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<td><strong>Authors(s)</strong></td>
<td>Baker, John</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Publication date</strong></td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publication information</strong></td>
<td>Ó Broin, D. and Kirby, P. (eds). Power, Dissent and Democracy: Civil Society and the State in Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publisher</strong></td>
<td>A&amp;A Farmar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Item record/more information</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/2862">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/2862</a></td>
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Liberal Equality versus Equality of Condition:
Conflicting definitions of equality and their implications for community
development

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Not so long ago, the idea of equality had fallen out of fashion. Anti-egalitarian forces, particularly in Britain and the United States, were in the ascendancy, boosted by the rise of Thatcherism and the fall of communism. It was never quite so stark in Ireland, where the New Right and neoliberalism were less triumphalist, but the same currents existed. Yet in the midst of this new political climate, equality was resuscitated, with the passage of the Equality Employment Act 1998, which established the Equality Authority and the Equality Tribunal, the Disability Authority Act 1999, the Equal Status Act 2000 and the Human Rights Commission Act 2000. Equality was also a major element in the Belfast Agreement of 1998 and in the Northern Ireland Act of the same year. These were major achievements arising from years of activism. Had Ireland bucked the international trend and put equality back on the map? Or had something more subtle, or complicated, occurred? Had equality come back in an attenuated form, one that served the privileged by eclipsing the radical demands of previous generations?

Such a stark contrast over-simplifies the facts, but it does point to an important distinction between different definitions of equality – or as I will call them, because of their complexity, conceptions of equality. My object in this chapter is to set out two main
conceptions of equality and to highlight some of the differences between them. I finish by suggesting why the differences matter for community development, but since this is not my own area of work, I hope that you as a reader will have a clearer answer to that than I do. A lot of what I say is based on the book Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon, Judy Walsh and I wrote called *Equality: From Theory to Action* (Baker et al. 2004), so if you find what I say of any interest you may like to follow it up by having a look at that book.

The main distinction I’d like to make is between what we call **Liberal Egalitarianism** and **Equality of Condition**. At the most general level, liberal egalitarianism assumes that there will be major inequalities in the conditions of people’s lives, but tries to make those inequalities as fair as possible. By contrast, you can think of equality of condition as trying to reduce, as far as possible, the degree of inequality in the conditions of people’s lives. But that’s all very general so let me be a little more specific.

**Liberal egalitarianism**

Let’s start with liberal egalitarianism. This conception of equality forms the general aspirations of many left-of-centre political movements and might be considered the dominant ideology of the modern welfare state. It’s important to note that there are a lot of views that lie to the *right* of liberal egalitarianism – this is definitely a left-of-centre viewpoint. But I will suggest later on that it does not go far enough.
The two key ideas within liberal egalitarianism are the idea of an **adequate minimum** and the idea of **equality of opportunity**. The first of these ideas is closely connected to the ideas of basic needs and of poverty. Basically, liberal egalitarians want to ensure that everyone’s basic needs are satisfied and that no one is living in poverty. The second idea, equal opportunity, itself has a couple of different interpretations and I’ll come back to that in a moment.

What is an adequate minimum? To spell that out in some detail it helps to distinguish between what we call different **dimensions** of equality. The first dimension has to do with that most people think of when you mention the idea of an adequate minimum, namely the material **resources** that people need to live a decent life. So, for a start, they will think about an adequate income. If you combine that with the idea of poverty set out in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, it can be defined as the income necessary for having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally …[and for] participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society (Government of Ireland 1997: 3).

In addition, an adequate minimum of resources should include sufficient access to public services such as water and sanitation, refuse services, health services, schools, libraries, and so on, as well as sufficient savings or wealth to provide a basic level of economic security. Of course we all know that not everyone in Ireland enjoys these basic minimums. The demand by liberal egalitarians for an adequate minimum of resources is therefore a real and important demand, and one that is recognised across a wide range of
public policy objectives even if it is given relatively low priority in budgets and partnership agreements.

Some liberal egalitarians have more ambitious objectives than the relief of poverty. In particular, the liberal egalitarian theorist John Rawls puts forward what he calls the Difference Principle, which states that social and economic inequalities are only legitimate if they maximise the standard of living of the worst off (Rawls 1999). Rawls is often misinterpreted as a defender of ‘tickle-down’ economics, as if he believed that any degree of inequality was acceptable so long as it yielded some benefits to the poor. His principle is much more restrictive, stipulating that inequalities are justifiable only if they are necessary for achieving the highest possible standard of living for the worst off group in society. It is very hard to maintain that the degree of inequality we have in Ireland meets this test, since there are many comparable countries where the worst off have a higher standard of living than in Ireland but where there is a lower degree of inequality.

A rather different dimension of equality is what we call respect and recognition. What liberal egalitarians tend to identify as an adequate minimum standard in this case are things like the equal public status of all citizens, together with the idea of tolerating differences and allowing people to live as they like within certain ‘private’ spaces like their families and religions. They accept that there may be important inequalities of esteem among people, but think that everyone should have a certain basic status. It’s obvious enough that not everyone living in Ireland has even these basic levels of respect and recognition, not just because many lack the legal status of citizenship – something
that has become much more important as a mark of social status than it used to be – but also because being a citizen does not guarantee that your distinctive values and lifestyles are tolerated by other citizens. That is something that Travellers and LGBT people have known for generations. In contemporary Ireland, the two forms of status inequality are interestingly combined in the tendency of some white Irish citizens to perceive everyone with a darker skin as a non-citizen and therefore as inferior. So again, the liberal egalitarian demand for a basic standard of respect and toleration calls for significant reforms in Irish life.

In recent years, the migration into Ireland of people from very different cultures has led to a shift towards what’s commonly called multiculturalism. Though it has many varieties, the typical stance of liberal egalitarians towards cultural diversity is to ‘live and let live’, in effect treating each group’s culture as a private space in which they can do as they like, so long as they do not hurt anyone. Seen in this way, multiculturalism is an extension of the ideas of toleration and respect for the private sphere.

A third dimension that we talk about in our book is love, care and solidarity. To be honest, liberal egalitarian theorists don’t talk that much about this dimension of equality because they are inclined to see it as a private matter that is not supposed to be dealt with by public policy. To the extent that they do address issues of love, care and solidarity, they tend to define equality negatively in terms of protection from abuse. It would be consistent with the idea of liberal egalitarianism to add a right to minimum standards of care, particularly when thinking about vulnerable people like children and infirm older
people. One need hardly labour the point that we have not succeeded in Ireland in achieving these minimum standards, either.

The fourth dimension of equality is **power**. Here the liberal egalitarian idea of an adequate minimum tends to be defined in terms of basic legal and political rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the right to a fair trial and so on, together with a commitment to liberal democracy, by which I mean the kind of democratic government that is meant to be in place in most western countries. These rights and institutions are meant to protect people against the abuse of power and to give them an adequate basis for influencing the decisions that affect their lives. Most of us in Ireland do enjoy these rights although there are clearly exceptions, and clear shortcomings in the operation of our liberal-democratic political institutions. Much of the work of recent tribunals has consisted in investigating abuses of power and other ways that democratic processes have fallen short of their professed standards.

The fifth dimension of equality that we identify is **working and learning**. In relation to work, liberal egalitarians are committed to decent working conditions that are enforced by things like health and safety legislation and other employment laws. With respect to learning, liberal egalitarians are committed to adequate education for citizenship and employment, so that everyone is able to play what is seen as a useful role in society. It seems clear enough that Ireland fails to meet these standards as well, for significant sections of the population. Working conditions, particularly for migrant workers, are sometimes sub-standard, and Ireland continues to fail to provide an adequate education to
all of its children. Liberal egalitarianism therefore poses important challenges to existing practices.

As I said at the start, in all of these dimensions liberal egalitarians expect there to be substantial inequalities between people. What they typically say is that these inequalities will be fair if they occur in a context of equal opportunity. If everyone has an equal opportunity to do well under each of these headings, then that’s the best that anyone interested in the idea of equality can reasonably hope for. What makes things a bit more complicated is that there are also different understandings or conceptions of equal opportunity. In particular, I want to distinguish between what can be called formal equal opportunity or non-discrimination and what Rawls calls fair equal opportunity.

**Formal equal opportunity** can be defined as the idea that in a certain situations, and particularly in the case of access to education and access to employment, people’s success should depend entirely on their abilities. Formal equal opportunity is generally enforced in western societies, as it is in Ireland, through anti-discrimination legislation which forbids schools and employers from discriminating between applicants on the basis of certain named grounds such as gender, ethnic origin, skin colour and religion. That is the kind of legislation we have in Ireland in the Employment Equality Act and the Equal Status Act. A lot of people would say that formal equal opportunity is a pretty thin ideal, since it doesn’t say anything about how people got their skills in the first place. For example, the points system is a perfect example of formal equal opportunity – the CAO does not allocate university places on the basis of sex or religion or social class. But it
strikes many people as unfair that students from middle class families are much more likely to get into universities than students from working class families. It’s that kind of example that motivates the idea of fair equal opportunity.

**Fair equal opportunity** is a much stronger idea, insisting that people should not be advantaged or hampered by their social background and that their prospects in life should depend entirely on their own effort and abilities. This does mean that children from working class backgrounds should have as good a future in life as children from middle class backgrounds, which of course is not the case at all in Ireland or any other western society (though some of them come a lot closer to the ideal than we do). Quite a lot of lip service is given to this understanding of equal opportunity and it is often assumed that if only we put enough resources into the educational system we could bring it about. That is a very doubtful proposition because as long as there are major inequalities of condition in a society, the privileged are going to find ways of advantaging their children. It is not just that their own educational advantages give their children a head start, but also that they can pay for more books, trips abroad, extra tuition, home computers, internet access and so on. It is perfectly rational for them to do so, particularly in a very unequal society, and the education system on its own cannot stop them. Of course, the structure of the education system will affect the degree of inequality of opportunity in a society, and will certainly affect the lives and prospects of working class students, so I’m not saying that it doesn’t matter what kind of education system we have. I’m simply saying that you can’t expect the education system to bring about fair equal opportunity on its own.
**Equality of condition**

As I’ve said, the idea of liberal egalitarianism is clearly progressive. It certainly aspires to a much fairer society than the one we live in at the moment. And as I’ve pointed out, Irish society hasn’t yet achieved the goals set by liberal egalitarianism. But I want now to contrast that with the ideal of **equality of condition**. If we go through the different dimensions of equality in the same order, then equality of condition can be set out like this.

First, under the heading of **resources**, equality of condition calls for much greater equality of income, wealth and access to public services than we have at the moment. Why I don’t say that it calls for completely equal incomes is because inequalities of income are justifiable enough if they reflect differences of need or burdens of work. But if those were the only kinds of inequality allowed, it would still mean that overall people would have a very similar standard of living. I would add that the idea of equality of condition recognises that there are other resources that are very unequal in most societies, such as differences in people’s social and cultural capital, and that these should be much more equal as well.

Under the heading of **respect and recognition**, equality of condition requires more than the toleration of differences. Quite how to define this higher aspiration is a bit tricky but something that we have found useful is the idea of ‘critical interculturalism’. That’s a bit of a mouthful, but what it’s meant to imply is that although there should certainly be an
acceptance of differences among people, there should also be interaction between people with different cultural backgrounds, different religious beliefs, different sexual orientations and so on rather than a simple ‘live and let live’ attitude, and that there should be space for self- and mutual criticism of people’s beliefs. After all, there are very few cultural traditions that are beyond criticism and many of them, including those dominant in Irish society, have been important in reinforcing inequality. So those traditions do need to be open to challenge. Equality of condition also raises doubts about the huge inequalities of esteem that are found in most societies. Can a society that grants some people celebrity status really be a society of equals?

In the dimension of love, care and solidarity, equality of condition calls for what might best be described as ample prospects for relations of love, care and solidarity. In other words, we need to accept that these relations are crucially important in most people’s lives. Societies should take this into consideration in the way they are organised and the policies they adopt. For example, we need to pay more attention to so-called ‘work-life balance’ and therefore to excessive working hours. Proper arrangements should be made for child care, for the care of infirm older people and for the care of other people who need it. We should also attempt to create more caring relationships within workplaces, and we should recognise and facilitate care work.

Turning to power, equality of condition retains a commitment to the protection of liberal rights, although it draws a distinction between the basic human right to personal property and the extended property rights that have, in capitalist economies, been at the core of
economic inequality. Recognising that group-related inequality can often only be challenged by collective action, it is also sympathetic to some kinds of group rights, such as the right of Travellers or disabled people to represent themselves on relevant decision-making bodies. More generally, equality of condition calls for participatory democracy, by which I mean a form of decision-making that involves widespread participation of ordinary citizens and that extends democracy throughout all the major institutions of society – not just what we currently call politics but other areas like schools, workplaces, families and even religions. Participatory democracy has to be rooted in a democratic social ethos; and although it is unreasonable to expect everyone to be involved in decision-making in every context and at every level, participation at all levels should reflect the social groups affected. We don’t have to think of participatory democracy as the opposite of ‘representative’ democracy, since participatory democracies use representation too. But their representatives should be much more accountable to those they represent. Finally, the participants of a participatory democracy would communicate with each other in a wide range of styles, making it much more possible for all of them to engage in it.

Under the heading of **working and learning**, equality of condition calls for education that contributes to everyone’s self-realization and to satisfying work for all. A very important form of work is the work involved in loving and caring, and equality of condition calls for this work to be properly recognised and shared. A society with equality of condition might still have a division of labour, with people specialising in different kinds of work, but it wouldn’t be marked by the kinds of inequality we are
familiar with, where some people get a lot of satisfaction and personal development from their work while others do work that is nothing but toil. Education would be centred on the self-development of each person, requiring a very different approach to the structure of the curriculum, a very different practice of teaching and a very different, inclusive ethos in educational institutions.

You might well ask, to be systematic, whether there is anything within equality of condition that is similar to the idea of equal opportunity. I think the answer is that equality of condition accepts the point that people should be free to make what they can of their own lives – it’s not up to the state, or society at large, to tell you what to do with your life. But in place of the idea of a fair competition for advantage, the type of equal opportunity that is found within equality of condition is the equal enabling and empowering of all. If people are, overall, roughly equal in the conditions of their lives, then that is a way of ensuring that they are equally enabled and empowered to live their own lives.

Returning to the start of this chapter, I hope it is easier to see how talk about equality could have become more common in a society that remains severely unequal. The kinds of equality that have become central to Irish discourse and legislation are primarily the weakest forms of liberal egalitarianism – such as anti-discrimination legislation and means-tested support for basic needs – as distinct from stronger forms of liberal egalitarianism and radical ideals of equality of condition. Like many other political concepts, there are more and less challenging conceptions of equality, and it is generally
the less challenging forms that have become familiar. However, the fact that equality is back on the political agenda provides an opportunity to press for more ambitious goals.

[insert Table 1 about here]

**Implications for community development**

I hope it’s clear from even this brief overview that there is quite a big difference between liberal egalitarianism and equality of condition, and that equality of condition sets out much more radical objectives for society than liberal egalitarianism (all summarised in Table 1). The question that I want to turn to now is ‘So what?’ In particular, does the difference between liberal egalitarianism and equality of condition matter for community development? As I mentioned at the outset, this is something I know much less about than the theory of equality. All I can do here is to provide some suggestions as to how the distinction might be important and leave it to you, the reader, to decide whether I am on the right track.

The first way I think it matters concerns the objectives of community development. What do we want community development to achieve? Do we just want to ensure that marginalised groups have tolerable lives, but on the whole to aspire to little more? If we also endorse fair equal opportunity, is it simply our aim to ensure that the brightest and best children from these communities rise to positions of privilege? Or should we aim towards a society where everyone can look forward to a life roughly as good as anyone
else’s? What does it say to members of marginalised groups to adopt only a liberal egalitarian set of objectives? These are of course rhetorical questions: I hope they suggest that the difference does matter. It may not have much effect on day to day issues, where one’s aims are often much more limited and sometimes consist in no more than resisting a change for the worse. But it seems to me that how these everyday objectives fit into a wider picture of a good society remains important.

The second way that I think the difference matters is in terms of the process of community development. Should this process be based on inequalities of rights and power, so that although people are consulted on issues of policy, real decision-making lies in the hands of a powerful minority? Or should it be a process of participatory democracy in which everyone has a real say? Should it be a process in which people relate to each other with equal respect and recognition, or one in which there are significant differences of status within community development organisations themselves? Should it be a process in which issues of love and care are left outside the door or one in which relations of love and care are addressed and nurtured? And should community development be a process with a division of labour between interesting and tedious work or one in which everyone can develop themselves through satisfying engagement? Again I hope that the questions answer themselves. It is of course a struggle to ensure that one’s practice conforms to one’s ideals, and few of us succeed. But there is a real difference between an organisation that aspires to work as a community of equals and one that does not.
I’m not under the delusion that equality of condition is within the current political horizon – we would, indeed, live in a better society and a better world if we could even achieve more of the objectives of liberal egalitarianism. But I do think that to see liberal egalitarianism as defining our goals rather than as a stage on the road to a richer vision of society is a truncated vision, and that it is therefore important to retain equality of condition as an ideal. And I also think that social change can sometimes occur when you least expect it. So rather than end on a depressing note, I’d prefer to quote Arundhati Roy (2003: 75):

Another world is not only possible, she’s on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.
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*Based on* Baker et al. 2004, p. 43.