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The Philosophy and Politics of

Equality of Condition*

John Baker

It’s so nice talking about equality in January. In January, everyone can still vividly remember the gross consumerism of Christmas, sitting uneasily beside the appeals for food aid for Africa. At this time of the year, people just can’t escape the huge contrasts that exist between the standard of living most of us enjoy in Ireland and the prospects of the world’s poor. And it’s not just a question of global inequality, as the Irish Times reminded us with its front-page visual story about homelessness. In fact, every day, year in, year out, we are reminded of huge inequalities in the conditions of people’s lives, whether the story is about the eight-figure salaries of corporate executives, the middle class schools that supply Irish universities with their students, the abuse of children by priests and pornographers, the banning of Travellers from pubs and roadsides, the desperate attempts people make to escape political and economic oppression, the destruction of Palestinian villages, the threat of war in Iraq, ... the list is endless.

* The ideas in this lecture have emerged from work within the Equality Studies Centre at UCD and with activists who have participated in our courses or informed our thinking in other ways, and are set out more fully and with more extensive references in Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh 2004. I should like to acknowledge the contribution of Alpha Connelly, Mary Kelly and Máire Nic Ghiallha Phádraig to the research project on which this work is based, as well as the many people who commented on that work, including Harry Brighouse, Vittorio Bufacchi, G. A. Cohen, Niall Crowley and other participants in our 2000 conference, Maggie Feeley, Tariq Josuf, Mags Liddy, Mary McEvoy, Pat McDonnell, Susan Miner, Maeve O’Brien, Deiric O Broin and Erik Olin Wright. This research was generously funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies and received institutional support from the Institution for Social and Policy Studies at Yale University (1998-99) and the Department of Politics, the Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies and the Institute for the Study of Social Change at University College Dublin.
How are we to respond to these huge inequalities in the conditions of people’s lives? Well, these are the Seamus Heaney lectures, so I suppose the appropriate way to start is with a bit of poetry. I have to confess that I don’t read a hell of a lot of poetry, but I’ve always liked a poem by Thomas Hardy that reminds us of the sheer contingency of how people’s lives turn out: how, to quote a lesser poet, ‘there, but for fortune, go you or I’. Hardy’s poem is called ‘The Man He Killed’ and it ends like this (Williams, 1960, pp. 127-128):

‘Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You’d treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown.’

The people we kill in war – the people we kill through economic sanctions – the people we kill through unfair trade and debt repayments – the people we kill by depriving them of decent homes and health care – they are people just like us, with real lives that matter just as much to them and to their families and friends as ours matter to us. And in favourable circumstances – if we met them in a pub, say – we would buy them a drink instead of killing them. We know in our hearts that the structures that sacrifice their lives to ours – that allow us to thrive while they go to the wall – are unjust.

Tonight I want to take you from that poetic insight through some philosophising that tries to articulate it in a more systematic and usable way, and on to some political challenges about how to turn it from an uncomfortable thought into a social reality. Of course, there’s not much you can say in fifty minutes, so it will all be a bit sketchy. But I hope it will give you something to respond to.

The Philosophy of Equality of Condition

There has been an immense amount of philosophical work on the idea of equality in the last thirty years or so, resulting in a number of different conceptions of equality. What I mean
by ‘equality of condition’ is one of these conceptions. I suppose the most general way of defining equality of condition is to simply to say that it is the belief that people should be as equal as possible in relation to the central conditions of their lives. Equality of condition is not about trying to make inequalities fairer, or giving people a more equal opportunity to become unequal, but about ensuring that everyone has roughly equal prospects for a good life.

It is tempting to call equality of condition ‘equality of outcome’ in order to contrast it with the idea of equal opportunity, and you can call it that if you like. But I think that that’s a little misleading, because there is no plausible egalitarian theory that says that the outcomes of all social processes should be the same for everyone. I think maybe the best way of putting it is that equality of condition aims at equalizing what might be called people’s ‘real options’, which involves the *equal enabling and empowerment* of individuals. Of course, nobody thinks this is easy to achieve, and we may well concede that all we can hope for is something roughly in the vicinity of equality of condition. But I still think that that’s what we should be aiming at.

Now all that’s still very general. To make it a little more specific, it helps to focus on the different ‘dimensions’ in which people can be equal or unequal. I think that there are five key dimensions that are particularly important in societies like ours: respect and recognition; resources; love, care and solidarity; power; and working and learning. These five dimensions represent five major determinants of how well a person’s life goes, in relation to a wide range of conceptions of what a good life looks like. They identify five types of condition that enable people to lead successful lives. Each of the dimensions picks out a type of equality or inequality that we have good reasons to care about. If I had all night, I would set out these five dimensions for you in some detail, but for tonight’s purposes I will only sketch them.

An important element of the first dimension of equality – the idea of equal respect and recognition – is the liberal idea that every individual is entitled to equal rights and privileges
of citizenship in the country in which they live, and indeed that we are all, in some sense, citizens of the world. But equality of condition is also about appreciating or accepting differences rather than merely tolerating them. Having said that, it is important to note that this doesn’t mean that we have an obligation to refrain from criticizing other points of view. Members of dominant groups do have a particular obligation to try to understand the perspectives and commitments of members of other groups, and to open their own ideas to critical interrogation. But none of us has to give up the belief that some ideas and practices are unacceptable. What we do need is to engage in a critical dialogue with others. We could call this approach ‘critical interculturalism’. There’s a third element of respect and recognition that we need to pay attention to, namely inequalities of esteem. Inequalities of esteem can disable people from making the most of their lives, so they need to be kept in check.

Turning to the second dimension of equality, equality of resources, the first thing to note is that there are many kinds of resource: not just income and wealth, but things like family connections, educational credentials, access to health services, environmental conditions and so on. Equality of condition is concerned with the whole range of these resources. No one could plausibly call for everyone to have exactly the same resources, because people have different needs and may take on different work burdens. Our overall aim, which is inevitably a vaguely defined one, should be to try to arrange the distribution of resources to ensure, first of all, that everyone’s basic needs are met, and beyond that to enable people to have roughly equal prospects of well-being. ‘Equality of resources’ is really shorthand for that. But it is a legitimate shorthand because it would involve a lot more equality of resources than we have now.

The third dimension of equality of condition is love, care and solidarity. This is an important dimension of equality because people clearly have a basic human need for these kinds of relationship. What does equality in this dimension amount to? I think it amounts to
something like everyone having ample prospects for relations of love, care and solidarity. Of
course we cannot always institutionally guarantee that everyone’s needs for love, care and
solidarity are met – we can’t have a Department of Love, where you fill out a form when you
feel that you aren’t getting enough of it. But we can try to arrange societies in ways that make
this more or less likely, by paying attention to how both paid and unpaid work are organized,
how transportation networks are set up, how children’s homes and other institutions are
structured, how criminals are treated and so on. Our aim should again be an enabling one. I
thought that as a gesture towards the development of equality of love and care, I’d give you
all a chance to take a break and connect with the people sitting next to you….

The central aim of equality of condition in its fourth dimension is to reduce power
inequalities as much as possible. To do this, I think first of all we need to endorse traditional
liberal civil and political rights, but with less of a commitment to property rights. We also
have to support certain group-related rights, such as the right of groups to political
representation or their right to education in minority languages. Finally, equality of power is
about a more egalitarian, participatory politics and about the extension of democratic
principles to all areas of society, particularly the economy and the family.

The fifth dimension of equality is working and learning. In all societies, work plays a
very important role not just in access to resources, but in shaping relations of status, power,
and love, care and solidarity. But work is also important in its own right, as a potential source
of personal development and as a potential burden. So work has to be looked at from both
these directions when considering equality. We should consider all kinds of work, paid and
unpaid, including the work done to sustain relations of love, care and solidarity. My view is
that everyone should have a right to some form of potentially satisfying work, that there
should be limits to inequality in the burdens of work, and that people should be compensated
for unequal burdens when they occur. Of course, all of that requires a major restructuring of the division of labour.

Now working as equals has clear implications for learning, because it means making sure that everyone has access to the education and training necessary for satisfying work. But we shouldn’t treat learning as no more than a preparation for work: it, too, is important for its own sake. So in my view we should aim for ensuring that everyone has opportunities for engaging and satisfying learning – learning that develops themselves as people. And we should think in terms of the whole range of sites of learning, not just formal educational institutions. As before, these principles entail major changes in systems of learning.

The idea of equality of condition has some serious implications. I’ve already mentioned some of the stark inequalities of our society and of the world more generally. The five-dimensional framework I’ve set out can help us to articulate more systematically the kinds of inequality we observe and the overlapping inequalities of respect and recognition, resources, love, care and solidarity, power, and working and learning that give some people so much better prospects for a good life than others. It’s not rocket science to see that these inequalities aren’t randomly distributed through the population, but are aligned with social divisions based on such factors as class, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, age and sexual orientation. These patterned inequalities are produced and reproduced by basic social institutions such as the economy, the political system, the educational system, the legal system and the family. It follows that we have to do some serious thinking about how these systems can be restructured in ways that produce and reproduce equality rather than inequality. In our book *Equality From Theory to Action*, Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon, Judy Walsh and I try to address these questions (Kathleen discusses some of them in her lecture in this volume). But I won’t say anything about these problems for the moment. The question I want to discuss is about how we can get from here to there. What kind of strategy can egalitarians adopt in promoting
equality of condition? That’s the question I am referring to in talking about the politics of equality of condition.

The Politics of Equality of Condition

In particular, I want to do two things. First, I want to suggest that promoting equality is best seen as the work of a social movement for equality – a social movement that already exists. Secondly, I want to address some of the strategic questions that this movement faces and argue for a perspective on them that I’ll call strategic pluralism.

If we picture the struggle for equality as the work of a social movement, I think we would expect that movement to have four key characteristics. First of all, we would expect it to be based on a wide range of overlapping social groups – groups that find themselves in subordinate, unequal relations. Secondly, we’d expect the motivations of egalitarian activists to be a mixture of self-interest and moral commitment, drawing on the existing ethical ideas of their societies but challenging hypocrisy and other value-contradictions within them. Thirdly, we’d expect them to see their ideological task as not just appealing to the interests of subordinate groups, but as emphasising the injustice of existing social arrangements, and even as pointing out how members of dominant groups can benefit from egalitarian change. Most importantly for what I want to say tonight, we wouldn’t expect them to operate through the activities of a single, coherent organisation but through the complementary actions of a large number of groups. Some of these groups would be formally organised while others would not be. Some would work primarily ‘within’ the system using ‘acceptable’ methods while others would work primarily ‘outside’ the system using radical, disruptive tactics. Their focus would vary across a wide range of issues.

In my view, many contemporary social movements can be viewed as components of an equality movement of just this description, because they are concerned with challenging inequalities in one or more of the dimensions I set out earlier. The labour movement is at its
heart a response to class-based inequalities. Other movements, such as women’s movements, disability rights movements, gay/lesbian/bisexual movements and anti-racist movements arise out of and work against inequalities that are more or less independent of class. Of course, not all social movements are egalitarian – for example reactionary nationalism and religious fundamentalism – but many of them are. We can think of the equality movement as, in effect, a network of these related movements.

So who’s in the equality movement? Here is a partial list of the types of organisations and groups that might be included in it in Ireland.

- Anti-poverty/social justice groups
- Anti-racism organisations
- Community-based drug rehabilitation groups
- Community-based women’s educational groups
- Community development groups
- Disability rights organisations
- Environmental activism groups
- Global solidarity organisations
- Human rights organisations
- Peace campaigners
- Penal reform groups
- Refugee support groups
- Reproductive rights organisations
- Sexual orientation organisations
- Travellers’ organisations
- Trade Unions and other workers’ organisations
- Academic centres focusing on equality issues
Political groupings in the anarchist, socialist and feminist traditions

Some political parties? – I’m not talking about Fianna Fáil – I’ll come back to that in a moment.

So if I’m right, a lot of the people in this room are already part of the equality movement. Those of you who aren’t might consider picking up a phone book tomorrow morning and contacting one of the hundreds of organisations working for equality in Ireland.

A lot of the groups I’ve mentioned are connected with the so-called ‘anti-globalisation’ movement. And that movement, too, has egalitarian ideas at its the centre. For example, the Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum ‘condemns all forms of domination and all subjection of one person by another’ (World Social Forum, 2001).

The movements I have named appeal to egalitarian ideas and have shaped the egalitarian agenda. Their aims and principles are at least complementary and in many ways overlap. They draw on each other’s experience, making use of parallel analyses, justifications, strategies and tactics. As each of these movements comes to recognise its own internal diversity, they become more and more intertwined. For example, the women’s movement has come to recognise the importance of class, ethnicity, ‘race’, disability and sexual orientation.

By recognising and naming an equality movement, I don’t mean to be minimising the importance of specific movements, or subordinating them to a higher goal. I’m just suggesting that these movements do have recognisably egalitarian aims. Highlighting this fact can help each movement by suggesting parallels and alliances. But it is also helps us to see how much is already being done to promote egalitarian aims and values, if not necessarily always in the name of equality itself. Instead of imagining that we need to construct a strategy for achieving equality more or less from scratch, recognising the existence of an equality movement allows us to see that there is already an implicit strategy in place. It is not a strategy of one big organisation with a coherent set of goals and tactics, but a strategy of (largely) complementary
actions by a diverse range of social actors, some more organised than others, some using more conventional and others more disruptive tactics, variously concentrating on local, regional, national or transnational issues, and all of them drawing on such common egalitarian values as human dignity, liberation from oppression, democratic rights and the recognition of diversity.

Within Ireland, these egalitarian movements have already had a significant legislative impact, as well as having a major influence on public discourse. Indeed, one could say that we would not be here tonight talking about equality if it were not for the movement’s success in putting equality on the agenda. There are many questions to ask about how this movement can accomplish its aims. I want to concentrate on a few strategic issues concerning its organisation and activities.

**Strategic issues for the equality movement**

There are the four issues I want to address: coordinating action, the role of political parties, radicals and moderates, and ends and means. The general theme of what I want to say is the endorsement of what can be called ‘strategic pluralism’, namely the acceptance within the equality movement of a range of different but complementary strategies pursued by different groups and organisations.

*Coordinating action*

Collective action is by definition the coordinated action of many individuals, and it’s clearly a necessary condition for egalitarian change. But coordination has its costs: not just in money, but in terms of power. After all, most of the groups within the equality movement have emerged as a response to being subordinated and marginalized by powerful elites. So it is not surprising that they do not want to be subordinated and marginalized within the equality movement itself.
For these reasons, the structure of the equality movement is less like an organisation than a network. Even in a small country like Ireland, there are hundreds of overlapping groups working for equality but no national organisation that brings all these groups together. Where national structures do exist, for example in the National Women’s Council of Ireland, there is a strong commitment to consensual decision-making and a continuing challenge to ensure that everyone is included. But despite this fragmentation, there have been a number of successful alliances among egalitarian groups for specific purposes, such as the defeat of the 2002 abortion referendum.

It is tempting to conclude that the equality movement has solved the problem of coordination by being a loose network of groupings that are always free to cooperate but never forced to do so. But we should not adopt too rosy a view of things. Coordination does not occur by accident. The World Social Forum has to be organised by somebody: in fact, an organising committee and an International Council (World Social Forum, 2003). The mobilizations in Seattle, Prague, Genoa and elsewhere were extensively planned in advance (Abramsky, 2001, ch. 75). Campaigns on equality issues need umbrella organisations and specialised working groups, as we saw in the 2002 referendum campaigns. These efforts at coordinating the activities of a large number of groups seem to work best when they adopt some simple principles. In particular, coordinating bodies need to be broadly based, to respect diversity, to operate by consensus and to be accountable to their wider constituents. These are egalitarian virtues, but it is easy to ignore them in the effort to get things done.

The degree of coordination that the equality movement is capable of may well fall short of what some people wish for. They may lament the fact that the aims of different groups and organisations are not wholly compatible, that the movement can’t always respond to events at short notice, that it can’t impose any great discipline on mass actions and that it lacks a single voice. But are these really weaknesses? They all stem from the fact that the equality agenda is
a complex mixture of aims that will inevitably be given different priorities by different groups, and that political action is an uncertain process in which activists inevitably make different practical judgements. The loose structure of the equality movement reflects these differences: a single, disciplined organisation would only repress them. So the loosely coordinated structure of the equality movement – one aspect of what I have called its strategic pluralism – should be seen not as a weakness, but a strength.

The role of political parties

There’s plenty of evidence to show that parties are important in deciding what happens within states, and that governments of the left are better than governments of the right. So what’s the problem here? It’s that mainstream political parties, by which I mean parties that aspire to participation in government, aim to win elections and not just to influence public opinion. In contemporary politics, it seems impossible to win elections on the basis of robustly egalitarian policies. It follows that mainstream parties can’t currently be expected to adopt and implement strongly egalitarian programmes.

So as egalitarians, we face a dilemma. We can’t act as though all parties are the same. But we can’t identify strongly with any mainstream party, because we’re bound to have deep disagreements with it. There are basically only three responses to this dilemma, which for dramatic effect can be called the Tony Benn, Noam Chomsky and Ralph Nader options. The ‘Tony Benn’ strategy is to work within a mainstream party to influence its programme in an egalitarian direction. This is, of course, the classic strategy of the labour movement and has been important in the history of the women’s, peace and environmental movements (Hanagan, 1998; Kreisi, 1995). The ‘Noam Chomsky’ strategy is to remain resolutely outside any political party and to exert independent, external pressure. This is the explicit stance of the Zapatistas in Mexico (Marcos, 2001). The ‘Ralph Nader’ strategy, or what in Ireland we might call the Joe Higgins strategy, is to set up a real party of the left that sticks to its
egalitarian principles and builds mass support for egalitarian change. This was of course the original strategy of labour movements in Europe; more recent examples are Green and New Left parties in Europe (Gallagher et al., 2001, pp. 209-213), the Women’s Coalition in Northern Ireland and the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores) in Brazil (Alvarez, 1997).

Of course, strategies always depend on circumstances. But I want to suggest that there’s nothing wrong with pursuing all three strategies at once, if that’s what emerges from the varying judgements of different equality activists. It’s easy to see how the ‘Benn’ and ‘Chomsky’ strategies can be complementary, since critics outside the party can strengthen the position of critics within it. Similarly, the threat of a radical party can shift a mainstream party to the left, and that might also help raise support for the radical party itself. How well these strategies work together will depend, among other things, on how their proponents relate to each other. If each group does nothing but disparage the others, that is likely to do their cause more harm than good. But if each group recognises that the others are trying their best to make difficult strategic judgements, and if each sees that the three strategies can be mutually reinforcing, then the movement as a whole can gain. This is another case of strategic pluralism – of how a social movement can be strengthened by its diversity. Perhaps the most difficult task in achieving this mutual acceptance is to persuade party activists to adopt a less instrumental – one might even say less predatory – approach towards their relations to other groups within the equality movement. Parties need to approach the equality movement in a genuine spirit of dialogue, engaging in the arguments and not just calculating what has to be done to recruit people into the party or to win their votes.

It’s no good imagining that a dialogue between mainstream politicians and equality activists will be anything other than strained. Egalitarians will continue to be seen by many politicians as demanding, unrealistic, obstinate and naïve, while many politicians will be seen
by egalitarians as compromised, cowardly, hypocritical and self-serving. But egalitarians have to face up to the fact that politicians will follow public opinion as much as lead it. And politicians have to recognise that a failure to engage with the equality movement can only fuel public disenchantment with politics and strengthen the right. All of this is connected to a broader set of questions, which is the relationship between radicals and moderates.

*Radicals and moderates*

Like most social movements, the equality movement has both radical and moderate wings. Radicals are likely to see moderates as too accommodating or even as having sold out for their own personal advancement. Moderates can see radicals as utopian and their actions as counter-productive. I want to argue that the equality movement needs both radicals and moderates, and that they should see each other, as far as possible, as allies in a cause. To clarify the question, it is worth noting that the contrast can be made in two different ways. The first kind of contrast is ideological; it’s about people’s aims and objectives. Radical aims are often labelled utopian or absurd by the opponents of change. But if we look at the struggle for equality in historical perspective, it’s clear enough that every major advance – the abolition of slavery, universal suffrage, the right to strike, the welfare state, and so on – was considered a radical objective at first. Ideological radicalism plays an essential role in expanding the egalitarian agenda. In any case, there will always be ideological radicals and moderates. What matters is whether they waste their energies in bitter conflicts. *Of course* they will see each other as mistaken: that follows from their having different convictions in the first place. But it makes more sense for each of these flanks to use the existence of the other constructively than to try – in vain – to bury it. Ideological moderates can surely see that radicals can make their own views look more acceptable. Ideological radicals can surely see that alienating moderate egalitarians does little for their cause.
The second kind of contrast is tactical. Disruptive action is one of the typical features of social movements (Tarrow, 1998a, p. 5). Why is that? Well, social movements are usually movements of relatively marginalised people who lack both material resources and access to state power. What they do have is a collective capacity to screw up the systems that dominate them, using strikes, boycotts, rallies, demonstrations, occupations, barricades and so on. But in our society, many egalitarian organisations have been recognised as legitimate players in the political system, with seats on committees and access to officials and politicians. Disruptive action is no longer their only option. Many of the people here tonight have been involved in what has been described as ‘confictual cooperation’ with the state (Giugni and Passy, 1998) and have influenced the formulation and implementation of policies in ways that are only possible by working within the system. Should we conclude that disruption is no longer necessary?

In fact, the history of social movements suggests that a dual strategy of working both inside and outside the system is more effective than a concentration on either approach. Disruptive action helps tactical moderates by demonstrating the depth of grievances and drawing attention to the injustices they hope to redress. It unsettles the political landscape and creates opportunities for them to operate within established institutions. Examples from both Europe (Tarrow, 1998b) and the United States (Gamson, 1990, pp. 157-160; Klinker and Smith, 1999; Piven and Cloward, 1977) show that significant reforms typically occur when protest movements bring pressure on national leaders. They confirm on a political level the fundamental assumption of trade unionism, that the power to disrupt, using industrial action, is an essential complement to negotiation and so-called ‘partnership’. But this analysis doesn’t show that the equality movement should give up on moderate tactics and engage only in disruption. On the contrary, it suggests that disruption works best when it has allies operating within conventional structures of power. Indeed, in the absence of strong allies within the
political system, the reforms prompted by disruptive action can be short-lived. For example, May 1968 created great opportunities for educational reform in France, but the reform process ran aground because of shifts in power within the French government (Tarrow, 1998b).

If the equality movement were constituted by a single organisation or party, this kind of strategic pluralism could face a serious problem, namely how a single organisation could adopt contradictory beliefs and tactics. By contrast, a loose network of groups and individuals can readily accept that some of its members are genuine moderates and others genuine radicals in either sense of the contrast. Nobody has to pretend that they believe something they do not, even if, as I have argued, they can recognise the benefits of being part of a movement that has both types of activist.

*Ends and means*

The issue of disruptive tactics raises a more general question about the relationship between ends and means. Saul Alinsky wrote that anyone ‘who sacrifices the mass good for his personal conscience . . . doesn’t care enough for people to be “corrupted” for them’ (Alinsky, 1971, p. 25). I can’t accept that way of looking at things. The equality movement is defined by its principles: it can’t expect to achieve its aims by ignoring them. In particular, we need to bear in mind the central dimensions of equality in thinking about acceptable political strategies.

Starting with the idea of equal respect and recognition, it is clear first of all that we have to respect the diversity of the equality movement itself, engaging each other in a critical dialogue that challenges our own prejudices and develops a truly egalitarian ethos. These are widely accepted ideas, although not always put into practice (Abramsky, 2001, ch. 76). Equality of respect and recognition also insists that we respect our opponents in the face of their own intolerance and contempt for others. We don’t have to tolerate their intolerance or to accept their culture of superiority. But we do have to engage with them as human beings
and remember that their lives matter as much as ours do. I think it is for this reason, as well as for tactical reasons, that practically all the egalitarian social movements in democratic states reject violent forms of action, in the sense of ‘the exercise of physical force so as to kill or injure, inflict direct harm or pain on, human beings’ (Geras, 1989, p. 186).

The principle of equality of resources means that we need to look seriously at the distribution of resources within the equality movement itself. Well-placed individuals and groups do share their resources, both material and organisational, but surely not enough. Workers of the world, get out your chequebooks!

A particularly difficult issue about resources has to do with dependence on state support. In Ireland, a large number of egalitarian organisations are funded by government grants. This funding is often short-term. It is also vulnerable to political disapproval, as we saw in 2002 when the Minister for Justice – and Equality! – abolished the Citizen Traveller campaign. We can’t realistically expect equality-related organisations to refuse public funding, but we need to find ways of making them as independent as possible.

Another question we need to consider is how the equality movement affects its members’ prospects for relationships of love, care and solidarity. Of course it’s a truism that a group that satisfies its members’ needs for satisfying relationships will attract more members and more commitment than one that neglects these needs. But we should attend to relations within the group not just because it serves the group’s purposes better, but also because this is part of the egalitarian ideal. At the same time, we shouldn’t expect a level of commitment to the group that undermines people’s relations of love and care with those outside it.

Power inequalities are another key issue for the equality movement. It’s taken for granted within the movement that groups should be organised democratically, but that doesn’t avoid a tendency towards becoming dominated by inner circles. In combating the large-scale power
inequalities of the world around us, it is easy to ignore the small-scale inequalities in our own groups and organisations.

The equality movement faces similar issues in relation to working and learning. However efficient it may appear to be, it is no good reproducing within the movement a division of labour between people who do interesting, rewarding work and others who take on the drudgery. The idea that anybody should be happy licking envelopes for the good of the movement contradicts the principles about working and learning that the movement ought to be promoting. We need to recognise and share opportunities for working and learning so that everyone involved in the equality movement develops their own skills and personality in the process. There are also questions about the work of caring and relationship maintenance. If we reject the gendered division of labour in society generally, we can’t accept the same division within the equality movement itself by leaving this work exclusively to women.

The principles of equality therefore generate their own constraints on the means acceptable to the equality movement. In most cases, neglecting these principles tends to weaken the movement as well. But it is not just their political effect that makes them important. If they are part of what we care about, then we should care about them in our practice and not just as a distant goal.

Conclusion

I’ve gone on a long time tonight, I hope not too long, because I wanted to put as many ideas on the table as I could and to hear your reactions to them. In particular, I wanted to set out the philosophical idea that there are five dimensions of equality of condition and also put before you the political idea of the equality movement with the related notion of strategic pluralism. But it wasn’t just that there were these two areas, like, that I couldn’t decide between talking about: the philosophy and the politics. It’s that the two are intimately connected. The philosophy arises from the politics of the vast, complex movement I’ve been
discussing, while at the same time helping to explain and inform that movement. What I’d really like to know is whether the kinds of things I’ve been talking about strike you as either completely ridiculous or bloody obvious, or something in between. All I can say for the moment is that this is how things look to me, right here and now – what I want to know whether they look at all like that to you. Because, to quote another poet, Wallace Stevens (1955, pp. 203-204):

‘There are many truths,
But they are not parts of a truth.’ …
‘The world must be measured by eye.’

References


