

The Politics of Envy: Outlaw Emotions in Capitalist Societies

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A common critique made by conservatives against those who support economic egalitarianism is that they are engaging in ‘the politics of envy’. For example, Margaret Thatcher (1974), the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and leader of the Conservative Party, dismissed egalitarianism as “the politics of envy, the incitement of people to regard all success as if it were something discreditable”. Similarly, Winston Churchill (1950, 347), another conservative former UK Prime Minister, called socialism “the gospel of envy”. This critique is not only to be found in political rhetoric. The economist and philosopher, F. A. Hayek (1978, 93) claimed that demands for the redistribution of wealth “rest on the discontent that the success of some people often produces in those that are less successful, or to put it bluntly, on envy.” In a recent book, Anne Hendershott (2020: Ch.6) describes egalitarian proposals to redistribute wealth and reorganize the economy as “the ultimate act of envious revenge.” The basic idea behind these critiques is that those with fewer resources are claimed to simply be envious of those who have more and that envy, due to its destructive nature, is deemed to be an illegitimate basis of political critique (Morgan-Knapp 2014).

Our aim in this chapter is to investigate how egalitarians can respond to this critique. Some have sought to defend egalitarianism by defending the role of envy in politics (Bankovsky 2018; Frye 2016). Our aims are similar, though we take a different approach towards this goal. We argue that envy for the rich actually plays a crucial role in supporting unequal capitalist societies. We start by examining the criticism that political envy is irrational in more detail (section 1). We then draw on William Reddy’s (2001) concept of *emotional regimes*, the set of norms governing emotional life that will underpin any stable political regime (section 2). We argue that envy for the wealthy plays a crucial role in the emotional regime of capitalist societies, as it encourages people to engage in conspicuous consumption and to compete with others for honor and esteem (section 3). Those who support capitalist societies with high levels of economic inequality, we argue, are therefore in no position to criticize egalitarians for promoting a politics of envy. We finish by drawing on Alison Jaggar’s (1989) work to argue that economic envy should be seen as an ‘outlaw emotion’ that can play an important role in helping people to recognize injustice (section 4).

1. Political Envy and Irrationality

Egalitarians are criticized for promoting the politics of envy, being motivated by envy for the rich themselves and inciting such feelings in others. By itself, though, this doesn’t provide any reason to reject egalitarianism. For this to count as a proper criticism of egalitarianism, and not simply an attempt to dismiss egalitarian concerns without properly considering them, some reason needs to be given for thinking that envy is an illegitimate source of political motivation.

The first step in this argument is to describe the nature of envy. Emotions typically involve distinctive evaluations, phenomenologies, eliciting conditions and action tendencies. Envy involves a judgement of positive value. When someone feels envy for another person, they view that person as having something or being someone of value. Importantly, it’s also a comparative judgment, as it involves the judgement that the other person has something valuable that the envier lacks. As Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (2000, 282) explains, “The person we envy has personal attributes (such as beauty,

patience, or intelligence), possessions (such as a car), or positions (being the boss) that we lack but desire.” Envy is also an unpleasant emotion. As Sara Protasi (2016, 536) articulates the consensus position, envy is “an aversive reaction” to this perceived inferiority.¹ The unpleasantness of envy is emphasized in Aristotle’s (*Rhetoric* II. 10) definition of envy as “pain at the good fortune of others,” and also Kant’s (*Metaphysics of Morals* 6:459) claim that envy is “a propensity to view the well-being of others with distress”.

Envy also seems to involve social comparison. As Jon Elster (1999, 70) puts the point envy involves the thought that “it could have been me”. Similarly, Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1388a) claims that “we envy those who are near us in time, place, age, or reputation,” and Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (1992, 556) claims that “in envy, our attention is focused on those perceived to be immediately above us.” Studies conducted by Niels van de Ven and Marcel Zeelenberg (2015) found that envy was indeed more likely to be elicited when participants judged themselves to be closer to the position of the envied person. Finally, in order to eliminate the gap between themselves and the person they envy, envious people can try to bring themselves up to the latter. This form of envy is called ‘benign envy’ (van de Ven, Zeelenberg & Pieters 2009). Alternatively, they may bring the envied person down to their level. This is called ‘malicious envy’ (see also: Protasi 2016). Clearly, conservative critics of egalitarianism take it to be motivated by the latter.

The reason that critics of egalitarianism provide for dismissing envy for the rich as a legitimate source of political motivation is that such envy is an irrational emotion. Christopher Morgan-Knapp (2014) provides a detailed argument for this position. The starting point of his argument is the following characterization of envy:

Envy’s characteristic presentation is of the subject lacking some good that her rival possesses, of this difference between them being bad for the subject, of this difference reflecting poorly on the subject’s worth, and of the difference being underserved. (2014, 118).

Morgan-Knapp then argues that no distribution of material possessions can possibly satisfy all of these features. There is no issue with satisfying the first two features. Some people may possess more of some good than others and this can be bad for the person who has less. As Morgan-Knapp (2014, 120) points out, this will be the case for positional goods and positionally distributed goods.

When goods are (physically or socially) scarce, the fact that others have more money than you can indeed come at your expense, so the difference in wealth can indeed be bad for you.

However, Morgan-Knapp argues that someone’s possession of a good cannot both be deserved and reflect badly upon those who lack it. If someone’s possession of a good is undeserved then it does not reflect poorly on the worth of the envier. On the other hand, if the difference does reflect poorly on the subject’s worth then this is because the difference is deserved in some way. This means that economic envy will always be misrepresenting the situation and so is never a fitting response to differences in material possessions. If we accept this argument then it seems reasonable to think that the envy people feel towards the rich should not influence political theorizing. Those who believe that egalitarianism is motivated by envy, then, have little reason to take this view seriously.

¹ This condition is also endorsed by Bankovsky (2018), Morgan-Knapp (2014) and Rawls (1971, 535).

There are several ways egalitarians might respond to this argument. One is to argue that envy can be a morally justifiable emotion when it's a response to injustice (La Caze 2001). Miriam Bankovsky (2018), for example, argues that envy can be a perfectly rational response if the envier accurately judges that the envied person does not deserve their success but that success still reflects badly on the self-esteem of the envier. In societies where wealth is a major source of self-esteem and poverty a source of shame, it is not irrational to feel envy towards those whose privileged start in life makes it much easier for them to acquire wealth. This means that an envier could meet all of Morgan-Knapp's criteria for envy without misrepresenting the situation. Another way to respond is to argue that egalitarians are motivated by resentment rather than envy. For example, Robert Young (1987) has argued that the emotions underpinning egalitarian concerns are better characterized as resentment rather than envy.² This means that these concerns are not vulnerable to the criticisms made of the envious.

Our aim in the remainder of this chapter is to provide a different way for egalitarians to respond to this criticism. We grant, for the sake of the argument, that some egalitarians may be partially motivated by envy. However, we argue that those who endorse capitalist societies with high levels of economic inequality are in no position to criticize egalitarians for promoting a politics of envy. Our first step will be to explain the role that envy plays in the social structures that underpin capitalist society.

2. Emotional Regimes

Envy, we argue, plays a key role in the emotional regime of capitalist societies. The term 'emotional regime' was coined by William Reddy (2001). Reddy argued that emotions have a universally-applicable core biological foundation but are nevertheless culturally flexible. Key to his account is the concept of *emotives* (Reddy 2001, 105), which are expressions, usually verbal, of emotions: e.g., 'I am happy', 'I am sad', 'I admire you'. According to Reddy, however, these speech acts do not only describe the world (i.e. express a specific experience); they also change it (Reddy 2001, 105). The way in which people label and express their emotions then plays an important role in determining their affective experiences. Importantly, the culture in which people live will have a major influence in shaping their emotional experiences and expressions.

This reveals the political significance emotions can have as they can and should be managed to ensure a stable political order. Reddy introduces the idea of an 'emotional regime' to describe this normative process of shaping people's emotional experiences. He defines an emotional regime as: "The set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and emotives that express and inculcate them; a necessary underpinning of any stable political regime" (Reddy 2001, 129). While these regimes may vary, some form of effective emotional regime are an essential component of any stable political regime.³ A society, then, is not only governed by institutions and rules but also by an emotional regime, i.e. by norms and expectations about the kind of emotions society can instill in its citizens and deem appropriate and inappropriate.

² For further discussion see Protasi (2021, 127).

³ Cf. Hochschild's (1983) work on feeling rules, Ahmed's (2004) work on the way emotions function as cultural practices, and Jaggar's (1989) work on emotional hegemony, which we discuss in Section 4.

3. Envy, Admiration and the Emotional Regime of Capitalism

Now that we know what an emotional regime is, we can ask what's involved in the emotional regimes that underpin capitalist societies. We follow the precedent of John Rawls (2001) in his definition of a capitalist society as one in which a minority of citizens control the major means of production in a way that allows them to monopolise the terms on which other people labour for a wage. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005) point out, the emotional appeal of capitalism needs to be powerful enough to ensure the stability of capitalism in light of the inherently unattractive features of the system:

In many respects, capitalism is an absurd system: in it, wage earners have lost ownership of the fruits of their labour and the possibility of pursuing a working life free of subordination. As for capitalists, they find themselves yoked to an interminable, insatiable process, which is utterly abstract and dissociated from the satisfaction of consumption needs, even of a luxury kind. For two such protagonists, integration into the capitalist process is singularly lacking in justifications. (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 7)

Material incentives and the threat of unemployment and poverty may be able to explain some form of engagement in the labour force. However, these incentives by themselves will not be able to generate the kind of active engagement and voluntary sacrifices that increasingly required from all wage earners (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 8). Moreover, appeals to economic self-interest by themselves will unlikely be enough to generate sufficient active engagement from members, which is why emotional engagement is needed to stabilize the capitalist order.

While the emotional regimes of capitalist societies vary, it's possible to investigate some general features that tend to characterize the emotional life of such societies.⁴ Eva Illouz (2007), for example, has analyzed the way in which capitalism is increasingly justified in emotional terms while at the same time colonizing and marketizing emotional life. Similarly, Martijn Konings (2015) has investigated how the ideals of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility combined with a scorn towards dependency are at the core of the emotional logic of capitalist societies. Our aim is not to contradict either of these compelling analyses, or to offer a complete analysis of the emotional regime of capitalism.⁵ Instead, we focus on one part: the mandated feeling rules towards the wealthy. Drawing on Adam Smith and Thorsten Veblen's accounts of the important role that emulation for the rich plays in capitalist societies, we argue that envy, alongside admiration, for the rich plays an active role in supporting and stabilizing capitalist societies.

In his *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith outlines a view of morality based on sympathy. According to Smith we have a natural tendency to sympathize with other people's emotions. This sympathy is based on imagining what we would feel if we were in another person's situation and approving the other agent's feelings as appropriate for the situation. Sympathy also plays an important role in thinking about how we should feel in a particular situation, as we have a desire to be approved of by others. The approval by others provides us with an incentive to act or feel in

⁴ The emotional regime of a particular society will also change over time. See Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) account of how the spirit of capitalism has adapted in response to anti-capitalist critiques.

⁵ We provide a more complete analysis in Thomas, Archer and Engelen (MS). Here we discuss shame for the arguably deserved poor, status anxiety amongst those competing for scarce status goods and envy, and admiration for the rich.

specific ways. However, Smith claims that we do not only desire to be approved of by other people, but also to be *worthy* of that approval (*TMS* III).

Smith claims that we find it easier to sympathize with those experiencing joy than with those experiencing sorrow, because it's pleasant to share in another's happiness, whereas sharing in another's pain is unpleasant. (*TMS* I.iii.1.5). This tendency leads the rich to flaunt their wealth, as it will lead others to pay attention to them and admire them:

The rich man glories in his riches, because he feels that they naturally draw upon him the attention of the world, and that mankind are disposed to go along with him in all those agreeable emotions with which the advantages of his situation so readily inspire in him. (*TMS* I.iii.2.1)

Meanwhile, the poor hide their poverty because it will not receive the sympathetic attention of other people. This results in a distorted moral outlook.

First, admiration for the rich leads those with fewer resources to feel deference towards those with more (*TMS* I.iii.2.3) and to develop a desire to emulate the rich (*TMS* I.iii.3.7). This deference allows the tastes of the rich to determine what is fashionable and the behavior of the rich to determine the behavior people seek to emulate, even when this behavior is immoral or foolish. To make matters worse, the rich need not worry about acting virtuously in order to secure the admiration of others, as their wealth will secure it for them. The ability of the rich to secure admiration without virtue encourages others to try to become wealthy as well: if successful, they too should no longer worry about acting decently in order to receive the admiration of others (*TMS* I.iii.3.8). This encourages us to emulate immoral people. It's also harmful for our wellbeing, as it encourages people to spend their lives laboring hard to achieve material possessions that do little to increase their happiness. However, it's also an important driver of the economy: "It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind." (Smith *TMS* IV.1.10).⁶

Importantly for our purposes the inequalities in wealth that characterize capitalist societies trigger widespread admiration for the rich, which in turn encourages people to defer to them, emulate them and strive to attain a similar status. As capitalist societies run on the promise of increasing material wealth for all parties involved, the hope of becoming richer is a crucial motivator for people to engage in the labor market. Admiration for the rich thus plays a key role in ensuring its stability.

Like Smith, Thorstein Veblen (1899) thought that the rich become objects of emulation. However, Veblen provides a wider account of the emotional reactions that people may be seeking to provoke through their wealth: not just admiration but also envy. According to Veblen, a key motivation driving people to acquire wealth is that "wealth confers honor" (1899, 35). In capitalist societies, social comparisons will be based on private property, as these become the signs that one has power, authority and superior status over others. Eventually wealth transforms into becoming worthy of esteem for its own sake and not just as a sign of power. This leads, according to Veblen (1899, 39) to 'pecuniary emulation': the "desire to excel in pecuniary standing and so gain the esteem and envy of

⁶ The claim that the pursuit of wealth is a private vice that brings collective benefits was outlined by Bernard Mandeville (1732 [1989]), first published in 1714, more than forty years before Smith's *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*.

one's fellowman." In other words, people attempt to equal or surpass the wealth of others in order to be deemed worthy of honor, admiration, or envy. Of course, it's not enough for the rich to simply possess more wealth than others do, they must also display it. They do so by engaging in conspicuous consumption, the buying of goods and services with the aim of displaying one's wealth.⁷ Conspicuous consumption shows others that they are fitting targets of esteem and envy. To signal their superiority, the rich display their wealth through expensive status symbols such as high-priced suits, cars and houses, competing between themselves for their own turn in the limelight in the economy of attention and celebrity.

According to both Smith and Veblen the envy and admiration people feel towards the rich is an unfortunate result of the way in which people seek esteem in capitalist societies. To stress that they are not merely incidental features but rather key components of the emotional regimes of capitalist societies, it's important to note how these emotional responses are actively encouraged by media representations of wealth. As Diana Kendall explains in her book *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America*, the media typically encourages a desire to emulate the rich by encouraging people to identify with them:

In a mass-mediated culture such as ours, the media do not simply mirror society; rather, they help to shape it and to create cultural perceptions. The blurring between what is real and what is not encourages people to emulate the upper classes and shun the working class and the poor. Television shows, magazines, and newspapers sell the idea that the only way to get ahead is to identify with the rich and powerful and to live vicariously through them. From sitcoms to reality shows, the media encourage ordinary people to believe that they may rise to fame and fortune; they too can be the next winner of the lottery of *American Idol*. (2011, 211).

Kendall explains various ways in which the framing of class in the media encourages a desire to emulate the rich. One is *consensus framing*, which encourages people to see the wealthy as like everyone else by downplaying or obscuring differences in wealth between different social classes (Kendall 2011, 29-34). Another is *emulation framing*, which focuses on the achievable nature of the wealthy's achievements by emphasizing humble origins and encouraging others to aspire to the same (Kendall 2011, 39-42). Finally, there is *price tag framing*, which focuses on the cost of the items bought by the wealthy (Kendall 2011, 42-49) and encourages a view "according to which a person's worth is measured by what he or she owns" (Kendall 2011, 212). All these presentations of wealth encourage, in different ways, people to view the pursuit of wealth as valuable and worthwhile.

We can see how these media frames encourage envy by returning to our account of the nature of envy. Price tag framing encourages viewers to value the luxury items possessed by the wealthy.⁸ Emulation framing encourages people to close the gap between themselves and the wealthy by acquiring the same goods and achieving the same successes. Consensus framing encourages people to believe that the rich are counterfactually close to them and that they too could achieve this wealth. This is important because the thought that 'it could have been me' is one of the key eliciting conditions for envy (Van de Ven & Zeelenberg 2015). In their framing of wealth, the media help create, shape, maintain and reinforce the desire to emulate the rich. As Gregory Mantsios (2003, 518) points out, this aligns with the ideological outlook of those who run the media and

⁷ For a detailed discussion of the problems caused by conspicuous consumption see Frank (2000).

⁸ For more on these issues see the contributions in this volume from Bankovsky, Van de Ven, and Wills.

entertainment industry: “The presentation of the rich as worthy of emulation is simply a reflection of the (upper) class outlook of those with prominent roles in the media.”

As we can see, the envy and admiration that is felt towards the rich is not simply the result of a natural tendency, as Smith claims. While such a natural tendency probably exists, these emotional reactions are likely to be particularly strong and geared towards a particular group, namely the rich, in capitalist societies. Admiration and envy for the rich then form a key part of the emotional regime of such societies. The ideology of consumerism encourages people to value material possessions, which in turn encourages people to desire to emulate the wealthy and to defer to them. This helps to maintain the power of the wealthy and helps to ensure the stability of the capitalist system.⁹

4. Implications for Political Envy

Having explained the role of envy for the rich in the emotional regime of capitalist societies, we can now respond to those who endorse capitalism and dismiss egalitarianism as a politics of envy. Our main claim here is that these authors are *themselves* endorsing a politics of envy, as they are supporting a political and economic system in which the promotion of envy for the rich is integral to its stability and continued existence. As such, they are in no position to criticize egalitarians for endorsing a politics of envy, as envy also has a key role to play in the very system they are promoting.

In response, it might be objected that there is an important difference between the envy for the rich that egalitarians are accused of and the kind of envy for the rich promoted under capitalism. As we have already pointed out, philosophers and psychologists distinguish between benign envy, which aims at improving the position of the envier, and malicious envy, which aims at bringing the envied person down to the same level as the envier. The envy for the rich that features in the emotional regime of capitalism arguably involves a desire to become more like the person being envied. It’s not a desire to bring the envied person down to the same position as the envier. Those wishing to defend capitalism, then, may point out that the benign form of envy for the rich that features in capitalism’s emotional regime is not the same as the destructive form of malicious envy that they claim is motivating egalitarians.

This distinction matters because benign envy is argued to be a morally permissible and perhaps even virtuous emotion (Protasi 2016; 2021, Ch. 3), while malicious envy is generally viewed as a morally bad emotion. Sara Protasi (2021, 80), for example, argues that those who experience certain forms of benign envy provide a model for how to engage in fair competition with others and will be motivated to improve both themselves and society as a whole. Malicious envy, on the other hand, is “radically vicious” as it is bad both for the envier and for others (Protasi 2021, 93). The envy endorsed by defenders of capitalism, then, would be less morally objectionable (and may even be morally desirable in itself) than the envy they claim motivates egalitarians.

One reply here is that, however plausible it may be, this distinction still involves conceding that those who endorse free market capitalism are also engaging in the politics of envy. This seems to take away much of the force from the criticism of egalitarians. “You are engaging in the politics of

⁹ Though, this may not promote the well-being of the rich. We explore this issue in Thomas, Archer and Engelen (MS).

envy” on closer inspection is revealed to include the caveat “and so are we but in a different way”. This undermines some of the rhetorical strength of the conservative’s dismissal of egalitarianism.

The more important point, though, is that this reveals the true nature of the criticism, namely that egalitarians feel the wrong kind of envy towards the rich. Instead of feeling malicious envy, they should be feeling benign envy towards the rich. Putting the criticism in these terms reveals that it’s functioning to enforce the emotional regime of capitalism. This emotional regime mandates that the rich should be admired, envied benignly, and emulated. The concerns of egalitarian critics are dismissed precisely because they don’t comply with these feeling rules.

The significance of this point becomes clear when we consider the different eliciting conditions of benign and malicious envy. Several psychological studies have found that malicious envy is more likely to occur than benign envy when the envier judges that the envied person’s success is undeserved (Lange and Crusius 2015; Lange et al. 2016; Van de Ven et al 2012; Van de Ven 2016).¹⁰ This suggests a connection between the thesis that benign envy is key to capitalism and the controversial thesis that market entitlements are deserved. A person may be entitled to a substantial economic reward for allowing a company to take a short cut over a piece of land that was, hitherto, being put to no productive use. As Amartya Sen points out, it’s difficult to see how merely permitting the use of one’s property is a form of productive contribution meriting economic reward (Sen, 1985, 15–17) The thesis that benign envy is a key motivation in capitalist society, then, cannot be detached from the thesis that such societies are meritocratic. The rich, so the capitalist emotional regime tells us, should be admired and emulated because they deserve to be rich. This is controversial because, as the example shows, merits and market entitlements can easily come apart. The same applies to the rich who acquire their wealth through rent-seeking: as this wealth is undeserved, malicious instead of benign envy might be more appropriate here.¹¹ This is an echo of Smith’s claim that the idea of markets as rewarding the bourgeois virtues is a fiction. To this, Amartya Sen adds that “it might...be seen as a ‘convenient fiction’, but that fiction is a whole lot more convenient for some than for others” (Sen 1985, 16). This puts the envy critique in an even clearer light. Egalitarians are likely to view the wealth of the rich as undeserved and may, as a result, feel malicious envy. Dismissing these concerns as the politics of envy is simply a convenient way to avoid engaging with the claim that this wealth may not be deserved.¹² The conservative dismissal of

¹⁰ Some studies also found that benign envy is more likely to be elicited when the envier judges the envied person’s success to be deserved (Van de Ven et al 2012; Van de Ven 2016), though other studies didn’t find this (Lange and Crusius 2015; Lange et al. 2016). For further discussion, see Protasi (2021, 36-37).

¹¹ Technically economic rent is income derivable merely from owning an asset and controlling the permissions that this grounds (such as giving a person a right of way over one’s own land). As Bill Edmundson explains: “To say that a doctor has a basic right to own a stethoscope is to obscure what is important, namely, the excellence that a competent doctor manifests in skilfully making us of [it] The right to profit from the sale or lease of medical instruments is another matter. In this sense of ownership, ‘ownership is not a productive activity’ as Cambridge economist Joan Robinson (1966) put it. Rawls coined the term ‘pure ownership’ to capture the idea” (Edmundson 2017, 26–7). The interpolated references are to Robinson (1966, 18) and Rawls (2007, 350). (Robinson actually says that “*owning* capital is not a productive activity”.)

¹² An alternative way to understand how emotional norms are violated here is that egalitarians feel the moral emotion of resentment, which is wrongly categorized as malicious envy. For a related

malicious envy is a way of changing the subject from whether or not the rich deserve the wealth to the emotional states of those claiming they do not.¹³

Alison Jaggar's concept of 'outlaw emotions' can help us understand the nature of this move. Outlaw emotions are those that contravene a society's emotional rules (Jaggar 1989, 166). For example, in a society that demands gratitude from welfare recipients some people may instead feel resentment when they receive their welfare payment. In the same way, feelings of malicious envy towards the rich can be viewed as an outlaw emotion that is prohibited by the emotional regime underpinning capitalist societies in which admiration and benign envy towards the rich are mandated. Outlaw emotions are more likely to be experienced by those in subordinate positions who do not benefit from the existing social structures. While they are often confusing and disorienting, Jaggar (1989, 167) argues that these emotions can also be epistemically valuable, as they enable and motivate new ways of seeing the world. The clash between the resentment felt by the welfare recipient and the gratitude they are supposed to feel can be the first step towards taking a critical stance to the dominant societal values and to a welfare system that stigmatizes recipients. Similarly, the clash between feeling malicious envy towards the rich and the socially prescribed feelings of admiration and benign envy can prompt an investigation into the causes of economic inequality and capitalist exploitation.¹⁴ This doesn't mean that we should always encourage such feelings or accept them uncritically. Rather, we should attend to outlaw emotions carefully and seriously, instead of dismissing, suppressing or condemning them from the start (Jaggar 1989, 169). We should not, then, be too quick to dismiss feelings of malicious envy towards the rich.

Attending to the outlaw emotion of malicious envy may lead us to question the extent to which the rich really are deserving of our admiration and benign envy. Sure, the rags to riches entrepreneur who achieves wealth through the exercise of qualities of character, from ingenuity to hard work and determination in the overcoming of obstacles may well be worthy of admiration or benign envy. But in other cases, admiring the rich as wealth creators, risk takers, and suppliers of enterprise to the productive process is simply mistaken, as it misrepresents the way in which contemporary political institutions favor not the heroic figure of the entrepreneur, but rather the "insider" figure of the rent seeker. Of course, much more can and should be said about the many mechanisms that cause wealth concentration at the top and growing economic inequalities without those being deserved, here. The short version, however, is that we live under 'rentier capitalism' (Christophers 2019), which is

discussion see Protasi (2021, Ch. 5). Alternatively, we might think that the emotion mischaracterized as envy is disgust. Thanks to Sara Protasi and Imke von Maur for suggesting these possibilities.

¹³ Compare this with Marilyn Frye's (1983, 84) claim that men often respond to women's anger by treating it as revealing something about the nature of women's psychology rather than something about the world. Similarly, Audre Lorde's (1984, 118) discussion of the demand that victims of racism get rid of their anger before discussing racism in feminist settings. According to Shiloh Whitney (2018, 497), when such dismissals are widespread across society, they constitute a form of affective injustice that she calls *affective marginalization*. When being thus deprived of uptake, people cannot emotionally influence others. Note, though, that according to our interpretation of the phenomenon, the conservative dismissal of egalitarianism acknowledges egalitarian envy, but denies its fittingness or moral appropriateness.

¹⁴ Compare with Bankovsky's (2018) claim that envy can be a rational response when the envied person doesn't deserve their success but that success still reflects badly on the self-esteem of the envier, and Harrison Frye's (2016, 522-523) claim that envy for the rich can play a useful role in triggering reflection on one's social situation, which may raise awareness of injustice.

marked by a hugely “unfair distribution of the benefits and costs of economic production” (Scanlon 2018, 152). The rent seeking that many of the rich are engaged in turns economic competition from win-win, to win-lose, as the rent seeker gains at the expense of her fellow citizens via her insider status in economic institutions.

While many wealthy people in capitalist societies have strong work ethics, which undoubtedly informs their self-proclaimed ethos of meritocracy, that does not come close to justifying the gaps. Many people, rich and poor alike, work very long hours: the differentiating factor is the structure of our economic institutions that sees, for example, American CEOs paid more than their median worker by a factor of 1000 (Leder 2021). The idea that the wealthy are worthy targets of admiration and benign envy and that the rest should therefore try to emulate them assumes a highly idealized – and indeed mostly fictional – view of how wealth accumulation works. While benign envy for the rich may be unobjectionable in those cases where it is fitting, we are skeptical that this applies for most of the rich in our own highly unequal capitalist societies.

When the personal qualities of the rich are not admirable qualities, then malicious envy might well be an appropriate response. If the superior status of the rich has been derived from exploiting an unfair institutional set up, such that they enjoy goods that others would have received under an alternative, just institutional set-up, then an attitude of malicious envy is appropriate. If restitution or redress is unavailable, we see no objection to seeing the unfair gains of the rent seeker confiscated even if they cannot be redistributed. The malicious envy we feel towards the rent seekers enables us to view levelling down as a justifiable option in this case.

Does this mean that egalitarians ought to always express their malicious envy and perhaps even promote it in others? Not necessarily. As Amia Srinivasan (2018) has argued, victims of oppression often find themselves in situations where they must choose between a fitting emotional response to injustice and the emotional response that best advances their cause.¹⁵ For example, victims of racism may feel justified anger (or outrage) in response to their oppression, but expressing this anger in public discussions could make others feel less sympathetic to their situation. Here, victims of racism face an *affective injustice* of having to manage the psychological conflict between a legitimate emotional response and the emotional response that would best advance their cause. Malicious envy may well be a fitting but counterproductive response to the rent-seeking rich that is unlikely to advance the egalitarian cause. If this is correct, egalitarians are also faced with the affective injustice of having to manage the conflict generated by their apt but counterproductive malicious envy.

That said, one can also argue the egalitarian cause would indeed be advanced by promoting malicious envy. According to contemporary neo-Machiavellians, our politics needs to be less civil, more agonistic, and more open to the channeling of emotions such as envy, rancor, outrage and anger against socio-economic elites (Green 2016; McCormick 2011). A conception of political civility that dismisses such outlaw emotions can be interpreted as obstructing the needed development of fairer political and economic institutions. Outlaw emotions such as malicious envy can trigger skepticism as to whether the wealthy really deserve their status as role models, innovators and cultural legislators. It is in this context that the policing of emotions that occurs when legitimizing benign envy and dismissing malicious envy is not a neutral activity. Dismissing, discrediting or banishing envy, animosity and rancor from politics serves to reinforce an unfair

¹⁵ For further discussion of this point, see Archer and Mills (2019).

institutional structure that systematically advantages those who can extract rents (insiders) at the cost of those who are unable to do so (outsiders).

Conclusion

We have investigated how egalitarians should respond to the criticism that they are engaged in a destructive and irrational politics of envy. We argued that inducing envy for the rich plays a key role in the emotional regime underpinning and stabilizing capitalist societies. This means that those who endorse capitalism are endorsing a political and economic system in which the promotion of envy for the rich is integral to the stability of the system. They are, then, in no position to criticize egalitarians for endorsing a politics of envy. Critics of egalitarianism can respond by pointing to an important difference between the kinds of envy involved here. While capitalist societies promote benign envy for the rich, egalitarians are arguably motivated by malicious envy.

However, we argued that this response helps to reveal the true nature of this criticism of egalitarians. This criticism serves to enforce the emotional regime underpinning capitalist society by dismissing the concerns of those who violate its feeling rules. Moreover, we argued that malicious envy for the rich is aptly understood as an outlaw emotion in capitalist societies. Given the potential for outlaw emotions to motivate new investigations and enable new ways of perceiving the world, we should attend carefully to such feelings rather than dismissing them. Like anger and outrage, malicious envy can trigger critical investigations of how capitalist institutions unfairly favor rent seekers and of the extent to which the rich really are really deserving of our admiration after all.¹⁶

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