

ISA RETREAT KEYNOTE

**“EGALITARIAN” AND “SEGMENTARY SOCIETIES”
REVISITED: THE STRANGE AFTERLIFE OF
CONCEPTS****FLORIAN MÜHLFRIED***Professor of Social Anthropology at Ilia State University*

From its founding as a discipline, some of the field's leading thinkers have been looking for a more just human world where all of humanity could be understood on a more equal footing. Quite a few of them were convinced of having found such a world in societies they consequently referred to as 'egalitarian'. The portraits of such societies have long focused on small communities of hunter-gatherers or pastoralists, with a resolute emphasis on mutual exchange, immediate returns, or the freedoms of political segmentation.

At the same time, such attempts to find egalitarian societies in real life have been strongly contested. Marshall Sahlins not only argued that all known societies exhibit status differentiation in terms of gender and age, but also that they are governed by metahumans and thus embedded in hierarchical power relations. Luis Dumont has insisted on the universality of hierarchy, rendering each attempt to undo hierarchy as futile. And Paul Dresch portrayed segmentary societies – classic examples of egalitarianism along with hunter-gatherers – as a fantasy.

Perhaps it is time to let go of the notion of egalitarianism altogether, but I would rather suggest a change of perspective. Instead of continuing to search so hard for admirably, but empirically shaky egalitarian alternatives to our own imperfect worlds, we might focus on the mechanisms by which different regimes of equality, across time and space, were hard won. What we might find, as I suggest in my presentation, is a good deal of hierarchy, with egalitarian aspirations made open to some but not all.



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