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**Review of *The Pursuit of Equality in American History*. J.R. Pole.  
Reviewed by Joel Blau, State University of New York at Stony  
Brook.**

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are of great consequence and its evidence on this score seems to me quite compelling. The book concludes with a discussion of how stratification processes in the U. S. might differ from those in Great Britain and of prospects for reducing the unequalizing effects of structural constraints through school reform.

Karl L. Alexander  
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J. R. Pole. *The Pursuit of Equality in American History*. Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1993 [Second edition, revised and enlarged]. \$35 hardcover.

Although Americans value equality, in practice, this equality has never been very complete. What, after all, in the context of the U. S. constitution, does equality mean? Here is a document that promised equality, at the same time that it withheld the benefits of that equality from women, slaves, and persons from the less propertied classes. In *The Pursuit of Equality in American History* (2nd Edition), J. R. Pole traces this ambiguous legacy from pre-Revolutionary times to the modern era.

The original concept of equality was a republican one, through which the authors of the Constitution sought to distinguish the new, United States of America from the European monarchies. In Europe, titles could be conferred through heredity; in the U.S., heredity conferred no such benefits. This distinction was both vital and limited: vital because it signified the establishment of an American republic, and limited because the equality before the law was originally protective rather than interventive. Seen from this perspective, the right to own African-American slaves was a property right to be defended, rather than a violation of human rights that warranted intervention. Echoes of this distinction can be heard in the present day, when even though the federal government intervenes with much greater frequency, there is a tendency to flinch from addressing basic human needs—the provision of housing and medical care, for example—because invariably, they involve somebody else's property rights.

Quite apart from this basic conflict, the concept of equality entails many other complications. As individuals, people are not equal in mental ability, in physical dexterity, or in income; as members of identifiable groups, they may be superior or deficient in any number of distinct qualities. The question then becomes, in which of these categories is equality desirable? One of the best examples of this conflict that Pole cites is the 1895 opinion of Supreme Court Justice Field in the first case about the constitutionality of an income tax: the law, Justice Field declared, unfairly "discriminates between those who receive an income of four thousand dollars a year and those who do not." Today, we are inured to the notion that this is precisely the kind of distinction that an income tax is supposed to make, but then debates about equality have always been debates about the politics of difference. Through political campaigns in the early years of this century, social reformers succeeded in making a difference in income one of the differences that mattered.

As Pole demonstrates, in its modern version, this debate has shifted somewhat, so that it now revolves around groups rather than individuals. This shift is significant, not in the least because it departs from the concept of the equal rights embodied in the Constitution. Inevitably, when gays, women, and people of color have sought to define the deprivation of their rights as a matter of group membership, others have either sought to reframe the issue as a individual matter, or have tried to highlight the differences within a particular group. As a result, the politics of identify have been superimposed on the politics of difference. Both are now an integral part of the fight for equal rights.

*The Pursuit of Equality in American History* is unquestionably authoritative on all these issues. Pole has taken one of the major themes in the evolution of the United States and analyzed it with great diligence and sophistication. His book deserves a reading both by those doing collateral research and by those who are interested in a careful study of the standard work in the field.

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