

First Among Equals

Visions of Equality Before Egalitarianism

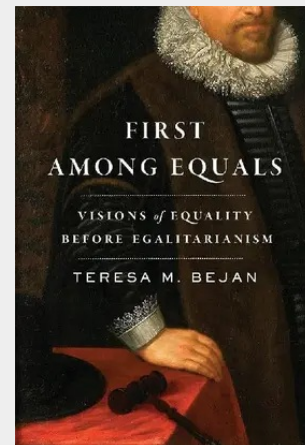
An incisive account of how equality transformed from an abstract ideal into a concrete social and political vision, thanks to seventeenth-century English dissidents like the Levellers and the political philosophers they inspired. Today, political theorists and philosophers treat as axiomatic the claim that all persons are equal. Dig deeper, however, and what we mean by equality—and what it demands from us, politically and otherwise—is far from obvious. Does it mean that we are all the same, and so the same standards should apply indifferently to everyone? Or does it mean that we are all different in ways similarly deserving of respect? These questions, and many more, reflect the profound ambiguities and contradictions that have riddled the history of the idea of equality. *First Among Equals* examines a radical turning point in that history. Since antiquity, influential legal and philosophical traditions have held that all humans are fundamentally equal. Yet these claims proved surprisingly at home in a world defined by social hierarchy, political exclusion, and enslavement. In seventeenth-century England, the meaning—and practical circumstances—of equality began to change. Political philosopher Teresa Bejan traces this transformation, revealing how equality finally became a concrete and actionable political ideal. Crucially, Bejan shows that influential early modern theorists of equality—chief among them Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and the early feminist Mary Astell—were responding to the increasingly radical visions proffered by contemporary social movements like the Levellers, Diggers, and Quakers. Inspired by the Leveller leader John Lilburne, these movements insisted that equality must be a basis on which ordinary men and women could demand to stand shoulder to shoulder with elites. These early modern activists and philosophers can still enchant us today, Bejan argues, while also helping us to restore the power of equality as a political ideal.

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