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The Challenge of Irish Inequality

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No one can walk through Dublin without being struck by many contrasts. Outside the fashionable shops of Grafton Street, children beg for loose change. Near the gleaming financial services centre stand desolate blocks of housing. Rotund executives leaving expensive restaurants in their BMWs pass women selling fruit from old prams. People with elegant houses in leafy suburbs use burglar alarms and a harsh prison system to protect themselves from drug addicts chasing the price of their next fix. Women, working class people, disabled people and Travellers are conspicuously absent from stories and pictures about people with power and status, while the very idea that there are people with power and status is taken entirely for granted. Inequality is as obvious as the pubs and Georgian streetscapes. It is a striking part of the background of our lives.

These inequalities are not inevitable. Like Dublin's buildings they are a human creation, shaped by law and custom, by history and fashion, by powerful elites at home and abroad. And just like architecture, inequalities vary from one society to another. Even among the relatively similar societies of western Europe, Ireland is one of the most unequal (Atkinson, Rainwater and Smeeding, 1995). Inequality is not a fact of nature.

Can we imagine an Ireland without inequality? What would the social landscape look like in an egalitarian society? In this paper, I set out a radically egalitarian perspective under five main headings, defining what might be called 'full equality'. I also discuss some intermediate principles representing steps or stages to full equality. Although I think that this perspective is attractive, and describe it in a rhetorically positive tone, I am not trying to put forward any *arguments* here, but only to provide an alternative vision worth arguing for. (For some arguments, see Baker, 1987.) Nor is it my intention here to address in any detail the kinds of social, economic and political institutions we would need to develop to carry the egalitarian ideal forward, involving radical, participatory democracy, a major shift from a predominantly capitalist to a predominantly socialist economy, changes in the educational system, the media, the law, the family, and other areas of life, at both national and international levels. These are important questions but they are large and complicated, calling for an interdisciplinary approach on a much larger canvas (see Barber, 1984 and Roemer, 1993 for discussions of participatory democracy and market socialism, respectively). Arguing for equality and institutionalising equality both depend on having a sense of what equality means. That is the question I am concerned with here.

The most natural way of trying to define equality, to say what equality means, is to suppose that equality is concerned with everyone being the same in some one way, or having the same amount of some one kind of thing. The question, 'What is equality?' becomes the question 'Equality of what?' (Sen, 1992). In my view this is an over-simplification. There is no one way that people should be the same, no one thing to be equally distributed. Instead, it is necessary to define equality by way of a set of inter-related principles. I group these principles below under a number of headings - need, respect, economic equality, political equality, the relation between individual and group equality - but it will become clear that these are overlapping categories. I close the paper by commenting on the global context of Irish equality and on some of the problems we face in bringing an egalitarian vision into reality.

Need

As complicated social creatures, human beings have a wide range of needs. Of course we need water, food and air, just to survive. Because we are complex, social creatures, we also need love, self-respect, a sense of purpose. And because our well-being depends on our being able to participate in society, we need whatever is necessary to take part in our own particular societies. This last fact means that needs vary from one society to another, for instance by making

literacy a need in all modern societies. But our needs are not limitless. Most of us do not really need VCRs, foreign holidays, designer clothes or many other commodities, though they make life more pleasant or convenient. So we can surely imagine an Ireland in which everyone's needs are met, or at least in which every reasonable effort has been made to meet them. Everyone would be able to live in decent housing conditions, could afford a healthy diet, would have access to an education which not only equipped them for a useful, productive life but broadened their horizons and stimulated their imaginations, and so on. Different people have different needs, due to their different circumstances and abilities, so catering for everyone's needs would involve appreciating and respecting differences between them: differences between Travellers and settled people, between people with physical impairments and the able-bodied, between people with different religions and those with no religious beliefs. Equality does not mean uniformity.

Satisfying needs is not an all-or-nothing affair. It would be a real step forward if we could say even that we had taken care of everyone's most urgent needs, for basic subsistence and security, and beyond that if we could say that we had eliminated poverty. This has led some people to think in terms of a 'hierarchy of needs' ranging from the most basic to the most advanced. I wonder how useful it is to compartmentalise needs in this way. For example, the quality

and character of people's education has a tremendous effect both on their individual economic prospects and on their collective ability to achieve political changes, so it isn't very helpful to think that we should worry about poverty now and education later. To take another example, we can't resolve the issue of adequate and appropriate shelter for Travellers without also addressing their need for social acceptance and respect. So even though it is true that some needs are more urgent than others, it may not be possible to satisfy those needs without thinking in a more holistic way.

Another important issue around needs is who defines them. It has always been possible for privileged people to define their own needs, while the needs of others are defined, according to their circumstances, by teachers, social workers, doctors and bureaucrats. This form of the power of professionals represents one of the ways in which the welfare state, even though it is based on the idea of need, can be an oppressive force in the lives of those whom it is supposed to be helping (Fraser, 1989). In an egalitarian society we could no longer subject ourselves to that kind of power. It would be up to us as citizens to define our own needs in a process of democratic deliberation. This does not mean that every claim of need would go unchallenged - that to say I need truffles and champagne would *show* that I do. It means aiming at democratic consensus rather than bureaucratic fiat (Baker, 1992).

Respect

As human beings and fellow citizens, we need and deserve each other's respect. No society is truly egalitarian if it treats some of its members as superior or inferior to others. In Ireland, we sometimes pride ourselves on being egalitarian in this sense, and contrast ourselves with class-ridden England. But we have many very similar gradations of status, ranging from the outright contempt and hatred shown to Travellers to the subtler snobbery so often expressed by middle class people towards working class people, by the urban towards the rural, by men towards women, by straight people towards lesbians and gays. Imagine how refreshing it would be to put all of that behind us, and for people to appreciate and value these differences instead of using them to prop up their own threatened egos. That would be a pluralistic society worthy of our allegiance.

As with need, equal respect has various levels. At the most basic level of respect for human dignity, it coincides with the rejection of torture, slavery, degrading treatment and religious persecution, and more generally with the promotion of fundamental human rights. At a higher level it involves toleration for people who seem different because of their physical impairments, skin colour, culture, sexuality, religion or class. But toleration still implies a kind of

grudging acceptance of difference. Perhaps in some cases that is as far as we can go: we can do no more than tolerate people whose ways of life go strongly against our own convictions. But in most cases we can aim for a yet higher level of equal respect, which occurs when people appreciate and value diversity, for its variety, vitality and testimony to human freedom. It is only when we reach that higher level of respect that minorities feel really secure. So, as with need, we should not make too strong a contrast between different levels of respect.

Economic equality

Imagine for a moment that we really took seriously the needs and equal status of everyone in Ireland. I argue elsewhere (Baker, 1987) that we couldn't possibly go on to endorse a distribution of income in which some people are expected to live on £3354 a year (the current long-term social welfare rate) while others had incomes tens or hundreds of times that amount. We would insist, instead, on much more equality of income and wealth. We might well agree to income differentials which reflected differences in need or differences in working hours, but that would hardly produce inequality on the scale we have at the moment. Perhaps we would end up with no one having more than twice the average income or less than two-thirds of it, so that the richest person was only three times richer than the poorest.

Something like that degree of income compression is one element of economic equality.

Economic equality isn't just about income. It is also about the nature of work and the provision of opportunities. As things stand, there are striking divisions between people whose work is autonomous, satisfying and empowering and people who tediously carry out the orders of others, between people in secure employment and those in short-term or casual jobs, between people who are paid for their work and people who do unpaid work at home. One of the obvious injustices in our society is that women are predominantly at the raw end of all these divisions of labour. But isn't it even more unjust for these divisions to exist in the first place? Why not imagine an Ireland in which workplaces are organised democratically, in which everyone has access to satisfying work, in which everyone is protected against the ravages of the labour market, in which everyone does their share of tedious work and of unpaid work in the household?

That question is very closely related to the idea of equal opportunity. We are used to thinking of equal opportunity in terms of a fair competition for attractive jobs and for the education they require - as an equal opportunity to become unequal. In an unequal society, that kind of equal opportunity matters a lot, and it is perfectly reasonable for egalitarians to complain about the lack of opportunity

experienced by the long-term unemployed, disabled people, women or Travellers. But in an egalitarian society equal opportunity would mean much more: it would mean the real opportunity for each person to develop their talents in a satisfying and fulfilling way. Implementing that idea of equal opportunity would require changing the educational system from a competition for Leaving Certificate points to a system which truly valued and developed each pupil's potential. We would also have to reshape our ways of organising paid and unpaid work and our ideas about the value of different ways of living.

As before, these ideas about the distribution of income and wealth, economic democracy, the division of labour and equal opportunity can be used to define more limited goals, such as an guaranteed minimum income, worker consultation, job enrichment, family-friendly work practices for fathers, mothers and other carers, affirmative action and so on. Irish governments have already legislated on some of these issues and others are on the horizon. Even these reforms encounter stiff opposition, which shows that they're worth fighting for. But I would like to suggest that many of the strains and contradictions that such reforms create are symptoms of their attempt to promote particular equalities in a context of severe general inequality. Worker participation looks fragile and hollow if ultimate power remains with management and shareholders. Households find it difficult to choose equality

in unpaid work if one partner can earn much more than the other in paid employment. Equal opportunity and affirmative action policies are harder to implement and have much higher stakes when the payoffs for winners and losers are very unequal. To these problems of equality, the solution is more equality.

Legal and political equality

Legal and political equality are much easier to assert than to analyse. At their most minimal, they involve the protection of basic legal and political rights such as equality before the law, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of association and the right to vote, all of which are guaranteed by the Irish Constitution (Bunreacht Na Éireann, articles 16.1, 40). But legal equality can be much more substantively defined to include genuinely equal access to the legal system, so that people have effective rather than merely formal rights, and more broadly to challenge the ways in which the legal system operates to the advantage of some sections of society and to the detriment of others.

Political equality can also mean much more, namely the dismantling of relations of domination and oppression, and replacing them with a real sharing of power through popular participation in decision-making. That would mean, first of

all, looking at all those relations of power in our society which avoid even the semblance of democratic control, most notably in the economy, which highlights one way in which economic and political equality overlap. We are passionate defenders of our rights to democratic government, but most of us accept that we have no such rights in the places we work and in the broader management of economic affairs. In an egalitarian society, that would have to change.

Political equality also means finding new ways of involving citizens in decisions which affect them, and particularly in finding ways to undo relations of dominance and oppression between social groups. An interesting recent example of extending participation is the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), which for the first time gave a formal role to representatives of 'groups traditionally outside the consultative process including women, the unemployed, the disadvantaged, people with a disability, youth, the elderly and environmental interests' (NESF 1996, p. 59). Of course, the NESF is only a consultative body, with significant influence but no formal powers. If we are serious about political equality, we have to look at how traditionally marginalised groups can gain real power both to govern their own affairs and to influence broader social and political issues. That might involve formal political group representation, formal protection of certain group rights, or group vetoes over certain types of issues. These options are

a matter of considerable contemporary debate internationally, but so far have barely made it onto the agenda in Ireland (Phillips, 1995).

Political participation is also about new ways of relating to each other politically. The standard party-political contest typical of parliamentary politics has its place, but it is hardly an appropriate image for the self-government of local communities, workplaces, group-based organisations and other forms of small-scale association. Many marginalised social groups have themselves developed inclusive and participatory procedures which could serve as models of participation for others. Key principles are equal respect for all and the search for consensus, so that everyone feels that their point of view has been heard and respected and that they can accept the group's decision (Mansbridge, 1983). This model of democratic participation isn't necessarily appropriate in every context, but where it is it provides a stronger basis for political equality than more traditional models.

Another area of democratic practice that needs development is the role of various forms of mass communication. One issue is how the mass media, and particularly TV and radio, can help to promote political equality and effective democratic discourse (see McCaffery, 1992). Another is to think of how modern forms of communication, ranging from the postal service to interactive computer networks, can be used to

enhance citizen participation. The two issues are clearly related, since political equality requires a well-informed and thoughtful public.

One of the biggest risks of expanding participation in an unequal society is that it could simply reinforce existing inequalities. Many countries, including Ireland, have limited financial contributions to political parties and candidates. But even if we had stronger rules about political finance, we could not do away with other ways in which economic privilege translates into political power. Effective participation takes time and energy as well as organisational and communicative skills, and to get your message across to your fellow citizens you need material resources like desktop publishing facilities and media training. The privileged members of Irish society are better resourced in all these ways than the unprivileged. If we are serious about political equality, we need to promote economic equality as well.

Individual equality and group equality

So far I have been talking about equality in a predominantly individualistic way, as though equality is mainly concerned with how each person fares with respect to others. But inequality in Irish society has clear patterns. Some groups - Travellers, disabled people, lesbians and gays, women and working class people, among others - are dominated and

oppressed, while other groups are privileged. This oppression takes many forms, including exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young, 1990). So it is important to think of equality not just between individuals but also between groups. Undoing relations of dominance and oppression undoubtedly interacts with issues of group identity and difference in important ways, but that does not mean that we should try to eliminate group differences. Instead, we need to reconstruct differences between these overlapping groups in a manner consistent with their full participation and inclusion in Irish society. That ideal is implicit in many of the ideas I have already discussed, but thinking in terms of groups helps to ensure that those ideas are truly inclusive and not biased against the weak and marginalised.

I have already mentioned group difference in distinguishing levels of respect, from human dignity to toleration to valuing diversity. A focus on group equality can also help our thinking about levels of equality in relation to needs and to economic, legal and political equality, which might for shorthand be called 'material equality'. The following discussion draws on collaborative work done by the UCD Equality Studies Centre (Equality Studies Centre, 1995).

At its most basic level, material group equality consists of the protection of formal rights and opportunities, so that

for example it is illegal for employers to refuse to hire people because of their sex or religion. This kind of anti-discrimination legislation already exists in Ireland for some groups, and legal protection for other groups is currently being prepared. Closely allied to formal rights and opportunities is equal access to major social institutions, so that for example there are no insurmountable physical or legal barriers to the participation of women or disabled people in education or politics or family life.

A step beyond equal access is equal participation, the goal of ensuring that different social groups have equal rates of participation in education, employment, politics, the arts, and so on. Equal participation requires not just the right to participate, but the resources and encouragement to be able to participate. This idea is closely related to need, since as mentioned earlier one component of what people need is what they require for participating fully in society.

Even if all groups are participating in society, there is no guarantee that they will all do equally well. This idea of equality of outcome is a strong principle which requires equality between social groups in educational attainment, average income, occupational status, political power, cultural recognition, and other indicators of social success. As things stand, many people are likely to react to such a radical principle with disbelief, as though it is simply

unthinkable that the different groups in Irish society are capable of doing equally well. That shows how deeply engrained these inequalities are in our way of looking at the world. It doesn't show that the world can't be changed.

Equality of outcome still presumes that there will be major inequalities in Irish society and that our objective should be to ensure that one group is no better or worse off on average than others. In a thoroughly egalitarian Ireland, based not just on group equality but on all the other principles I have mentioned and which together constitute full equality, there would be equality within social groups as well as between them.

What is the relation between these four levels of material equality and the levels of respect I mentioned earlier? Although there is no neat correspondence, it seems obvious that we could not hope to achieve the stronger forms of material equality without higher levels of respect, and that these higher levels of respect would themselves be empty if not matched by strong material equality. That is just another illustration of the interconnections among egalitarian ideas.

The global context of Irish equality

I have concentrated on Ireland in this paper, but it is impossible to think about radical equality in one country

without thinking of how that project relates to the rest of the world. The first major issue has to do with the obstacles facing any radical political project in a small country. Radical egalitarianism challenges the power and privilege of the people in charge of transnational corporations. It is not just that they can move operations elsewhere, but that they have huge resources for opposing radical local initiatives. Confronting this power requires international cooperation. That is one reason why it is important for egalitarians to find ways of engaging in and developing supranational structures like the European Union and the United Nations in spite of their shortcomings.

Another major issue is that we cannot pursue equality in rich countries like Ireland without thinking about global justice. The rest of the world's people also have needs and deserve respect. They are as entitled to economic, political and group equality as Irish people are. The principles of global justice are not essentially different from those in Ireland. Of course, the scale of the problem of achieving global justice is daunting. But if we really want to imagine an egalitarian future, our imaginations have to stretch beyond the boundaries of our own country to embrace the rest of the world as well: a world at peace, in which everyone's needs are satisfied, in which differences are respected and valued, in which resources and power are equally shared, in which no group dominates or oppresses another.

Putting it into practice

The contrast between the pervasive inequality I discussed at the beginning of this paper and the global equality I have just been imagining can make the egalitarian project seem utopian. How can we possibly presume that we can end thousands of years of inequality and oppression? We can look at the world in an optimistic vein, and take some encouragement in the genuine progress that human beings have made in struggles against slavery and for human rights, sexual equality and democracy. But we can also see the world in a pessimistic light if we think of the Holocaust, of Rwanda and Bosnia, of Tiananmen Square and East Timor. The struggle for human progress has often seemed hopeless in the past, and yet progress has been made. Somehow it always seems that the privileged believe in the inevitability of oppression more than the oppressed do. Doesn't that tell us something about what's possible?

Many of the most important obstacles to equality belong to a category I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, when I talked about social, economic and political institutions. Realising an egalitarian future is not simply a matter of will-power, but of bringing about major changes in the basic structures of our society and of the world at large, and this will involve not simply designing new institutions but also

working out how to develop them from where we now stand. But one thing we can be sure of is that no such changes will occur unless there is will-power as well, and that means building a politics of equality and not just a theory. In this last section I want to concentrate on some of the sites in which such an egalitarian politics can be developed.

Promoting equality can occur in many contexts. At the core of the egalitarian project in Ireland are groups of women, disabled people, Travellers, gays and lesbians, unemployed people, political activists and many other groups who are acting together to promote social change. At their best, these groups operate according to egalitarian standards of mutual acceptance, consensual decision-making and cooperative action. In a number of areas, such as the NESF, Local Area Partnerships, and various government-sponsored commissions and task forces, these groups have a role in formal political structures. How to build on these developments and to find more effective ways of empowering marginalised and oppressed groups is a continuing challenge. Speaking impressionistically, there seems to be little interaction between these progressive groups and political parties, even though equality is an explicit value of at least the parties of the 'left'. Instead, there seems to be a pattern of direct contact with government ministers and agencies. Is this because people no longer see political parties as effective agents of change? Are political parties irrelevant to the

struggle for equality? I find it hard to believe that major changes in the structure of Irish society can be brought about without their involvement.

In the economy, some trade unions and employers have recognised that egalitarian reforms are not just fair but can also make firms more efficient and productive. This is of course only one small step in achieving a radical change in the way our economy is structured. Somehow we need to build an alliance between people in full-time, secure employment, people in insecure, temporary or part-time jobs and people excluded from the paid workforce altogether if we are to make real progress. For many radicals, the very idea of the 'labour movement' rings hollow and the idea that this movement could embrace radical change seems laughable. But again I find it hard to see how we can change society in fundamental ways without it.

The struggle for a democratic, egalitarian society depends on the development and sharing of skills and knowledge among egalitarians. So there must be a role for the educational system in promoting equality. The major long-term challenge is to create an educational system which truly values all our citizens in all their diversity. The question is how to get there from a system which for the most part reproduces Irish inequality. Fortunately, many committed teachers, parents and students in all educational sectors are working hard to

redress inequality. Some policies are being developed, although all too modestly, to widen educational opportunities for disadvantaged groups. Various third-level programmes, of which Equality Studies at UCD is the clearest example, are designed particularly to focus attention on equality and to provide intellectual support for egalitarians. As always, it is important to try to structure these educational developments in an egalitarian way. That means, among other things, trying to find ways of working in partnership with marginalised and oppressed groups. It also means developing a new way of conducting equality-related research which supports and gives a voice to marginalised groups rather than treating them simply as 'subjects' (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994).

Politics, the economy and education are key sites for promoting equality, but other areas are also very important. In the area of religion, many voices have supported egalitarian aims ranging from the protection of human rights to the case for a guaranteed basic income (e.g. Reynolds and Healy, 1995). In the mass media, there are a significant number of pioneering production units and some important experience in widening access (Kelly, 1996). In Irish families there have been major changes in ideas about relations between men, women and children, although changes in people's behaviour have sometimes been slow to follow. Equality is not the business of any one group of people in one area of life. It is the business of us all.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to contrast the pervasive inequality of Irish society with a vision of a radically egalitarian alternative. I have set out that vision under the headings of need, respect, economic equality, political equality and individual and group equality, but I hope that it has become clear that these are only rough and ready categories and that the principles of equality are strongly interconnected. I have also tried to show that the path to full equality can involve many steps, starting with provision for people's most urgent needs and the protection of their most basic rights, and including at various stages such objectives as the toleration of difference, a guaranteed minimum income, worker participation, extensions of democracy, formal protections against discrimination, and so on. There are degrees of equality, and Ireland could be a much more equal society long before it became a fully equal one. At the same time, I have suggested that it is not always a good idea to separate apparently long-term from short-term goals, because of the way these goals interact.

I have tried to say something about the relation between the challenge of Irish inequality and the broader challenge of global inequality, for the sake of both justice and strategy,

and to say something, too, about how we can develop a stronger movement for equality in Ireland. I am acutely aware that these remarks are sketchy and open-ended, and I wish I knew the answers to the questions I have raised. But I take heart in the thought that the challenge of Irish inequality is indeed a challenge for collective, cooperative action, and that together we can meet it.

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