Research Repository UCD

Title	Your Arguments for Equality
Authors(s)	Baker, John
Publication date	1990-12
Publication information	Baker, John. "Your Arguments for Equality." Open University Press, December 1990.
Publisher	Open University Press
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/3876

Your Arguments for Equality

John Baker

Are you depressed and angry about the destruction of the
welfare state and the rampant contempt for equality which
has accompanied it? I am, too. Reversing the tide won't be
easy, but one of the things we can do to help is to reassert
and reformulate the case for equality itself. Equality,
however, is a complicated idea. Its expression, defence,
and implementation depend on a cooperative project involving
people with many types of experience. This paper is
addressed to welfare workers as participants in that
project. In it, I ask you for your contributions to the
case for equality: to clarifying its central principles, to
reinforcing the arguments in its favour, and to developing
the practical policies necessary for its implementation.

Clarifying the Central Principles of Equality

Equality has been defined in various ways. My own view is
that it is helpful to think of it under several basic
headings. First, there is the principle that everyone has
the right to the satisfaction of their basic needs.
Egalitarians reject the idea that some should live in luxury
while others face utter deprivation. Instead, they look
forward to a society in which everyone has not just a
bearable, but a satisfying, fulfilling life. Secondly,
egalitarians stand for equal respect. They reject any form
of degrading treatment or circumstances, as well as the

patronizing attitudes of the privileged and the deference which they foster. Egalitarians look towards a society in which everyone has an equal social status, and in which people relate to each other on the basis of fellow-feeling or community, not hierarchy.

Egalitarians also believe in economic and political equality. They call for much more equality in income and wealth, both within societies and between them, as well as for democratic control of production and access to decent work for everyone who wants it. They value the formal political rights of voting, free speech, and so on, but for them political equality means equal power, and thus a wide-ranging and imaginative extension of democratic participation. Finally, egalitarians stand for sexual, racial, ethnic, and religious equality, rejecting the ways in which some people are treated worse than others because of gender, colour, culture, or any other irrelevant difference.

One of the contributions welfare workers can make to egalitarianism is to help to clarify and defend the central concepts in which these principles are expressed. To illustrate, I want to look in particular at the ideas of need and respect, and at the meaning of sexual, racial, and ethnic equality.

The idea of need is a central, justifying concept in welfare work, but explaining what needs are raises serious problems. Most accounts start by distinguishing

'instrumental' needs from 'intrinsic' needs. Instrumental needs are things someone needs for some particular purpose, like needing a can opener to open a tin of beans. Intrinsic needs are things without which a person would suffer harm. But harm of what kind? Some authors think that this can be defined very generally, as damage to the interests which all human beings have in survival and personal autonomy (Plant et al 1980, Wiggins 1985). Others take a more socially relative approach. Braybrooke (1987: 48) relates need to what people in a particular society require for performing the basic roles of parent, householder, worker, and citizen, while Walzer (1983: ch. 3) defines need and harm by reference to the particular priorities of each society. Miller's account (1976: ch. 4) is even more relativized: needs consist in what is essential to each individual's plan of life.

Accounts such as these raise various problems which threaten the very idea of need. In particular, the disputability of what counts as harm has made some people argue that political thinking would be much better off by avoiding the concept of need altogether (Barry 1965: 47-49). Others seize on the idea of social relativity to suggest that need has no moral force above the level of mere subsistence, and that more extensive claims of need only reflect a conventional 'rising minimum' as societies get richer (Rosen 1977). As welfare workers, you are in constant contact with people's needs. Can you use your

experience to help to refute these objections?

It is easy for a theorist, remote from real cases of need, to raise doubts about the idea of harm, and to suggest that need is endlessly disputable. But welfare workers are continually dealing with needs which nobody could dispute. It is indisputable, for instance, that a woman who has suffered violent attacks from her husband needs not just some kind of protection but also help in coming to terms with very conflicting feelings and beliefs. These are not, for most women, survival needs: it is all too evident that many women have survived lives in violent households. But their description as needs does not depend on contentious claims about what actually harms people. Nor are these needs cases of the so-called rising minimum -- something which people are only thought to need in affluent societies. Social and economic changes may have influenced the possibility of women effectively articulating these needs, but prosperity didn't invent them. So even if needs are sometimes disputable, there are cases in which they are perfectly clear. From your own experience, you can surely make a list of many other cases of indisputable need, and thus help to defend need as a central principle of social policy.

To deal with the second problem about need, social relativity, it helps to distinguish between 'conventional' and 'real' needs (cf. Braybrooke 1987: 81-111). A sense of need is merely conventional when people in a society have

simply come to expect something as part of a normal life.

By contrast, the way a society is organized may make it

necessary to use certain socially-specific means as the only

way to to satisfy certain indisputable needs. In that case

there is a real, though relativized, need. For example,

there is a widespread belief in Britain that people need

meat. The existence of many healthy vegetarians shows that

this is a merely conventional view. Contrast this with the

need to be able to read and write. That is not something

which everyone in every society has always needed, but it

really is needed in Britain today because society is so

structured that life is intolerably difficult for the

illiterate. Obviously there is a process by which

conventional needs can turn into real needs, or even vice

versa, and there are intermediate cases. But this doesn't

undermine the distinction altogether. Now when the

opponents of equality try to discredit the idea of need,

they talk as though every socially relative need is a matter

of mere convention. You who work with the needy can help to

rebut that attack, by showing just how necessary many things

are for preventing real harm.

A second key egalitarian idea is respect. But what is

it to respect someone? Perhaps the most famous

philosophical account comes from the eighteenth century

philosopher Kant: 'Act in such a way that you always treat

humanity . . . never simply as a means, but always at the

same time as an end' (Kant 1785: 91; see also Williams 1962,

Lukes 1977). A fine sentiment, but (it might be argued) far too abstract and subjective a notion to relate to the legislative and institutional issues which politics is about (Charvet 1969). If respect is to play an important role in the idea of a good society, it needs to be grounded in everyday experience. It also needs to be shown to have a clear, objective application to questions of social and political policy.

As welfare workers you can defend the concreteness of respect by describing clear cases in your own experience. Consider, for instance, the following newspaper report:

> The Labour Court has recommended that a woman who was dismissed by Kildare Street and University Club, Dublin, should receive the equivalent of two weeks' wages and be provided with a reference in more favourable terms . . . She washed dishes, prepared cheese and made tea and coffee. A representative of the club said that she was a bad time-keeper, tended to be idle and displayed no interest in her work (Irish Times 1989).

The sheer contempt displayed by the club's representative in this report is palpable, but far from unusual; in your experience, you can doubtless cite many similar cases. It is from these real-life examples that the idea of a society based on mutual respect gets its force.

But is the idea of mutual respect too subjective, too personal, to be the aim of a political movement? We can see

from the example that even if what ultimately matters is

interpersonal attitudes of respect, it is still possible to

change the way people treat each other. Thus, even if

individual employers have contempt for their workers, they

can still be required to operate in a context which refuses

to institutionalize this contempt and thereby to condone it

socially. This change of context can also help to change

attitudes themselves.

Lack of respect doesn't have to be deliberate. It is

often the result of an unexamined failure to take other

people's interests seriously. A good example is the

traditional lack of wheelchair access to public buildings.

It is not as if architects and planners sat down and

deliberately chose to exclude disabled people; it is

precisely the failure even to consider their needs which

counts as a form of disrespect. By thinking of other

examples, with a view towards analyzing and understanding

the various ways institutional arrangements can express this

lack of consideration, you can help to show that respect is

not too personal or subjective to form the basis for radical

social policies.

A third set of principles important to equality falls

under the heading of sexual, racial, ethnic, and religious

equality. These ideas, though clearly important, raise many

problems of interpretation; perhaps the most central is the

question of the distinction between different treatment and

unequal treatment (Barry 1965: ch. 7). For instance, our

language treats men and women differently in many ways
(Strainchamps 1971, Baker 1979). Is it a mere difference,
or is it an inequality, that women are colloquially referred
to using terms for domesticated animals, or that English
uses gender-specific pronouns in the third person singular?
The key issue is whether such differences in treatment can
be demonstrated to increase or decrease inequalities of
wealth, status, power, and opportunity between men and
women.

Many issues of social policy present serious
difficulties of this kind. The most intractable cases are
many-faceted, so that different treatment is egalitarian in
some respects and anti-egalitarian in others. A widely
discussed example concerns interference in the practices of
minority cultures. Non-interference seems to respect ethnic
equality, but sometimes also to reinforce inegalitarian
customs. Whether this conflict within egalitarianism is
inevitable, and, if so, how to resolve it, depend very much
on a detailed understanding of particular cultures,
including an informed view of the internal importance of
their allegedly inegalitarian features. Welfare workers can
be well placed to explain such issues, since you are often
concerned with the ways in which both majority intolerance
and minority practices can lead to suffering and despair.

These are only some of the ways in which welfare
workers can help to clarify and defend the central ideas of
egalitarianism. In each case, these ideas have a real

social relevance -- that is what makes them so important.
But unless their relevance is constantly reasserted and
verified by our own experience, they can become empty
phrases to which everyone does lip-service while behaving
exactly as they please.

Reinforcing the arguments for equality

In my view, arguing for equality occurs in two stages. The
first stage sets out the basic case for equality, based on
the ideas of need, respect, and community. The second stage
involves rebutting the common arguments against equality,
often by showing that the very ideas which anti-egalitarians
put forward can be used to provide positive support for
equality itself. I have in mind, in particular, the belief
in equal opportunity as an alternative to full equality; the
suggestion that the privileged deserve their privileges and
that the deprived deserve their deprivation; the arguments
that equality would destroy freedom and that inequality
provides incentives which benefit everyone; and the
conviction that equality is in any case impossible. I
cannot summarize all of these arguments here (for a fuller
treatment, see Baker 1987). Instead, I want to suggest some
ways in which welfare workers can contribute to their
success.

The basic case for equality is fairly simple. If you
are concerned about the needs of others, if you believe in
basic human dignity and respect, and if you value a sense of
community, then you ought to care about equality. This is

partly a matter of understanding clearly how these ideas are related conceptually to the principles of equality, but it is also because inequality leads in fact to frustrated needs, assaults on human dignity, and divided communities. At least, that's the theory. What you can do is to provide as much evidence for the theory as anyone can.

Being in constant contact with people in need, you can see, more clearly than most, how inequality prevents these needs from being satisfied. You can explain, in a concrete way, how inequalities reinforce each other so that some people are cushioned against ever falling into serious need while others are so badly off in every way -- economically, politically, socially, educationally, physically, and emotionally -- that their voices never get heard, their interests never get taken seriously, and their needs are never met. A classic example is the case of a homeless person who cannot get a home because she has no job and cannot get a job because she has no home. Because she has no job she has a very low income, but because she has no permanent home she has unusually high expenses. As she has nowhere to cook, her diet is poor and she is prone to illness; her mental life is full of anxiety and depression. Not being settled, she does not even count politically, and certainly hasn't the organizational resources of long-time residents. This is, of course, simply an image, perhaps even a stereotype. What welfare workers can provide is as many actual examples as anyone can ask for in demonstrating

the interaction between need and inequality.

Anti-egalitarians like to think that it is possible for a society to sustain respect for others and a sense of community even if there are major inequalities of wealth, power, and status (Lucas 1977: 264-270). Some of them even claim that our own society is a case in point. No one engaged in welfare work can believe that. You are vividly aware of the contempt shown towards the poor and powerless, often by welfare bureaucracies themselves, and of the sense of alienation and social division at the bottom end of all the social scales. It is only to be expected that the well-heeled will try to deceive themselves into thinking that everyone in western societies has a respected place as a member of a single community. You can help to shatter that self-deception, both by articulating the facts about degradation and alienation and by encouraging the unprivileged to find their own voices and to make their own claims for respect and for full membership of society. And because you can see the interconnection between these wrongs and the huge inequalities which create the gulf between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, you can press home the argument that only an egalitarian society can create a real sense of mutual respect and concern.

So much for the basic case for equality. But what about those who argue that full equality is unnecessary, if only we had equal opportunity (Friedman 1962: 195)? Well, it is natural enough for welfare workers to press for

greater equality of opportunity, and especially for programmes of positive action and preferential treatment (Wasserstrom 1980). But there are a lot of problems with equal opportunity which we shouldn't lose sight of (Schaar 1967). One of the most serious is the degree to which major inequalities of condition make real equal opportunity impossible. That is a statement of fact, for which welfare workers have all the evidence anyone needs. You see, year in and year out, the effects of poverty and powerlessness on the ability of people to gain the skills and qualifications they need to compete in a supposedly equal opportunity society. You can challenge the believers in equal opportunity with concrete cases of children whose prospects in life were sealed from before they were even born, of adults whose lack of opportunity is the direct result of lifetimes of social deprivation. How could all that be changed except by a real equality which made equal opportunity redundant?

Another objection to equality is the idea that some people deserve to be better off than others, because they've been so diligent or clever or resourceful (see Miller 1976: chs. 3 & 6). But if anyone believes that the rich deserve their privileges because of hard work, they must surely have no idea of the work done by the worst paid. If they are sympathetic to the stress and responsibility of corporate executives, they must surely have no idea of the stress and responsibility of unemployed parents trying to raise their

children. Anti-egalitarians also claim that the captains of industry and of high finance make more of a contribution to society than cleaners, child-minders, and cooks. That view is problematic in many ways, but particularly in its central value judgment about who does most for society. You are in a position to question that judgment -- to ask what the captains of industry have done to help those most in need; to stand up for the contributions made by ordinary people to their families and local communities; to defend the contributions made by the social services themselves. Finally, there is the widely held view that the poor deserve their poverty, because they are feckless, lazy, and unreliable. Sensational stories in the tabloids about 'dole scroungers' and 'problem families' reinforce that image. You can prove just how false it is, by matching every sensational case with countless examples of enforced poverty. Your detailed knowledge of poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunity is absolutely essential in winning the case against the idea of deserved inequality.

In the past twenty years or so, anti-egalitarians have returned with a vengeance to a venerable line of argument: that equality would destroy freedom (Lucas 1977: 270-273, Nozick 1974). We might well ask, particularly in contemporary Britain, how strong a commitment to freedom is exhibited by government restrictions on broadcasting and publication, on the rights of trade unionists, and on the powers of local governments. But more fundamentally, we can

ask about the effects of inequality itself on the freedoms

of the worst off (Norman 1987: ch. 7). As welfare workers,

you are confronted every day with those effects. You see

how narrowly circumscribed are the choices of the poor, the

needy, the disabled, how little scope they have for

developing their capacities, for exercising their democratic

rights as citizens, even for choosing between brand X and

brand Y in the local supermarket. You have observed the way

the worst off members of society are treated by the police,

the courts, the schools -- as well as by the social

services. That knowledge needs to be shared, to become

common knowledge, if the issue of freedom for all is to get

a fair hearing. Only then will people begin to see that the

freedoms championed by the right -- freedoms of

self-development, of property ownership, of consumer choice,

of democratic participation -- are systematically thwarted

in an unequal society.

The opponents of equality are not always so blind to

the interests of the disadvantaged. One of their favourite

arguments, in fact, is that inequality is actually good for

people, because it creates incentives. The efforts drawn

forth by high salaries at the top of the scale create

benefits for everyone (Rawls 1972: 78, 315). It is a nice

theory, but is it true? Welfare workers who have dealt with

poverty and deprivation for ten, twenty, or thirty years

have seen various incentive policies come and go, with the

rich sometimes benefiting by hundreds of thousands of

pounds. What have these policies done for the poor? Has
prosperity trickled down? If the incentives allegedly
generated by greater inequality were really justified, their
effects on the lives of the worst off would surely have been
more visible. Meanwhile, the bad effects of inequality
remain and are intensified. The frustration, depression,
envy, and lack of self-esteem which inequality engenders are
among the all too visible costs which the incentive argument
ignores. As welfare workers, you can explain vividly and
compellingly how these arise from inequality, as well as
describing how little effect incentive policies have had on
the lives of the worst off. In doing so, you are making
vitally important points about the true costs and negligible
benefits of inequality.

A final argument against equality claims that equality
is impossible; that human nature is too competitive for
advantage, too eager for domination and superiority.
Against this argument, egalitarians have always maintained
two things: first, that it exaggerates the degree to which
equality requires people to be nice to each other, and
secondly, that it ignores the effects of social structures
on people's attitudes and values. Equality does not expect
people to be angels. On the contrary, egalitarians often
point out that equality would be in the self-interest of the
great majority of citizens. But an egalitarian society
would also encourage and reinforce different attitudes and
values. In welfare work, you are constantly reminded of the

way people's characters are affected by their social

circumstances and by the broader structure of society. That

immersion course in social psychology is worth any number of

textbooks in showing how malleable human nature is. It

provides yet another kind of knowledge which needs to be

deployed against the view that human nature makes equality

impossible.

In this section, I have considered a selection of

arguments for and against equality, and have tried to show

how your own experience as welfare workers can contribute to

the egalitarian case. The selection is not exhaustive;

there are many other arguments to analyze and to answer.

But I hope these examples have shown that the case for

equality is not an abstract philosophers' game to which

lived experience is irrelevant. It depends, time and again,

on basic facts about everyday life -- facts which you are

particularly well placed to reassert.

Developing egalitarian institutions

Equality is more than a set of principles. It is a vision

of an alternative society, based on and developing those

principles. That means thinking seriously about how the

principles of equality can be implemented through

appropriately constructed social institutions. There are

undoubtedly many areas in which your special experience can

be invaluable in this respect. To illustrate, let us look

at the principles of need, respect, and democracy.

The work of existing welfare bureaucracies is widely

supposed to be based on need. But anyone who works within them knows that they are far from perfect, that legislation and organizational practices sometimes prevent them from meeting needs effectively or even from recognizing the needs that are there. An egalitarian society would certainly have to include institutions designed to satisfy needs; the experience of welfare workers, as well as that of the users of welfare services, will be absolutely vital in replacing existing structures by new and sometimes radically different ones. You need to tell the rest of us what you think is wrong with services as they stand and how they could be more effectively organized. We have to know how much of their work is concerned with patching up damage done by current inequalities and how much would still be necessary in a more equal society. There will be questions in an egalitarian society about integrated and specialized services, about decentralization, about forms of provision, about the treatment of offenders, all of which we ought to be thinking and talking about now. There is always a temptation to concentrate on short-term reforms; this is only a plea for some visionary thinking as well.

All of these questions raise a strongly related issue, namely how a society committed to satisfying needs can simultaneously treat every one of its members with respect (cf. Downie & Telfer 1980). For there is probably no better example of how institutions can foster disrespect and contempt than classic welfare bureaucracies and residential

institutions. What can welfare workers teach us about the
design of systems to avoid such effects? How, in
particular, can the major institutions for planning an
economy according to need be constructed so as to avoid the
belittling effects of current bureaucracies?

Surely a part of the answer to these problems lies in
the idea of democracy. The paternalism and oppression
typical of classic welfare systems necessarily depend on
such systems being organized in undemocratic ways. In the
classic welfare bureaucracy, power rests firmly at the top
of the organizational pyramid. That has got to change, not
just in welfare work but throughout society (Norman 1987:
ch. 8). Some welfare organizations, particularly those in
the grant-aided 'voluntary' sector, have already experienced
such changes, and should already be able to contribute to
the effective design of participatory workplaces. But
welfare work is also by its very nature a social service
which involves more than just worker-management, and an
increasing number of welfare services include their users in
key decisions, based on a principle of democratic control by
everyone involved (Beresford & Cross 1986). As in any
democracy, this must surely create serious conflicts and
organizational difficulties; as in any new initiative, it
must also make for mistakes and for learning by trial and
error. The question of how to empower the users of welfare
services while respecting the employment rights and personal
integrity of welfare workers has wide-ranging ramifications

for the design of a democratic economy. Many welfare workers are already at the frontier of these issues and you need to share your experiences and reflections about them.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have not tried to tell you as welfare workers how to be egalitarians in your work. That is something on which your own reflections will have much more bearing than anything I could say. What I have tried to do is to encourage you to tell the rest of us how your work can contribute to the development of a new vision of society: how it can help us to clarify key ideas, how it can further the arguments for equality, and how it can lead to the development of new forms of institutions based on egalitarian principles. It seems particularly appropriate to address these questions to people whose work often generates strong personal and political tensions between privilege and deprivation. For equality will not be brought into being by academic theorizing or by government think-tanks. It will come, if at all, out of the lived experience of people like you.

<u>References</u>

Baker, J. (1987) <u>Arguing for Equality</u>. London: Verso.

Baker, R. (1979) '"Pricks" and "Chicks": A Plea for "Persons"' in Bishop, S. & Weinzweig, M. (eds.) <u>Philosophy and Women</u>. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth.

Barry, B. (1965) <u>Political Argument</u>. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Beresford, P. & Croft, S. (1986) <u>Whose Welfare?</u>. Brighton: Lewis Cohen Urban Studies Centre.

Braybrooke, D. (1987) <u>Meeting Needs</u>. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Charvet, J. (1969) 'The Idea of Equality as a Substantive Principle', <u>Political Studies</u> Vol. 17 No. 1.

Downie, R.S. & Telfer, E. (1980) <u>Caring and Curing</u>. London: Methuen.

Friedman, M. (1962) <u>Capitalism and Freedom</u>. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Irish Times (1989) 'Court ruling on reference', 00 January.

Kant, I. (1785) <u>Groundwork to a Metaphysic of Morals</u> in Paton, H.J. <u>The Moral Law</u>. London: Hutchinson, 1948.

Lucas, J.R. (1977) 'Against Equality Again', <u>Philosophy</u> Vol. 52 No. 201.

Lukes, S. (1977) 'Socialism and Equality' in Lukes, S. <u>Essays in Social Theory</u>. London: Macmillan.

Miller, D. (1976) <u>Social Justice</u>. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nozick, R. (1974) <u>Anarchy, State, and Utopia</u>. Oxford:

Blackwell.

Plant, R., Lesser, H., & Taylor-Gooby, P. (1980) Political
Philosophy and Social Welfare. London: Routledge & Kegan
Paul.

Rawls, J. (1972) A Theory of Justice. Oxford: Oxford
University Press.

Rosen, F. (1977) 'Basic Needs and Justice', Mind Vol. 86 No.
341.

Schaar, J. 'Equality of Opportunity, and Beyond' in Pennock,
J.R. & Chapman, J. (eds.) Nomos IX: Equality. New York:
Atherton.

Strainchamps, E. (19xx) 'Our Sexist Language' in Gornick, V.
& Moran,B. (eds.) Woman in Sexist Society. New York: Basic
Books.

Walzer, M. (1983) Spheres of Justice. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wasserstrom, R.A. (1980) 'Preferential Treatment' in
Wasserstrom, R.A. Philosophy and Social Issues. Notre Dame,
Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

Wiggins, D. (1985) 'Claims of Need' in Honderich, T. (ed.)
Morality and Objectivity. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Williams, B. (1962) 'The Idea of Equality' in Laslett, P. &
Runciman, W.G. (eds.) Philosophy, Politics and Society:
second series. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wollheim, R. (1975) 'Needs, Desires, and Moral Turpitude' in
Peters, R.S. (ed.) Nature and Conduct. London: Macmillan.

Note

I am grateful to Gabriel Kiely for his helpful comments and suggestions.