

We now explore the term 'equality', defined in two ways: first, that which concerns equality as a starting point to life; second, equality as an outcome. We also consider equality before the law, equal political rights and equal social rights. After that we examine individual and group equality, and equality in terms of the class structure and international relations. Finally, we discuss the present position of 'equality': has its value decreased in general esteem because of the almost universal acceptance of liberal capitalism and its emphasis on 'freedom' as the prime political and social goal?

POINTS TO CONSIDER

- Why has equality been valued less than liberty in Western societies?
- Do recent advances in genetics give the lie to the statement 'all men are created equal'?
- Is absolute equality an unrealisable ideal? If so, is the quest for greater equality of any value?
- Equality of opportunity or equality of outcome – which is more desirable?
- In what ways, if any, is a society based on 'merit' better than one based on 'privilege'?

When Adam delved, and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman? (John Ball, *Blackheath Sermon*, 1381)

The law in its majestic equality forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread. (Anatole France, *The Red Lily*, 1894)

‘Equality’ has usually been the poor theoretical relation of ‘liberty’. The former is usually perceived as less important, less life enhancing and a weaker rallying call to action than liberty. Nevertheless, equality has been a significant element in political theory from its Greek beginnings in the fifth century BC until the present. Plato, for example, denied that men were equal. He observed that they were endowed with unequal talents and virtues. It was unjust to treat men as equal when they were patently not equal. Aristotle agreed with his teacher on the fundamental inequality of men, but he asserted that equality was a major driving force in politics:

The universal and chief cause of . . . revolutionary feeling . . . (is) the desire of equality, when men think that they are equal to others who have more than themselves; or again the desire of inequality and superiority, when conceiving themselves to be superior they think that they have not more but the same or less than their inferiors . . . Now in oligarchies the masses make revolution under the idea that they are unjustly treated, because as I said before, they are equals, and have not an equal share, and in democracies the notables revolt, because they are not equals, and yet have only an equal share.¹

Rebellious medieval peasants, the **Levellers** and the **Diggers** during the political ferment of the English Civil Wars, and many other oppressed people all appealed to equality as a fundamental human right and a basis for better treatment by their social and political superiors (who listened to and then suppressed them). The American rebels in 1776 declared that ‘all men are created equal’, but it was for liberty they fought, not equality. No revolutionary declared, ‘Give me *equality* or give me death’.

Equality became an important feature of politics with the growth of liberalism and socialism as ideological movements during the nineteenth century. One forgets today how radical the principle of equality once was and how deeply held were beliefs in a natural hierarchy and human inequality. Liberalism stakes a claim for the fundamental equality of rights possessed by all humans as a birthright. But it was socialism, in its many forms, that positioned equality at the heart of its ideology and its programme for social change. Both

Levellers

A faction of Cromwell’s army who in the 1640s made remarkably ‘modern’ political demands, including voting rights for all males who were not servants.

Diggers

A faction in the English Civil Wars of the mid-seventeenth century who set up communes on both common land and the land of wealthy men. They advocated the eventual abolition of private property.

movements linked equality with democracy. *Unequal* societies were declared to be *undemocratic*. Democratic societies had to address fundamental social and economic inequalities if democracy was to have real meaning.

Few modern politicians defend social and political inequality, at least not in their public pronouncements to a mass electorate. Questions are raised, however, as to what form of equality should be pursued. Most people support equality of opportunity, but what does it mean in practice? Is it impossible to achieve? Should there be greater equality in rewards, or 'outcomes', in society? If so, how much? Does greater equality always mean erosion of liberty? If it does, should liberty be given the higher priority? Are we right to concentrate on individual equality when people are unequal as a consequence of being a member of a social group? If equality can best be pursued by extending the opportunities available to members of oppressed groups, which groups are to be identified and what are the best ways of creating greater equality for them? All too often such issues have been raised to disguise a fundamental opposition to equality and resist reforms made in favour of greater equality.

One can realise, therefore, that equality is a rather complex political and social issue, one that is worthy of scrutiny.

Equality: a starting point

Complex as the issue of equality is, one can reduce it to two major themes, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754), attempted:

I conceive that there are two kinds of inequality among the human species; one, which I shall call natural or physical, because it is established by nature, and consists in a difference of age, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind or of the soul: and another, which may be called moral or political inequality, because it depends on a kind of convention, and is established, or at least authorised, by the consent of men. This latter consists of the different privileges which some men enjoy to the prejudice of others; such as that of being more rich, more honoured, more powerful, or even in a position to exact obedience.²

In other words, one can discern inequalities based on *nature* and inequalities that arise out of *social* factors. Egalitarians, as the supporters of the principle of greater equality are known, have taken up this idea and identify two kinds of equality:

- **Foundational, or primary, equality:** all human beings are claimed to be *equal* in some fundamental sense, irrespective of race, creed, class, gender or any other biological or social characteristics. Human beings are equal because they are endowed with 'certain inalienable rights', a proposition that is open to question and is often left rather vague.

- **Distributional, or secondary, equality:** it follows that *if* all humans are equal, as foundational equality claims, one must consider how such equality might be brought about. Society is characterised by a multiplicity of degrees of inequality, as evinced by the present distribution of wealth, power and status among people.

Foundational equality appears to assert a statement of *fact*: all humans *are* equal, while distributional equality may be seen as a statement of political principle: that all people *should* be equal. These two forms of equality, foundational and distributional, are clearly intertwined. If, for instance, human beings are not equal in a foundational sense then there is no need to attempt to reduce social inequalities by distributional means.

If, on the other hand, as liberals and socialists aver, we are all fundamentally equal in some sense, then social inequalities are not ‘natural’ but come under the realm of politics and raise the prospects of social change. Social inequalities are thus ‘unjust’. Some people acquire wealth, power and privilege for no better reasons than the luck of parentage, a win on the National Lottery, or having natural abilities valued in society – so that an ability to sing, for instance, or play football to a high standard, will bring massive financial and other rewards. Egalitarians believe that some inequalities should be removed, such as hereditary peerages in the House of Lords, and that others, such as ownership of wealth, should be greatly reduced.

Let us now study each of the forms of equality in turn.

Foundational, or primary, equality

Here are some anti-egalitarian arguments against the idea of foundational equality and some of the relevant egalitarian retorts.

The major problem with equality as a political principle is that it is very difficult to establish, especially as a starting point from which to develop a political programme. Society is patently unequal and opponents of equality maintain that this is because people are not equal in their innate qualities. Human beings vary considerably in intelligence, height, physical strength, artistic and musical skill, and many other attributes. Anti-egalitarians point out that humans also vary greatly in their capacity for reason and understanding. Indeed, if people were treated *equally* (in whatever manner this might be defined, such as in terms of legal rights and material rewards) when they are so obviously *unequal*, one would not only be ignoring reality but would also be acting unjustly. Injustice would arise because people with ‘superior’ talent or intelligence, or some other attribute valuable to society, should not be treated as if they were the same as those without these qualities, or possessing inferior versions of them.

Egalitarians point out that modern anti-egalitarians have moved from attacking the principle that people are basically equal in some undefined sense to questioning the idea of equal rewards for people of equal talent. However, egalitarians claim that this is merely a tactic by their opponents, who still believe that people are innately unequal and should be treated as such. Egalitarians argue that fundamental equality remains a very important element in the theoretical discussions about equality, one which has enormous implications for social and welfare policies.

Most egalitarians distinguish between the principle of human equality, which applies to all people in all societies, and the reality of the inequalities of rewards that vary considerably in particular societies, depending on the prevailing economic, social, political and cultural traditions. Very few egalitarians, in fact, support a fundamental equality of rewards. However, they accuse anti-egalitarians of creating a false notion of fundamental equality in order to defeat it as a principle and so undermine the egalitarian hope of greater social equality in health, welfare, education, income and property ownership.

Egalitarians therefore make a strong case for fundamental human equality on the basis of our common humanity. Egalitarians believe that humans resemble each other more than they differ: all people are born, have lives to live as best they can, and all will die. Furthermore, all people have, as Jeremy Bentham and the Utilitarians claimed, an equal capacity to experience pain and pleasure. Finally, all human beings have some basic capacity to act as moral agents, to use reason to discover and follow moral laws, to distinguish right from wrong and to identify their own interest.

From these beliefs derives the principle that all people have equal rights to what might be summed up as 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. One might dispute what these rights are in practice and one must recognise that they may change over time, but the principle of equal rights is the issue. If this principle is established, then one can use reason to discern what these rights might be. Such equal rights might include freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the right to own property, freedom of association, and so on. (One can see how this concept of equality is closely associated with the issue of 'liberty'.)

The principle of equal rights does not mean the same as equality of rewards or outcomes; as we have mentioned, few egalitarians would endorse that. One might have freedom of speech, for example, but it does not mean that all opinions are of equal validity. Everyone has a right to own property, but the principle does not mean that all should have an equal amount of property. All citizens have the vote, but it does not follow that all can equally influence government policy.

One can discern that the principle of fundamental equality is the basis for a number of principles in modern societies, principles that shape both political culture and political and social institutions:

- equal consideration;
- equal opportunities;
- equal voting and participation rights;
- equality before the law;
- equality of welfare and social rights.

Equal consideration

‘Equal consideration’ is a vague notion but it links the principle of fundamental equality with the fair treatment of people, unless there is some clear and generally recognised legal or moral reason why they should not be treated equally. In public institutions all citizens have a right to equal consideration, as all pay taxes and all are affected by the decisions of government. In private life everyone is considered to be equally worthy of respect in line with the ‘golden rule’: ‘Treat others as you would yourself wish to be treated.’ This assertion of the fundamental equality of all humans acts as a defence against discriminatory and morally wrong policies against innocent individuals and groups, such as existed under the Nazi regime in Germany and apartheid in South Africa.

Equal opportunities

A belief in ‘equal opportunities’ points to a basic right of an equal chance for people to make the most of their talents. It argues, for example, that equal educational provision is vital if every person is to have such a chance. In practice, some will work harder than others, some have greater abilities, some will take advantage of these chances and others will not. But justice will have been done if such opportunities have been provided. It is important to be clear that, for most egalitarians, equal opportunities do not automatically translate into equal rewards. ‘Rewards’ are determined by the value placed on a particular skill by the prevailing social system. For example, a schoolteacher and a stockbroker may be equally well educated but the financial rewards for each are significantly different.

Equal voting and participation rights

‘Democratic equality’ means that all have a fundamental right to participate in political institutions. Rousseau agreed with Aristotle that political communities should be as small as possible, allowing all citizens equal participation in decision-making. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the claims for democratic equality by women and the working classes would be met, they

believed, through achieving the right to vote. In Britain the principle of 'one person, one vote, one value' was finally established in 1948 when multiple voting rights were abolished. Supporters of democratic equality doubt that equality of 'value' has in fact been achieved. Parliamentary constituencies are of unequal size, most are 'safe' seats that remain in the hands of one political party, and the voting system ensures that most MPs and all governments are elected on minorities of the popular vote. Democratic equality does not exist in most modern democracies, according to egalitarians, and will not exist until there is greater devolution of political power to institutions which are closer to the people and which offer a greater degree of direct democracy than at present exists.

Equality before the law

'Legal equality' is in modern societies the basis for equality in political, economic and cultural activities. However, this was not always the case. It was once assumed that inequality in social standing should be reflected in the law. **Nonconformists**, Roman Catholics and Jews in Britain did not have the same legal rights as Anglicans until the late 1820s. Slaves had no right to recourse to law until 1772. Members of the House of Lords accused of a serious criminal act could elect to be tried by their fellow peers until 1910. The poor were excluded from the vote until 1918. Women lacked property rights on the same bases as men until 1870 and were excluded from equal voting rights until 1928. Fundamental legal equality is now accepted as a form of strict equality in any democratic society's legal system. Judges should treat all before them equally. Any discrimination in law has to be made on the grounds of relevant elements in the case and all similar cases should be treated alike. Equality before the law as a principle is not, however, balanced by an equal power to exercise legal equality because of the sheer expense of going to law and the very unequal distribution of wealth in society. As Lord Justice Darling said in 1920: 'The law courts of England are open to all men, like the doors of the Ritz Hotel'. Legal aid schemes exist in most modern societies to ensure that the poor get legal advice and some degree of equal access to the law.

Nonconformists

Churches in the Protestant tradition which in the 1660s did not 'conform' to the established church. Non-conformists today include all mainstream Protestant churches outside the Church of England, such as Baptists, Methodists, Quakers and Unitarians.

Equality of welfare and social rights

'Equal welfare and social rights' are viewed as vital elements in fundamental equality. Strictly speaking, one should include these under 'distributional equality' as they involve some degree of equalising wealth and power in society. The egalitarian principle, however, is relevant here and is quite

straightforward. All citizens pay taxes to support health, educational and welfare systems provided by the state. All citizens, therefore, whatever their personal wealth, have an equal right to a range of benefits constituting a 'citizenship package'. This package includes child benefit, state pensions, disability benefits, unemployment payments and access to health, education and social services. Citizens may claim other 'means-tested' benefits on the basis of an assessment of their assets. If, however, citizens choose to exercise their freedom and pay for private health and education, for example, it does not entitle them to reduce their contributions to the state scheme, nor does it disqualify them from access to state provision.

Anti-egalitarians have not given up the attack on **egalitarianism** as a principle even though a strong element of egalitarianism has been introduced into modern societies. They doubt the existence of fundamental equality by claiming that modern genetic science provides evidence of innate human inequality. Geneticists have been demonstrating that some human characteristics previously believed to have been social in their origins now lie in a person's genetic make-up. Individual intelligence, for example, may owe a great deal more to genetics than was previously assumed and thus a great deal less to social influences. If genetics are the fundamental determinant of human inequality then, obviously, calls for social engineering to reduce or remove inequalities are doomed to fail.

egalitarianism

The belief that social equality is the main political good.

Egalitarians challenge the implications for morality and fundamental equality of scientific developments that are as yet in their infancy. Genetic differences, they assert, no more justify social inequality than does the long-established genetic basis for hair colour, skin colour or gender, or whether one has blue or brown eyes. People still have fundamental equality irrespective of genetic make-up. Whatever the role of science and technology in advancing genetics and its application to the overcoming of biological inequalities, the fundamental moral equality of people remains unchanged.

In the opinion of anti-egalitarians, foundational equality contributes to the undermining of social order. If people are equal, and are conscious of being so, the authority of those in command will be undermined. Authority requires from the mass of the population the recognition of the basic *inequality* of humans in a hierarchy of social and political power.

Egalitarians challenge the view that good government and social order require fundamental *inequality*, which in their view is little more than a 'political myth' that serves the interests of those who are against greater equality and democracy. Politicians, police and other functionaries of government derive their authority in modern societies, so egalitarians assert, from merit and

competitive recruitment rather than from appealing to an underlying inequality of people.

Anti-egalitarians claim that the recognition of natural inequality among people benefits all in society. The moral and religious bases of human equality *might* be acceptable, declare the critics of fundamental equality, but inequality is a powerful engine in the improvement of civilisation, art, culture, science, and so on. The resultant social progress benefits everyone and not just the 'elite', even if the latter get greater rewards. (If they do so, it is because they deserve such rewards for their crucial role in leading and improving society.)

Egalitarians challenge the idea that culture and progress is an inevitable by-product of fundamental inequality. The social inequalities that create 'high' culture and 'progress' do not, they argue, undermine the egalitarian premise that humans are fundamentally equal in their capacity or potential to enjoy high culture or contribute to progress. There are some egalitarians who would deny that some forms of cultural expression are 'better' than others and that 'progress' is to be applauded.

Most egalitarians claim that fundamental equality exists. Some, however, do not think that the existence or not of an innate right to equality is important to the egalitarian case. One must look, they claim, to the social inequalities created by man in a practical analysis of society, rather than merely debating theoretical ones. Many egalitarians doubt that rights of any kind, let alone equality, are inherent in humans by virtue of their common humanity. According to most modern egalitarians equality, or the lack of it, corresponds to the social conditions of real people, in actual social circumstances. In this view, equality is exclusively related to the level of opportunity available in a society. Nobody can reasonably object to a person possessing greater natural abilities than another. However, one can reasonably object to a society where some people acquire opportunities to develop their talents, while other people are denied such opportunities on the grounds of class, gender, race or some other socially determined inequalities. We will now examine how these inequalities might be rectified or moderated.

Distributional, or secondary, equality

If inequality is a consequence of nature, little can be done to alleviate it; if, however, society is responsible, equality can be promoted by changing social conditions and providing the means for people to realise their full potential.

The two major areas governed by distributional equality are equality of opportunity and equality of outcome.

Equality of opportunity

Egalitarians claim that the absence of equal opportunities programmes, or their ineffective implementation, is morally unjust and economically inefficient. It is unjust that people are unable to have the chances to realise what they are capable of and inefficient that talent is wasted while the less able, but more privileged, get access to economic and political power they are incapable of using effectively. Society is damaged by inequality. It is less prosperous than it might be and less united, less cohesive. Political action is required to rectify this undesirable situation: 'Because men are men social institutions . . . should be planned, as far as possible, to emphasise and strengthen, not the . . . differences which divide, but the common humanity which unites, them'.³

This principle is generally accepted across the political spectrum. Conservatism (a political stance not usually associated with equality) claims 'equality of opportunity' as a desirable goal of social policy. Conservatives advocate a 'levelling up' rather than a 'levelling down' (as they accuse their leftist opponents of wanting), if for no other reason than claiming to be interested in 'equality' to attract votes. However, they would be opposed to the rise in taxes needed to give all schoolchildren the resources of their counterparts at Eton.

Nevertheless, both Labour and Conservative governments since the Second World War have steadily increased public spending (with concomitant tax rises), providing greater equal opportunities through welfare state policies that originated in the 1940s. Members of all political parties (and none) created the bases for the egalitarian nature of the post-war consensus in welfare, education, employment and health.

William Beveridge (a New Liberal) produced his 1942 report, *Full Employment in a Free Society*, on the provision of 'cradle to grave' welfare protection within a National Insurance scheme and universal benefits for *all* citizens irrespective of wealth or poverty. Conservative politician R. A. Butler's *Education Act* (1944) created an education system based on elitism but with greater equality of educational provision and more opportunities for children than had ever existed. J. M. Keynes (another New Liberal) produced an employment white paper (1944) which committed governments to maintaining full employment using state economic intervention. Finally, the Labour Government introduced the National Health Service Act (1946) to establish a greater equality of health provision in Britain than had ever existed before.

All of these measures, influenced by principles of **collectivism**, were related to increasing equal opportunity in society along distributional lines. All involved creating a united society around common institutions guaranteeing an

equality of basic services, available to all on the basis of need.

However admirable these institutions (and their counterparts in other countries) may be, egalitarians realise that people have a different starting point in life. Advantages of income, parental education, social environment and so on, ensure that some individuals have *greater* opportunities for achievement than others do. Equal opportunity ideals might have influenced the welfare state and some aspects of government policy for decades now but massive inequalities of opportunity remain in British society, inequalities that are unlikely to be significantly reduced without unacceptably high levels of state interference in family life and personal liberty.

collectivism

The belief that co-operative effort is the best way to achieve human goals; often taken to imply common ownership of property.

Equality of outcome

‘Merit’ may well be the modern basis of rewards and achievement in society but equality of opportunity, even if it were possible, does not justify equality of rewards. As Margaret Thatcher once bluntly stated: ‘What is equality of opportunity if it is not the opportunity to be unequal?’ Few egalitarians would disagree with her.

It is a matter of equality and justice that people should get paid the same for the same work and for work of equal worth without reference to personal characteristics of age, gender or race. Few egalitarians would support the idea of *equal* rewards for *unequal* work. Such a policy, most believe, would be unnatural and unjust and would remove incentives for effort and ability, incentives vital for the economic and cultural advancement of society. Obviously, most egalitarians would be in favour of a basic wage, a ‘minimum wage’, to ensure an equal starting point for income and to enable people to fulfil their basic needs of food, clothing, shelter and warmth. Most egalitarians would also favour a ‘maximum wage’ and taxes to reduce levels of wealth accumulation. As Rousseau declared in *The Social Contract* (1762): ‘no citizen shall be rich enough to buy another and none so poor as to be forced to sell himself’.⁴ Some egalitarians argue that such policies would *help* the rich by reducing the burden of wealth and the dangers of corruption associated with it.

Greater equality in outcomes, but not *total* equality, does seem to have social benefits. Scandinavian countries have very high levels of taxation on income and wealth and very high levels of distributional equality. Such societies do appear to have lower levels of crime, higher levels of social cohesion and more harmonious social relations than countries with greater social and economic inequalities, such as the USA and the UK. Indeed, there is little evidence to support the anti-egalitarian view that such societies lack incentives for effort

or are less free than Britain and the USA. Neither is there much to support the Marxist contention that inequality will only be removed when private property has been abolished. No Scandinavian country has supported the abolition of private property and unequal incomes in pursuit of greater social equality.

Group rights and equality

The discussion so far has concentrated on the essentially liberal doctrine of equal rights as being inherent in *individuals*. This principle was not generally accepted at the beginning of the nineteenth century but had been established in modern societies by the mid-twentieth century. For about 150 years political debate centred on the degree to which individual equality should or *could* be advanced by state intervention in health, education and welfare.

A great deal of equality was achieved by the creation of welfare systems, greater educational opportunities and access to healthcare. However, egalitarians became increasingly dissatisfied as the persistent inequalities in society blunted equality of opportunity for many people who were female, non-white or working class. Many women and many black and working-class people continue to succeed in Western societies, but fundamental inequalities remain for people as members of these and other social groups. Over the last thirty years or so there has developed the concept of 'group rights' to tackle these forms of inequality in society:

- gender equality;
- racial equality;
- class equality.

Gender equality

Feminists perceive debate about equality as being about equality between *males*. They point out that Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau and most political philosophers, regarded women as fundamentally inferior and not entitled to share equal democratic citizenship with men. Most feminists strongly believe that formal legal and political equality, finally achieved in Britain by the late 1920s, did not remove the remaining deep inequalities for women in income and career opportunities. From the early 1960s feminists campaigned with success for legal measures to advance female equality. In Britain a number of Acts of Parliament established a legal basis for female equality: the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) are the most prominent. However, great inequalities remain for women in job security, pay and career advancement. Mere legal reforms do not appear to have advanced women's equality as significantly or swiftly as feminists want. The struggle for gender equality goes on.

Racial equality

Few people outside the fascistic right would today claim that ethnic and racial groups are fundamentally inferior. Nevertheless British society does distribute rewards and penalties in a very unequal manner that results in most black and Asian people having higher levels of unemployment, lower incomes and greater overall poverty than their white neighbours. Black Britons have a higher rate of incarceration in prisons than white Britons and tend to serve longer sentences for the same offences. Legislation, from the Race Relations Act (1968) onwards, has removed most forms of overt discrimination from British society. But covert forms of discrimination continue to exist (usually called 'institutional' racism) and impede the development of non-white people in Britain.

Class equality

Marxists and the political left tend to believe that the fundamental problem of equality in society is the product of social class and the privileges and disadvantages that it confers. Class, rather than gender, race or some other group classification, is the major cause of inequality in society. An Asian businessman or female barrister does not have the same interests as an unskilled Asian textile worker or a part-time woman office cleaner. Address the issue of continuing class inequality in modern society and all the other issues of economic and social discrimination will be alleviated. This type of inequality is particularly related to the distributional equality discussed earlier.

The exercising of group rights and group equality seems to undermine the liberal concept of *individual* rights and *individual* equality as the central concern of political discourse. Group-rights theorists argue for unequal treatment for women and ethnic or racial minorities to overcome their unequal treatment in society. One might have 'quotas' of women and non-whites in education or job appointments to reflect their numbers in society. Such a policy might be combined with 'positive discrimination' to offer opportunities to groups who have suffered past discrimination and disadvantage if other things are equal between candidates.

However, critics argue that the selection of such 'disadvantaged' groups is often rather arbitrary and favours those who can 'shout the loudest'. They also claim that 'equal opportunities' doctrines do little to help those who are disadvantaged but provides many opportunities for those who get jobs in the race relations and equal opportunities 'industry'. Finally, critics believe that equality as a principle is undermined by making some groups more 'equal' than others on the grounds of race or sex. They claim that 'positive discrimination', as this principle is called, causes resentment among those who are not 'privileged' to be members of a 'disadvantaged' group. Group equality will remain as an issue in contemporary political debate.

Equality in international society

We have observed the issue of equality as it pertains to individuals and groups. This principle also applies to international society, where the members of the community are not individuals but nations and sovereign states. We have discussed the issues surrounding national self-determination and state sovereignty elsewhere, but it is worth mentioning them again here.

National self-determination refers to the principle that all nations have an equal right to be independent and self-governing – free, that is, of being ruled by people from another nation within an empire. Nations are notoriously difficult to define, but one might describe them as a body of people having some shared sense of belonging together by dint of language, history, culture, geographical proximity and so on.

National self-determination was a rallying cause of nationalists within the Turkish and Austro-Hungarian empires during the nineteenth century. At the Versailles Peace Treaty (1919) this principle was enshrined in international law (although it only initially applied to nations within the defeated powers, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey). After the Second World War national self-determination was used by nationalists in European colonial empires to demand independence. In the modern world the equality of nations is a principle that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the disintegration of Yugoslavia throughout the 1990s. It remains a major principle in international law and politics.

States are recognised as sovereign legal entities in international society. This is a very important principle on which international law and international institutions, such as the European Union and the United Nations, rest. The UN General Assembly, for example, enshrines this legal equality in the principle of ‘one state, one vote’. However, as in domestic society, there are great differences between the *principle* of equality and the notable differences in *power* existing between members of that society. States are unequal in their military capacity, economic power and technological prowess. This guarantees a massive inequality in the ability of states to protect and advance their interests in international society.

The principle of state equality before international law remains. However, states are obliged to obey only those laws that they have agreed to in an international treaty. Even then, a state can give notice if it intends to withdraw from a treaty, or if national security precludes its involvement in a particular court case. States are not subject to a higher authority in international law. The power of strong states has to be recognised by weaker ones. But no legal authority exists over one state by another, unless by an agreed international treaty, unlike in domestic society where the state imposes a legal equality on all individual and group members.

It is to domestic society that we must return to conclude our discussion of equality.

The decline of equality

It is to be hoped that by now you will be aware that equality is an important issue in political discourse. Nevertheless, as we stated right at the start of this chapter, equality remains the ‘poor relation’ of liberty in political theory. Freedom is always a more appealing concept than equality. If anything, the last quarter of a century or so has seen a decline in the fortunes of equality and a rise in those of liberty in modern political struggle. Why might this be so? We shall suggest a number of reasons, although they are by no means an exhaustive collection.

Western societies are permeated by ideological beliefs and social structures that militate against equality, especially collectivist measures to enhance equality. Individual ‘liberty’ and ‘choice’ remain the dominant ideology, and social policies reflect this. Egalitarian policies and institutions have a limited role in comparison. The ideological stress on *freedom* over *equality* ensures that the most powerful economic and social forces are those of the capitalist free market. Public-sector services are perceived as merely a safety net for when the private option is unavailable or too expensive. No British government has been willing to reduce tax and other incentives to, say, private health and educational provision let alone take steps to abolish them. No government has been prepared to raise taxes to the level needed to provide resources sufficient to make state services so attractive that private provision ‘withers on the vine’. In fact the trend in recent decades has been to extend the role of the private sector in the provision of health, education and pension provision.

Most politicians and also the public place a greater priority on liberty over equality in their policy preferences. There is no great constituency among voters for extending state provision and raising taxes to pay for it, with the possible exception of the health service. This, of course, may simply be a reflection of the powerful anti-egalitarian ideological elements in Western societies. It may, however, be more the result of the growth of new class and income structures in society that reinforce a commitment to liberty rather than equality. Big industries with large workforces, infused with collectivist and egalitarian beliefs (industries such as coal, steel, shipbuilding, heavy engineering), have largely disappeared, to be replaced by a growing white-collar and professional sector, non-unionised and influenced by individualist ideological assumptions, including the priority of freedom over equality. The ‘new’ workers in the expanding middle classes do not believe that increasing taxes to pay for greater redistribution in pursuit of greater social equality – taxes they would largely have to find – would be in their interests, and

middle-class voters have considerable power to ensure that their interests are protected.

Scepticism among voters about egalitarian policies is reinforced by their awareness that the tax burden to pay for redistributive policies tends to fall on the poor and middle-income groups. In Britain, for example, there is an upper limit on the amount people pay in National Insurance contributions, an amount which remains the same above a prescribed income level. Despite some minor changes in the National Insurance ceiling announced in the 2002 Budget, higher earners pay proportionally less of their income on welfare payments than others, hardly an egalitarian measure. Many studies of the welfare state reveal that middle-income people and the better off benefit disproportionately from the welfare state: they are more likely to stay on in education, demand more from the health services, and draw their state pensions for longer than the poor.

In Britain and most other Western societies there has been little effort to challenge dominant ideological assumptions that militate against equality. Similarly there has been little effort by governments to tackle the *sources* of inequality in society. There has been no sustained challenge to economic and social inequalities, most of which originate in the capitalist and private sectors. In fact, state and welfare systems are viewed as a drain on the productive private sector of the economy and as weakening initiative and effort, especially of the poor (an idea that has changed little since the Poor Law reforms of the early nineteenth century). There has been little attempt to integrate the public and private sectors to increase social equality and little desire to do so.

One can set declining interest in equality in Britain within an international context. The decline and fall of the Soviet Union removed a major force for equality in the West. The USSR was oppressive, bureaucratic and a disaster for its own working class. But it was of great benefit to the Western working classes as their governments created welfare systems to 'tame' capitalism and make it more attractive in comparison to the socialist alternative in the East. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism exposed not only the bankruptcy of socialism but also the apparent failure of egalitarian policies as pursued by the Soviet Union. The globalised economy of the post-Cold War world has been dominated by the USA and large corporations. Acting on free-market principles, it has reinforced inequality both within societies and between nations and regions.

There seems little likelihood that equality will move up the political agenda in the foreseeable future, but the problems remain. Social inequality and poverty in Western societies are sources of instability and crime, insecurity and fear that will have to be addressed at some point. Similarly, the increasing

inequality between people in different countries is one source of war, disturbance and mass migration that will also have to be alleviated if the hopes of a peaceful and prosperous world stand any chance of being realised in the twenty-first century.

Summary

Equality is a word capable of several different meanings. One can speak of 'primary' equality, which is the claim that, whatever the actual circumstances, all human beings are 'equal' by virtue of being human. However, even if this is conceded, it has little practical consequence unless one accepts a range of other 'equalities' such as equality of consideration, equality before the law, political equality and equal opportunities. These different forms of equality have proved highly contentious. One of the main divisions lies between those who advocate equality of outcome and those who favour equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity may be a fine thing, but it must include the opportunity for unequal outcomes if liberty is to be respected. Equality as a goal of social policy seems currently to be out of fashion, though in the West there is a general consensus on the desirability of such 'group' equalities as gender equality and race equality which are important elements in achieving greater liberty for disadvantaged groups.

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SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- 1 To what extent is inequality incompatible with democracy?
- 2 Is 'equality before the law' a 'fig leaf' concealing the privileges of the rich?
- 3 To what extent and in what ways do British political parties differ in their commitment to equality?
- 4 Is it possible to make a serious case for the existence of primary equality? Is this not merely a figment of the imagination of political and social idealists?
- 5 'The concept of group inequality, and the need to rectify supposed injustices based on this idea, is a dangerous distraction from the essential issue of creating the conditions for greater equality between individuals.' Discuss.

