

# Is Equality Passé? Homo Reciprocans and the Future of Egalitarian Politics

Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis\*  
Department of Economics  
University of Massachusetts  
Amherst, Massachusetts, 01003

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A man ought to be a friend to his friend and repay gift with gift.  
People should meet smiles with smiles and lies with treachery.

From The Edda, a 13th century collection of Norse epic verse.

## 1 IS EQUALITY PASSÉ?

We think not. The welfare state is in trouble not because selfishness is rampant (it is not), but because many egalitarian programs no longer evoke, and sometimes now offend, deeply held notions of fairness, encompassing both reciprocity and generosity, but stopping far short of unconditional altruism towards the less well off. Recasting egalitarianism to tap these sentiments should be high on the agenda of those who worry about the human toll being taken by poverty, inequality, and insecurity in the United States and in the world.

The United States public remains deeply committed to helping those in need. In 1991 an ABC/WP poll found that twice as many were “willing to pay higher taxes” to “reduce poverty” as were opposed. In 1995 61% expressed willingness to pay more taxes to “provide job training and public service jobs for people on welfare so that they can get off welfare.” (Weaver, Shapiro and Jacobs 1995). Almost three quarters of those surveyed by Time

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Magazine in 1991 agreed (more than half of them “completely”) with the statement: “The government should guarantee every citizen enough to eat and a place to sleep.”

Many however think that policies to pursue these objectives are either ineffective or unfair. In a 1995 CBS/NYT survey, for example, 89% supported a mandated work requirement for those on welfare. It is thus not surprising that egalitarian programs have been cut even as increases in measured inequality of before tax and transfer income have taken place. For the most part voters have responded with approval rather than resistance.

Egalitarians now defend their programs on moral and empirical grounds that many, even among the less well off, find unconvincing. In the face of a hostile public, many egalitarians have become soured on what they consider to be a selfish electorate that identifies with materialistic middle-class values and is indifferent to the plight of the less fortunate.

We believe this pessimism is fundamentally misdirected. It misunderstands not only the reasons for opposition to egalitarian programs, but the powerful sentiments supporting them. It is not self interest that opposes the welfare state, nor is it unconditional generosity that supports it. We will show that there is a solid foundation for cooperation and sharing in two basic human motives which we term *strong reciprocity* and *basic needs generosity*, that hostility to contemporary forms of egalitarianism is not evidence against that deep foundation, but evidence for it, and that new egalitarian initiatives are fully compatible with that foundation.

Understanding the predicament of egalitarian politics today thus requires a reconsideration of *Homo economicus*, the unremittingly selfish prototype whose asocial propensities have provided the starting point for deliberations on constitutions and policies from Thomas Hobbes to the current debate on welfare reform. We do not wish to replace the textbook *Homo*, however, with a cardboard-cutout altruist, an equally one-dimensional actor unconditionally willing to make personally costly contributions to others. While these motives are much admired by many advocates of the welfare state, we doubt that unconditional altruism explains its success, nor does its absence explain our current malaise. In experiments and surveys people are not stingy, but their generosity is conditional. Moreover, they distinguish among the goods and services to be distributed, favoring those which meet basic needs, and among the recipients themselves, favoring those thought to be “deserving.” Strong reciprocity, along with basic needs generosity, not unconditional altruism, better explains the motivations that undergird egalitarian politics. By strong reciprocity we mean a propensity to cooperate and share with others similarly disposed, even at personal cost, and a

willingness to punish those who violate cooperative and other social norms, even when punishing is personally costly. We call a person acting this way *Homo reciprocans*. *Homo reciprocans* cares about the well-being of others and about the processes determining outcomes—whether they are fair, for example, or violate a social norm. He differs in this from the self-regarding and outcome oriented *Homo economicus*. We see *Homo reciprocans* at work in Chicago’s neighborhoods, in a recent study (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls 1997) that documented a widespread willingness to intervene with co-residents to discourage truancy, public disorders and antisocial behaviors, as well as the dramatic impact of this “collective efficacy” on community safety and amenities.

*Homo reciprocans* is not committed to the abstract goal of equal outcomes, but rather to a rough balancing out of burdens and rewards. In earlier times—when, for example, an individual’s conventional claim on material resources was conditioned by noble birth or divine origin—what counted as “balancing out” might entail highly unequal comfort and wealth. But, as we will see, in the absence of specific counter-claims, modern forms of reciprocity often take equal division as a reference point.

We do not wish to banish *Homo economicus*, however. The evidence we introduce shows that a substantial fraction of individuals consistently follow self-regarding precepts. Moreover most individuals appear to draw upon a repertoire of contrasting behaviors: whether one acts selfishly or generously depends as much on the situation as the person. The fact that *Homo economicus* is alive and well (if often in the minority) is good news, not bad, as people often rely on asocial individualism to undermine socially harmful forms of collusion ranging from price-fixing to ethnic violence. Pure altruists also doubtless exist and make important contributions to social life. In short, egalitarian policy-making, no less than the grand projects of constitutional design, risk irrelevance if they ignore the irreducible heterogeneity of human motivations. The problem of institutional design is not, as the classical economists thought, that selfish individuals be induced to interact in ways producing desirable aggregate outcomes, but rather that a mix of motives—selfish, reciprocal, altruistic and spiteful—interact in ways that prevent the selfish from exploiting the generous and hence unraveling cooperation when it is beneficial.

The strong reciprocity of *Homo reciprocans* goes considerably beyond those cooperative behaviors that can be fully accounted for in terms of the self-regarding, outcome oriented motives that are the defining characteristics of *Homo economicus*. We call these self-interested forms of cooperation ‘weak reciprocity.’ Examples include market exchange and cooperation

enforced by tit-for-tat behavior—what biologists call ‘reciprocal altruism.’ Such actions are costly to the giver but in fact are self-interested because they involve future repayment. Strong reciprocity, like the biologists’ concept of altruism, imposes costs on *Homo reciprocans* without prospect of repayment. Yet unlike the vernacular usage of altruism, it is neither unconditional nor necessarily motivated by good will towards the recipient.

Students of cultural and biological evolution have long wondered how individually costly but socially beneficial traits, such as altruism, might evolve in competition with genetically and economically rewarded selfish traits. Like altruism toward strangers, strong reciprocity thus represents an evolutionary puzzle, one that we will seek to unravel. But first we will show that *Homo reciprocans* is indeed among the *dramatis personae* in today’s political arena, and most likely has been for the last hundred thousand years.

## 2 THE LEGACY OF A HUNDRED THOUSAND YEARS OF SHARING

Other than unconditional altruism, there are two distinct reasons why people might support egalitarian policies. First, many egalitarian programs are forms of social insurance that will be supported even by those who believe they will probably pay in more than their expected claims over a lifetime. Included among these are unemployment and health insurance, and more broadly, the various social programs that soften the blows during the rocky periods that people experience in the course of their lives. Even the securely rich support amelioration of the conditions of the poor on prudential grounds. The insurance motive is consistent with conventional notions of self-interest, considering that people are broadly prudent and risk-averse.

The second reason for support of egalitarian programs, by contrast, is not fundamentally self-regarding: egalitarianism is often based on a commitment to what we have termed *strong reciprocity*.<sup>1</sup> It will come as no surprise that people are considerably more generous than the model in economics textbooks allows. More remarkable, however, is that they are equally unselfish in seeking to punish, often at great cost to themselves, those who have done harm to them and others. Programs designed to tap these other-regarding motives may succeed where others that offend underlying motivational structures have been abandoned.

Both historical and contemporary experimental evidence support this position. Consider first the historical evidence In his INJUSTICE: THE SO-

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<sup>1</sup>Ernst Fehr, whose experimental work is described below, call this ‘reciprocal fairness.’ See Fehr and Gächter (1998b).

CIAL BASES OF OBEDIENCE AND REVOLT, Barrington Moore, Jr. (1978) sought to discern if there might be common motivational bases—“general conceptions of unfair and unjust behavior” (21)—for the moral outrage fueling struggles for justice that have recurred throughout human history. “There are grounds,” he concludes from his wide-ranging investigation,

for suspecting that the welter of moral codes may conceal a certain unity of original form...a general ground plan, a conception of what social relationships ought to be. It is a conception that by no means excludes hierarchy and authority, where exceptional qualities and defects can be the source of enormous admiration and awe. At the same time, it is one where services and favors, trust and affection, in the course of mutual exchanges, are ideally expected to find some rough balancing out. (4-5,509)

Moore termed the general ground plan he uncovered “the concept of reciprocity—or better, mutual obligation, a term that does not imply equality of burdens or obligations. . .” (506) In like manner James Scott (1976) analyzed agrarian revolts, identifying violations of the “norm of reciprocity” as one the essential triggers of insurrectionary motivations. We do not think that Scott’s or Moore’s assessments are idiosyncratic.

One is tempted to consider strong reciprocity a late arrival in social evolution, possibly one whose provenance is to be found in Enlightenment individualism, or later in the era of liberal democratic or socialist societies—a set of beliefs whose reproduction is secured by the deliberate inculcation of modern concepts of distributive justice through schooling and other intentional means. However, this account does not square with overwhelming evidence of the distant etiology of strong reciprocity.

Christopher Boehm, a primatologist at USC, concluded on the basis of an encyclopedic survey that (1993):226

. . . with the advent of anatomically modern humans who continued to live in small groups and had not yet domesticated plants and animals, it is very likely that all human societies practiced egalitarian behavior and that most of the time they did so very successfully. One main conclusion, then, is that intentional leveling linked to an egalitarian ethos is an immediate and probably an extremely widespread cause of human societies’ failing to develop authoritative or coercive leadership.

Anthropologist Bruce Knauft of Emory University (1991):393,395 adds:

In all ethnographically known simple societies, cooperative sharing of provisions is extended to mates, offspring, and many others within the band. . . . Archeological evidence suggests that widespread networks facilitating diffuse access to and transfer of resources and information have been pronounced at least since the Upper Paleolithic. . . . The strong internalization of a sharing ethic is in many respects the *sine qua non* of culture in these societies.

Far from a mere moment in the history of anatomically modern humans, the period described by Knauff and Boehm spans something like 100,000 years before the present to the advent and spread of agriculture 12,000 years ago, or perhaps ninety percent of the time we have existed on the planet.

One group of contemporary foragers, the Aché of Eastern Paraguay, have been particularly closely studied, and the amounts and nutritional values of food acquired and consumed by members of the group measured (Kaplan, Hill, Hawkes and Hurtado 1984).<sup>2</sup> Sharing is so widespread, the researchers found, that on average three quarters of what anyone eats was acquired by someone outside the consumer's nuclear family, and even more remarkable, in the case of meat and honey, the main goods foraged by men:

women, children and adult siblings of the acquirer receive no more. . . from their husbands, fathers and brothers respectively than would be expected by chance, and men eat from their own kills a good deal *less* than would be expected by chance.

The Aché are probably unusually egalitarian, and there is evidence that hunting prowess is rewarded, if not with more food, then with enhanced social esteem and increased mating success. Nevertheless it is typical in foraging societies that families with less successful hunters, and indeed those unable to hunt, are nonetheless adequately provisioned by the group.

The resulting egalitarian distribution of resources is not the unintended byproduct of an ecological or other constraint; rather it is deliberately sought. Using data from forty-eight simple societies, Boehm (1993):239 concluded that

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<sup>2</sup>Our assessment of the generality of food sharing in foraging bands is based on our reading of Woodburn (1982), Boehm (1982), Boehm (1993), Blurton-Jones (1987), Cashdan (1980), Knauff (1991), Hawkes (1992), Hawkes (1993), Kaplan and Hill (1985b), Kaplan and Hill (1985a), Kaplan et al. (1984), Lee (1979), Woodburn and Barnard (1988), Endicott (1988), Balıkcı (1970), Kent (1989), Damas (1972), Wenzel (1995), Knauff (1989).

... these societies may be considered to be intentional communities, groups of people that make up their minds about the amount of hierarchy they wish to live with and then see to it that the program is followed. (239)

He found evidence that the following constrained potentially arrogant members of the group: public opinion, criticism and ridicule, disobedience, ostracism and assassination.

It seems likely then, that most of human history has been characterized by what James Woodburn (1982):431 calls “politically assertive egalitarianism.” The modern welfare state is thus but an example of a ubiquitous social form. Sharing institutions, from families to extended gift giving, to barn raisings and tithing, to egalitarian division rules for the catch of the hunt, have cropped up in human history with such regularity and under such diverse circumstances that one is tempted to place them among Talcott Parsons’ (1964) *evolutionary universals*: social institutions that confer such extensive benefits upon their users that they regularly reappear in course of history in otherwise diverse societies.

Karl Polanyi’s (1944) account of the reaction to the human costs of Nineteenth Century *laissez-faire* capitalism and the eventual emergence of modern protections of the weak from the vicissitudes of the market, as well as the sharing of the national product, records just one of thousands of cases of the independent emergence of institutions of this type. The evolutionary viability of sharing institutions and of the motivations that support them counsels against those who have written off egalitarianism as an idea whose time has come and gone.<sup>3</sup>

Our suggestion that these distantly originating behaviors may be important influences on contemporary behavior is not an ethical endorsement of them or the societies from which they originated—indeed some of the baser human motives, such as the desire for revenge, are examples of strong reciprocity. Rather it is a hypothesis that if true has significant bearing on present day egalitarianism, because it can help us understand the pattern of public approval and disapproval of welfare state initiatives. Is it true?

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<sup>3</sup>On the structural basis of pro-social norms in a game-theoretic framework, see Bowles and Gintis (1998b). On the relationship of market institutions to the development of culture, see Bowles (1998). On the evolution of strong reciprocity, see Bowles and Gintis (1998a). This and other of our unpublished paper can be easily downloaded from the web site [www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~gintis](http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~gintis).

### 3 *Homo Reciprocans*

An impressive body of experimental evidence, much of it deployed in the first instance to validate the model of the selfish purveyor of market rationality, *Homo economicus*, in fact has served to undermine this model. In its place this body of evidence suggests a new *persona*. A convenient starting point in tracing the birth of *Homo reciprocans* is a tournament involving differing strategies of the play in the prisoner's dilemma game undertaken two decades ago by Robert Axelrod at the University of Michigan.<sup>4</sup> The prisoner's dilemma requires each of two players to choose simultaneously one of two actions, 'cooperate' or 'defect.' The payoffs are such that both players do better by cooperating than by defecting, but whatever one player does, the other player does better by defecting (for example, the payoff to mutual cooperation is 10 for each, the payoff to mutual defecting is 5 for each, but the payoff to defecting when the other player cooperates is 15 for the defector and 0 for the cooperator). The iterated prisoner's dilemma is simply repeated play of the well known game with "winners" being those with high cumulative scores over however many rounds are played.

Axelrod asked a number of game theorists, economists, political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists to submit computer programs giving complete strategies for playing the game. successive rounds of which were repeated with the same partner. Each program was pitted against every other program, as well as itself and a program that randomly chose to cooperate and defect. Surprisingly, the winner among the fourteen strategies submitted was the simplest, called 'tit-for-tat' (submitted by game theorist Anatol Rappoport). Tit-for-tat cooperates on the first round, and then does whatever its partner did on the previous round.

Following up on this result, Axelrod held a second tournament in which a larger number of participants, including the original contributors, were told of the success of tit-for-tat and asked to submit another program for playing the iterated prisoner's dilemma. Knowing that tit-for-tat was the strategy to beat did not help the players: once again Rappoport submitted tit-for-tat, and once again, it won.

Speculating on the strong showing of tit-for-tat, Axelrod noted that this strategy for cooperation has three attributes that are essential for successful cooperation. The first is that tit-for-tat is *nice*: it begins by cooperating, and it is never the first to defect. Second, tit-for-tat is *punishing*: it retaliates

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<sup>4</sup>See Axelrod and Hamilton (1981) and Axelrod (1984) for details and theoretical development.

relentlessly against defection. Finally, tit-for-tat is *forgiving*: as soon as a defecting partner returns to cooperating, tit-for-tat returns to cooperating.

*Homo economicus* would readily embrace tit-for-tat, of course, at least if there were enough other tit-for-tatters around and there were a reasonable chance that one would interact repeatedly with the same person. Under these conditions tit-for-tat will be the self-interested strategy to follow, and thus is an example of reciprocal altruism rather than strong reciprocity. But for reasons that will become clear immediately, we think that the ubiquity of tit-for-tat sentiments among people (rather than computer programs) is more aptly explained by strong reciprocity motives that violate the tenets of economic man.

There have been many experiments with human subjects involving the iterated prisoner's dilemma. If Axelrod's tournaments showed that nice guys finish first, the experiments reveal that there are lots of nice guys, even among the economics majors who show up for experimental games.

1. The simplest, but still quite revealing, laboratory experiment is the 'dictator game,' in which one of two players, the 'proposer,' is given a sum of money (typically \$10), is asked to choose any part of the sum to give to the second player (the two players are mutually anonymous), and is permitted to keep the rest. *Homo economicus* gives nothing in this situation, whereas in actual experimental situations, a majority of proposers give positive amounts, typically ranging from 20% to 60% of the total (Forsythe, Horowitz, Savin and Sefton 1994).<sup>5</sup>
2. The commonly observed rejection of substantial positive offers in what are called ultimatum games is our second piece of experimental evidence. Experimental protocols differ, but the general structure of the ultimatum game is simple. Subjects are paired, one is the responder, the other the proposer. The proposer is provisionally awarded an amount ('the pie'—typically \$10) to be divided between proposer and responder. The proposer offers a certain portion of the pie to the responder. If the responder accepts, the responder gets the proposed portion, and the proposer keeps the rest. If the responder rejects the offer both get nothing.

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<sup>5</sup>As in other experimental situations, a significant minority (between 25% and 42% in the Forsythe et al. experiments) behave self-interestedly and give nothing. Moreover, in a double-anonymous study (Hoffman, McCabe, Shachat and Smith 1994), where not even the experimenter knows the behavior of the proposer, the fraction of proposers who gave nothing increased to two-thirds. This accords with our notion that strong reciprocity is a conditional behavior, in this case weakening in the face of high levels of social anonymity.

ing.<sup>6</sup> In experiments conducted in the United States, Slovakia, Japan, Israel, Slovenia, Germany, Russia, and Indonesia the vast majority of proposers offer between 40% and 50% of the pie, and offers lower than 30% of the pie are often rejected (Fehr and Schmidt 1997). These results have occurred in experiments with stakes as high as three months' earnings.<sup>7</sup>

When asked why they offer more than one cent, proposers commonly say that they are afraid that respondents will consider low offers unfair and reject them as a way to punish proposer's unwillingness to share. When respondents reject offers, they give virtually the same reasons for their actions. The proposers' actions might be explained by selfishness but the respondents' cannot. Because these behaviors occur in single-shot interactions and on the last round of multi-round interactions, they cannot be accounted for by the responder's attempt to modify subsequent behavior of the proposer. Punishment *per se* is the most likely motive. As evidence for this interpretation, we note that the rejection of positive offers is substantially less when the game is altered so that rejection does not punish the proposer (Abbink, Bolton, Sadrieh and Tang 1996). Moreover the fact that offers generated by a computer rather than another person are significantly less likely to be rejected suggests that those rejecting low offers at a cost to themselves are reacting to violations of fairness norms rather than simply rejecting disadvantageous offers (Blount 1995). See also Bolton and Zwick (1995) and Suleiman (1996). Thus the ultimatum game experiments provide evidence for our view that strong reciprocity is a common motivation.

3. More directly analogous to strong reciprocity in groups however, are findings in what are called  $n$ -player public goods experiments. The following is a common variant. Ten players are given \$1 in each of ten rounds. On each round, each player can contribute any portion of the \$1 (anonymously) to a 'common pool.' The experimenter divides the amount in the common pool by two, and gives *each* player that much money. If all ten players are cooperative, on each round each puts \$1 in the pool, the experimenter divides the \$10 in the pool by two, and gives each player \$5. After ten rounds of this, each subject has \$50. By being selfish, however, each player can do better as long as the others are

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<sup>6</sup>See Güth, Schmittberger and Schwarz (1982), Forsythe et al. (1994), Camerer and Thaler (1995) and Roth (1995).

<sup>7</sup>See Cameron (1995) on experiments in Indonesia and Fehr and Tougareva (1995) on experiments in Russia.

cooperating. By keeping the \$1, the player ends up with “his” \$10, plus receives \$45 as his share of the pool, for a total of \$55. If all behave this way, however, each receives only \$10. Thus this is an ‘iterated prisoner’s dilemma’ in which self-regarding players contribute nothing.

In fact, however, only a small fraction of players contribute nothing to the common pool. Rather, in the early stages of the game, people generally contribute half their money to the pool. In the later stages of the game, contributions decay until at the end, they are contributing very little. Proponents of the *Homo economicus* model initially suggested that the reason for decay of public contribution is that participants really do not understand the game at first, and as they begin to learn it, they begin to realize the superiority of the free-riding strategy. However, there is considerable evidence that this interpretation is incorrect. For instance, Andreoni (1988) finds that when the whole process is repeated with the same subjects, the initial levels of cooperation are restored, but once again cooperation decays as the game progresses.

James Andreoni (1995), an economist at the University of Wisconsin, suggests a *Homo reciprocans* explanation for the decay of cooperation: public-spirited contributors want to retaliate against free-riders and the only way available to them in the game is by not contributing themselves. Indeed, if players are permitted to retaliate directly against non-contributors, but at a cost to themselves, as in the experiments of Ernst Fehr and Simon Gächter, economists at the University of Zürich, they do so (Fehr and Gächter 1998a). In this situation, contributions rise in subsequent rounds to near the maximal level. Moreover punishment levels are undiminished in the final rounds, suggesting that disciplining norm violators is an end in itself and hence will be exhibited even when there is no prospect of modifying the subsequent behavior of the shirker or potential future shirkers.

Such experiments show that agents are willing to incur a cost to punish those whom they perceive to have treated them, or a group to which they belong badly.<sup>8</sup> Also in everyday life, we see people consumed with the desire for revenge against those who have harmed them or their families, even where no material gain can be expected (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, Boehm 1984).

Moreover strong reciprocity coexists with simple generosity and compassion in many, perhaps most people. Evidence for this comes not only from

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<sup>8</sup>See Ostrom, Walker and Gardner (1992) on common pool resources, Fehr, Gächter and Kirchsteiger (1997) on efficiency wages, and Fehr and Gächter (1998a) on public goods. Coleman (1988) develops the parallel point that free riding in social networks can be avoided if network members provide positive rewards for cooperating.

dictator games, as we have seen, but also from an ingenious set of experiments devised by political scientists Joe Oppenheimer and Norm Frohlich (1992). Twenty-eight groups of subjects engaged in individual work tasks and decided on a principle of redistribution within the group of the rewards associated with successful performance of the tasks. At the conclusion of the experiment, the experimenters distributed cash rewards to the subjects according to their productivity and the rules of redistribution selected by the group, so the stakes were real. As the subjects decided on the redistribution rule before knowing how well they would perform on the task, the experiment would seem to elicit the subjects' abstract notions of just reward, a kind of experimental instance of the Rawlsian veil of ignorance.

By far the most popular principle of distribution was a minimal floor to be granted to every member of the group irrespective of the individual's productivity in the task. Subjects elected to finance the floor by a tax on the individual earnings of the more productive members. High levels of support for the floor principle were expressed by the high productivity (and hence highly taxed) members, and their level of satisfaction with the floor principle increased with repeated play. Of course the rules selected by the group reflect reciprocity as well as generosity, as the principle of individual reward proportional to productivity was only modified, not annulled by the tax. When these rules were imposed on the groups by the experimenters rather than chosen by the groups, the floor principle remained popular, but less so.

These results show clearly that people are not generally the self-interested actors of traditional economics, since they value treating others fairly, and will incur personal costs to do so. Nor are people the unconditional altruists of utopian thought, since they want to hurt free-riders and other norm-violators. These experiments also show that strong reciprocity is not simply a mechanism for norm-enforcement, but also often includes a powerful concept of *fairness* or *sharing*—the notion that all else equal, there should be a rough balance of rights and obligations in social exchange. Proposers in the dictator game treat sharing as a good in itself, and respondents in the ultimatum game retaliate not against the violation of norms in the abstract, but against norms of equal sharing in particular.

A remarkable aspect of these experiments—and one very germane to our concern with egalitarian policy—is the degree to which behaviors are affected by the experimentally contrived social relationship between players. Communication among participants prior to the game, or experimental conditions that reduce the subjective 'social distance' among participants,

lead to higher and more sustained levels of generosity and cooperation.<sup>9</sup> For example, fraternity brothers at UCLA were asked to rank outcomes in a prisoner's dilemma situation given that they were interacting with a fellow fraternity brother, a member of another (unnamed) fraternity, a non-fraternity student at UCLA, a student from USC and an officer from the UCLA Police Department. They showed a strong preference for mutual cooperation over defection against one's partner when playing with fraternity brothers, with the rankings reversing with increasing social distance—they were as willing to exploit the USC students as the UCLA police! (Kollock 1997).

People care about who they give to: Eckel and Grossman (1997) found that proposers in a dictator game gave more when the recipient was “the Red Cross” rather than another experimental subject. Finally, when the right to be proposer in the ultimatum game is earned by being a winner in a trivia quiz rather than by lot, proposers offered less, and respondents accepted lower offers (Hoffman et al. 1994). It appears that minor manipulations of the social context of interactions may support significant behavioral differences.

In all of the experiments a significant fraction of subjects (about a quarter, typically) conform to the self-interested preferences of *Homo economicus*, and it is often the self-serving behavior of this minority that, when it goes unpunished, unravels initial generosity and cooperation.

These experiments also indicate that strong reciprocity spans all the societies studied, though in somewhat varying strength and content.<sup>10</sup>

The following five generalizations sum up the relevance of these experiments to the problem of designing and sustaining programs to promote economic security and eliminate poverty. First, people exhibit significant levels of generosity, even towards strangers. Second, people share more of what they acquire by chance rather than by personal effort. Third, people contribute to public goods and cooperate to collective endeavors, and consider it unfair to free-ride on the contributions and efforts of others. Fourth,

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<sup>9</sup>For the communication result, see Isaac and Walker (1988), and for the social distance result, see Kollock (1997) and Hoffman, McCabe and Smith (1996).

<sup>10</sup>The only known exception to this statement concerns experiments run by the UCLA anthropologist Joe Henrich, a member of our research group who works with the Machiguenga Indians, a famously individualistic indigenous group living in a remote region of the Peruvian Amazon. In the ultimatum game, he found offers to be small, and even small offers were typically accepted. In the public goods game, contributions to the public account were very low. We believe the most likely explanation of this result is a peculiarity of the subjects: their basic social unit consists of closely-related kin, with extra-kin social relationships being much weaker than typical even of simple societies.

people punish free riders at substantial costs to themselves, even when they cannot reasonably expect future personal gain therefrom.

It would not be difficult to design a system of income security and economic opportunity that would tap rather than offend the motivations expressed in these first four generalizations. Such a system would be generous towards the poor, rewarding those who perform socially valued work and who seek to improve their chances of engaging in such work, as well as to those who are poor through accidents not of their own making, such as illness and job displacement.

The fifth, however, is more troublesome: each of these aspects of reciprocity is more salient, the less is the perceived social distance among the participants. This last generalization may help explain why inequalities are so readily sustained even among apparently generous publics. Economic inequality—particularly when overlaid with racial, ethnic, language, and other differences—increases the social distance that then undermines the motivational basis for reaching out to those in need. Indeed, surveys consistently reveal that the support for those in need is stronger in societies whose before tax and transfer incomes are more equal.

The experimental evidence, casual observation of everyday life, ethnographic and paleoanthropological accounts of hunter-gatherer foraging bands from the late paleolithic to the present and historical narratives of collective struggles have combined to convince us that strong reciprocity is a powerful and ubiquitous motive. But we hesitate to revise *Homo economicus* by elevating the individually costly sharing and punishment of norm violators characteristic of *Homo reciprocans* to a privileged place in the repertoire of human behaviors until we have addressed the evolutionary puzzle posed at the outset. In short we are more prone to believe and to generalize from the experimental and historical evidence we have introduced if we can explain how strong reciprocity motives might have evolved despite the costs these motives seemingly impose on those bearing them.

We have elaborated our attempt to resolve this puzzle in a recent technical paper and we are continuing to explore the issue with a research team of experimentalists, ethnographers, and others (Bowles and Gintis 1998a). Our reasoning is that strong reciprocity supports the adherence to norms within groups and some of these norms—requiring work towards common ends, sharing, and monogamy for example—are beneficial to most group members. Where reciprocity motives embrace the individually costly enforcement of these group-beneficial norms, strong reciprocity may evolve because *Homo reciprocans* will be disproportionately likely to be in groups that have effective norm adherence, and hence to enjoy the group benefits

of these norms. By contrast, where reciprocity motivates the individually costly enforcement of norms that on average confer little benefit on group members, or inflict group costs, of course reciprocity is unlikely to evolve.

Strong reciprocity thus allows groups to engage in common practices without the resort to costly and often ineffective hierarchical authority, and thereby vastly increases the repertoire of social experiments capable of diffusing through cultural and genetic competition. The relevant traits may be transmitted genetically and proliferate under the influence of natural selection, or they may be transmitted culturally through learning from elders and age mates and proliferate because successful groups tend to absorb failing groups, or to be emulated by them. We think it likely that both genetic and cultural transmission is involved. The 100,000 years in which anatomically modern humans lived primarily in foraging bands constitutes a sufficiently long time period, and a favorable social and physical ecology, for the evolution of the combination of norm enforcement and sharing that we term strong reciprocity.

#### 4 STRONG RECIPROCITY AND THE REVOLT AGAINST WELFARE

This model of *Homo reciprocans* supports our optimism concerning the political viability of egalitarian policies. Like Petr Kropotkin (1989[1903]) almost a century ago, we find compelling evidence—both evolutionary and contemporary—for the force of human behavioral predispositions to act both generously and reciprocally rather than self-interestedly in many social situations. While most egalitarians have failed to appreciate the practical importance of these predispositions in policy matters, their salience was not missed by the conservative economist and philosopher Frederick Hayek (1978):18,20

...wanting to do good to known people will not achieve the most for the community, but only the observation of its abstract and seemingly purposeless rules... the long submerged innate instincts have again surged to the top. [The] demand for a just distribution... is thus strictly an atavism, based on primordial emotions. And it is these widely prevalent feelings to which prophets, (and) moral philosophers... appeal by their plans for the deliberate creation of a new type of society.

But while strong reciprocity may support egalitarianism, it may also help explain the rising tide of opposition to welfare state policies in the advanced market economies in the past decades. Specifically, in light of the

experimental regularities outlined above, we suspect the following to be true as well: egalitarian policies that reward people independent of whether and how much they contribute to society are considered unfair and are not supported, even if the intended recipients are otherwise worthy of support, and even if the incidence of non-contribution in the target population is rather low. This would explain the opposition to many welfare measures for the poor, particularly since such measures are thought to have promoted various social pathologies. At the same time it explains the continuing support for social security and medicare in the United States, since the public perception is that the recipients are ‘deserving’ and the policies do not support what are considered anti-social behaviors. The public goods experiments are also consistent with the notion that tax resistance by the nonwealthy may stem from their perception that the well-to-do are not paying their fair share.

These inferences from the experimental evidence find some confirmation in survey and focus group data. Opposition to egalitarian policies does not primarily reflect the selfish interests of the economically secure. Indeed, income and social background are very poor predictors of the degree of one’s support for either particular programs or egalitarianism in general. Of far greater import is one’s views of why the poor are poor, and specifically one’s beliefs about the relative importance of effort rather than luck or other circumstances beyond the control of the individual in explaining individual incomes.<sup>11</sup> Christina Fong of Washington University compared individuals’ responses on nationally representative surveys to questions indicating support for increases or decreases in expenditure on welfare with responses to questions about why the poor are poor (“lack of effort by the poor themselves”). In a 1990 sample of the General Social Survey she found that only 18% of those citing “lack of effort” thought too little was spent on welfare, while 49% responded “too much.” By contrast among those who thought that “lack of effort by the poor themselves” was “not important” in explaining poverty 44% thought that we were spending too little on welfare, and only 28%, too much. Remarkably, Fong found that the belief that effort is important to “getting ahead in life” has a considerably larger impact on opposition to aid to the poor than one’s income, years of schooling, and parents’ socioeconomic status *combined*—those whose effort beliefs differed from the average by a standard deviation were more opposed to aid than

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<sup>11</sup>Thomas Piketty (1995) also explores the importance of one’s beliefs about the importance of effort but in his model those who believe effort leads to success oppose redistribution not because the poor are undeserving but because the necessary taxes will discourage effort, thus raising the cost of aid.

those whose level of privilege on all three measures was a standard deviation above the mean!

Fong's research confirms earlier studies. In a 1972 sample of white women in Boston the perceived work ethic of the poor was a far better predictor of support for aid to the poor than one's family income, religion, education, and a host of other demographic and social background variables (Williamson 1974). Indeed in predicting support for such aid, the addition of a single variable measuring beliefs about work motivation tripled the explanatory power made possible using all of the background variables.

Consistent with our interpretation of these data, support for anti-poverty expenditures varies with economic conditions. Fong found, for example that statistically controlling for race, schooling, income, religion and other variables, the self-employed tend to oppose such policies, and that much of their opposition is statistically associated with a belief—no doubt grounded in their experience—that individual effort makes a difference in getting ahead. Martin Gilens of Yale University found that during recessions people are less likely to explain poverty by “lack of effort by the poor”, and more likely to support egalitarian programs (Gilens 1999).

A more striking fact about the decline in the support for the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Food Stamps, and other means-tested social support programs in the United States, however, is that overwhelming majorities oppose the *status quo*, whatever their income, race, or personal history with such programs. This pattern of public sentiment, we think, can be accounted for in terms of the principle of strong reciprocity.

We rely mainly on two studies. The first (Farkas and Robinson 1996) analyzes data collected in late 1995 by Public Agenda, a nonprofit, non-partisan research organization. The authors conducted eight focus groups around the country, then did a national survey, involving half-hour interviews, of 1000 randomly selected Americans, plus a national oversample of 200 African-Americans. The second, political scientist Martin Gilens' *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, is an analysis and review of several polls executed during the 1990's and earlier by various news organizations.<sup>12</sup>

In the Public Agenda survey 63% of respondents thought the welfare system should be eliminated or “fundamentally overhauled” while another 34% thought it should be “adjusted somewhat.” Only 3% approved of the system as is (p. 9). Even among respondents from households receiving welfare only 9% expressed basic approval of the system, while 42% wanted

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<sup>12</sup>A third study by Weaver et al. (1995), drawing in addition on NORC and General Social Survey data, comes to broadly similar conclusions.

a fundamental overhaul and an additional 46% wanted some adjustments.

The cost of welfare programs cannot explain this opposition. While people generally overstate the share of the Federal budget devoted to welfare (p. 9), this cannot account for the observed opposition.<sup>13</sup> Farkas and Robinson note that

By more than four to one (65% to 14%), Americans say the most upsetting thing about welfare is that “it encourages people to adopt the wrong lifestyle and values,” not that “it costs too much tax money.” . . . Of nine possible reforms presented to respondents—ranging from requiring job training to paying surprise visits to make sure recipients deserve benefits—reducing benefits ranked last in popularity (Table 4).

The cost, apparently, is not problem. In focus groups:

Participants invariably dismissed arguments about the limited financial costs of welfare in almost derisive terms as irrelevant and beside the point. (p. 9,10).

Nor can the perception of fraud account for this opposition. It is true that 64% of respondents (and 66% of respondents on welfare) believe welfare fraud is a serious problem. However most do not consider it more serious than in other government programs, and only 35% of survey respondents would be more “comfortable with welfare” if fraud were eliminated (p. 11,12).

In commenting on this fact Martin Gilens (1999):1,2 observes that “Politics is often viewed, by élites at least, as a process centered on the question ‘who gets what.’ For ordinary Americans, however, politics is more often about ‘who *deserves* what’ and the welfare state is no exception.” In the Public Agenda study, respondents overwhelmingly consider welfare to be unfair to working people and addictive to recipients. By a more than five to one margin (69% to 13%, and 64% to 11% for people receiving welfare), respondents say that recipients abuse the system—for instance by not looking for work—rather than actually cheating the system—e.g., by collecting multiple benefits (p. 12). Moreover, 68% object (59% of welfare recipients) that welfare is “passed on from generation to generation, creating a permanent underclass” In the same vein, 70% (71% of welfare recipients) say

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<sup>13</sup>As a general rule non-experts vastly overstate the share of the tax revenues devoted to things of which they disapprove, whether it be foreign aid, welfare, aids research, or military expenditure—the opposition is generally the cause of the exaggeration, not *vice-versa*.

welfare makes it “financially better for people to stay on welfare than to get a job,” 57% (62% of welfare recipients) think welfare encourages “people to be lazy” and 60% (64% of welfare recipients) say the welfare system “encourages people to have kids out of wedlock” (p. 14,15)

But this is beside the point. Whether or not, for example, welfare *causes* out of wedlock births, for example, or fosters an unwillingness to work, citizens object that the system provides financial support for those who undertake these socially disapproved behaviors. Their desire is to bear witness against the behavior and to disassociate themselves from it, whether or not their actions can change it.

This then is the moral opposition to welfare. Many of the objections to the system, and many of the ethical judgments of the poor are based on misconceptions, a lack of compassion, and prejudice, fanned by political entrepreneurs of the right. Racial stereotyping and welfare bashing are closely associated. The public agenda survey shows that whites are much more likely than African Americans to attribute negative attributes to welfare recipients, and much more likely to blame an individual’s poverty on lack of effort. But even here reciprocity motives are evident. The survey data show, writes Gilens, that

For most white Americans, race-based opposition to welfare is not fed by ill-will toward blacks, nor is it based on whites’ desire to maintain their economic advantages over African Americans. Instead race-based opposition to welfare stems from the specific perception that, as a group, African Americans are not committed to the work ethic.

Taking account of the *fact* that many Americans see the current welfare system as a violation of deeply held reciprocity norms does not oblige us to either agree or disagree with these views. Still less does it require that policy makers adopt punitive measures and stingy budgets for the poor. Indeed the public strongly supports income support measures when asked in ways that make clear the deserving nature of the poor: a 1995 NYT/CBS poll, for instance, found that twice as many agreed as disagreed that “it is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves.”

Like Oppenheimer and Frohlich’s experimental subjects, those surveyed by pollsters, exhibit what we have termed ‘basic needs generosity,’ a virtually unconditional willingness to share with others to assure them of some minimal standard, especially, as the survey data show, when this is implemented through provision of food, basic medical care, housing, and other essential

goods. The interplay of basic needs generosity and strong reciprocity, we think, accounts for the salient facts about public opinion concerning welfare.

## 5 CONCLUSION

If we are right, egalitarians have misunderstood the revolt against welfare and the resistance to helping the needy, attributing it to selfishness by the electorate rather than the failure of many programs to tap powerful commitments to fairness and generosity and the fact that some programs appear to violate deeply held reciprocity norms.

There is an obvious objection of our argument. “Morality is socially determined,” we hear the reader musing, “so why not transform morality to fit the needs of egalitarian policy rather than tailoring policy to existing morality?” Why not promote a public morality of expanded, virtually unconditional altruism towards people whom the hypercompetitive, hyperindividualist market system have left behind, rather than pandering to the sometimes punitive expressions of strong reciprocity? Have not radical egalitarians, from nineteenth century abolitionists to contemporary feminists, civil libertarians, and welfare state activists, successfully made consciousness-raising a central part of their political practice? What ever happened to the socialist ideal of ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’? Why, in short, be trapped by the present in designing a future?

Our answer is that while a strong public morality is important in an egalitarian society, the human mind is not a blank slate that is equally disposed to accept whatever moral rules are presented to it by either dominant élites or egalitarian reformers. Rather, people are predisposed to accept some moral rules, others can be imposed upon them with some difficulty, and still others cannot be imposed in any stable manner at all. Egalitarians have been successful in appealing to the more elevated human motives precisely when they have shown that dominant institutions violate norms of reciprocity, and may be replaced by institutions more consistent with these norms. Countless other egalitarian initiatives have failed. We believe that basic needs generosity and strong reciprocity are among those that we are predisposed to accept. Barrington Moore, Jr., in his comparative study of revolution and revolt cited earlier, expresses this idea in the following words:

... awareness of social injustice would be impossible if human beings could be made to accept any and all rules. Evidently there are *some* constraints on the making of moral rules and therefore on the possible forms of moral outrage. (Barrington Moore

1978):5.

What accounts for our moral predispositions? The answer is some combination of genes and culture. Neither is immutable, but likewise neither is amenable to reconstruction in an arbitrary manner. The cultural and the genetic structures that frame our lives and affect our propensity to accept or reject particular moral principles are products of cultural and biological evolution. Moral principles succeed because they have aided those individuals who have used them and those groups in which they have been prevalent. They may well conform to particular philosophical, political, and/or religious logics, but they persist largely because the individuals and social groups that have deployed these moral principles have prevailed, while others that have not have perished or been assimilated.

This is not to say that culture change is always conservative and slow-moving, for we know that this is not the case. Nor is public opinion immune to persuasion, as the meteoric rise of environmental concerns and feminist values over the past three decades attest. Rather it is to say that cultural change, like technical change, is subject to enduring laws and material constraints. The evidence is that among these regularities is the ease with which people assume the behavior of *Homo reciprocans* and the unsustainability of egalitarian programs that violate norms of reciprocity.

Many traditional projects of egalitarians, such as land reform and employee ownership of their workplaces are strongly consistent with reciprocity norms, as they make people the owners not only of the fruits of their labors, but more broadly of the consequences of their actions. The same may be said of more conventional initiatives such as improved educational opportunity and policies to support home ownership—there is good evidence, for example, that home ownership promotes active participation in local politics and a willingness to discipline personally those engaging in antisocial behaviors in the neighborhood. An expansion of subsidies designed to promote employment and increase earnings among the poor would tap powerful reciprocity motives, as has been suggested by Columbia University economist Edmund Phelps in his recent book *Rewarding Work* (1997), and by Robert Haveman in these pages. Similarly, social insurance programs might be reformulated along lines suggested by University of California economist John Roemer in these pages to protect individuals from risks over which they have no control, while not indemnifying people against the results of their own choices, other than providing a minimal floor to living standards. In this manner, for example, families could be protected against regional fluctuations in home values—the main form of wealth for most people—as Yale

economist Robert Shiller (1993) has shown. Other forms of insurance could partially protect workers from shifts in demand for their services induced by global economic changes.

If we are correct, an egalitarian society can be built on the basis of these and other policies consistent with strong reciprocity, along with a guarantee of an acceptable minimal living standard consistent with the widely documented motives of basic needs generosity.

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