Chapter 2: A New Paradigm for Equality Studies

How should we respond politically and intellectually to persistent inequalities and the challenges they pose? In this chapter, we argue for one answer to this question, by setting out the case for the field of equality studies as it has developed in the Equality Studies Centre at University College Dublin. In the first section, we argue that equality is an appropriate focus for progressive political action, and therefore for progressive intellectual enquiry. In the second section, we characterize equality studies in terms of its central questions. The third section compares equality studies with some other progressive and interdisciplinary perspectives. We finish by returning to the relationship between equality studies and egalitarian politics. Our overall aim is to encourage those who are worried by the inequalities discussed in Chapter 1 to look at their own work from an equality studies perspective and thereby to encourage them to develop their own forms of interdisciplinary cooperation along similar lines.

1. Why Equality?

The argument for taking equality as a political and intellectual focus is as follows. First, any progressive political and economic response to the issues raised in Chapter 1 should be driven by basic principles which define our central commitments. Equality is
an enduring principle of progressive politics, so it is at least one candidate for this job.

Of the other principles associated with the left, some refer to particular forms of equality, while others identify goods which need to be incorporated into egalitarian ideals. Moreover, the idea of equality provides a useful framework for negotiating conflicts between other values and, more importantly, for recognizing their interdependence. None of this shows that it is impossible to structure the intellectual concerns of the left in other terms, but it does show that equality is well suited for this purpose. Let’s now look at that argument in detail.

If our task is to characterize the political and intellectual project of a progressive political movement, it stands to reason that the best place to start is with what that movement is trying to achieve. It might be said that it aims to achieve socialism, or democracy, or a new world order, but these institutional answers to the question rest on a deeper foundation, namely a set of political principles and empirical analyses. Thus to the extent that some form of socialism remains a key objective of the left, this is because the principles to which the left is committed, together with some analysis of how capitalism violates these principles, provide a case for socialism. Of those two elements of the case for socialism, it is clearly the principles which define the movement’s deeper objectives, while the analysis shows how those objectives are to be achieved. If all progressives were agreed on one particular model of socialism or
democracy or global order, it would be relatively unimportant whether we defined their task in terms of the model in question or the principles which motivate it. But as no such agreement now exists, it makes sense to focus on the deeper, less derivative level of objective expressed by political principles. Even at this level there are important disagreements; one of the strengths of focusing on equality is that these disagreements can be pursued rather than neglected.

We take it for granted that equality is an important progressive value: equality of some sort has always belonged to the ideals of the left. Nor could anyone deny the relevance of equality in today’s world, with the widespread and savage inequalities discussed in Chapter 1. The real issue is whether it makes sense to give equality special status among progressive ideals as the defining concept in our thinking. We will argue that it does, because of the special relationships between equality and those other values. But to do this it is necessary to say a little about the argument of Chapters 5 and 6 below.

In Chapter 5, we show that equality is a complex ideal. We argue for a framework that involves five key dimensions of equality: the distribution of resources, relations of respect and recognition, power relations, relations of love and solidarity, and the division of labour. We set out a framework of principles that is clearly egalitarian in character, even though it does not always call for strict equality of distribution. It is
partly because of the complexity of equality that a number of the principles traditionally
associated with the left can be seen as aspects or elements of an egalitarian outlook. In
Chapter 5, we show that many of the ideas associated with the left - human rights, basic
needs, the relief of poverty, liberation, recognition - are simply part of what egalitarians
believe. In Chapter 6, we consider other values, such as freedom, community, and a
healthy environment. We argue that far from conflicting with these values, the idea of
equality makes explicit something which all leftists implicitly endorse, namely that these
goods are being claimed for everyone equally, not just for some privileged few. It
follows that focusing on equality does not divert us from other progressive values. On
the contrary, because principles of equality are always about other values, we must
assert them at the same time as we assert the claims of equality.

What is normally at stake in discussions about the conflict between equality and
other values is actually more complicated, namely a problem about whether some
particular type of equality, for instance economic equality, is compatible with some other
type of equality like political equality. These are genuine problems of egalitarian theory
and we do not want to minimize them. What we want to point out is that equality
provides a useful framework for discussing the relations among and conflicts between
the values we believe in. Precisely because we can talk about both equal liberty and
equal membership it is possible to discuss the relation between freedom and community
in an egalitarian framework. At the same time, this framework prevents us from neglecting the issue of how liberty and membership are distributed; it prevents us using the supposed conflict between these values as a cloak for defending the privileged.

Fortunately, Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate that the relationship between different types of equality is more often complementary than conflictual. If different types of equality were constantly in conflict and failed to combine into any kind of coherent egalitarian project, then the value of equality as a tool for integrating a variety of concerns would disappear. The fact that, on the contrary, different types of equality are mutually supportive and interdependent reinforces the argument for using equality in this way.

If these arguments are sound, it makes sense to take equality as a central or defining concept for progressive politics. Such a focus does not exclude other values, even if they are not related to equality in one of the two ways we have mentioned, because it is always possible to ask whether the pursuit of equality should be qualified or supplemented by other normative ideals. All we are saying is that equality is *sufficiently* inclusive to provide a framework we can build on. It may not be the only framework available but it is a framework worth using.
2. Central questions of equality studies

If equality represents a central, unifying value for progressive politics, then it follows that the study of equality is a central intellectual project for the left. Broadly speaking, equality studies can be defined as the study of significant equalities and inequalities in human life, both as it has been and as it might be. A more precise account of equality studies can be given by setting out its central questions. Here are six such questions.

1. What are the central, significant, dominant patterns of inequality in our society, western capitalist society more generally, and, more generally still, the world at large? An initial task of equality studies is simply to get a grip on the scale and patterns of existing inequalities. How are income and wealth distributed among households and individuals? What are the differences in income and occupational status between men and women? How do different classes compare in access to education? Which ethnic groups are discriminated against and denied basic rights? What are the basic facts about the global distribution of resources? We have cited some of the answers to these questions in Chapter 1. Although this is essentially a descriptive task, it provides an essential backdrop for a wide range of egalitarian concerns.

2. What are the best ways of explaining these inequalities, using which overall frameworks? Contemporary social science is awash with explanatory frameworks: rational choice theory, systems theory, structuralism, post-structuralism,
functionalism, hermeneutics, marxism in its various versions, critical theory, psychoanalytic approaches, and so on, each with their internal conflicts and subdivisions. We cannot study inequality without making use of such frameworks, but there is certainly no consensus, even among leftists, on which of them are most helpful. So equality studies must currently operate pluralistically, encouraging work within different paradigms, and learning what we can about inequality from each of many traditions. For the moment, we are sceptical about the prospects for a uniform explanatory theory of inequality, while recognizing that in particular contexts some approaches throw more explanatory light than others. This part of equality studies is probably its most heavily researched area, although the explanation of inequality is sometimes hampered by disciplinary boundaries. Explaining inequality is a core concern in sociology, economics, political science, geography and the interdisciplinary fields we discuss in Chapter 3. For this reason, we do not devote much space in this book to explanatory research, although we rely on it when necessary.

3. What are the central principles or objectives of equality? What in principle are egalitarians trying to achieve? There are many possible conceptions of equality. It is clearly a central problem for equality studies to articulate these conceptions and explore their interrelations and relative merits. There has been a considerable amount of theoretical work in this area in the last thirty-five years. A common feature of this work
is to consider the relationship between equality and other normative concerns, such as freedom, community, cultural diversity, individual well-being, sexual difference, environmental values, and so on. Although there is no emerging consensus on either the formulation or justification of egalitarian principles, it is clear that these contributions nevertheless form a distinct theoretical family.

A great deal of egalitarian theory concerns the problem of defining the egalitarian ideal: what might be called, as Tawney (1964) put it rather vaguely, ‘equality of condition’. It is also worthwhile to try to distinguish more limited objectives which can be treated as intermediate steps to more far-reaching aims. Setting out an egalitarian ideal does not itself decide the case between radical and reformist political strategies, nor is it meant to distract us from urgent action to secure basic needs and other human rights. In Chapter 5, we attempt to provide a relatively inclusive framework for thinking about both equality of condition and intermediate aims. In Chapter 6 we try to show how the framework relates to values that are not at first sight closely connected to equality.

4. What are the best institutional frameworks for achieving equality in different spheres and contexts? The institutional parallel to setting out egalitarian principles or objectives is to set out the case for corresponding social institutions, in the broad sense of economic and political structures, legal systems, educational systems,
family forms, and so on. Although there has been a tremendous amount of relevant work in this area, it rarely has an explicitly egalitarian focus. Thus, for example, there have been many recent discussions of models of socialism, and particularly of the use of markets within broadly socialist structures (e.g. Le Grand and Estrin, 1989; Miller, 1989; Nove, 1991; Yunker, 1992; Bardhan and Roemer, 1993; Archer, 1995). But although issues about distribution usually arise at some point or other in these discussions, the egalitarian case for socialism is only given a central role by a few authors (e.g. Roemer, 1993 and 1994; Schweickart, 1994). References to the idea of political equality are more prominent in the considerable literature on participatory democracy. Yet only a few treatments are based on an integrated conception of the role of participatory democracy in a wider egalitarian project (e.g. Green, 1985; Bowles and Gintis, 1987). Similar remarks could be made about work on other social institutions. Situating these discussions within an equality studies framework can help to bring out more clearly the purposes of alternative institutions and their role in a coherent vision of an egalitarian social order.

As with egalitarian principles, we can talk about both the social institutions necessary for a fully egalitarian society and other more limited reforms. The institutions of contemporary welfare states are not directed towards full equality, but do aspire to certain limited egalitarian objectives such as the elimination of poverty and the
satisfaction of some basic needs. How these institutions can be reformed to achieve these limited goals more effectively is a perfectly legitimate question for contemporary egalitarians.

Because this area of equality studies is undeveloped, we have prioritised it for this book. In Part II, we discuss some of the kinds of change equality calls for in political, economic, legal, educational and linguistic institutions. Although each chapter takes up only a selection of the huge number of issues that arise, we hope that the range of institutional contexts and problems demonstrates the value of addressing these issues within an equality studies framework.

5. Within a given institutional context, what policies would best promote equality? Whether we are concerned with the ‘utopian’ question of a fully egalitarian society or the reformist question of improving the world as it stands, the state and other institutions face a range of policy choices which may be more or less egalitarian. A large amount of contemporary work in social policy is concerned with this question, often in connection with limited objectives, such as equal opportunity and the relief of poverty. Well-known examples are debates around affirmative action and welfare reform. There is no precise borderline between major policy initiatives and institutional reform (question 4), but some issues are clearly on one side or the other. In Part II, we draw attention to the relation between broader institutional issues and more specific policy
choices. For example, we note that the institutions of participatory democracy require policies on how political activity is financed. But we recognise that policy issues tend to be even more dependent on local contexts than institutional questions.

6. What are the best political strategies for promoting equality, given our vision of equality, our understanding of the causes of inequality, and the (corresponding?) obstacles to achieving equality? Work on egalitarian principles, institutions and policies is concerned with both the long-term goal of an egalitarian society and more immediate reforms. How are these changes to be brought about? What is needed is an understanding of social change which uses the successes and failures of egalitarian movements to develop practical strategies for promoting equality. There are obvious reasons for pursuing this task in cooperation with the marginalized and oppressed groups involved in egalitarian politics. In Part III, we put forward some ideas about these issues, raising more questions than we answer. But if equality studies is to have any point, then these questions of political strategy are as much on its agenda as the more familiar tasks of describing, explaining, philosophising and constructing alternatives.

It is a mark of the intellectual coherence of equality studies that these six central questions are so inter-linked. Although it is certainly possible to address some of them without addressing them all, work in each area can be improved by considering its
relation to the others. This is most obvious in the sequence from question 1 to question 6, since it is clear enough that we need to identify inequalities in order to explain them, that both explanations of inequality and egalitarian principles are required for the task of developing egalitarian institutions and policies, and that we cannot develop a political strategy for equality without identifying our long-term aims, our immediate objectives, the principles which should govern our actions and our analysis of the obstacles before us.

But the interdependence also works in other directions. The task of describing patterns of inequality (question 1) depends on the explanatory and normative concerns of equality studies (questions 2 and 3) because deciding what count as the most significant forms of inequality depends both on which inequalities are thought to be causally significant in producing other inequalities and on which inequalities matter most from a normative point of view. Choosing which inequalities to identify and describe is also partly dependent on strategic issues (question 6) because the degree of inequality in our world is largely concealed from the public, or lost in a forest of other facts and statistics. Merely exposing and documenting the scale of inequality is therefore important both academically and politically.

How we explain inequality (question 2) is affected, at a deep level, by certain egalitarian norms (question 3). This is not because there are simple political tests of
whether one explanation is better than another, but because our values inevitably affect the way we understand others, how we react to different ideas and how we relate to others in research. So, for example, a person who values human autonomy simply cannot countenance a sociological explanation which treats people as the passive carriers of social structures and will inevitably adopt explanatory frameworks which allow for human agency. An anti-racist will be suspicious of theories which ascribe racial inequalities to innate inferiorities. A radical democrat will look twice at the theory that political apathy is functional for stability. And as we discuss in Chapter 4, someone who is concerned about oppression will research oppression in a different way from someone who is not.

Finally, we cannot engage in the task of articulating and justifying principles of equality (question 3) without asking what these principles entail in terms of social institutions and policies (questions 4 and 5) and whether these implied changes are remotely feasible (cf. Carens, 1981, 1985). We cannot defend these principles unless we have an explanation of inequality which makes it a contingent rather than inevitable feature of human society (question 2). Even articulating the principles to begin with is a task which has always learnt from and reflected the political priorities of groups engaged in egalitarian struggles (question 6).
Central questions of equality studies

1. What are the central, significant, dominant patterns of inequality in our society, western capitalist society more generally, and, more generally still, the world at large?

2. What are the best ways of explaining these inequalities, using which overall frameworks?

3. What are the central principles or objectives of equality? What in principle are egalitarians trying to achieve?

4. What are the best institutional frameworks for achieving equality in different spheres and contexts?

5. Within a given institutional context, what policies would best promote equality?

6. What are the best political strategies for promoting equality, given our vision of equality, our understanding of the causes of inequality, and the (corresponding?) obstacles to achieving equality?

The six questions set out above are by no means definitive of a field which is only in the early stages of development, and are in any case rather open-ended. For example, it might be suggested that we should explicitly include questions about the history of
equality and egalitarianism, treating these as valuable in their own right and not just as contributions to other concerns. Another challenging suggestion is that we should highlight the question of personal transformation: what changes do we have to make in our own lives here and now if we claim to take equality seriously? It would be foolish to treat the six questions as exhaustive, but they do establish a coherent core for the study of equality.

With such a wide range of questions to address, it is clear that equality studies has to make use of a range of methods of enquiry. It is an interdisciplinary project that requires skills and knowledge drawn from political theory, empirical politics, sociology, law, economics, psychology, and probably other disciplines as well. Like any cooperative project, it must operate on the basis of a certain division of labour – no one has to know everything – but it is important for its practitioners to listen to and learn from each other if their cooperation is to be as fruitful as possible. The fact that this book is the outcome of cooperation among specialists in political theory, sociology, economics and law is intended to show both the necessity and the benefits of a cooperative, interdisciplinary approach.

3. Equality Studies Compared with Other Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Equality studies has not developed on a green-field site. It is built on the foundation of similar projects associated with the left and similar interdisciplinary fields of enquiry.
In this section, we compare equality studies with marxism and critical theory. In Chapter 3, we compare it with the interdisciplinary fields of women’s studies, development studies and disability studies.

An obvious antecedent to equality studies is marxism, once the paradigm leftist project. Like marxism, equality studies seeks not just to describe and explain the world but to change it. Like marxism, equality studies takes its normative stance from the point of view of the oppressed and exploited, and treats social class, in at least roughly the same sense, as a key organizing concept. Like marxism, equality studies is a holistic approach to society in the sense that it tries to look at how major social institutions operate in interrelated ways to sustain and reproduce certain social relations. But there are also significant differences.

One important difference from marxism is the explicitly ethical focus of equality studies. Although it is sometimes maintained that marxism contains a coherent ethic centred on the ideas of alienation and exploitation, there is a long-standing and unresolved dispute about whether such an ethic really exists in Marx’s mature writings and, in any case, about how any such ethic should be characterized (Lukes, 1985; Peffer, 1990). By contrast, it is essential to equality studies to consider how an egalitarian ideal can be articulated and justified.
A second important difference is that equality studies is centrally concerned with more forms of inequality and oppression than those associated with class. This is only to say that equality studies attempts to build upon and integrate recent thinking on gender, development, ‘race’, disability, sexuality, cultural pluralism, and so on, much of it originating in critiques of marxism. It is true that, in its most ambitious forms, marxism has also attempted to understand and respond to these types of inequality. In this regard, these forms of marxism might be seen as particular approaches to equality studies. But marxism as a tradition has tended to focus on class to the exclusion of other inequalities.

As a successor to marxism, equality studies occupies a similar position to critical theory. As the interests of critical theorists, and Habermas in particular, have turned towards integrating social and ethical theory, they have formulated a project very close to that of equality studies. One significant difference is in the scope given to the idea of equality. Habermas’s egalitarianism remains essentially proceduralist – his focus is the strongly democratic self-government of free and equal citizens – and other forms of equality come into the picture only derivatively, either through reflection on the presuppositions of democracy or as the result of democratic decision-making itself. It might also be said that critical theory has had a tendency to pay more attention to critique than to strategies for change. But rather than trying to start an argument with
critical theorists, we should like to invite them to compare their project with the idea of equality studies and to consider how closely the two are related. If critical theory is a fundamentally egalitarian project, as we believe it to be, is it not a species of equality studies? Can this view of critical theory help its practitioners to develop a new self-understanding, new practices and new alliances?

These remarks on marxism and critical theory can be generalised to address anyone trying to combine a moral commitment to egalitarian principles of social justice with social analysis and a strategy for change. We have no desire to impose a label on what other people are doing; we merely want to encourage them to look at their work in the light of the framework we have set forward in this chapter.

4. Equality Studies and Egalitarian Politics

In this chapter we have argued for treating equality studies as a central intellectual project for leftist politics. We tried to show, first of all, that equality is an appropriate focus for this project, since it is both an enduring value of progressive politics and a useful framework for discussing and integrating other values. We went on to spell out six central questions of equality studies, ranging from the description and explanation of patterns of inequality through the construction of egalitarian principles, institutions and policies to the development of effective political strategies, emphasizing the inter-relations among these tasks and their connection to an emancipatory paradigm for
research. Finally, we compared equality studies with the related projects of marxism and critical theory. Our aim throughout has been to encourage progressives to think of equality studies as a possible framework for their own intellectual task.

In one form or another, all of these issues concern the problematic relationship between leftist academics and political movements. We are all familiar with allegedly radical intellectuals who have disappeared in the labyrinth of an arcane research programme which has no discernible connection to political progress. At the same time, the demands of paid and unpaid work make it nearly as hard for academics to find the time and energy to be politically involved as for other workers; their privileged social position also creates obvious barriers and disincentives to progressive political action. Equality studies is not on its own a solution to these problems. But by highlighting the issue of the relationship between researchers and oppressed groups and by recognizing strategies for change as a central concern, equality studies does attempt to build the connection between research and political practice into its approach. After all, the point of equality studies is the development of an egalitarian society. In that respect, as in others, it is an essentially political project.

Notes to Chapter 2

1 [move to acknowledgements: We are grateful to participants at a conference on Reconstituting Social Criticism, Queen’s University Belfast, June 1996, for comments]
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2 Two excellent examples of data on national and global inequalities, respectively, are Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1995 and Sutcliffe, 2001.


4 One aspect of this task is taken up by Cohen, 2000.

5 By critical theory we mean the work associated with Jürgen Habermas. The term is used more widely in some contexts. Examples of the work referred to in this paragraph are Habermas, 1993; 1996, esp. pp. 123, 388-427; and 1982.