Equality

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On the face of it, equality is just another of those principles which Irish society is happy to endorse on ceremonial occasions so long as it doesn't impinge on real life. There it is in the Easter Proclamation: "The Republic guarantees . . . equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, . . . cherishing all the children of the nation equally." The Constitution also pays its respects: "All citizens shall, as human persons, be held equal before the law" (Art. 40.1). Meanwhile, back in the real world, Ireland is a deeply unequal country, marked by one of the most unequal distributions of income in Europe, by massive class inequalities in educational participation, by entrenched intolerance towards minorities such as Travellers. So equality seems to be no more than a pious aspiration, an idea which is fine for the Constitution so long as it stays there.

This picture is complicated, however, in two major ways. First, despite the widespread complacency with which privileged people view Ireland's gross inequalities, the issue refuses to go away. Groups which have been oppressed and marginalised – women, Travellers, disabled people, gay men and lesbians, working class communities, and others – continue to assert their claim to equal treatment. The second complication, and the main concern of this essay, is that equality has more than one meaning: there are many different types of equality (Rae, 1981). So it is not enough to demand "equality": we need to know what kind of equality we want.

In this essay, I set out three different definitions or conceptions of equality, which I call basic equality, liberal equality and radical equality. I try to show that these different ideas of equality place very different demands on Irish society (and by implication on the relation between Irish society and the rest of the world). At the same time, I argue that it

is not that easy to believe in basic equality without believing in liberal equality, or to believe in liberal equality without taking the next step to radical equality.[1]

Over the last century, there have been many attempts to define equality and to classify types of egalitarianism. The framework developed here is only one alternative, which I think is particularly relevant to contemporary Irish society. I try to relate it to some of the major theorists of equality, but they do not all fit in very neatly. That is because the categories are meant to distinguish broad approaches to equality rather than to analyse particular theories, and broad classifications always involve a certain amount of simplification and generalisation. Theorising about equality is constantly challenged both by new academic work and even more importantly by social movements of the marginalised and oppressed. The framework below is meant for now, not forever, and is meant to be open enough to allow for different interpretations and perspectives.

Basic equality

The idea of basic equality is the cornerstone for all egalitarian thinking: the idea that at some very basic level all human beings have equal worth and importance, and therefore are equally worthy of concern and respect. It is not easy to explain quite what these ideas amount to, since many people will claim to hold them while defending a wide range of other inequalities, including the view that some people deserve more concern and respect than others. Perhaps what is really involved in basic equality is the idea that every human being deserves some basic minimum of concern and respect,

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[1] This paper represents work in progress as part of a collaborative research project within the Equality Studies Centre. I am grateful to other members of the Centre for their ideas and suggestions.

placing at least some limits on what it is to treat someone as a human being. At any rate, that is how I will define basic equality here.

The minimum standards involved in the idea of basic equality are far from trivial. They include prohibitions against inhuman and degrading treatment and at least some commitment to satisfying people's basic needs. In a world in which rape, torture and other crimes against humanity are a daily occurrence, and in which millions of people die every year from want of the most basic necessities, the idea of basic equality remains a powerful force for action and for change. Yet taken on its own, it remains a rather vague and minimalist idea. On its own, it does not challenge widespread inequalities in people's living conditions or even in their civil rights or educational and economic opportunities. It calls on us to prevent inhumanity, but it does not necessarily couch its message in terms of justice as distinct from charity. These stronger ideas only arise in more robust forms of egalitarianism, of the sort to which the rest of this paper is devoted.

It is surprisingly hard to provide any *arguments* for basic equality. That is partly because it is an assumption of our age and therefore something we do not feel any need to justify, and partly because the people who reject basic equality in practice do not have any interest in arguments. (In fact, they commonly pay lip-service to equality at the same time as they are wielding the knife.) Most people willingly accept that there are such things as inhuman treatment and human needs; these ideas seem to be built into the very idea of morality. They are in any case the common assumptions of all modern political outlooks. I will not survey all these outlooks here. Instead, I will concentrate on two which are particularly important for our times and which can both claim to be genuinely egalitarian.

Liberal equality

The idea of liberalism has itself been interpreted in many different ways, all of them embracing basic equality but varying quite a lot in terms of the other types of equality they believe in. I mean to include under the idea of liberal equality only those forms of liberalism that move well beyond basic equality in terms of social, economic and political equality: positions which might be called "left liberalism" and which are often found in social democratic political movements. But liberal equality still covers a range of outlooks.[2]

A key assumption of liberal equality is that major inequalities of income, status and power will always exist. The role of the idea of equality is to regulate these inequalities so that they are fair to everyone. Broadly speaking, we can say that liberal equality involves both strengthening the basic minimum to which everyone is entitled and regulating the competition for advantage by means of the idea of equal opportunity. But in spelling out these ideas it is helpful to use a number of different headings.[3]

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[2] The paradigm case of liberal egalitarian thinking is Rawls (1971; 1993). Other authors whose work falls largely within the realm of liberal egalitarianism are Dworkin (1981a; 1981b; 1987; 1988), Walzer (1985) and Williams (1962). Important contributions to liberal egalitarianism have also been made by Barry (1995), Arneson (1989), Cohen (1989), Sen (1992) and Van Parijs (1995), although these authors are to varying degrees more radical in their egalitarianism.

[3] The headings are chosen for ease of exposition and to provide a coherent framework. The first, second and third headings correspond to the three types of principle set forward by Rawls (1971; 1993). The third, fourth and fifth correspond to the classic and ultimately inescapable Weberian trio of class, status and party (Weber, 1958). Redistribution and recognition form the framework for Fraser's (1997) analysis.

1. Basic rights

The most central and long-standing idea within liberal egalitarianism is the protection of basic civil and personal rights. Such rights include the prohibition of slavery, of torture and of cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment. They include equality before the law, protection against arbitrary arrest and a right to the due process of law. Also included are such rights as freedom of movement, the right to own property, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of association. These civil and personal rights are familiar features of modern liberal regimes and can be found in such documents as the American Bill of Rights (1789, except of course for its acceptance of slavery), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the European Convention on Human Rights (1950) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976). Quite what is included in these rights and how they are specified and interpreted has varied, the prohibition of slavery being the most glaring example. But taken overall, they are one way of setting limits on the degree of inequality any society should tolerate.

A related feature of liberal egalitarianism is the distinction it makes in the name of personal freedom between those aspects of human life that are subject to social and legal regulation and those which are protected against any such interference, a distinction sometimes phrased in terms of the "public" versus the "private".[4] Arising in the wake of religious wars in Europe, one of the cornerstones of liberalism was the recognition of religious belief and practice as a private concern beyond the reach of public regulation. Another less explicit exemption was the realm of the family, allowing for male

[4] In fact, liberalism makes several different public/private distinctions. The distinction discussed is the one most relevant to basic rights.

dominance of family affairs regardless of the degree to which women were able to achieve equality in other areas. Neither of these exemptions have been absolute – religions aren't allowed to perform blood sacrifices, husbands aren't allowed to murder their wives. But the public/private distinction has protected important spheres of life from egalitarian challenges.[5]

2. Liberal equal opportunity

Another central and long-standing liberal egalitarian idea is equality of opportunity, the principle that people should in some sense have an equal chance to compete for the better positions in society. This principle has two major interpretations. The first, non-discrimination, is expressed in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) as the principle that all citizens "are equally eligible for all positions, posts and public employments in accordance with their abilities" (Art. 6). In our own times, many states have anti-discrimination legislation which makes it illegal to deny education or work to people because of their religion, sex or other specified characteristics. Some states also prohibit "indirect" discrimination, which is the use of irrelevant criteria which favour one group over another. An example would be the requirement for employees to be a certain height, if there is no job-related reason for this, because this indirectly discriminates against women.

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[5] The liberal protection of the family as a private sphere has in recent times been used to defend a wider variety of family forms, such as one-parent families and single-sex couples. Two key issues distinguishing a liberal egalitarian from a radical egalitarian position on such questions are whether this variety should be "tolerated" or "celebrated" and whether such family forms are viewed as exempt from or open to critical scrutiny.

Non-discrimination is a weak form of equal opportunity, because it does not consider how people come to have their educational or job-related abilities in the first place. A stronger form of equal opportunity insists 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 principle, which Rawls (1971: 73) calls "fair equal opportunity", implies that the educational system should try to compensate for the obstacles people from working class and other disadvantaged backgrounds face in developing their talents compared to people from privileged backgrounds. Since most educational systems do little in this regard, another implication of fair equal opportunity is the development of "affirmative action": policies for helping members of disadvantaged groups to compete for and obtain education and jobs. The reasoning is that if members of these groups are under-represented in, say, universities or the professions, this must be because they have not had equal opportunities to develop their abilities. Affirmative action is a way of improving the balance at a later stage, ensuring greater equality of opportunity in the end. A strong form of affirmative action is the use of quotas to ensure that disadvantaged groups are represented at all levels of society.

A useful framework for testing the degree of fair equal opportunity in a given context is provided by the ideas of equality of access, participation and outcome (Equality Studies Centre, 1995). The clearest way to deny opportunities to the members of a particular group is to deny them *access* to education, jobs, political influence and so on, by erecting legal, bureaucratic or other barriers. Opportunities can also be limited by making it harder for them to *participate* on an equal footing with more privileged groups. Ultimately, the strongest test for whether or not a group has achieved full equality of opportunity is in the *outcomes* of participation: have its members succeeded

at the same level as other groups? Only when groups are achieving roughly the same levels of success can we be reasonably confident that they have had the same opportunities to succeed (O'Neill, 1977).

A common feature of both non-discrimination and fair equal opportunity is the assumption mentioned earlier that the world will always contain major inequalities. The role of liberal equal opportunity is to ensure that the competition for advantage is as fair as possible.

3. Redistribution: anti-poverty focus

A third key element of liberal equality, though of more recent vintage, concerns what might be called the economic or more broadly the material condition of people's lives. The material condition of a person's life has a number of different components – not just their income and wealth, but also other factors such as their social and physical environment, their access to public services and local amenities and their working conditions. For example, the material condition of disabled people is strongly affected by an environment designed to serve non-disabled people.[6] In addition, the same circumstances can have a different impact on different people because of their different needs. This complexity sometimes makes it hard to compare the material condition of

[6] Equalising the incomes of disabled and non-disabled people would certainly be an advance in a society like Ireland, where most disabled people live in poverty. But it would still only be addressing one aspect of their disadvantage. How to analyse the disadvantages faced by disabled people is itself an important issue on which liberal and radical egalitarians disagree, with liberals tending to employ a medical model of disability and radicals employing a social model. A relevant discussion is Smith and O'Neill (1997).

specific individuals, but it does not prevent us from seeing that some people are materially much better off than others.[7]

Broadly speaking, the liberal egalitarian position on material inequality is that it should be cushioned at the bottom, that there should be a safety net or floor below which no one should be allowed to fall. This is a logical extension of the basic egalitarian commitment to satisfying human needs and a central idea of the modern welfare state.[8] Quite where the floor should be and how it should be defined is a continuing issue for liberal egalitarians, illustrated in debates about whether poverty is an "absolute" or "relative" idea and whether it can be defined entirely in terms of income or has to include other factors. The key point here is that liberal egalitarians are more concerned with eliminating poverty than promoting material equality.

A more demanding liberal egalitarian principle, at least in theory, is John Rawls's "difference principle", which states that "social and economic inequalities" should work "to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged" members of society (Rawls, 1971: 83;

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[7] This issue is closely related to the "equality of what?" debate. Some relevant sources are Sen (1992), Nussbaum and Sen (1992), Dworkin (1981a; 1981b) and Cohen (1989). "Material condition" is not a wholly satisfactory terminology because the needs in respect to which it is partly defined are not all "material" needs, but I hope it is reasonably clear for present purposes. It is meant to be open to interpretation rather than to take too definite a stand on "equality of what?".

[8] There has always been some tension between this idea and the liberal belief, embedded in the principle of equal opportunity, that people should take responsibility for their own lives and should bear the costs of their own failures. Although some liberal egalitarians, emphasising equal opportunity, take the view that individuals who deliberately squander their advantages deserve no help from society, I think it is more accurate to the liberal egalitarian tradition to distinguish between equal opportunity and the safety net and to acknowledge the tension.

1993: 6). Like other liberal egalitarians, Rawls assumes that there will be major social and economic inequalities, explaining that "the function of unequal distributive shares is to cover the costs of training and education, to attract individuals to places and associations where they are most needed from a social point of view, and so on" (1971: 315). But rather than aiming simply at bringing everyone above the poverty line, the worst off should be brought as high up the economic scale as possible. How far this approach takes us towards full equality depends on the degree of inequality necessary to perform the function Rawls sees for it. So it is hard to judge in practical terms quite how far the difference principle departs from an anti-poverty position.

4. Recognition: tolerating differences

A fourth element of liberal egalitarianism is its commitment to "social" equality in the sense of tolerating individual and group differences, so long as they respect basic rights. This toleration is embedded in freedom of conscience and opinion and in the protection of the private sphere from outside interference. But it extends to the idea that people have very different views about what matters in life – different "conceptions of the good", as it is sometimes put – and that society should as far as possible be impartial among these different beliefs.

5. Power: liberal democracy

On the face of it, liberal egalitarianism has a stronger commitment to equality in the political sphere than in the economic. The principle that every citizen has an equal say through the ballot box, and the extension of this principle over the past two centuries to all social classes, to women and to ethnic minorities, is clearly an egalitarian idea, and one which plays an important role both in reducing economic inequality and in

expressing the equal status of all citizens. But we need to contrast these equal political rights with the fact that economically and culturally dominant groups have much more influence on public policy in all liberal democracies than disadvantaged groups. Liberal democracy also assumes that there will necessarily be a power gap between ordinary voters and the people they elect. Elections are seen, primarily, as a method for choosing and limiting the power of decision-makers rather than as a means by which the people engage in self-rule in any meaningful sense. A further feature of liberal democracy is its concentration on what is generally considered "politics", neglecting power inequalities in the economy, the family, religion and other areas.[9] Liberal democracy and the conception of political equality that goes with it are thus themselves in line with the general idea that liberal equality is about regulating inequality rather than eliminating it.

6. Reform of existing social structures

The discussion so far has concentrated on the key principles of liberal egalitarianism, but the picture would be incomplete without discussing how liberal egalitarians think of these principles as being implemented: what social structures or institutions are necessary to put these principles into practice? Liberal egalitarianism's vision of the world and of the possibility of change seems to be based on the assumption that the fundamental structures of modern welfare states are at least in broad outline the best we are capable of. In saying this I do not mean to imply that liberal egalitarians think that we live in the best of all possible worlds or that there is little we can do to improve the way we manage our societies. But I think they are convinced that certain

[9] There is a close connection between this limitation and the public/private distinction mentioned earlier, but in this case even the economy is brought within the idea of the private.

key features of modern welfare states – including representative government, a mixed economy, a developed system of social welfare, a meritocratic educational system, a specialised and hierarchical division of labour – define the institutional framework within which any progress towards equality can be made, and that the task for egalitarians is to make various adjustments to these structures rather than to alter them in fundamental ways. It is partly because these structures inevitably produce inequality that liberal egalitarians think that inequality is inevitable and that the egalitarian agenda must be defined in terms of regulating inequality rather than eliminating it.

Justifying liberal equality

Liberal egalitarianism represents a tremendous challenge not just to the inequalities of pre-capitalist societies but also to the entrenched inequalities of the contemporary world. Can this challenge be morally justified? Many of the arguments put forward by liberal egalitarians are rooted in the idea of basic equality, the claim of every human being to basic concern and respect. If we are to take the ideas of concern and respect seriously in the context of modern societies in which people have complex and diverse needs and differ profoundly in their moral and political beliefs, we must surely take steps to protect their personal freedoms, to enable them to participate in decision-making and to tolerate differences. The ideas of concern and respect also support the principle that everyone should have a decent standard of living, including the resources necessary to exercise their rights and freedoms. The most novel idea of liberal egalitarianism, equal opportunity, can be seen as a way of showing basic respect and concern for human beings as rational agents with differing talents and ambitions. None of this amounts to a compelling *argument* for liberal egalitarianism, but it indicates something of the way in which many authors have attempted to construct one. In any case, the tenets of liberal

egalitarianism are in fact widely accepted in contemporary welfare states (Miller, 1992). But is liberal equality enough? I shall argue that it isn't.

Radical equality

Radical egalitarians challenge the liberal assumption that major inequalities are inevitable and that our task is simply to make them fair. Our aim should be much more ambitious: to eliminate major inequalities altogether, or at least massively to reduce the current scale of inequality.[10] The key to this much more ambitious agenda is to recognise that inequality is rooted in changing and changeable social structures, and particularly in structures of domination and oppression. These structures create, and continually reproduce, the inequalities which liberal egalitarianism sees as inevitable. But since social structures have changed in the past, it is at least conceivable that they could be deliberately changed in the future. Exactly how to name and analyse these structures and their interaction is a matter of continuing debate, but one way or another they clearly include capitalism (a predominantly market-based economy in which the means of production are privately owned and controlled), patriarchy (systems of gender relationships which privilege men over women), racism (social systems which divide people into "races" and privilege some "races" over others) and other systems of oppression.[11]

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[10] Among radical egalitarians I would include Schaar (1967), Carens (1981), Nielsen (1985), Norman (1982; 1987; 1991), Baker (1987), Okin (1989), Cohen (1981; 1989; 1991; 1995; 1997; n.d.), Young (1990) and Fraser (1989; 1997). There are of course many differences among these authors but my aim is to draw together their most important insights.

[11] These oppressive systems include structures which systematically exclude people with impairments from participating fully in their societies, structures which socially construct a division between "heterosexual"

This emphasis on social structures in explaining inequality affects the way radical egalitarians understand equality as well. In contrast to the tendency of liberal egalitarianism to focus on the rights and advantages of individuals, radical egalitarianism is also sensitive to the rights and advantages of groups. In contrast to liberal egalitarianism's tendency to concentrate on how things are distributed, radical egalitarianism pays more attention to how people are related, particularly through power relations. In contrast to the tendency of liberal egalitarianism to treat individuals as responsible for their successes and failures, radical egalitarians are more likely to notice the influence of social factors on people's choices and actions. These contrasts should not be overstated, but they do affect how radical egalitarianism operates, as will become clearer by looking at its central ideas.

1. Personal and group rights

Radical egalitarians retain the liberal commitment to basic civil and personal rights, including the right to personal private property. They recognise, however, that the general right to private property enshrined in some declarations of rights, including the Irish Constitution (Arts. 40.3.2 and 43), can be used to protect capitalism, and they therefore adopt a more limited definition of what this right involves. Radical egalitarians also point out that the systematic oppression of social groups may sometimes be countered by creating group-based rights, for example the right of a linguistic minority

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and "homosexual" persons and privilege the former over the latter and systems which privilege dominant over subordinate ethnic groups. No attempt is made here at a complete list of oppressive relationships and no inferences should be drawn as to their relative importance. The key point here is that radical egalitarians tend to have a more sociologically informed understanding of the causes of inequality than liberal egalitarians.

to educate its children in their first language or the right of an ethnic minority to political representation. Such group-based rights are a natural extension of individual rights in response to group-based oppression.

A significant shift between liberal and radical egalitarianism concerns the definition of the "private" sphere, the area of life that ought to be protected from regulation by either law or social convention. Radical egalitarians are not opposed to the very idea of a private sphere, but they point out that how that sphere has been defined in the past has protected certain forms of oppression: in particular, the oppression of women and children inside both families and religions (Okin, 1989; Cohen, n.d.).

2. Radical equal opportunity

Discussions of equality sometimes contrast the liberal idea of equality of opportunity with the idea of equality of outcome. In my view this is not really valid, since radical egalitarians are also keen to ensure that people have a wide range of choices rather than insisting that everyone should end up the same. The difference is in how equal opportunity is understood. Liberal equal opportunity is about fairness in the competition for advantage. It implies that there will be winners and losers, people who do well and people who do badly. An "opportunity" in this context is the right to compete, not the right to choose among available alternatives. So two people can have equal opportunities in this sense even if one of them has no real prospect of achieving anything of value. For example, a society in which only 15 per cent of the population attend third level education could in this liberal sense give everyone an equal opportunity to do so, even though in a stronger sense it would clearly be denying the opportunity for third level education to 85 per cent of the population.

Radical equal opportunity is about opportunities in this stronger sense, what might be called *real* opportunities or *real* choices. In the field of education, it means ensuring that everyone is enabled to develop their talents and abilities. In the economy, it means that everyone has a real choice among occupations that they find satisfying or fulfilling. This is not the same as an open admissions or hiring policy, through which anyone can walk into any course or job regardless of their preparation or ability. It is about helping people to develop the skills necessary for pursuing worthwhile educational and career choices, and about reforming the structure of education and employment so that every alternative is worthwhile .

3. Redistribution: equality of material condition

For radical egalitarians, economic or material equality means much more than satisfying basic needs or providing a safety net, although these are clearly urgent priorities.[12] It means aiming for a world in which the economic or material conditions of people's lives are roughly equal. Because of the multi-faceted nature of material condition, equality here does not mean that everyone should have the same income, but it does involve a dramatic reduction in the scale of income inequality. In adopting this

[12] A complication which I cannot pursue here is that basic, liberal and radical egalitarianism tend to operate with increasingly wide lists of needs. Basic egalitarianism tends to concentrate on subsistence needs, liberal egalitarianism on the idea of a decent standard of living and radical egalitarianism on what people need for a full human life, raising issues about the "neutrality" of political principles between conceptions of the good life.

view, radical egalitarians reject the liberal belief that substantial material inequalities are inevitable.[13]

In thinking about economic equality, it is natural to start off by looking at inequalities between major social groups: men and women, disabled and non-disabled people, members of dominant and subordinate cultures, and so on. This is partly because economic inequalities between groups are symptoms of a lack of "fair equal opportunity". Focusing on groups also helps us to avoid difficult issues about the comparing the material condition of different individuals. But equality between social groups does not excuse inequalities within them. Ultimately, equality of material condition is about the condition of every person, not just of groups.

4. Recognition: celebrating difference

One of the great strengths of the liberal tradition is its commitment to respecting and tolerating differences. However, radical critics of liberalism have pointed out that toleration is not quite what it seems, since the very idea of toleration suggests a superiority of the tolerant over the person tolerated, and therefore a fundamental inequality of respect. It is only dominant cultures that "tolerate" subordinate ones, not vice versa. The dominant view is still seen as the normal one, while the tolerated view is seen as deviant. There is no suggestion that the dominant view may itself be questionable, or that an appreciation of and interaction with subordinate views could be valuable for both sides.

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[13] A major question here is the alleged need for incentives; see Carens (1981), Baker (1987: ch. 9) and Cohen (1991; n.d.) for relevant discussions.

For these reasons, radical egalitarians prefer to talk about the appreciation or celebration of difference. Differences from the norm are to be welcomed and learned from rather than simply permitted, and the dominant culture itself needs to be critically assessed, particularly if its sense of identity depends on belittling others. But the celebration of difference does not mean that subordinate cultures have to be accepted uncritically, either. In fact, by redrawing the line between public and private, radical egalitarians are likely to widen the scope for criticising and transforming both dominant and subordinate cultures. How to conduct such criticism can be a difficult issue for radical egalitarians, particularly in cases where the view from outside a particular culture seems to conflict with the values of those within it. Without wishing to avoid this issue, it is worth noting that there is often resistance within oppressive cultures. It is not always a conflict between insiders and outsiders.[14]

5. Equality of power

As discussed earlier, liberal democracy has a strictly limited impact on power inequalities, leaving dominant groups largely unchallenged in the political sphere and neglecting many other types of power altogether. Yet it is precisely these power relations which sustain inequality between privileged and oppressed groups. Radical egalitarianism responds to these limitations on two fronts. First of all, it promotes a stronger, more participatory form of politics in which ordinary citizens, and particularly groups who have been excluded from power altogether, can have more control over decision-making. Strengthened local government, closer accountability for elected

[14] There are some useful discussions of this issue in Parehk (1996; 1997), Nussbaum and Sen (1992) and Nussbaum and Glover (1995).

representatives, procedures to ensure the participation of marginalised groups and wider access to information and technical expertise are some of the elements of this radical democratic programme.

The second aspect of equality of power is to challenge power in other areas, such as the economy, the family, education and religion. The agenda here includes democratic management of individual firms and democratic control over key planning issues for the local, national and global economy. It involves rejecting the power of husbands over wives and questioning the power relations between parents and children. It means a democratic, co-operative model of education. It implies that the power structures of religious organisations are just as open to question as those of the secular world.

In both cases, the aim is to promote equality of power rather than to contain inequalities of power, recognising that power takes many forms, is often diffuse and has to be challenged in many different ways.

6. Challenge to existing structures

It seems clear enough that the radical egalitarian agenda challenges the basic structures of contemporary societies. A predominantly capitalist economy continually creates and reproduces inequalities in people's real opportunities and material condition; it relies on and perpetuates inequalities of power. Many of the key structures of the welfare state, from the welfare office to the "caring" professions to the prison system, marginalise and disempower the very people they are supposed to help. The ways in which Irish and other societies are structured around gender differences, in the organisation of the economy, in the family, in religion, in education and in other areas, systematically limit women's opportunities, material well-being, status and power.

Societies pervasively and systematically disable and disempower people with impairments and members of ethnic and "racial" minorities. Liberal democratic politics protects and sustains inequality.

Radical equality would require quite different economic, political and social institutions, developing socialist, participatory, inclusive, enabling and empowering ways of co-operating in all areas of life. This is not the place to pursue these issues, but they represent perhaps the most challenging questions for radical egalitarianism.

Justifying radical equality

Radical egalitarianism represents a radical challenge to existing attitudes and structures, but many of the arguments in its favour come from basic and liberal egalitarianism. The most general way of putting the case is that the aims of both basic and liberal egalitarianism are thwarted by inequalities of wealth, status and power which they refuse to challenge. On the face of it, it seems a simple enough task to ensure that everyone in the world has access to clean water and decent food, but layers of entrenched inequality make it quite possible for the privileged to resist this minimal goal. On the face of it, it seems easy enough to ensure that everyone's basic rights are protected, but in practice the rights of powerless and marginalised people are easily violated. Liberal egalitarians are eloquent proponents of equal opportunity, but equal opportunity is impossible so long as privileged people can deploy their advantages on behalf of themselves and their families.

Other arguments for radical egalitarianism arise out of the internal tensions and contradictions of liberal egalitarianism. We have seen how the idea of toleration embodies the very inequality of respect it purports to reject. There is a similar

contradiction in the "incentive" argument for inequality, namely that when privileged people demand an incentive for helping the worst off, they are taking resources away from the very people they pretend to be concerned about (Cohen, 1991). Another tension arises in arguments for liberal equal opportunity. This principle is often justified by appealing to the interest each person has in "experiencing the realization of self which comes from a skilful and devoted exercise of social duties" (Rawls, 1971: 84). Yet it is clear enough that a system of liberal equal opportunity operating within an unequal society provides precious few people with this experience.

Additional arguments for radical egalitarianism come from reflections on the limited assumptions of liberal egalitarianism. In a curious way, liberal egalitarians seem to ignore the structured nature of inequality, the ways in which inequality is generated and sustained by dominant social institutions, and the influence of these institutions on people's attitudes, preferences and prospects. Thus when Rawls, for example, explains fair equal opportunity by saying that people's prospects "should not be affected by their social class" (1971: 73), he seems to be accepting the idea of a class-divided society at the very same time as he is endorsing a principle which implies the elimination of class altogether. His work is also notorious for its neglect of gender.[15] A related problem is the liberal egalitarian emphasis on choice and personal responsibility, which plays an important role in supporting the idea of equal opportunity but tends to ignore the extent to which people's choices are influenced by their social position.

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[15] The point about class was made as early as Macpherson's (1973) discussion and never really addressed. The classic gender-based critique of Rawls is Okin (1989). Rawls's later work (1993: xxix) briefly acknowledges the issue of gender inequality but in a way which seems to continues to ignore the depth of gender inequality.

These, then, are some of the key arguments for radical egalitarianism.[16] If they are sound, then Irish society in particular, and the world more generally, are deeply unjust and need to be radically rebuilt.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to set out a framework for thinking about equality, distinguishing the basic egalitarianism that is the common assumption of all modern political thinking from what I have called liberal and radical egalitarianism (see Table 1). I have outlined and contrasted the main ideas of liberal and radical equality under six headings, to do with basic rights, opportunities, material redistribution, social recognition, power and social structures. I have also tried to sketch the reasons why a person who takes basic equality seriously is obliged to move on to a belief in liberal equality, and how the difficulties involved in holding a liberal egalitarian position give rise to radical egalitarianism. These arguments are far from complete, but I hope they give some sense of the case for a radical egalitarian position.

In contemporary Ireland, basic egalitarianism is taken for granted at the level of moral and political rhetoric. The Irish left is primarily concerned with what I have called liberal egalitarianism. Unlike some leftists, I do not consider "liberal" to be a term of abuse. But I have tried to show that there is a radical alternative to liberal egalitarianism,

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[16] For more arguments, see Nielsen (1985), Norman (1987), Baker (1987), Okin (1989), Young (1990) and Cohen (1981; 1989; 1991; 1995; 1997; n.d.). One general upshot of these arguments is that, contrary to appearances, it is liberal egalitarianism which is unrealistic or utopian, because its limited aims are in fact unrealisable in a world marked by severe inequality and because it neglects the real influence of social structures. Of course, this does not show that radical egalitarianism is any less utopian: perhaps, as many critics of equality believe, both forms of equality are out of reach.

and that this radical position is a natural extension of the concerns and difficulties involved in the liberal outlook. If I am right in believing that radical egalitarianism is a better outlook, this only emphasises the scale of the tasks ahead of us. We face the challenge not only of constructing plausible models of an egalitarian society, but also of developing a political movement for radical change.

	Basic egalitarianism	**Liberal egalitarianism**	**Radical egalitarianism**
Basic rights	Protection against inhuman and degrading treatment	Classic civil and personal rights Public/private distinction	Liberal rights *plus:* Restricted property rights Openness to group rights Redefined private sphere
Opportunities		Non-discrimination "Fair equal opportunity"	Radical equal opportunity
Redistribution	Provision for basic needs	Anti-poverty focus Rawls's "difference principle"	Basic needs *plus* equality of material condition
Recognition	Basic respect	Toleration of differences	Critical celebration of difference
Power		Liberal democracy	Equality of political and other forms of power
Social structures		Reform of current structures	Radical restructuring

Table 1: Basic, Liberal and Radical Egalitarianism

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