

On Envy: Social and Economic Implications

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1. Approaches in the Humanities

From everyday experience all of us know the feeling of envy whether as source or target of it. In philosophical and social science discussions, however, envy looks much less important than in everyday life and experience. Schoeck (1966) and de la Mora (1987) provide apt starting points for our analysis. De la Mora (1987, p. 107, my translation) points out that "envy is grief about other people's property"; he also maintains: "Envy is the displeasure that is felt in view of other people's better, strongly desired, unattainable and unassimilable happiness or luck." Suffering from the fact that others are in some respects better off than oneself- e.g. in prestige, talent, and wealth - may lead to very different reactions. One might attempt to close the gap between one's own and other people's happiness, or the gap between one's own and other people's resource endowments, by one's own effort. From a social perspective this would constitute a productive response.

Instead one also might attempt to close the gap by making others worse off. As is already indicated in the title of his book, de la Mora (1987, p. 109, my translation) proposes that envy elicits destructive responses since he maintains: "Envy leads us to the attempt to eliminate the pain produced by our own frustration by means of the humiliation of others. Competition makes one improve oneself, envy leads to diminution of the self. The primary intention of the envious is not to become better off oneself but to diminish others. There is no will to excell, only to equalize." If the envious attempt to victimize productive and successful others, i.e., if envy aims at the punishment of success and superior achievements, then Schoeck's (1966, p. 17, my translation) following proposition should hold: "The easier private citizens and power-holders in a society find it to act, as if envy did not exist, the stronger will economic growth tend to be and the larger will the number of innovations tend to be."¹

De la Mora's and Schoeck's propositions look plausible to me. They correspond to my own views of society. Unfortunately, this says nothing about the truth of these propositions - certainty about possession of the truth is unattainable in principle - nor about compatibility between statements and observable facts, nor even about the information content, i.e., whether the statements actually inform us about reality. De la Mora defined envy by "displeasure ... in view of ... other people's unattainable happiness" and the proposition about the negative consequences of envy follows more or less automatically. If the grief about other people's higher degrees of happiness or better resource endowments would stimulate one's own efforts or even success in improving one's own circumstances in life, then there would be no envy **by definition**. If one connects envy and socially harmful consequences by definition, as de la Mora and Schoeck seem to do, then theories of envy contain little information about reality, because refutation or falsification according to Popper (1959) and his criterion for the demarcation of science is inconceivable. All that has been said is the following: There are feelings with harmful social consequences, such as grief about other people's happiness. We call these feelings envy. If similar feelings should have productive consequences, we will name them differently. In spite of much sympathy for de la Mora and Schoeck, I find it hard to accept their methodological approach.

Since Rawls (1971) more or less shares some of de la Mora's and Schoeck's basic ideas, my skepticism pertains to him, too. Rawls (1971, p. 532) defines envy "as the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others though their being more fortunate does not detract from our advantages". He arrives at the conclusion: "So understood envy is collectively disadvantageous: the individual who envies another is prepared to do things that make both of them worse off, if only the discrepancy between them is sufficiently reduced." Essentially, Rawls' new idea is the proposition that there is more envy in a society which does not respect his difference principle according to which improvements in the circumstances of the better off should also lead to improvements for the worse off. Even if one accounts for differences between humans in resource endowments (from talent to wealth) by accident or luck, as Rawls (1971, p. 536) does, it has to be pointed out that Rawls' difference principle implies a rejection of the idea that adults own themselves rather than being owned

by some community; and it implies a devaluation of liberty. For Rawls' individual efforts which benefit oneself without harming others and which thereby do increase inequality are illegitimate. What might elicit envy in others becomes a legitimate obstacle to individual freedom.

Rawls does not primarily want to develop descriptive or falsifiable theory - although his relationship between inequality and envy belongs into this context - but he wants to develop a normative theory or standards of justice. The result is much more closely tied to the ideal of equality than to the ideal of liberty. Whereas the normative message of de la Mora and Schoeck results in a bad conscience for the envious, according to Rawls the targets of envy should suffer from a bad conscience, because their good luck or success elicits the envy of others. Therefore, they are to blame for the deficit in happiness of others.² Rawls' theory of justice also implies the rejection of the Pareto criterion, according to which the improvement of the lot of some people is a social improvement, if nobody therefore has to suffer a loss. If society lives up to Rawls' standards, one has to buy the right to improve one's standard of living from one's less fortunate fellow men - even if it is done by one's own hard work and at the expense of nobody else.

One possibility to evaluate a normative theory consists of analyzing the likely consequences of its general acceptance. In a free society one may do whatever does not harm others and where those **directly concerned** agree (for example, the partners in exchange, buyer and seller; agreement of the competitors of the seller is not required). The difference principle strongly delimits the realm of liberty and self-determination and it strongly expands the realm where agreement of others is required.³ What this implies for innovation and the standard of living of human beings has been pointed out by Rosenberg and Birdzell (1986, p. 130): "A society which delayed innovations by the amount of time required to reach a political consensus would fall further and further behind a society which did not ... It implies the substantive criterion that the benefits of innovation are sufficiently understood and predictable that they can be verbalized in advance of its adoption - that is, that everything is too clear to need the test of experiment." Whereas Rawls' argument implies that we are interested in others being equally well or better off than

ourselves in order to avoid becoming targets of their envy, Rosenberg and Birdzell imply that we are interested in the liberty of others, because others are a potential source of innovation and progress if they remain free and if their creative talents are not extinguished by extreme requirements for consent.

At the level of testable or falsifiable theory Rawls and Schoeck contradict each other. For Rawls, more equality implies less envy. Schoeck (1966, p. 281) explicitly rejects this proposition. Following de Tocqueville (1835-1840, 1954) one even may hypothesize that approaching equality might sharpen the sensitivity for remaining inequalities and thereby reinforce envy. For good reasons Schoeck (1966, pp. 224, 288-289, my translation) maintains that envy occurs most frequently within classes or among similarly placed people and "that no society may be »just« or equal enough to avoid envy."⁴ Worse than the impossibility of avoiding envy by equalization is another fact pointed out by Schoeck (1966, p. 286, my translation), namely "that the nimbler and more talented person will soon intentionally reduce her achievements to the mean level of the group in order to avoid envy." By reducing the readiness to work in fit and efficient people, by nurturing feelings of guilt in them, envy harms even those who achieve little, but benefit from the effort and achievement of others (see de la Mora 1987, p. 249).

2. *Social Science Approaches*

So far, envy has been discussed as a human propensity with socially harmful consequences. But much remains obscure. We know neither under which conditions envy develops, nor whether envy always or only under specific conditions results in the negative consequences of limitations of liberty, less innovation and less achievement. As long as one defines envy as a malignant feeling, bad consequences seem to be a matter of course - although inferences from motivations to consequences of actions are never permissible. We should therefore raise the issue whether envy may be reasonable in the sense that the envy eliciting success of others and one's own lack of success are causally related to each other. I shall neglect a related problem: Under which conditions do personality differences

develop which may make some people simple utility-maximizers disregarding the welfare of others, which make other people maximizers of collective benefits, and which make still others maximizers of the difference between one's own and other people's benefits.⁵

We may simplify and distinguish three types of goods whose possession should differentially affect envy. First, there are **ordinary goods**, like bread, where availability for one person and availability for others are essentially unrelated. It is conceivable that someone gets his bread and others starve. It is equally conceivable that every one gets his bread and all are well fed. The satisfaction of the demand of someone does **not** significantly affect the satisfaction of the demand of others. Then, there are **collective** or **public goods** (like clean air), i.e., goods which either are available to all or to nobody. Since either every member of a group or no member of it gets the collective good, such goods should not elicit envy - at least not within groups or collectives where we engage in making most of our social comparisons.

According to Hirsch (1977), there is a third type of goods, **positional goods** which are defined by an extreme **rivalry in consumption**. Whoever claims positional goods for himself must necessarily reduce the likelihood of others getting the same positional good. The most important example of positional goods are social positions. Obviously, not everybody may become president of a state or employer or owner of a big corporation or chairman of a bureaucracy. It is not even conceivable that everyone employs a scrub woman or cleaning lady. If claiming a superior or privileged position for oneself necessarily implies that others must remain in inferior positions, then envy from below is an almost inevitable emotional reaction.

Frank (1985) did infer from the interdependence of superior and inferior endowments with positional goods that superiors have to compensate inferiors in money or ordinary goods terms for their superior endowment with positional goods or status. According to Frank, people with low status are sellers in the status market. In spite of their poor record in the competition for status they do not end the game by exit and thereby make the attainment of status and positional goods possible for others. Why

shouldn't the "sellers" demand compensation by the "buyers"? That is why - at least following Frank (1985, p. 48ff.) - workers are frequently not paid according to the value of their work, but the better the lower their rank in the hierarchy of their firm or organization is. Where a worker with average skills is the worst worker within an enterprise and thereby suffers a loss of status, he is likely to make more money than another worker with equal skills who happens to be the best one in his enterprise and therefore feels pride. The latter one has to pay for his status by transfers within the enterprise. The former one benefits from transfers. Since such results arise spontaneously, I don't know any conceivable objection from a libertarian perspective against the compensation of some people for their painful lack of status and for their exposition to a situation leading to the arousal of feelings of envy. Otherwise, there might be no takers for positions at the lower end of hierarchies.

But Frank moves beyond this point. In his view, there is a spontaneous redistribution of returns for the benefit of people with low rank even without government interference. Nevertheless, he favors **government coercion on top** of this spontaneous redistribution. Why a simple, voluntary and spontaneous deviation from the principle of pay according to merit does not suffice, why the returns according to merit need a double correction, why state coercion has to be applied in the second round, all this has not been explained to my satisfaction. Frank comes closest to a justification where he compares the competitive economy with a treadmill where everyone competes for the improvement of his rank, where most participants must necessarily fail to realize their desires. If one does not view competition as a means to mobilize effort, achievement and innovation, but as a mechanism that makes people overwork themselves or accept accident-prone jobs, then restrictions of competition should be welcome. Taking trade unions as an example, Frank (1985, pp. 185-186) explicitly applies this argument. He is happy that unions reduce competition among workers. In his implicit cost-benefit calculations comfortable conditions of work seem to matter more than satisfying the demand of consumers. In capitalism or a free market society priorities differ.

For decades sociologists specializing in industry and organization know that groups of workers spontaneously generate social norms which may prohibit "too much hard

work” or innovation or spectacular achievements (see Homans 1950 on the “bank wiring observation room”; also Mui 1995). Deviations from norms of behavior usually lead to sanctions. The feeling behind social norms which prohibit success or achievement is likely to be envy, the suffering from other people’s happiness or rewards. Working against group norms requiring mediocrity should be one of the most important leadership tasks for entrepreneurs. If politicians limit the freedom of entrepreneurs to fire workers by so-called protective measures for the benefit of workers (as they do in Germany), then they must strengthen the envious of modest effort and talent at the expense of achievement-oriented workers. The envious may still get rid of colleagues who work too hard by mobbing; he or she may be driven to voluntarily giving up the job. The entrepreneur, however, no longer can fire the ring leaders of the envious.⁶ Readiness to work hard, innovation and success are thereby diminished.

There are positional goods other than social positions. Real estate in specific locations or works of art also may be positional goods. Not everyone may own a painting by Rembrandt or Cezanne for his living room. The more the demand for ordinary goods - like bread, warm homes with bathrooms or cars, for example - has been satisfied, the more everyone lives comfortably, the more important positional or oligarchical goods become. Hirsch (1977, p. 26) maintains: “As average productivity grows, and democratic wealth grows with it, the appetite for oligarchical wealth will also grow, and in practice at a faster rate. In the aggregate, it is an appetite that cannot be satisfied. Attempts to satisfy it may remain rational for the individual, at least while others are making the same attempt. The combination of a rising potential for democratic wealth and a static potential for oligarchic wealth must be expected to produce a rise in effective demand for the latter in terms of the former. More wealth of the kind available by all will paradoxically mean an increased scramble for the kind of wealth attainable only by some.” Hirsch (1977, p. 111) also points out that relative income correlates more strongly than absolute income with feelings of satisfaction or happiness.⁷

If positional goods cannot even in a purely mental experiment and much less in reality be provided for everyone, if the satisfaction of wants for ordinary goods

merely shifts demand toward positional goods, i.e., toward goods which cannot be made available for everyone, if envy tends to be an emotional reaction to the superiority of others whom one can never catch up with, then envy can never be overcome, not even in principle. Only if one considers the effects of positional goods and extreme rivalry in consumption, Rawls' (1971) theory of justice starts to make sense. Then, monetary improvements of the position of superior performers on the market may actually reduce the chances for others with constant incomes to attain positional goods. This holds even in the absence of inflation.

So far, the impression may have arisen that collective goods in contrast to positional goods are "benign" and that they never arouse envy. This is true only for **direct** effects. If somebody enjoys clean air there is no reason to envy others who enjoy the same good. If somebody does not need to fear muggers on the street, then one may happily concede the enjoyment of the same good to others. Envy, however, may already arise, if some people feel that they contributed to the procurement of public goods at their own expense, whereas others, i.e., free riders, merely join in consuming the collective good. Unequal sharing of costs is not only a conceivable case, but the ordinary state of affairs in social life. Everywhere the tax burden is shared unequally. In well governed societies some significant part of taxes is used for the production of public goods - like rule of law, external defense, or protection of the natural environment - and **not only** for more bureaucracy, social transfers, and subsidies. Even the least problematic tasks of government and the least divisive government expenditures imply concessions of big taxpayers to small taxpayers. The latter ones are permitted to be something close to free riders. But successful people are not protected from the envy of others by high contributions to the procurement of public goods, i.e., by what Olson (1965) has referred to as the exploitation of the big by the small. Moreover, even free-riders may become the target of envy from successful people - because of their freedom from responsibility, because of their free time, because those who do not enjoy a superior position obviously cannot lose it and therefore don't need to fight in order to keep it.

There is another indirect relationship between public goods and envy. Since public goods are available to all members of a group or society, if they are provided at all,

their provision is quite unlikely in large groups. The application of coercion (e.g. in taxation) in order to procure public goods, however, already requires the existence of a **mechanism** of coercion. This mechanism may be regarded as another collective good, i.e., a collective production good.⁸ Even the application of selective incentives which reward contributors by social approval or other goods becomes easier if a mechanism to guide the group exists. There are theories which explain the development of **collective production goods**, coercive organizations and states differently from the approach outlined below. In my view, however, such approaches are complementary to the following idea: Positional goods or the hope to get a position of leadership are crucial selective incentives to induce some people to work for the provision of public goods. If contributors had always to remain invisible, if they were never rewarded with social approval, prestige or positions of leadership, then there would be much less effort to procure public goods. If societies **need public goods**, then they have to **accept** positional goods and the evolution of **inequalities of rank**. What benefits all approximately equally may be attainable only if providers are somehow privileged.⁹

Positional goods institutionalize the pain about others being better off than oneself. They guarantee the existence of envy because becoming equally well off must remain unattainable for most people. If one dispenses with the above criticized connection by definition between envy and evil consequences, if one defines envy as pain because of the well-being of others but irrespective of the consequences of the feeling, then the problem arises under which conditions the consequences of envy tend to be more or less evil. In principle, those who envy others because of their money, wealth or position may try to become better off by market activities. In a competitive market and in the long run, those actors are most successful who serve consumers best and who act **as if** they were **altruists** and genuinely interested in serving their customers. Adam Smith (1776/1976) knew this more than two hundred years ago. In a competitive market the knowledge that others are better off elicits productive responses. If one wants to get what others already have, then one has to invest some effort for the benefit of one's customers. The positive consequences of

envy like the positive consequences of selfishness depend, however, on the **unavailability of coercion** for selfish or envious actors.

The **combination of envy** as grief about the well-being of others **and politics** or the state must generate negative effects. As Max Weber (1964, S. 38, 1082) has outlined, politics is a struggle for power. Power is the probability to prevail in such a struggle. Power may rest on coercion and violence. The state claims a monopoly of coercion within some territory. As soon as coercion becomes applicable, the gap between one's own endowment and the endowment of others with goods - whether positional or ordinary goods - needs no longer be narrowed by one's own effort in serving others and satisfying their wants, but one may easily resort to the destructive options analyzed by de la Mora and Schoeck. Rational utility-maximizers will choose the option which is most likely to result in success. Under autocracy **and** democracy alike there are reasons to believe that resort to coercion and violence is cheap and likely to succeed for some actors. Under autocracy this is obvious because the power of autocrats typically depends on their habit and readiness to apply violent means instead of serving their subjects. Under majoritarian democracy one merely needs to assemble a majority ready to expropriate some minority and ready to resort to coercion in order to prevail. De la Mora (1987, p. 145, my translation) analyzed the consequences of the combination of envy and the "democratic" interest in social justice in the following terms: "The coercive expropriation of the successful and capable and the consequent enrichment of the unsuccessful and incapable generates the greatest fulfillment for the envious." I want to underline that the destructive efforts do not result from the feeling of envy by itself, but from the combination of envy and constitutions, including democratic constitutions, which provide too much latitude for the application of coercion and violence instead of limiting government and leaving distributional issues to the market.

How one might avoid the overemphasis on coercion and government has been outlined by Hayek (1952). He rejects progressive taxation because it permits majorities to decide that others, i.e. minorities, should pay higher taxes in future. This implies the constitutional proposal that political **participation rights** should be

dependent on the **obligation** to carry some part of burden. Nobody should be capable of voting in favor of higher burdens for others than for oneself. Then, the consent requirements for the application of coercion are no longer easily met. There are likely to be fewer victims of coercion. Those who agree with burdens for themselves need no longer be coerced. Then, coercion is required only to guarantee that people actually accept those burdens which they voluntarily imposed upon themselves.

3. *Conclusions*

Envy or suffering from the well-being of others, will never be overcome for the following reasons. First, people differ in their natural talents and acquired resources and in luck. Second, there are positional goods. This by itself rules out that any conceivable redistribution may satisfy all wants. The persistence of envy, however, need not imply harmful consequences. In free markets we observe a productivity enhancing division of labor and **voluntarily** entered contracts of exchange. In this context actors have to consider the well-being of fellow men, i.e., the well-being of their customers. Selfish and envious actors in a market have to act, as if they were better people than they actually are. A **competitive market neutralizes** not only selfishness, but **envy**, too¹⁰. Politics and the state, however, provide a different context, even within a democracy. Politics and the state of least imply threats of coercion and violence. No characteristic of democracy forces the envious to behave in a way that is morally superior to their character.

Democracy **seems** to provide envious majorities with the chance to close the hated gap between one's own well-being and the well-being of others exclusively at the expense of the targets of envy. This doesn't say, however, that politics and democracy actually keep the promise and satisfy redistributive desires. In fact, income distributions in the oldest democracies are even less egalitarian than distributions in younger democracies, although politicians should have had more time to work on equalization in older than in younger democracies (see Weede

1992, p. 218 ff.). Democratic redistribution looks most successful in increasing bureaucratization, regulation, social transfers, state expenditure and in driving the economy toward stagnation, but not in equalizing incomes.

In contemporary European societies unemployment is an even worse problem than slow economic growth. In our age of globalization wealthy industrial societies seem to be exposed to a choice between the acceptance of more inequality (as in the US) or the acceptance of higher unemployment (as in France or Germany). Whoever envies those who receive superior incomes, who therefore punishes success by taxation and rewards or reinforces the lack of success by income transfers and benefits - no social policy which actually helps the poor can avoid this - implicitly accepts less growth and more unemployment (see Weede 1999 for some econometric evidence). In politics, even in democracies, the consequences of envy are harmful and dismal: more unemployment and less liberty, more taxation and less wealth. Such consequences do not look like serving the interests of majority - as little as the agrarian policies of the European Union do. But big government and lots of regulations serve the interests of politicians and so-called "public servants".

Within the social science research community there is wide agreement (see Atkinson, Rainwater and Smeeding 1995; Cox and Alm 1999, pp. 70-73) that most Western societies and especially the United States since the 1970s are affected by a trend towards less equality. This may generate sufferings from low status and envy. Rawls' (1971) difference principle seems to be violated because increasing incomes benefit only the top 40%, and because the increasing inequality is not mitigated by higher incomes for the bottom 20%. My professional colleagues, i.e., German-speaking sociologists, call this a "deterioration of the distribution of income". Politicians call it a "gap in social justice".¹¹ Thereby, social scientists and politicians endorse the perspective of the envious and worse: they even endorse the perspective of those envious people who cannot even take care of their own interests.

I shall focus **only** on the lot of the bottom 20% of Americans in 1975. In spite of increasing income inequality, 80% of them succeeded to become at least part of the

middle class by joining the top 60% of income receivers until 1991. Most of the American poor in 1975 succeeded not only in escaping from material poverty until 1991, but also in reducing their suffering from low status and envy. Those contemporaries who noisily demand "justice" and who accept the egalitarian targets of the envious do generate social problems like unemployment and reduce the prospects of those who still suffer from their low status and would like to become targets rather than bearers of feelings of envy - simply by joining the group of superior income receivers. An inequality accepting society even provides some consolation for those of the poor who do **not** succeed in overcoming poverty. In the middle of the 1990s the poorest seventh of all American households possesses about as many of durable household consumer goods as average Americans did at the beginning of the 1970s (Cox and Alm 1999, p. 8-15).

Ultimately, envy is a constitutional problem. The more distributional conflicts are decided politically, and this includes decisions by democratic majorities, the more envy results in consequences which first harm the targets of envy and soon also harm majorities and bearers of envy. The more distributional questions are left to the market, the less it matters for our actions whether we are envious or morally better persons. Decent institutions and social orders serve the purpose to neutralize human defects like envy.

Endnotes

¹ Essentially the same proposition has recently been avocated by the German journalist Ziesemer (1999) in the title of his book according to which envy paralyzes the German economy.

² Similar arguments are made by Yamashige (1995) who defines justice by the absence of feelings of envy and who thereby permits the envious to define social justice.

³ Although Rawls does not restrict the requirement of consent to those directly concerned, consent or conceivable agreement is an important element of this theory.

⁴ See Runciman (1966) or Weede (1992, p. 78 ff.). Podder (1996) suggests that social comparisons produce relative deprivation and envy. In his view, absolute equality or extreme inequality - such as between master and serf - may minimize relative deprivation and envy. Then, inequality and envy are non-monotonically related. Since absolute equality has never been realized anywhere, since I don't see how it can ever be realized, approaching equality should correlate positively with feelings of envy.

⁵ See van Lange, de Bruin, Otten and Joireman (1997).

⁶ Recently, an organization representing German enterprises (Unternehmerinstitut 1999, p. 70, my translation) commented on this issue: "Protection against involuntary dismissal of workers who do not want to work or who lack discipline has been increased for a long time by judicial rulings." In Germany, it seems to be somewhat easier to end a marriage contract (supposedly for life) than a contract between worker and employer.

⁷ Recently, Kenny (1999) has reiterated this point.

⁸ One may also consider mechanisms of coercion (including states) as public bads because they tend to be used not for the benefit of the public, but for the benefit of special interests and power-holders.

⁹ At least in so far as the incomes of politicians and representatives are concerned, even socialist politicians endorse this point.

¹⁰ In his Progress Foundation lecture of November 11, 1999, Ernst Fehr arrived at different conclusions, because he wanted to point out that even purely voluntary action in a market by status-oriented or envious actors may lead to consequences which might be improved by unspecified institutions. If envy primarily results from the struggle for positional goods, as I believe, and if the satisfaction of all claims on positional goods is inconceivable (Hirsch 1977), then I contend that the frustrating struggle for positional goods nevertheless serves a useful purpose. Even if two actors compete for status and waste their money on expensive status symbols embodied in their cars, and if they are frustrated by this exercise in futility because none gets ahead of the other one, this competition in the dyad forces them to acquire the necessary means for this contest in a wider market where they have to provide goods or services for other actors. Since humans tend to compare themselves within relatively small reference groups, and since markets tend to become global, I believe that the necessity to satisfy demand in increasingly global markets to be more important than the frustrations in the many overlapping and self-centered status contests.

¹¹ I like Feldstein's perspective much better than the perspective of my fellow sociologists.

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