Leveling the Playing Field: Cultural Relativism and Inequality
Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *The Sirens of Titan* and short story “Harrison Bergeron”

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Vonnegut and Anthropology: An Introduction
In his 1989 essay “The Concept of Fiction” (“El concepto de ficción”), Argentinean writer Juan José Saer mentions the expression “speculative anthropology” (“antropologia especulativa”) as a “suggested definition of fiction” (Hemer 180). Although he never goes on to elaborate on this definition, according to Oscar Hemer, Saer “quite obviously uses the word [speculative] in an affirmative sense—speculative as uninhibited, unpredictable, transgressive” (182). The fiction of American writer and public intellectual Kurt Vonnegut (probably best known as the author of the seminal novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*) fits that bill perfectly for a variety of reasons. This chapter will provide a reading of Vonnegut’s novel *The Sirens of Titan* and his short story “Harrison Bergeron” as well as a selection of his nonfiction works. Through this reading, I will explore the ways in which Vonnegut’s study of anthropology informs his thought and writing, to the extent that his fiction becomes speculative anthropology itself. I will also elaborate on the interrelatedness of anthropological and political thinking in his works, apparent in his treatment of, and comments on, social and economic inequality.

Vonnegut had a somewhat unconventional educational history. Coming from a family of hardware salespeople and, later on, architects, there was a family pressure on him to study science: “Although [Vonnegut] would have preferred to study literature or the humanities, or to become an architect like his father and grandfather before him, both Kurt, Sr., and his older brother, Bernard, pushed him toward the sciences. . . ” (Farrell 5). He first started studying biochemistry at Cornell University in 1940, but left in 1942, partly due to his enlistment in the US Army, but partly due to his displeasure
with studying science. After his enlistment, “Vonnegut was sent back to college as part of the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), where he studied mechanical engineering, first at Carnegie Technical Institute and later at the University of Tennessee” (5). In 1944, he was shipped over to Europe as part of the 106th Infantry Division to fight in World War II, where he was captured and held as a prisoner of war in Dresden, Germany. He survived the Allied firebombing of the city in 1945 and returned to the US in May 1945. It was only after all this, in December 1945, that Vonnegut enrolled as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, initially “as an undeclared major” (Shields 86).

Trying to decide what to study, he started with physical anthropology, which he found “tedious” (Wampeters 177), and archeology, but neither of those appealed to him. As Vonnegut writes, “I went to my faculty adviser, and I confessed that science did not charm me, that I longed for poetry instead” (178). The adviser suggested he tried social or cultural anthropology, which he described as “poetry which pretends to be scientific” (178). Although he left the University of Chicago without a degree, his studies in anthropology have had a profound influence on his works, particularly on those written during the 1960s and 70s.1

One of the most pervasive influences of Vonnegut’s study of anthropology is that he learned of the idea of “folk societies,” a term most famously employed by then-University of Chicago professor and renowned anthropologist Robert Redfield, whom Vonnegut called “the most satisfying teacher in [his] life” (Wampeters 178). Redfield describes and elaborates on this ideal type of society in a 1947 article, which he characterizes as being “small, isolated, nonliterate, and homogeneous, with a strong sense of group solidarity” (Redfield, “Folk” 293). According to Shiela Pardee, “Redfield’s ideas continued to resonate in [Vonnegut’s] fiction throughout his career. He credited Redfield for his thematic emphasis on the human need to belong to a small, supportive social group” (187).

In his 1971 address to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, Vonnegut describes his “biochemical-anthropological theory” through which he can explain “everything” (Wampeters
182, emphasis in original): “And I say to you that we are full of chemicals which require us to belong to folk societies, or failing that, to feel lousy all the time. We are chemically engineered to live in folk societies, just as fish are chemically engineered to live in clean water—and there aren’t any folk societies for us anymore” (180). In short, Vonnegut “believed that the need for belonging to a group small enough for everyone to be known and to have roles to play was innate and biological” (Pardee 187). Pardee goes on to describe various appearances of such folk societies in Vonnegut’s works as “sense-making systems” (I borrowed the expression from Peter Freese [145]), as his proposed ways of overcoming “a longing for community” (Standish 79). This chapter will explore a different aspect of Vonnegut’s folk societies, namely, the role such communities play in trying to address different forms of social and economic inequality.

Equality as Dystopia?
Although Vonnegut touches upon the subject of social inequality in many of his works, most notably in his essays, speeches and other nonfiction writing, I will discuss two main texts where the issue of inequality features very prominently or even takes center stage. The first one of these two is Vonnegut’s 1959 novel *The Sirens of Titan*, which describes the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, one of Vonnegut’s invented religions. Members of the Church are required to wear weights and other handicaps to level the playing field “in the race of life:”

[The Reverend C. Horner Redwine had a] blue canvas bag of lead shot [. . .] strapped around his wrist. There were similar bags of shot around his ankles and his other wrist, and two heavy slabs of iron hung on shoulder straps—one slab on his chest and one on his back. These weights were his handicaps in the race of life. He carried forty-eight pounds—carried them gladly. A stronger person would have carried more, a weaker person would have carried less. Every strong member of Redwine’s faith accepted handicaps gladly, wore them proudly everywhere. The weakest and meekest were bound to admit, at last, that the race of life was fair. (Vonnegut, *Sirens* 224)
As Reverend Redwine explains to Malachi Constant (one of the novel’s protagonists), the Church requires this type of forced equality so that “no one could then reproach you for taking advantage of the random ways of luck” (Vonnegut, *Sirens* 230). “Unbelievers,” that is, those who object to such an idea of equality, are threatened to face “the righteous displeasure of crowds” that are present “in every part of the world. The total membership of Churches of God the Utterly Indifferent was a good, round three billion” (231). People are monitored and, in a sense, controlled by the “disciplinary arm of the Church [which] was in crowds everywhere” (231).

Although the narrator describes followers of the Church as “happily self-handicapped people,” who are apparently happy because “nobody took advantage of anybody any more” (227), the idea of such equality that is controlled and forced onto people still implies a controlling agent, an enforcer. In *The Sirens of Titan*, this role of the enforcer would suit Winston Niles Rumfoord, who founded the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent and gave it its two main teachings: “Puny man can do nothing at all to help or please God Almighty, and Luck is not the hand of God” (183). His system of controlled equality is coupled with the elimination of the ideas of destiny and exceptionalism, to create a world where everyone lines up for the race of life with equal chances (or more precisely, equal lack of chances) to succeed amidst unpredictable “accidents.”

Elaborating on almost exactly the same idea, Vonnegut’s 1961 short story “Harrison Bergeron” is probably his most up-front treatment of the issues of egalitarianism and equality, or more accurately, the misunderstandings surrounding these ideas. The story briefly describes a dystopian society in the year 2081, where

> ... everybody was finally equal [...] every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. (Vonnegut, “Harrison” 7)

Due to the 211th, 212th and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and on the orders of the United States Handicapper General, strong people carry weights; beautiful people wear hideous masks; and
talented professional dancers in a TV performance dance off rhythm and in a somewhat clumsy way (so that nobody would feel bad about not being as good a dancer as they are); and smarter, more intelligent people have radio transmitters in their ears that frequently emit different distracting noises “to keep [such people] from taking unfair advantage of their brains” (Vonnegut, “Harrison” 7). In short, everyone is wearing some sort of a handicap in order to make sure that all people are truly equal in every possible way. The handicaps are assigned and monitored by the office of Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General. In the story, we see an otherwise highly intelligent husband George Bergeron and his perfectly average wife Hazel watching a dance performance on TV. They discuss—in rather simplistic terms—the goods of their equality-based society and contrast it to “the dark ages [that had] everybody competing against everybody else” (9).

Suddenly a news bulletin interrupts the TV program and an announcement is read to inform viewers that “Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen [. . .] has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous” (Vonnegut, “Harrison” 10). He was recently taken from George and Hazel’s home by officers of the Handicapper General. Suddenly, amidst great noise and earthquake-like shaking of the ground, Harrison busts his way onto the scene through a door. George immediately realizes it must be his son, but “the realization was blasted from his mind instantly by the sound of an automobile collision in his head” (11). Harrison proclaims himself Emperor and cries that everyone must obey him. He initially wears a huge amount of crippling heavy handicaps:

Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles were intended to make him not only half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides. Scrap metal was hung all over him. Ordinarily, there was a certain symmetry, a military neatness to the handicaps issued to strong people, but Harrison looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred
pounds. And to offset his good looks, the H-G men required that he wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggletooth random. (Vonnegut, “Harrison” 11)

Harrison removes all of his handicaps, orders the musicians on scene to play to the best of their abilities (and removes their handicaps as well), and asks if there’s a woman brave enough to join him as Empress. One of the ballerinas rises, Harrison removes her handicaps and her mask, and she turns out to be stunningly beautiful. They start dancing intensely to the music, they literally elevate and go higher and higher in exaltation until they “kiss the ceiling [. . .] and then, neutralizing gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other for a long, long time (Vonnegut, “Harrison” 13). At this moment, Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General herself, enters the scene with a gun, and shoots both Harrison and the ballerina dead. She then gives everyone ten seconds to put their handicaps back on. George and Hazel’s TV tube burns out, and Hazel wants to say something about it to George, but he has gone out to the kitchen for a beer. When he returns, he asks whether Hazel’s been crying, as there are tears on her cheek. She says that she did about “something real sad on television,” but she doesn’t really remember, as it’s “all kind of mixed up in [her] mind” (14). George suggests that she “forget sad things” (14), and they go back to their lives, apparently as if nothing has happened.

It is a natural first reaction to sympathize with Harrison when he is shot dead by the Handicapper General, the apparent oppressor of individuality, amidst his attempt at escaping the (quite literal) bondages of such a society. But, as Darryl Hattenhauer points out, “[t]hose who hold Harrison up as a model of freedom overlook the fact that he is a would-be dictator” (391). He proclaims himself the “Emperor,” and he also says that “everybody must do what I say at once” (Vonnegut, “Harrison” 12). On the surface, Vonnegut seems to have written a short story about the impossibility, absurdity, and, indeed, ridiculousness of total equality, but on closer scrutiny, it is revealed that “Harrison Bergeron” (as well as The Sirens of Titan) is
a very calculated and witty jab at what Leonard Mustazza calls “the cold arrogance of class-conscious America” (54).

In a short yet important article, Darryl Hattenhauer argues that the above jab is aimed to a large extent at “America’s form of egalitarianism: anti-intellectual leveling” (390). Egalitarian social plans usually target economic inequality, especially in terms of income and wealth, and they “tend to rest on a background idea that all human persons are equal in fundamental worth or moral status” (Arneson). The idea of income redistribution is notably missing from “Harrison Bergeron,” mainly because “equal income redistribution would contradict [America’s dominant ideology, that is,] the fact that some are smarter than others (corollary: the rich are smart and the poor are dumb), and also contradict the fact that some are better looking or more athletic than others (corollary: attractive and athletic people deserve wealth)” (Hattenhauer 390). All that is left is a carefully wrapped-up satire about the “American common sense version of equality,” which is “nonsense” (391).

Here we can turn back to Winston Niles Rumfoord in *The Sirens of Titan* as well and see that even though he proposes an egalitarian society of sorts, he proposes it for everyone else but not for himself. And he does all that from the convenient and privileged position of a wealthy and powerful American aristocrat, who can afford becoming “the first person to own a private space ship, paying fifty-eight million dollars out of his own pocket for it” (Vonnegut, *Sirens* 23). Rumfoord is “a member of the one true American class. The class was a true one because its limits had been clearly defined for at least two centuries [. . .] The strength of his class depended to some extent on sound money management—but depended to a much larger extent on marriages based cynically on the sorts of children likely to be produced. Healthy, charming, wise children were the desiderata” (21-22). As seen earlier, true egalitarianism is supposed to be based on the idea that every human being is of equal worth and dignity (see Arneson), but Rumfoord “has been content to manage human affairs by virtue of nothing more than his own sense of self-worth, a kind of social Darwinism at its worst” (Mustazza 54).
Inequality and Vonnegut’s Anthropological Social Plans

*The Sirens of Titan* and “Harrison Bergeron” provide just two examples of Vonnegut’s satirical takes on the misinterpretation of egalitarian societies and social plans. Groups and elements, devised to provide isolated individuals with such a sense of inclusive community, abound in Vonnegut’s novels, from the *karasses* of the invented Bokononist religion in *Cat’s Cradle*, through the artificial extended families in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slapstick*, all the way to the chrono-synclastic infundibula of *The Sirens of Titan* (“. . . where the smartest daddies from different places can all be right at the same time, even though they all disagree” [Pardee 193]). These communities of course have a quality of irony in themselves, but they are certainly not mere jokes. Much rather they are “lovely dream[s]” (Vonnegut, *Wampeters* 178) through which Vonnegut can communicate his deep-rooted concern for those at the bottom of the social pyramid, the poor and the lonely. 3

Much of what Vonnegut has to say about social issues in general, and inequality in particular, is of course political in nature. He frequently speaks about the poor who are “urged to hate themselves” and who “mock themselves and glorify their betters,” and he blames the rich and the powerful for doing “less for their poor, publicly and privately, than any other ruling class” and for creating “a mass of undignified poor [. . . who] do not love one another because they do not love themselves” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 161-62). In spite of the obvious political charge of his message, however, Vonnegut’s concern for those left behind and his firm stance against social inequality is to a very significant extent informed by his study of anthropology. As pointed out earlier, a truly egalitarian system should recognize people’s equal fundamental worth, which resonates deeply with the idea of cultural relativism, which was a prevalent trend in American anthropological thought around the time when Vonnegut was attending the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago: “At that time they were teaching that there was absolutely no difference between anybody. [. . .] Another thing they taught was that no one was ridiculous or bad or disgusting” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 9-10). Although this is of course an
oversimplified summary of cultural relativism, the essence of the idea is indeed something similar. One of the most important early proponents of this idea was American anthropologist Franz Boas, who wrote that “emotional reactions which we feel as natural are in reality culturally determined,” and in order to understand behaviors and cultures that are different from our own, we “must lay aside many points of view that seem to us self-evident, [. . . so that we can] view our own civilization objectively” (qtd. in Bunzel, Introduction 5).

This idea is also an important feature in the works of Robert Redfield, whose lectures, as mentioned earlier, had a lasting effect on Vonnegut’s thought and writing. Redfield (and others as well, see e.g., Bunzel, Economic 381 or Burns 129) conceives of folk societies as egalitarian communities. This does not necessarily mean that everyone is equal “every which way.” There are members in such a folk society who are stronger or more beautiful than others. There are people who are better at carrying out certain tasks than others. They can even take advantage of others. The important thing is that in such folk societies, there exists a web of relationships among the members, which ensures that the community is working and looking out for the individual as well, not just the other way round. In folk societies, this is usually taught “through example,” so that children can learn “about their relationship to the group and the moral behavior honored by the community” (Burns 129). In this sense, the organization of folk societies involve an “elementary equality” not only among the individual members, but also between the individual and society, so that they “both served each other” and “drew strength from each other” (129). This complex system of relationships involves and includes every member of the community, equally, regardless of who they are and what they can do.

Outside of stories about his own family and ancestors and their ways of life, Vonnegut had personally witnessed the workings of a community, which, in his eyes, resembles this ideal very closely. In 1970, he was in the then-Republic of Biafra, in present-day Nigeria. Biafrans declared their independence from Nigeria in 1967. However, after two and a half years of civil war, they surrendered
unconditionally, and the territory was reintegrated into Nigeria. While there, Vonnegut described that “a more typical Biafran family might consist of a few hundred souls,” and that “families took care of their own—perfectly naturally” (Wampeters 150). A Biafran military commander, General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, for example, told him that his family was “three thousand members strong,” and “he knew every member of it by face, by name, and by reputation” (150). Such a community of relatives comes quite close to embodying Redfield’s idea of a folk society, where relations are not simply personal but “familial” (Redfield, “Folk” 301).

Redfield was, of course, aware that the folk society he describes in his 1947 article is an ideal concept, which never aligns perfectly with the myriad ways real-world communities are organized, that in real life, “no known society precisely corresponds with it” (Redfield, “Folk” 294; see also Community 144). Vonnegut was also aware of this. Just a year after his visit to Biafra, he wrote (with some bitterness) that “the generation gap is an argument between those who believe folk societies are still possible and those who know they aren’t” (Wampeters 181). The anthropological social plan of the folk society may be only a “lovely dream,” but writing provided the opportunity for Vonnegut to make this ideal a reality, if only in his fiction. Anthropological thought thoroughly permeates his novels and his short fiction as well; moreover, it is not only informed by anthropological ideas and concepts but in turn his fiction can be seen as a form of speculative anthropology itself. According to Oscar Hemer, anthropology “shares a very crucial feature with literature; it can encompass everything” (180). Fiction has a “dual character, which inevitably blends the empirical with the imaginary” (180), which is exactly the way in which Vonnegut creates his fictional worlds and peoples and applies the ideas and concepts of his speculative anthropology to them.

Notes
1. Vonnegut submitted thesis proposals for his master’s degree, all of which were rejected, but eventually, “in 1971, the University of Chicago accepted the novel Cat’s Cradle […] as a thesis and awarded him a master’s degree in anthropology” (Whitlark 77).
2. In the novel, Rumfoord pilots his private spaceship into an “uncharted chrono-synclastic infundibulum two days out of Mars” and as a result, he “existed as wave phenomena” (Vonnegut, Sirens 7). In this state, he got to know everything past and future and used his knowledge to orchestrate and implement a range of global events, such as the invasion of Earth by a Martian colony, or the founding of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. Later on in the novel, it turns out that in fact all of human history, including Rumfoord’s schemes, was controlled by an extraterrestrial race of robots from the planet Tralfamadore. This of course complicates Rumfoord’s status as “enforcer” of the Church’s regulations, but for the purposes of this chapter, it is a reasonable thing to say. For more thorough analyses of the questions of free will and agency in The Sirens of Titan, see Bogar and Calvo Pascual.

3. Apart from his expressed preference of a type of government that looks out for the “Losers” (Vonnegut, Wampeters 187; see also A Man Without a Country 95-96 and Hattenhauer 387-88), such concern is clearly shown by Vonnegut’s admiration of famous American Socialist and labor organizer Eugene Victor Debs: “Next to the Sermon on the Mount, the words Vonnegut quotes most often in his work were spoken by his fellow Hoosier, Eugene V. Debs, while running for president on the Socialist Party ticket: ‘While there is a lower class I am in it. While there is a criminal element I am of it. While there is a soul in prison I am not free’” (Wakefield).

Works Cited


