems people face. Here's another problem with academic philosophy: philosophers tend to speak in the voice of the 'view from nowhere', trying to make universal propositions or speak as if making universal propositions that apply everywhere. Yet in fact, if you read the canonical theorists closely, people such as Hobbes, Locke, and other canonical thinkers, you see they are absorbed with the political, economic, and social events of the day, and are addressing those events. They might speak universally, but really, they were focused on contemporary problems. It's really important to study the political context in which they're writing and the concerns that they had in order to understand what they're up to. Then what they say makes sense, whereas before it's a little mysterious sometimes.

**CJLPA: Why do we continue to see a detachment between the kind of people who actually make the decisions and dictate the structure of society, and then the inequalities faced in reality and the social movements who seek to remedy these inequalities?**

EA: This is all part of the historical dynamics of the struggle for equality. You can see in history that there has been a very uneven progress toward equality. It tends to leap ahead in bursts due to social movements, democratic participation, and sometimes war – real struggles on the ground. But it's hard to keep up a movement: how long can you be on the streets? Also, egalitarian movements are very sharp on critique. They have very powerful critiques deeply rooted in human experience and in a precise criticism of actually existing institutions. But once the movement gets rid of what it diagnosed as the source of the problem—for example, the universal franchise—they figure, 'OK, this is it, we have our equality.' Time and again,

the movement relaxes, and that gives space for people who want to be on top to start clawing back. They'll figure out ways to game the new rules of the system, to restore their privilege. It's always two steps forward, one step back. If there's any progress at all, it's very halting and partial, and you always have people who want to resist and reverse that.

Now we're at a local historical peak of inequality. In the twentieth century, you had a huge surge forward, starting around World War One, of more egalitarian institutions getting installed: women get the right to vote, you get a welfare state, progressive taxation, all kinds of egalitarian policies are implemented. That's carried through after World War Two, another leap forward: you had the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, construction of advanced welfare states and social democracy in Europe, the dismantling of colonial empires. That progress stalls in the mid-1970s. You see massive clawing back. Inequality has been skyrocketing, especially in the United States and the UK. We share that work ethic tradition. All these arguments we see about the work ethic today, go back and read Malthus, it's all there: the idea that we can't have generous welfare benefits because you're just going to turn people into lazy slackers, you have to make the poor work for their benefits. We've heard it all before because we said this centuries ago. This is just brushing the dust off these old arguments and erecting them again. Powerful interests think like this. The difference is that in Malthus' day, the rich were idle. Today, they're very busy. What they do may look like work in the sense of adding net value to society. But in many cases they are pursuing business models that merely extract wealth from others. Maybe they're engaged in predatory loans, or they package up some worthless stuff as some fancy asset and everybody goes running after the latest bogus tranches of credit default swaps and mortgage-backed securities that's all just fancy fraud. This makes a lot of money for some people and leaves a whole bunch of others in ruin.

**CJLPA: What common misconceptions do people have of your work as a philosopher?**

EA: I have spent a lot of my career trying to reorient the way philosophers think about political theory so that they get grounded. There's been at the heart of analytic philosophy an aspiration towards this kind of universal theorising for all time, in all contexts. I think that's a deep mistake. We're not capable of figuring out useful normative principles for all time, in all contexts, in all cultures. We just don't have that, or if we came up with a formula it would be so empty, it wouldn't help us in any particular day or problem. I want theory to be grounded. That means that you have to engage empirical materials in the social sciences and history. We have to understand ourselves. There's a reason why we're thinking the way we do because we've inherited ideas that can be pretty dysfunctional. Society has changed, yet we're still hooked on some Puritan ideas that don't fit. Societies often have an awful time overcoming their past. In France, they're still arguing bitterly over the Revolution. And America still hasn't gotten over slavery: it's such a deeply scarring historical institution, which has left pathological legacies that are passed down through generations to the present.

**CJLPA: And if we're not making these big universal claims, how wide should our claims be?**

EA: They have to be tailored to the problem that we need to solve. We have lots of problems and some of them are huge. Climate change is the biggest problem humanity has ever faced. It involves the whole globe. We have to figure out ways to cooperate on a

global scale. That has never been tried before—all pulling together around a solution to a single overwhelming problem that we all face. I don't know if human societies are up to it. But I do have to say that one product of the work ethic, and it's very deep in the history of thinking about the work ethic, is the enormous power of the division of labour. You can get far more done with a well-designed division of labour. This is a very complex and sophisticated form of human cooperation that can be scaled. That was always on the forefront of the minds of the classical economists, just how stunning it was in the Industrial Revolution that you could scale up production to levels that were unimaginable before through a sophisticated division of labour. We have to do something similar, because it's a mistake to think of climate change as just a matter of technology. In fact, we have plenty of amazing technology that's ready to roll. What we really need to do is solve the political problem of getting our acts together and implementing it: that's much harder than actually designing the technology. All praise to the engineers who are coming up with this stuff, but the much harder problem is figuring out how to bring everybody around to work together to solve this problem.

**CJLPA: What would you recommend to students of philosophy, law, political science, and the like, who want to kind of keep one eye on the practicalities and the realities of policy-making, and the other on the theory?**

**EA:** This is why I think the history of classical political economy should be studied closely. Read Adam Smith and you will see that he had his eye on both. He was both one of the greatest moral philosophers ever and also an amazingly creative economist who had a deep knowledge of history, studied institutions, and understood human psychology. He put it all together, and that's what we need. Academic specialisation has its role and the division of labour is important there, but we still need people who are synthesising findings across the disciplines, and we need to work more collaboratively across the disciplines to solve the problems that we face today.

**CJLPA: Is this something that you see becoming evident in your work as a professor and across academia?**

**EA:** Oh, absolutely. One place where it's happening is in PPE (Politics, Philosophy, and Economics) programmes. They are exploding in the United States. I established the program at the University of Michigan and ever since then, there have just been more and more and there's an appetite for it. The students love it and it's the place where I think a lot of philosophical theorising needs to be.

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