

ISSN 1363-5964

# Imprints

Elizabeth Anderson

Interview

John Baker

Equality: What, Who,  
Where?

Jenny Keeble

What do Multi-National  
Corporations Owe the  
World's Poor?

Alex Callinicos

Reviews Diamond on  
How Societies Choose to  
Fail or Survive

Steven R. Smith

Reviews Baker et al. on  
Equality: Theory & Action

egalitarian theory and practice

vol. 9 no. 1 2005

£6.00

# IMPRINTS

egalitarian theory and practice

VOLUME 9

2005

NUMBER 1

- 3 Egalitarian Theory and Practice:  
An Interview with Elizabeth Anderson
- 29 Equality: What, Who, Where?  
*by John Baker*
- 42 What do Multi-National Corporations Owe the  
World's Poor?  
*by Jenny Keeble*
- REVIEWS
- 62 Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to  
Fail or Survive*  
*Reviewed by Alex Callinicos*
- 75 John Baker, Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon, and  
Judy Walsh's *Equality: From Theory To Action*  
*Reviewed by Steven R. Smith*
- 85 Subscription Information
- 86 Notes for Contributors
- 88 Contributors to this Issue



*IMPRINTS* aims to promote a critical discussion of egalitarian and socialist ideas, freed from theoretical dogma but committed to the viability of an egalitarian and democratic politics, and open to the possibility of such politics at the international level. We take for granted that most societies in the world are characterised by class oppression, but that class division does not exhaust the unjust inequalities to which their peoples are subject.

Contributions are invited on topics such as the theory and practice of equality in domestic and global contexts, the theory of history, the normative foundations of social inquiry; and on social inequality, political practice, and institutional change. The criteria for the acceptance of papers include analytical power and empirical rigour; no school of thought or intellectual tradition is excluded, though we are committed to the view that the world remains a rationally intelligible place.

---

*Editor*

Catriona McKinnon

*Associate Editors*

Christopher Bertram

Harry Brighthouse

Alan Carling

Saladin Meckled-Garcia

Axel Gosseries

Jeremy Moss

Steve Smith

Published three times a year by the *Imprints* editorial collective.

ISSN 1363–5964

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or be transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, recording, photocopying or otherwise) without the written permission of the *Imprints* editorial collective.

Copyright © *Imprints* 2005

Interview:

## Egalitarian Theory and Practice: An Interview with Elizabeth Anderson<sup>1</sup>

*What brought you to political philosophy, and who do you consider to be your greatest influences?*

I owe a lot to my father, who got me interested in political philosophy as a teenager. Together we read Mill's *On Liberty*, parts of Plato's *Republic*, and many works by libertarians such as Hayek and Friedman. Political discussion was always a featured topic of conversation at the dinner table. At Swarthmore College, I studied the history and philosophy of science under Hugh Lacey. His splendid work on the interaction of facts and values in science continues to influence on my thinking. He also introduced me to a way of doing philosophy that engaged empirical research, a method I have found as fruitful for political philosophy as for the philosophy of science. John Rawls, my dissertation advisor, was also a strong influence, less for the specific content of his contractualism than for his general approach to political

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to Paula Casal and Andrew Williams for additional questions.



philosophy. I learned a lot from his magisterial perspective on the history of philosophy, his pragmatism, and his 'political' approach to political philosophy.

The philosophical figures who have most influenced my thinking are Mill, Kant, and Dewey. When I was at Harvard, Dewey's texts were rarely assigned, but the spirit of pragmatism pervaded the philosophy department. When I decided to study Dewey seriously, years after I earned my Ph.D., I found that he was articulating ideas that I had long held inchoately. I must also mention Amartya Sen, who was my Hume, awakening me from my dogmatic slumber, which in my teens consisted in naïve libertarian faith in the economic theory of rational choice and the superiority of unregulated markets for solving all problems.

*You mentioned that Amartya Sen's work woke you from your 'dogmatic slumbers'. Could you expand on how Amartya Sen's work is influential in your current research, and comment in particular on the importance of the capability approach?*

Sen's work has influenced me in many ways. His work on famine is exemplary for its nuanced, empirically informed investigation of the role of markets in both generating *and* helping to eliminate famine. It's a beautiful example of a strategy I have pursued in my own work: neither to embrace free markets as the solution to all problems, nor to reject them as inherently oppressive, but to carefully define their role so that we can make best use of what they do well, while limiting them where they tend to go wrong. His work on how democracy prevents famine also opens up a huge realm of investigation into the *epistemological* functions of democratic institutions – the ways they collect and use dispersed, socially situated information about how society is working. This provides a major point of intersection with my research on feminist epistemology, which is crucially focused on the proper uses of socially situated knowledge, which varies according to the social position of the knower.

Sen's work on freedom, opportunity, and development is also of great importance to me. He has shown how libertarian conceptions of freedom are flawed for their obsessive focus on processes to the exclusion of outcomes, even though we often value processes for the outcomes we expect them to be able to secure. Once we view freedom in terms of

opportunity sets (although that's not all that freedom consists in), we can devise a workable notion of freedom for purposes of political economy. That's where the capability approach comes in. Measures of outcomes in terms of capabilities steer a happy medium between preference-based measures and resource based measures. Subjective (preference-based) measures are flawed because they underweight the objective interests of individuals whose desires have adapted to oppressive circumstances, overweight the interests of fanatics and spoiled brats, usually fail to screen out antisocial preferences, cannot satisfy the publicity condition, and fail to explain why, just because some individual wants something, they are entitled to appeal to the coercive apparatus of the state to secure it for themselves. Objective measures are able to satisfy the publicity condition, and are better able to respect the equality of citizens. They properly limit state objectives to securing *political* goods – that is, things that can be recognised in a political conception of justice as goods citizens owe one another and may use the state's coercive powers to obtain. That still leaves a broad choice between resourcist views and capability conceptions. Here I think several considerations weigh in favour of capability measures. As Sen notes, individuals vary in their ability to convert resources into valued outcomes. Many of these variations are of proper political concern, because they implicate the ability of citizens to function as equals, to the extent that this is possible. Capability measures help us see why extra resources may be needed by the disabled, especially in matters of health care and education. They also call attention to a wide variety of injustices that resourcist views have a hard time handling. Consider, for example, the injustices of stigmatisation. Sen has this marvellous example: the capability to appear in public without shame. Some cultures enforce a norm that the disabled should remain hidden. No amount of money you can give the disabled can make up for that. But the state should take action against this injustice, for example, by integrating the disabled into its own institutions (for example, mainstreaming disabled children, to the extent feasible, into 'normal' classrooms). Resourcist views place far too much emphasis on money and other individually distributed goods, to the neglect of other issues such as the ways public infrastructures and norms exclude or include different people as equals and the ways group stereotypes and stigma keep people down.



*In much of your work – on, for example, cost benefit analysis, and women's labour – you engage directly with the details of existing policies and institutions, the actual workings of political procedures and economic processes, and the content of common-sense judgements about value. Should political philosophers be doing more of this kind of work?*

Yes. We philosophers have a tendency, begotten by our misguided confidence in *a priori* reasoning, that we can figure out what is right and just without bothering with pesky empirical matters. Those are merely administrative details, many of us seem to think. Objections arising from the consequences of implementing political ideals are dismissed as merely 'pragmatic' rather than principled, and hence as not touching the worthiness of the ideal. Ideal theory is valorised over non-ideal theory, even when it is conceded that numerous practical objections to an ideal suffice to remove it from the table of alternatives worthy of significant pursuit. These argumentative moves rationalise our woefully poor training in the social sciences.

Political philosophy needs to become empirically responsible. Political ideas have *consequences*, and it is by their consequences that they must be judged. Here I am not affirming consequentialism as a moral theory, but rather pragmatism as a theory of how we learn about the good and the right. Pragmatism tells us to treat value judgements as hypotheses. We test them by living in accordance with them, and seeing whether doing so solves the problems for which they were devised. We should make new value judgements when we find that our old ones don't solve the problems for which they were devised, when new problems arise for which our current value judgements offer no satisfactory solutions, and when we come up with alternatives that can better solve our problems.

We political philosophers should revise our practices in the way philosophers of science did decades ago when they rejected classical empiricism. The classical empiricists thought that we could know *a priori* the terms in which empirical truths must ultimately be cast – as complexes of colours, shapes, and other sensory data. The history of epistemology and philosophy of science showed that path to lead to a dead end. Philosophers of science have learned that to do their job, they need to learn a lot of science. They need to draw their problems from

engagement with the problems scientists face, attending to the terms scientists have devised to explain the world.

Much of today's moral and political theory, whether it takes a consequentialist or deontological perspective, shared the defects of classical empiricism. It supposes that we can know *a priori* the terms in which normative assessment must be conducted. Consequentialists, for instance, typically presume that these terms involve sums of pleasure, or subjective preference satisfaction, perhaps weighted by some other factor, such as desert. Mill demolished Bentham's monistic theory of the good by exposing irresolvable problems that arose in living in accordance with its terms. In his autobiography, Mill showed how he needed a richer normative vocabulary (qualitative distinctions among pleasures) to make sense of his problems and his life.

The lesson I draw from Mill and Dewey is that our normative frameworks must be subject to testing in experience. This leads us away from consequentialism and deontology, which purport to produce a formula for right action sufficient to specify a decision procedure in ethics, toward pragmatism, which tells us how to improve our normative ideas, without promising any ultimate answers – fixed goals or absolute rules of right. Improvement comes from careful attention to the consequences of acting in accordance with our ideas, which can show us whether they deliver what they promise, or lead to unforeseen problems whose solution may require revisions of our normative ideas. Think, for instance, of the lesson liberals drew from the wars of religion: that it was folly to suppose that religious conformity was essential to social order. That conclusion could not be fully vindicated until an alternative conception of social order, based on sphere differentiation (for starters, a basic public/private distinction, with religious belief relegated to the private sphere) was tried and found conducive to peace and stability.

Like philosophers of science, we political philosophers need to draw our problems from our subject of study, which in our case is politics, considered as a real-world practice. We need to draw our problems from engagement with the political problems people actually face, which requires attention to the ways they make sense of those problems, and the observed consequences of different ways of dealing with them.

*You are highly critical of cost benefit analysis, at least as it is practised by policy makers in the United States. However, with respect to addressing the imminent problem of climate change, cost benefit*



*analysis looks like the only game in town. In that case, do you think that philosophers can help 'green' campaigners to play that game in such a way as to promote global initiatives to tackle climate change?*

Let's distinguish an informal and a formal meaning of cost-benefit analysis. In the informal sense, cost-benefit analysis tells us what the consequences of alternative policy paths are, and what it will take to implement these different paths. It might tell us that if we do nothing to change our fossil-fuel consumption habits, resulting floods in Bangladesh will make millions homeless, numerous Pacific island states will go under, drought in Africa will lead to famine, political instability, and warfare, many Arctic species will go extinct, and malaria will spread to North America. It might tell us that to prevent such consequences, we'll have to switch to alternative fuels and energy-conserving technology, pay much higher prices for carbon-based energy, and endure substantial transitional costs of unemployment as energy-intensive industries shrink. Any responsible approach to climate change must consider the costs and benefits of alternative policy paths in this informal, unaggregated sense.

Formal cost-benefit analysis does four things beyond this: it reduces all the consequences to a common denominator, expresses that common denominator in monetary terms, measures the monetary costs and benefits of alternatives in terms of what individuals are willing to pay for similar benefits provided by the market, and ranks alternatives according to their net aggregate monetary value, ignoring distributive considerations. We have strong reason to resist each of these moves. Values are irreducibly plural; there is no sound formula for aggregating them; political decisions are about what we citizens shall will together, not about what each consumer would choose on the basis of their private preferences; distributive consequences matter.

Green campaigners would play a fool's game were they to agree to limit the terms of political debate to the terms of formal cost-benefit analysis. Which is more likely to persuade people that they must take action on global warming – vivid, concrete descriptions of the myriad harms of inaction – from famine, destructive storms, and mass extinctions to warfare, disease and loss of precious coastal areas – or some arid dollar figure of future losses, discounted to its present value?

Fortunately, formal cost-benefit analysis is not the 'only game in town.' Indeed, in the case of climate change environmentalists enjoy the rhetorical advantage. People already talk about environmental policies in terms of diverse unaggregated concrete consequences – death, disease, hunger, homelessness, species loss – rather than in terms of the present discounted monetary value of the loss of a statistical life, or of a species. Our common-sense ways of talking about policy are superior to the technocratic rhetoric of formal cost-benefit analysis.

This does not mean that common-sense ways of thinking are always right. Most of our common-sense ways of thinking arose at a time when we were not aware of the long-term global impacts of our behaviours. These parochial ways of thinking have been incorporated into our ideas about property rights and national sovereignty, for instance. Philosophers can play a role in exposing the limitations of these ideas and proposing revisions better suited to our globalized world.

*You are doing work on taxation. Which kind of contribution can philosophers bring on this topic?*

Controversies over taxation reach to core ideas about property rights and distributive justice. Current political rhetoric about taxation, as well as contemporary economic theory, depends on a philosophical fiction – that there exists a distribution of income that would be produced by the 'pure' free market – an unregulated market economy – against which degrees of 'redistribution' or inefficiency can be measured. But there is not first a 'real' distribution, and then some state 'interference' with that distribution via a system of taxation. Taxation is a constitutive part of a single, unified system of property rights and claims, which is artificial, *all the way down* – a point that Liam Murphy and Thomas Nagel have also made in their book, *The Myth of Ownership*.

Overcoming the philosophical myth of a 'natural' domain of property and free markets is critical to a larger project in political economy. We need to develop a typology of feasible systems of political economy suited to our post-Cold War, globalized world. Communism and socialism (understood as comprehensive state ownership and control of industry) are now understood to be no more viable than feudalism. All of the credible options require granting very large roles to private property and markets – that is, to some version of capitalism.



Popular political rhetoric and political philosophy alike have not kept up with these developments. A grave error was to concede to libertarians their favoured characterisation of capitalism as involving some form of absolute or deontological property rights along with virtually unregulated freedom of contract and full alienability of property, even in the person. I have argued in my blog-posts and other work that capitalism as we know it does not involve either of these features and indeed is inconsistent with them. Capitalism requires innovation in property rights; it is stymied by fixed, supposedly natural and deontological property rights. Consider, for example, the critical role bankruptcy plays in enhancing the dynamism of capitalist enterprise and in ensuring that people stay productively engaged. Most of those failed .com entrepreneurs from the 90s are back in business after the bubble burst. In our pre-capitalist system, they would have been rotting in debtor's prison, or reduced to debt peonage. In offering relief from creditors and cancellation of debts, bankruptcy abrogates what libertarians would think of as absolute property rights of creditors. (Keep in mind that debtors were sent to prison at the will of their creditors, not at the will of the state.) There is no basis in natural property rights for bankruptcy, but capitalism cannot flourish without it. Libertarians cannot account for this.

The system libertarians favour really amounts to what I have called contract feudalism. Feudalism was based on two principles: that possession of private property grounds the right to rule others (employees, tenants), and that property rules be designed to keep property within family lines. Libertarians reject the second, aristocratic principle, but allow the first, anti-democratic principle. Hence, their property rules accept quasi-feudal contractual arrangements such as debt peonage, indentured servitude, company towns, payment of workers in scrip rather than cash (redeemable only at company-owned stores), and discriminatory uses of private property designed to maintain caste systems, including caste hierarchies of race and gender. According to libertarians, if competition manages to eliminate these abuses, that's OK, but if it doesn't, that's OK, too.

So our standard typology of economic forms is not only obsolete, in including systems now known to be infeasible, but radically misconceived, in failing to offer an adequate characterisation of the

systems we have. Capitalism is now the only game in town, but the actual and feasible variants of capitalism are *highly* diverse and have not yet been adequately understood or fruitfully classified. (The so-called 'mixed' economy, I have argued in my blog, is also a misnomer.)

Studying modern taxation offers us an entry point into this problem, once we understand it to be integral to the artificial systems of property essential to capitalism, rather than as an external interference with some mythical self-defined 'natural' domain of private property. We also need to endogenize preference formation under capitalism. Capitalism has helped change our aspirations and self-conceptions – away from a culture of honour, hierarchies of birth, and personal subjection toward a culture of respect, equality, and personal independence. Norms of property and exchange have altered in response, but do not fully embody these aspirations. Hence, the persistence of our quasi-caste systems of race and gender, along with elements of contract feudalism. The theme I have been developing in my blog-posts, as well as my work on bankruptcy, is that the same arguments that justify private property justify social insurance and regulations of contracts. These should be seen as constitutive of a dominant version of capitalism, rather than a challenge to it. Capitalism is far more flexible than either its adherents or its critics give it credit for.

*What do you consider as interesting recent developments on the choice/circumstance distinction (if any)?*

For purposes of distributive justice, it's a hopeless distinction. We should abandon the project of trying to draw it as misguided from the start. The felt need to draw this distinction comes from the thought that the demands of distributive justice should be cast in terms of particular patterns of distribution. Perfect equality of outcome is unacceptable because that would unfairly burden responsible people with the costs of making up for the irresponsible decisions of others. Alternatively, on Arneson's view it is unacceptable because considerations of desert should also bear on the determination of just distributive outcomes. For either reason or both, luck egalitarians need to modify equal outcomes with moral appraisals of personal responsibility. This requires that they draw a line between outcomes that are attributable to free choice and outcomes attributable to circumstantial factors beyond the individual's control.



By contrast, I agree with Rawls that fair distributions are a matter of pure procedural justice. Citizens are responsible for ensuring that each of us has effective access to a package of goods needed for equal standing. Citizens capable of cooperation get access to that package by participating in the system of cooperation, the rules of which define what goods an individual can expect for filling each cooperative role in the system. What goods people actually end up with over time depends on their choices between labour and leisure, saving and consumption, and between different occupations. As long as the rules defining expectations are fair, any distribution that results from following the rules is just. Citizens do not concern themselves with whether individuals are morally at fault for the choices they make, or whether they couldn't help themselves. They are only responsible for assuring certain expectations or opportunity sets to one another. Moral assessments of how well or poorly they use their opportunities are irrelevant to a political conception of justice.

Judgements of personal responsibility are necessary when people break the rules (in criminal law and civil suits). But the last thing we should want is for such judgements to play a normal role in determining global distributions. A system in which the state is looking over one's shoulder at each of one's choices, judging how responsibly one has used one's liberties, is incompatible with a free society. I do not care to be put on moral trial in order to determine my fair share. Moreover, the attempt to draw the line between choice and circumstance entangles politics in irresolvable metaphysical conundrums over free will and determinism. One may as well try to run society on the premise that people's fair shares are to be determined by whether they are saved or damned by God. The state can't be trusted with global judgements of personal responsibility for each person's decisions: it would involve outrageous invasions of privacy; unleash bitter and irreconcilable conflicts over where to draw the line, and generate perverse incentives – for moralising busybodies to seize control over distributive tribunals, and for everyone else to devote their energies to persuade others to conceive of them as hapless victims.

A system that directs people's energies instead to thinking of ways to serve others' interests – which well-regulated markets do – is vastly superior in its capacity to protect privacy, advance freedom, promote

cooperation, and generate wealth. For markets to promote these values, prices need to be free to vary so as to signal where current demand is, not where moral merit lies. This inevitably introduces an element of undeserved luck in distributions. To those who complain of bad luck, the proper response is not to give them an opportunity to whine before some hard luck compensation board, but to point out to them that they can attain equal standing by exercising the powers they have to contribute to the system of cooperation. Since citizens are not entitled to claim more than this from one another, the unlucky have no grounds for complaint.

*Though you rely on Rawls's view of the role of pure procedural justice in determining individuals' fair shares, and have employed his term 'democratic equality' to refer your favoured conception of economic justice, you appear to reject both Rawlsian fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle, and instead affirm far less radically egalitarian principles. When did you become dissatisfied with these Rawlsian principles, and what arguments led you to reject them?*

Your question implies that I was at one time satisfied with Rawls' principles. To be sure, I studied under Rawls and learned a great deal from him. I do subscribe to his 'political, not metaphysical' approach to political philosophy. But I never found his second principle of justice convincing. I explain below why I think perfect equality of opportunity is a pipe-dream, and why attempts to achieve it would come at unacceptable cost to other important goods. This is another case, so common in political philosophy, where an aspiration has been erected into a principle before considering the costs of implementing it.

The difference principle suffers from many well-known weaknesses. As Brian Barry has argued, its derivation depends on excessively fine rigging of the conditions in the Original Position. But rather than fuss over the details, let me tell you a story that I think reveals a lot about why Rawls found the difference principle compelling. One day he invited me to lunch at the august Harvard Faculty Club (you have to broaden the a's and drop the r's to get the aristocratic feel of the place: 'Haaavaaad Faculty Club'). 'Order anything you want,' he said as I (starving graduate student) poured over the menu. Rawls ordered just a pot of hot water and a measly slice of American cheese. When they came, he pulled out from his pocket a teabag and two slices of generic



whole-wheat bread, between which he placed his cheese. 'Tea is my only vice!' he told me with a smile.

Obviously, Rawls was financially well-off (royalties from *A Theory of Justice* would have assured that). But even mundane middle-class pleasures like a decent restaurant meal, a nice suit, or a new car meant nothing to him. He'd come to seminar wearing a jacket and socks with holes in them. Occasionally he would drive me home after seminar (I lived in Somerville, which was on his way home) in 'the brown bomber,' a big old American car that I guess was manufactured in the 1960s. It's easy to embrace the difference principle for oneself if one is in a position to have wealth, but cares little for it. But not everyone has such Spartan tastes.

What I find odd is that Rawls supposes a certain asymmetry between the desires of the best-off and the worst-off (or, more precisely, the desires a chooser in the Original Position thinks she would have if she were later to find herself in either of those positions). The best-off are supposed not to care much about luxury, about getting more, as Rawls did not. But the worst-off are supposed to think it of very great importance to get as much more as they possibly can, no matter how objectively well off they already are. I don't see why preferences should differ so much depending on one's relative position in the distribution of wealth.

Egalitarianism was born out of aspirations to abolish social inequality, understood as a system of social relations in which superiors hold inferiors in contempt, oppress them, and shut them out of opportunities for advancement. Democratic equality, as Rawls and I both agree, is essentially opposed to this. The question is, what does it take to dismantle inegalitarian relations and secure the social equality of citizens? Rawls supposes that the income interests of the least materially advantaged are insatiable with respect to this project. I think this grossly exaggerates the connections between income inequality and social inequality. I believe the project of securing social equality among citizens involves satiable interests in income. Once the influence of wealth is suitably cabined in (so it can buy luxury, but not Senators), and everyone has enough to enjoy a secure and decent standard of living, more wealth does not make one superior to others. It just gives one access to lots of stuff that doesn't matter from a political point of view.

Some people care about getting lots of this stuff; others don't. Once citizens' satiable interests in securing social equality are satisfied, and the system secures for all a decent chance to get more, the state has no further interests of justice in micromanaging how the gains from cooperation are divided.

*Part of your argument against 'luck egalitarianism'— that its evocation of 'pity' and 'sympathy' toward those defined as 'disadvantaged' and 'worse-off' is condescending — has attracted criticism from liberal egalitarians such as Richard Arneson that you misconstrue what many versions of egalitarianism are actually promoting. What do you say to these criticisms in general, and, more specifically, do you think Arneson satisfactorily addresses the issues you have raised in respect to what his version of 'prioritarianism' or 'liberal egalitarian teleology' is seeking to recommend?*

Arneson advocates 'responsibility-catering prioritarianism.' Because his view is prioritarian, rather than egalitarian, it does not base distributions on comparative judgements (that A is, pitifully, worse off than B), but on absolute judgements of well-being. This is supposed to avoid the objection from pity (and the related objection from envy). While a pure prioritarian view can in principle avoid pitying the less advantaged, a view that modifies distributions according to judgements of individual desert or responsibility reintroduces pity into the system. To gain access to a fair share of goods, people will have to represent themselves as sad sacks, as pitiful victims of undeserved luck, lest their lesser share be judged to be their own fault.

Rather than running down a scattershot list of objections and replies, I'd like to place my most fundamental disagreements with luck egalitarians on the table. They don't focus just on the 'luck' or responsibility-catering aspect of their version of egalitarianism. They reflect core disagreements over what political philosophy is about and how to practice it. Here are three key ideas that I think should guide political philosophy:

1. Egalitarianism refers to a family of theories about political justice. Theories of justice essentially involve claims that persons can make on others, by themselves or through representatives. These claims consist in demands that others promote or respect one's interests.



Theories of *political* justice (as opposed to purely personal claims, such as arise in playing games among friends) essentially involve the use of organised coercion to enforce claims. To justify political theories of justice, one must show not only that the claims they endorse are morally sound but that they are of sufficient public interest to justify collective, coercive enforcement.

2. We cannot identify ultimate ends of political conduct in abstraction from the concrete problems of political life.
3. We cannot responsibly affirm as an ultimate end of political conduct what appeals to us merely in our idle moral fantasies, where we imagine the end existing apart from the means needed to realise it, and apart from the further consequences that would be brought about by trying to realise it. The determination of means is not merely a technical problem of figuring out how to achieve an end found appealing in idle reflection. It is integral to assessing the worthiness of the proposed end. To be morally responsible, therefore, political philosophy needs to be empirically responsible.

Much post-Rawlsian egalitarian thought, including that of luck egalitarians, has gone astray because it is not guided by these ideas. Many contemporary egalitarians ask us, for instance, to judge the moral desirability of different patterns of distribution across two distant planets: would it be better if planet A has one million people enjoying 50 utils each, and planet B has one million people enjoying 110 utils each; or if A and B each have one million people enjoying 75 utils each? This is precisely the wrong question for political philosophers to ask. Planets A and B cannot causally interact. So no claims of justice can arise between them. Whatever intuitions are being probed here, they are not intuitions of justice and cannot ground an egalitarian theory of justice. They seem either to belong to the realm of aesthetic judgements, or of fantasised divine judgements, asking what we would do if we were God, able to make the cosmos just as we like.

Even when these types of judgements are brought down to earth, by taking A and B to be two human societies, they are still of dubious political relevance. That we would approve of a pattern of distribution if it just happened does not justify using the coercive powers of the state to make people bring it about. To do that, one must show that the state of

affairs is one that people are entitled to demand that others bring about, that they have some valid complaint against others if they do not bring it about, of weighty enough significance that they may even call upon us to use coercion. One must also show that acceptable means exist that can bring about the distributive pattern, that doing so does not come at too great a cost to other values, such as freedom, privacy, and dignity, and that we can trust the state to realise this end without abusing the powers we give it. Most contemporary luck egalitarian literature brushes these concerns aside or relegates them to those irritating administrative details that supposedly don't touch the worthiness of the ideal. This is exemplary of the empirical irresponsibility of much contemporary political philosophy.

Contemporary egalitarianism also often identifies ultimate ends of political conduct in abstraction from the concrete problems of political life. Envy aside, how could the bare fact that others have more than me be a problem for me? The lack of an acceptable answer to this question makes me think that starting political reflection from egalitarian intuitions about desirable patterns of distribution, is wrongheaded. Prioritarians at least can ground their intuitions in the more acceptable sentiment of sympathy. But, as Arneson's work illustrates, they still tend to think that we can identify ultimate ends of political conduct in abstraction from consideration of the means needed to achieve them. Prioritarians have still not done the hard work of justifying the use of coercive means for sympathetically grounded ends, nor of justifying the overriding weight they give to sympathy over distinct moral sentiments such as dignity. No wonder their sympathy so often degenerates into pity. Moreover, many of the targets of contemporary egalitarian/prioritarian sympathy seem bizarrely idiosyncratic and apolitical – for example, idle surfers with an involuntary aversion to work, and those who can't manage to entertain themselves with inexpensive diversions. Even supposing that the people who have these conditions see them as problems, I see no reason why they demand public attention, much less why we should think they give rise to claims for compensation.

Democratic equality, by contrast, starts with real world problems of deprivation, oppression and contempt – the problems that have traditionally animated egalitarian political movements, and that ground the core political claims we already make on each other. It pays attention



to the costs of seeking different goals, the limitations of political institutions, and the need to justify coercion. It denies that our idle moral fantasies about what distributive patterns would be nice to occur is any guide at all to whether we should try to realise it.

*In your essay 'What is the point of equality?' you defend a conception of equality as real equality of status, where citizens are guaranteed the capability to function as equal co-members of a democratic society. How do you see this conception of what justice requires being extended beyond the boundaries of a single polity to the global arena?*

My work on democratic equality locates the proper role of equality in a theory of justice. It does not presume to offer an exhaustive account of the demands of justice. We have humanitarian duties to persons that apply beyond the bounds of any particular society. Humanitarian duties have nothing to do with equality. They tell us to end hunger, disease, and violence, not to equalise these evils. Nor are such duties based on a presumption of equal moral status. People can recognise that they have humanitarian duties to their pets, even if they reject the thought that animals and humans have equal moral status. Humanitarian duties must play a substantial role in any theory of global justice. But they do not extend beyond securing for people basic protection against cruelty, aggression, disease and severe deprivation.

Democratic equality is considerably more demanding than this. But its scope is limited to members of the same society, since its conception of equality is essentially relational. Claims of equality do not arise among people who are not interacting with one another in a common politico-economic system. That is why egalitarianism as a political movement has traditionally focused on state-centred policies.

Globalization challenges the state-centred conception of the boundaries of egalitarian justice. As capitalism extends the scope of economic cooperation, and organisations such as the WTO establish a regime of global governance (although limited to specific issues) we increasingly come to live in a common politico-economic system. Looking beyond trade, the scope of global cooperation will also need to be extended to deal with problems of climate change.

These developments extend the notional reach of claims to equality. The challenge is to figure out how global cooperative institutions may be

designed to avoid the evils of oppression (including imperialism and its functional equivalents) and, more ambitiously, to embody relations of equality. No direct deduction of egalitarian distributive patterns follows from globalization. Nor do I advocate a single world government, which is a dangerous fantasy. We are still experimenting with supra-national governing institutions to see what their potentials and limitations are. Philosophers should be watching the evolution of the European Union closely and cautiously, as an example of what can be gained and lost from supra-national governing bodies, rather than leaping to conclusions about what system would be best.

*Does your remark that 'claims of equality do not arise among people who are not interacting with one another in a common politico-economic system' imply that proposals to equalise states' entitlements to emit carbon dioxide into a shared atmosphere are plausible only amongst states that already trade with one another according to common rules? If so, is this conclusion at all plausible? Isn't it more plausible to assume some equal entitlement to share in the value of natural resources, which requires, rather than relies upon, the existence of certain global political and economic institutions?*

First let's distinguish the claims of humanity from the claims of equality. If carbon emissions are causing climate changes that undermine the capacities of poor countries to feed and house their populations, they have valid claims to humanitarian assistance from any country in a position to help them, whether or not they trade with that country. We also all have humanitarian duties to *avoid* causing catastrophes in any other country, whether we trade with them or not. These humanitarian duties are sufficient to justify the establishment of global institutions needed to limit carbon emissions. They have nothing to do with equality.

Emission entitlements arise in the context of arrangements for sharing the burdens of reducing emissions. In practice, the states that are too isolated to have trading relations with others are too poor to be significant factors in the emissions problem, and for the most part lack the administrative ability to effectively regulate their emissions. They will remain that way until they are integrated into the system of world trade. So in practice, agreements sharing out the burdens of emissions reduction wouldn't affect them anyway, until they join the global economy.



So now let's think about what would be just arrangements for distributing emissions entitlements. You talk about equalising 'states' entitlements,' but I assume you can't mean that Luxembourg should get the same entitlements as China. Presumably you mean that each *individual* is entitled to an equal per capita emissions entitlement. Yet, it would be impossible and foolish to administer emissions entitlements at the individual level. The monitoring costs would be prohibitive, especially given that not all sources of greenhouse gases are sold in the formal (hence regulable) market, and many emissions are done to corporate entities rather than individuals. Moreover, it would be gratuitously costly to expect individuals to do all the adjusting in an uncoordinated way, because state-level policy choices, for example in constructing infrastructure, are vastly cheaper and more effective in reducing emissions than uncoordinated individual conservation efforts could be. So the assumption behind your question, that somehow states will need to be responsible for managing emissions entitlements, is correct.

Perhaps your question should be interpreted to mean, then, that each state should be given an emissions entitlement proportional to its population size, such that per capita emissions in each country would be equal. Consider some numbers. Climate scientists estimate that the environmentally sustainable emissions rate is one ton of carbon dioxide per person per year. The average US citizen emits 4 tons; the average EU citizen, 3 tons; the average Bangladeshi, 0.1 tons. We cannot implement 1 ton per person overnight. The economic infrastructures of rich countries are not geared to enable production under this constraint, and would immediately collapse under it, with consequent collapse of the system of world trade and all the poorer countries that rely on it.

One way to mitigate this problem would be to implement global emissions trading. This would direct emission reductions to where they are most cheaply implemented. Some kind of cap-and-trade regime will be an indispensable part of any viable system for addressing global warming. But even with cap-and-trade, the implementation of equal per capita emissions would cause wrenching economic dislocations. This would not merely affect prosperous people in First World countries. A world emissions market would set a single global price for emissions rights that might outstrip the ability of very poor individuals, and individuals in very cold climates, to pay for the fuel they need to survive.

That would drive them to seek non-marketed, poorly regulated fuel, such as wood poached from forests, which causes even greater carbon emissions per unit of energy than marketed fuels such as kerosene, as well as other environmental damage. Furthermore, granting states equal per capita emissions rights would give those whose populations emit below their quota a perverse incentive to grow their populations, so as to acquire more tradable emissions rights. There is spectacular waste even in countries where per capita emissions are low. India, Indonesia, and Nigeria heavily subsidise energy consumption. In some Indian states, electricity is provided for free. Of course, only the middle class is in a position to benefit from this. Leaving administration of energy policy up to states under an equal per capita regime would effectively give a free pass to states like India to continue their outrageous subsidies of wasteful middle-class energy consumption by dedicating emissions 'credits' from their destitute, low-energy consuming population to this end.

A reasonable global warming policy will need to balance at least 4 objectives. First, reduce total emissions to a globally sustainable level in the cheapest way possible. This efficiency concern argues for some kind of global cap-and-trade regime. Second, enable all individuals to consume enough fuel to live a minimally decent life. This humanitarian concern argues for reducing the costs of fuel to the very poor and those who can't move to warmer climates, and thereby modifying the impact of a pure free market in emissions rights. Third, avoid perverse intrastate incentives to grow the population, shift to unregulated, more polluting fuel sources, and use the unused emissions rights of the poor to subsidise waste by the middle class. Fourth, avoid excessive transition costs in moving to a regime of environmentally sustainable emissions. Each of these objectives leads us away from the original assumption that everyone, or each country, should get an equal per capita emissions right. A just, environmentally sustainable global energy policy will in practice lead to substantial convergence between the per capita emissions of the rich and poor countries. The rich countries will need to drastically reduce their emissions, because they are the main cause of the problem, and the poor countries will need room to grow. But poor countries, even those well under average-per-capita emissions, will need to feel real costs from wasteful emissions, lest they lock themselves into radically sub-optimal energy infrastructures. (This is urgent from a



global perspective. Consider that China, at current rates of growth, will soon match the US's total carbon emissions even though its per capita rate of emission will still be far below that of the US). The trick is to make poor as well as rich countries feel these costs and respond accordingly without making life impossible for the poor individuals within those countries, and without perversely driving people to even worse environmental practices. I don't see how policies that grant each individual an equal per capita emissions right, or each country emissions rights on an equal per capita basis, helps us achieve these 4 objectives.

*Where does the conflict between egalitarianism and identity politics leave 'the left' from your point of view? To what extent do you think this conflict provides a platform for a progressive agenda that is both philosophically coherent and politically sustainable?*

Brian Barry has identified this conflict as follows: the more ethno-religious groups stress their differences and demand distinct state-supported institutions, the less strongly citizens will identify with one another, and so the less they will support egalitarian economic policies. My work on affirmative action and integration focuses on a central causal mechanism linking identity politics to inequality: it leads to *de facto* segregation, which isolates disadvantaged groups from the social networks regulating access to advantage, and makes privileged groups alienated from and ignorant of the interests of disadvantaged groups, and hence negligent or worse when they make decisions affecting the latter's interests. Multiculturalists have failed to trace the causal consequences of advancing identity politics among the disadvantaged, which include inspiring far less benign forms of identity politics among the advantaged. Empirical work by social scientists in Europe – notably the distinguished Dutch sociologist Ruud Koopmans – confirms that multiculturalist policies do not serve the economic interests of immigrant groups.

Nancy Fraser argues that transformative politics, which challenge existing identities in a postmodernist spirit, and fundamentally restructure distributive mechanisms, can overcome this conflict. This may hold promise over the very long term. But I do not expect it to yield positive results in the foreseeable future. My own work has stressed the imperative of integration. I agree with Barry that if members of different groups enjoy socioeconomic equality, then their cultural identities can

largely be left up to their private decisions. The classical liberal strategy of privatisation is broadly the right way to go. But Barry grossly oversimplifies when he assumes that group-blindness and minimal accommodation of minority differences can get us to socioeconomic equality. Some accommodation of group differences is often needed to promote integration, which is a prerequisite to socio-political equality. I've been working to put race-based affirmative action on an explicitly integrationist footing, as opposed to its current multiculturalist 'diversity' rationale, for this reason.

Integrative policies are not confined to affirmative action. They can also be advanced by abolishing class-based residential zoning, and by redrawing electoral districts so that they are integrated (with disadvantaged groups numerous enough that no politician who neglects their interests can win election).

*In your view, is fair equality of opportunity – understood so as to rule out substantial inherited privilege – a requirement of justice? If not, why not?*

Perfect equality of opportunity – zero correlation between the advantages enjoyed by parents and their children – is an illusory goal. To attempt to achieve it would require massive invasions of freedom and privacy, and most likely the replacement of families with state-run communes for raising children, to the detriment of parents and children alike. Even then, some communes would be better at raising children than others, leading to new forms of inherited privilege. Democratic equality does not demand the complete elimination of inherited inequality in any event. Rather, it strives to keep inherited advantages within bounds consistent with the equal standing of citizens. This requires at least that members of all socially significant groups have effective access to positions of power and responsibility, lest the most privileged group rule in its own interests alone.

Let's disaggregate the sources of inherited advantage into financial capital, social capital (connections), and human capital. Inequalities in financial capital are the easiest to address. The inheritance tax is by far the most just and painless tax ever invented. It should be restored and enhanced. Inequalities in social capital should also be reduced. Access to advantage is determined as much by whom one knows as by what one knows. This makes it imperative to open up otherwise insular social



networks of the privileged to participation by members of all socially significant groups. This is a major reason why I advocate policies such as affirmative action, promotion of formal over informal criteria of advancement in jobs, and the abolition of class-based residential zoning. These are all designed to promote class, race, and gender integration in civil society. Inequalities in human capital need to be addressed by the educational system. Schools should do what they can to provide a decent skill set to less advantaged children.

Still, we should be under no illusions about the prospects of eliminating inherited advantage. Social capital cannot be entirely replaced by pure meritocracy, as measured by formal, impersonal criteria. All organisations rely on qualities such as loyalty and trust that can only be cultivated and judged in informal relationships. Similarly, inherited inequalities in human capital cannot be eliminated without destructive levelling-down. It's part of the job of parents to teach their skills and successful habits to their children. Parents with better habits and superior skills will inevitably have more to teach. Instead of trying to eliminate such inherited inequalities, a just society should strive to ensure that, as Rawls put the point, they redound to the benefit of everyone, including the least advantaged.

*You criticise luck egalitarians for failing to restore to sufficiency those who have squandered their initial equal share of resources 'on the spurious grounds that their bankruptcy is their fault'. But is it always spurious? If so, why not restore them to equality rather than to mere sufficiency?*

I conceive of equality as a social relation among persons, not as a mathematical relation between the contents of their pocketbooks. The connection between social equality and rules of just distribution is indirect, with the latter being derived from the former. I deny that equal shares are needed for equal standing in society. Rather, distributive rules should set a floor of effectively accessible opportunities, determined by the capabilities citizens need to relate as equals. They should also give citizens a fair chance to achieve more than this sufficiency level, for instance, by devoting extra resources to educating the children of the less advantaged, and by facilitating the social integration of less privileged groups in civil society (a move that is anyway required to produce a

democratically accountable leadership). Since the system of cooperation would operate by rules of pure procedural justice, one can't say in advance what distributive patterns would emerge from people's choices. One can say only that society should design the distributive rules so as to ensure, to the extent possible, that a package of goods sufficient to secure relational equality be within the power of each citizen to achieve, and that everyone have a fair chance to achieve more than that through their cooperative activities. Whether and to what extent they choose to exercise their powers of cooperation to reach or exceed the sufficiency level is up to them. Egalitarian justice does not forbid monks from taking a vow of poverty. It only insists that monks not be trapped there if they change their minds. It also strives to ensure that children are not trapped by mis-education and social pressure into thinking that they have to become monks, or assume any other position, such as housewife. This is an integral part of the anti-caste agenda of egalitarianism.

Because patterns of distribution are twice removed from the equality I believe is fundamental (once by the gap between relational equality and distributive rules, next by the gap between rules and distributive outcomes, which is mediated by people's choices), I find your question ill-posed. There is no presupposition of equal shares either as a starting point or as something to which people are entitled to be restored. Moreover, a just society does not base normal distributions (those arising from everyone following the rules, as opposed to responses to violations of rules) on judgements of whether one is at fault for one's disadvantages. Rather, it strives to ensure that everyone has effective access to a fair package of goods by exercising the powers of cooperation that they have.

My objection to letting people fall so far that they are unable to recover to the sufficiency level is not that they would never be at fault for the choices that might bring them that low. It is that putting this possibility into their prospects is incompatible with having a society of equal citizens. A society of equals is also incompatible with a state that acts as our moral nanny or priest. The state can't be trusted with global moral judgements of our characters. These judgements are, like religious judgements, properly relegated to the private sphere (and for much the same reasons). Official state rankings of who is naughty and who is nice create a hierarchy of the saved and the damned, not a society of equals.



*Have you modified your views on commercial surrogacy now that it has become more widespread with no significant impact on the status of women or how they are perceived?*

Commercial surrogacy, far from being more widespread, is a declining business model for assisted reproduction. It has been largely replaced by egg donation. The latter affords greater security to the contracting parents, who don't have to worry about how to get possession of the child if the biological mother doesn't want to give it up. This means they don't have to coercively manipulate a pregnant mother to avert this problem. That egg donation has largely replaced commercial surrogacy represents a moral advance, and also limits the impact that surrogacy has on the status of women. This does not make gamete donation morally unproblematic. It extends to women the androcentric norm that it's fine to reproduce for fun and profit, without worrying about how one's offspring are to be cared for. I don't think it enhances the status and well-being of children to spread this norm.

*You have been doing work on Locke. Do you think Lockean theories, be they right or left, can bring about some interesting insights re. the current debates on intellectual property?*

Locke has been widely misunderstood. Theorists on both the right and the left think his theory supports property rights that have a 'deontological' cast, sufficient to trump considerations of social welfare. To the contrary, Locke understood property rights to be wholly instrumental to promoting the goal given to us by the moral law, to protect and preserve human life. Lockean property rights have a distributive, not just an aggregative element, in requiring that each existing individual have access to what they need to survive, and not just that the maximum number of people exist. Locke rightly saw that some system of private property or other would best serve this goal. But the rules of property are not fixed in the state of nature. Once a state is established, it may redefine property rules in whatever ways better promote the moral goal – for instance, by establishing taxation to support a welfare system, provision of public goods, and so forth. Hence I do not see Locke as offering a rival view to rule utilitarianism in matters of property, including intellectual property. Utilitarians, too, see

the need to protect intellectual property so as to provide an incentive to produce it. But, given that intellectual property is a non-rival good, once it exists it is best, from both Locke's and a utilitarian point of view, to maximise its availability. Thus, individual rights to intellectual property should be set at the level just sufficient to induce its production.

'Lockean' property rights, understood in some deontological sense, I think are misconceived, whether they come from the right or the left. Capitalism, the only game in town, is a highly dynamic system that requires frequent innovation and revision of property rights. This requires that we conceive of property rights as artificial and instrumental to other goals rather than foundational. They ought to change as circumstances change. The great contribution of left-libertarianism was to reveal the contingency and arbitrariness of the harsh conclusions drawn by right-libertarians from their starting premises. But it is folly to insulate the rules of property from modification in light of the consequences of acting on them. As for the supposed natural right of property in the self, I agree with Barbara Fried that nothing follows from it. (Anyone who is tempted by libertarianism of any stripe ought to read her articles on the subject right away.) Libertarianism, whether of right or left, suffers from the same flaw that pervades political philosophy more generally – empirical irresponsibility.

*You are part of the Left2right blog. Do you think that such a blog can transform to some extent the intellectual landscape in political philosophy?*

I am a great advocate of web publication. It gives academics access to a non-academic audience, and opportunities for non-academics to interact with academics. It remains to be seen whether the blog format is the best way to open up these channels of communication.

*What are you working on now?*

In political philosophy, I am extending my research on integration, so far confined to racial issues in the US, to issues of immigrant integration in Western Europe, with a special focus on Muslims. At the intersection of political philosophy, feminist epistemology, and the philosophy of the social sciences, I am exploring Dewey's pragmatism as a model for understanding the relations of facts to values in social science and political philosophy, with the aim of showing how to integrate these



inquiries more fully. One of the implications of Dewey's work, also advanced by John Stuart Mill, Amartya Sen, and feminist epistemologists, is to re-conceive democratic institutions as epistemological devices for pooling widely dispersed socially situated knowledge, so as to make the problems and successes of social arrangements publicly known, and to enable the testing of alternative arrangements from all points of view.

### Selected Bibliography of Works by Elizabeth Anderson

- 'Dewey's Moral Philosophy,' in Edward Zalta, ed., *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2005
- 'Ethical Assumptions of Economic Theory: Some Lessons from the History of Credit and Bankruptcy,' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 7 (2004): 347-360.
- 'Rethinking Equality of Opportunity,' *Theory and Research in Education* 2 (2004): 99-110.
- 'Racial Integration as a Compelling Interest,' *Constitutional Commentary* 21 (2004): 101-127.
- 'Sen, Ethics, and Democracy,' *Feminist Economics* 9 (2003): 239-261.
- 'Uses of Value Judgments in Feminist Social Science: A Case Study of Research on Divorce,' *Hypatia* 19 (2004): 1-24.
- 'Integration, Affirmative Action, and Strict Scrutiny,' *NYU Law Review*, 77 (2002): 1195-1271.
- 'Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science,' in Edward Zalta, ed., *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2001.
- 'What is the Point of Equality?,' *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287-337.
- 'Pragmatism, Science, and Moral Inquiry,' in Richard Fox and Robert Westbrook, eds. *In Face of the Facts: Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship* (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 10-39.
- 'The Democratic University: the Role of Justice in the Production of Knowledge,' *Social Philosophy and Policy* 12 (1995): 186-219.
- Value in Ethics and Economics*. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1993.
- 'John Stuart Mill and Experiments in Living,' *Ethics* 102 (1991): 4-26.

Article:

## Equality: What, Who, Where?

John Baker

IN EVERYDAY POLITICAL DISCOURSE, as well as in the more rarefied discussions of academics, a number of different expressions are used to talk about equality. These expressions implicitly express a certain typology which, like many other everyday expressions, philosophers and other theorists are likely to use unreflectively or otherwise to misinterpret. The everyday language of politics is of course contentious and full of distortions and contradictions, and yet attending to some of its distinctions can help us to deepen our own thinking about equality. In this paper, I focus on three sets of expressions that are used in everyday politics and suggest that they characterise three cross-cutting ways of categorising equalities and inequalities, relating to the what, the who and the where of these relationships. The analysis not only results in a useful framework for studying equality and inequality but also reveals ways in which such studies are likely to be too narrowly constructed.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This paper is the result of collaborative work in the *Equality Studies Centre* of University College Dublin and, in particular, work undertaken for John Baker, Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon and Judy Walsh, *Equality: From Theory to Action* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). It forms part of the research project on Equality and Inclusion in Ireland, supported by SEUPB's *Peace II Initiative* in



My starting point is to consider three groups of expressions commonly used in the non-academic world in particular, but also in the academic world, all of which belong to the same field of language, the 'language game' if you like, of equality and inequality. First, there are expressions of the form '(in)equality of x', e.g. of income, power, respect. Secondly, there are expressions like 'racial equality', 'ethnic equality', 'gender equality' and 'sexual equality', as well as related expressions like 'equality *between* men and women', 'equality *for* disabled people' and 'equality *for* lesbians, gays and bisexuals'. Then there is a third set of expressions that includes 'economic equality', 'cultural equality', 'political equality' and 'legal equality'.

My concern is with how these three groups of expressions fit together. What I will argue is that the way they are related shows something about the structure of egalitarianism, and also, necessarily, about the way the normative theory of equality interacts with the sociology of inequality. To see this, we have to review certain debates in normative egalitarianism and in the sociology of inequality and then try to put the pieces together.

### Equality of What?

Amartya Sen is credited with putting the question 'equality of what?' at the centre of normative egalitarian theory.<sup>2</sup> His point is that different egalitarian theories of justice since Rawls have been concerned with different answers to the question of what, fundamentally, should be distributed equally (or with priority for the worst off, or whatever). To put it in Cohen's terms, what is the 'currency' of egalitarian justice?<sup>3</sup> What is its 'distribuendum'?

---

Northern Ireland and border counties. I am grateful to my co-authors, to members of the *Political Studies Association* of Ireland, to Eithne McLaughlin and Fran Porter, and to the editor and reviewers of *Imprints* for comments on earlier versions.

<sup>2</sup> Amartya Sen, 'Equality of What?', in A. Sen, *Choice, Welfare and Measurement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> G. A. Cohen, 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', *Ethics*, Vol. 99 (1989).

In answer to this question, Rawls says we should be interested in the distribution of primary social goods, Sen says we should be concerned with the distribution of capabilities to achieve valued functionings, Dworkin says we should care about resources, Arneson says (or said) opportunities for welfare, Cohen says access to advantage.<sup>4</sup> Even some of the people who say they are not interested in this debate have an answer to the question; for example, Young favours equality of self-determination and self-development.<sup>5</sup> It seems clear enough that this is the locus of the first set of expressions I set out above, expressions of the form 'equality of x'.

It is worth remembering, though, that regardless of how you answer Sen's question about what equality should ultimately be about, other answers to his question don't just disappear. Suppose you are fundamentally interested in equality of capabilities. That still means you are going to be interested in the distribution of wealth, income, power, status, education, work and so on – things that are broadly in the same ballpark as Rawls's primary social goods – because how these things are distributed has a very important effect on people's capabilities. You might not be committed to distributing all of them equally but you will still care about their distribution, and you will want them to be distributed in an egalitarian way, that is, in a way that reflects your commitment to whatever you think is the basic rationale of egalitarianism.

In *Equality: From Theory to Action*, Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon, Judy Walsh and I have taken something like this approach. We take the view that although it remains debatable what the answer to Sen's question is, or even whether it has an answer,<sup>6</sup> any normative theory of equality is likely to require you to pay attention to how certain kinds of

---

<sup>4</sup> Richard J. Arneson, 'Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare', *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 56 (1989), Cohen, 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), Sen, 'Equality of What?'

<sup>5</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) and 'Equality of Whom? Social Groups and Judgments of Injustice', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 9 (2001).

<sup>6</sup> Brian Barry, *Why Social Justice Matters* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p. 22.



good should be distributed – perhaps ‘deployed’ is a better word<sup>7</sup> – in an egalitarian society. In particular, you will have to consider what we call five key ‘dimensions’ of equality because all of these dimensions have important and wide-ranging effects on the quality of people’s lives. The five dimensions we focus on are:

1. respect and recognition
2. resources
3. love, care and solidarity
4. power, and
5. working and learning.

Those are all terms that could be slotted into phrases of the form ‘equality of x’. Most of these dimensions of equality are familiar features of discussions of equality and social justice, although they are not always discussed in the same breath and are open to a variety of interpretations. Our conception of resources, for example, differs from some mainstream views because we include not just privately held material resources but also social and cultural capital, access to public services, environmental conditions and time.

What is more unusual is bringing issues of love, care and solidarity under the umbrella of equality, since these have often been treated as alternatives to, rather than constituents of, equality and social justice. Recent work, particularly by feminist theorists, argues for their inclusion within theories of justice for at least three reasons.<sup>8</sup> First of all, it is clear

<sup>7</sup> In light of Young’s valid criticism in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* of the misleading implications of the idea of distribution.

<sup>8</sup> What follows draws on Diemut Elisabet Bubeck, *Care, Gender, and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), Virginia Held (ed.), *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), Eva Feder Kittay, *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999), Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Selma Sevenhuijsen, *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998).

that various forms of love, care and solidarity are important conditions of human well-being. In infancy, illness and old age we are undeniably dependent on the care of others. More generally, the need and desire for love, care and solidarity is a central and perennial feature of human life. These relationships are just as important for how people’s lives go as the material resources stressed by traditional theories of justice. So the question of unequal access to these relationships is as normatively important as the question of unequal access to material resources.

A related reason for putting love, care and solidarity on the agenda of egalitarian theories of justice is that these relationships require work to sustain them. This work, which has typically been in the form of unpaid, under-valued work done by women, is one of the ‘burdens of social cooperation’ that theories of justice since Rawls have often mentioned in passing but nearly as often have failed to investigate. So even if inequality of access to relationships of love, care and solidarity were not an issue in itself, it would be important to name these relationships as important goods in order to draw attention to the inequalities of work involved in providing them.

This raises a third reason for treating love, care and solidarity as issues of egalitarian justice. It is that the process of providing these goods raises important conflicts of interest of the sort that it is the business of theories of justice to resolve. If human beings in general need love and care, and if it falls to individual human beings, traditionally women, to provide them, then there is clearly a potential conflict of interest between those who need them and those who provide them – a conflict that can easily lead to a lack of love and care for carers themselves. This conflict of interest cannot be addressed unless the interests in question are recognised in the first place.

In identifying love, care and solidarity as a key dimension of equality, we do not mean to imply that these concepts are interchangeable or to deny the potential conflicts among them. Clearly this is a complex family of concepts with important similarities and differences. But that is true, as well, in the other dimensions of equality, as evidenced by the variety of different kinds of resource. And if there are difficult questions about, for example, the possible tensions between sustaining intimate relations of love and more distant relations of solidarity, so there are also difficult questions about potential trade-offs between personal income,



public services and environmental goods.<sup>9</sup> Each of the dimensions of equality has its own complexity.

In our book, we use the five dimensions to analyse three different conceptions of equality, conceptions that we call 'basic equality', 'liberal egalitarianism' and 'equality of condition', but that distinction is tangential to the point of this paper. For present purposes the important point is that any normative egalitarian theory will have to say something, at some level, about these different dimensions.

### Equality Among Whom?

'Equality of what?' is not the only question that egalitarian theory has been concerned with. Another important question is 'equality among whom?'. This question has bubbled along below the surface for a long time and has been particularly associated with the work of Young and discussions thereof.<sup>10</sup> Most liberal-egalitarian theories answer this question by saying that we want equality among individuals, but Young makes a strong case for paying attention to equality among social groups. (Incidentally, Rawls's view, despite its emphasis on the separateness of persons, is group-based insofar as the difference principle applies to representatives of socio-economic groups rather than to individuals, but I won't pursue this here.)

Here again we can make a similar point to what I said about 'equality of what?', namely that even if your answer to this question at the most fundamental level is 'individuals', that does not mean that you should not be interested in relations between groups, because one of the most important factors that determines how individuals' lives go is the way social structures and institutions work to privilege the members of some groups over others. If we look at the way societies are actually structured, there are clearly a number of unequal social divisions.

<sup>9</sup> We discuss some of these conflicts in Chapter Three of *Equality: From Theory to Action*.

<sup>10</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* and 'Equality of Whom? Social Groups and Judgments of Injustice'.

Among these are gender, sexuality, disability, 'race' and ethnicity, class and age. This is not an exhaustive list: one can also find inequalities structured around religion, caste, belonging to an indigenous people, being an immigrant, being or having been a prisoner and so on. But it is a good working list for illustrating a lot of issues about egalitarianism.

It is clear enough that my second set of expressions is concerned with this kind of list. When we talk about gender equality, or equality for disabled people, or racial equality, we are concerned with equality between groups. These expressions are also linked to a number of other expressions like 'sexism', 'racism', 'disablism' and 'ageism', and to 'homophobia'. It is noteworthy, however, that we do not find much evidence in ordinary English usage of the expressions 'class equality' and 'classism' (although 'classism' is used in some quarters<sup>11</sup> and people do talk about class *inequality*). One possible explanation for this is that 'class equality' is strictly speaking a contradiction in terms, in the way that the others are not, because 'class equality' would involve the abolition of classes.<sup>12</sup>

### Equality Where?

There is a third question in egalitarianism that has not received as much attention as the first two I've mentioned. It might be called 'equality where?'. To grasp it, it helps to make a very brief diversion into social theory, and in particular into ways of analysing societies into *somewhat* distinct social systems. In Marxist sociology, for example, there is a central distinction between the economic system – the base – and

<sup>11</sup> See for example Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin (eds), *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Source Book* (New York: Routledge, 1997). The most natural interpretation of the term is as a label for failures of respect and recognition within class-divided societies.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Post-Socialist' Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). There are of course people who think that the solutions to homophobia and disability are to 'cure' homosexuals and eliminate impairment, but I take it for granted that these are not egalitarian policies.



everything else – the superstructure.<sup>13</sup> In Weberian sociology, there is a basic distinction between the economic system, the political system and the cultural system – what Weber calls the economic, legal and social ‘orders’.<sup>14</sup> These systems are also identified in the structural-functionalist theory of Talcott Parsons.<sup>15</sup> I think it is fair to say that these days it is a sociological truism to distinguish between the economic system, the political system and the cultural system. The conceptualisation of society in terms of systems is thus a common assumption among theories that disagree over how these systems operate and interact. The systems can be defined in various ways, but for present purposes the economic system might be defined as the system concerned with the production, distribution and exchange of goods and services, the political system as the system concerned with making and enforcing collectively binding decisions, and the cultural system as the system concerned with the production and transmission of cultural practices and products and with the legitimisation of social practices more generally.

In our book, we argue that this Weberian trio neglects a fourth important social system, which we call the affective system: the system in society that is organised around providing and sustaining relationships of love, care and solidarity among people, and, through its failures and distortions, leaves some people loveless, uncared for, isolated, disliked, abused or hated. Attending sociologically to this system is of course the counterpart to attending normatively to love, care, solidarity and their opposites, and the sociological arguments for taking it seriously parallel the normative arguments for taking love, care and solidarity seriously. For if the operation and reproduction of social structures relies on at

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party’, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works, Volume I (1845-59)* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Max Weber, ‘Class, Status, Party’, in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

<sup>15</sup> Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), Talcott Parsons and Neil J. Smelser, *Economy and Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956).

least some people’s needs for love, care and solidarity being met, then it is important to investigate how this is accomplished. Such an investigation will identify processes by which some groups are systematically privileged and others systematically burdened. It will locate and explain the conflicts that arise within these processes and how they are regulated by social institutions.

There is of course a certain arbitrariness in identifying social systems and distinguishing between them, since the idea of a social system is an abstraction from the concrete actions of social agents and the same actions can be conceptualised as belonging to two or more systems. Much of what goes on in the affective system can also be characterised as belonging to the economy, or to the political system, or to a society’s culture. But seeing these actions and relations as a system helps us to trace interconnections and patterns that get lost if things are looked at exclusively through the lens of economy, polity or culture.

In everyday language, people quite happily talk not just about the economic system and the political system, but about the educational system, the legal system, the transportation system and various other systems – systems that have a higher degree of specificity than the four systems I have mentioned and may be more or less closely connected to them. As before, regardless of what you think are the right fundamental sociological categories, there is going to be some place in your sociology for all of these social systems.

Returning now to normative issues, what I would like to suggest is that the everyday expressions in my third category – expressions like ‘economic equality’ and ‘political equality’ – relate to this sociological point; that is, they refer not to answers to the first two questions I raised but to the third normative question, ‘equality where?’. And I would make a similar point to the one I’ve made about the other questions, namely that even if your answer to ‘equality where?’ is expressed in terms of a wider, perhaps politically or geographically defined context, like ‘equality in Ireland’ or ‘global equality’ – and each of these wider contexts does raise specific issues of its own – you will have to look at what happens in these core social systems because that determines to a very great degree the amount of equality and inequality in any wider context. That is why, even if Rawls is wrong to say that the subject of justice



is the basic structure of society,<sup>16</sup> he is right to pay attention to basic structures.

All of this raises an interesting further question, namely what the relationship is between 'equality of what?' and 'equality where?'. It seems to me that the typical assumption of political theorists is that there is something like a one-to-one correlation between the answers to these two questions. What I will call the standard assumption seems to be that economic equality is the same as equality of material resources, that political equality is equality of power and that 'social' or 'cultural' equality is equality of respect or status. If political theorists were to take the affective system seriously, the corresponding version of the standard assumption would be that 'affective' equality is the same as equality of love, care and solidarity.

An interesting theorist in this respect is Michael Walzer, whose book *Spheres of Justice* would seem to be focused precisely on the question 'equality where?', but who organises his whole discussion around a list of answers to the question 'equality of what?'.<sup>17</sup> The same kind of assumption seems to inform Nancy Fraser's influential discussion of redistribution and recognition, where she identifies redistribution with the 'political-economic structure of society' and recognition with the 'cultural-valuational structure'.<sup>18</sup> The assumption can also be found in Weber, who seems to go even further in lining up a one-to-one relationship between who, what and where:

Whereas the genuine place of 'classes' is within the economic order, the place of 'status groups' is within the social order, that is, within the sphere of the distribution of 'honour'. From within these spheres, classes and status groups influence one another and they influence the legal order and are in turn influenced by it. But 'parties' live in a house of 'power'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>G. A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup>Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

<sup>18</sup>Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>19</sup>Weber, 'Class, Status, Party', p. 194. See also pp. 180-1.

Another interesting example of the conflation of what and where is the widespread use of the ideas of a 'family-friendly workplace' and of 'work-life balance', at least if these are interpretable as saying that it is important to achieve a balance between the sphere of paid work with its associated monetary rewards and the sphere of personal relationships which are assumed to take place in the family.

By contrast, I want to suggest that the truth is almost completely different from the standard assumption. The simplest way of putting it is that in every social system there are likely to be inequalities in all five of the dimensions I mentioned earlier. For example, in the economic system, there are certainly inequalities of income, wealth and other resources, but there are also inequalities of power, of respect, of working and learning, and of prospects for love, care and solidarity. Similarly, in the political system, there are certainly inequalities of power, but there are also inequalities of politically relevant resources (money, social networks, cultural capital, etc.), of respect and recognition, of working and learning and of prospects for love, care and solidarity. The same could be said of the cultural system, the affective system and more specific systems like the educational system, the legal system and so on.

The bottom line is this. Rather than there being a one-to-one correlation between answers to 'equality of what?' and 'equality where?', they are two sides of a matrix. You can find inequalities in each dimension in every system. So we need a conceptual map that looks something like this:



	Economic system	Political system	Cultural system	Affective system
Respect & recognition				
Resources				
Love, care & solidarity				
Power				
Working & learning				

→ I said that the truth is almost completely different from the standard assumption because of course the different social systems do have special relationships to the key dimensions of equality. The economic system clearly plays a central role in generating and distributing material resources, while the political system clearly plays a central role in structuring relations of power: that is where the standard assumption comes from. But that is not much of a concession to the standard view.

A normative egalitarian theory, then, will have to say something, at some level, about how things should be ordered in each of the cells of this matrix. It may not claim that what we want in each cell is for there to be strict equality, but it will need to say something about what we should want in virtue of our commitment to equality as the core idea of the theory we espouse. One might mention in passing that a similar point could be made beyond the confines of egalitarianism, in relation to practically any theory of justice.

If the view I am putting forward is more adequate than the standard assumption, then it is also relevant to the question 'equality among whom?'. Because it means that for each group difference, it is worth assessing how those groups are doing, in each of the five key dimensions, in each for the four major social systems, compared to what

egalitarianism requires. Different groups are likely to come up with significantly different profiles, and this will surely affect their political aims and priorities. Since the political movement for equality depends on strengthening the already-existing coalitions among various disadvantaged or oppressed groups, it is important to identify where group priorities agree as well as where they diverge. Such an assessment can provide a framework for doing this.

### Conclusion

In this paper I have linked some of the complexities of the everyday discourse of equality and inequality to issues in egalitarian theory. I have tried to show that this discourse highlights at least three different kinds of question for egalitarians, and that each of these questions can be addressed at different levels. The debate in political philosophy about the best conception of equality tends to assume that there is a single answer to 'equality of what?', that equality is fundamentally about individual human lives, and that questions of egalitarian justice are primarily concerned with arrangements within a relatively self-contained society. I have not challenged these assumptions directly. What I have argued is that even if these assumptions are correct, they in no way preclude us from paying attention to equalities and inequalities in several different dimensions, affecting several different social groups, and occurring in several different social systems. On the contrary: even if the philosophers are right about trying to find fundamental, monistic principles of equality, the application of these principles will inevitably involve working at the other levels I have emphasised. The fact that our everyday language of equality and inequality is designed to capture these levels is at least an implicit recognition of this fact.



Article:

# What do Multi-National Corporations Owe the World's Poor?<sup>1</sup>

Jenny Keeble

**T**HE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS states that all human beings have a right to subsistence. That is to say, all human beings should have adequate access to the basic necessities they require to live, these being clean water, food, shelter and health-care.<sup>2</sup> It does not state explicitly on whom the responsibility falls to fulfil this right. Since the Declaration's creation in 1948, the underlying assumption has been that the responsibility belongs to the domestic

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Leif Wenar, Jimmy Lenman, Catherine Bowman and to three anonymous referees for their comments on this paper.

<sup>2</sup> It may be argued that a right to basic necessities also includes socio-economic rights such as the right to education. However I am restricting the meaning of basic necessities to what is necessary to simply stay alive, rather than what is necessary for a satisfactory quality of life.

© 2005 *Imprints*, Politics, University of Reading, RG6 6AH, United Kingdom.

government of a nation.<sup>3</sup> In today's increasingly interdependent and globalised world such an assumption seems unfounded. The current global economic order, often in combination with other domestic factors causes many national governments to be unable to assist those whose right to subsistence is violated. In addition, nations are no longer the only economic entity with the capacity to fulfil rights. Multi-national corporations have become one of the dominant economic institutions in today's global society, and also have such capacity.<sup>4</sup> Given this shift in economic power and the millions of people around the world without access to basic necessities, I will be examining the nature of the moral responsibilities multi-national corporations have to the world's poor. I will argue that multi-national corporations have a moral responsibility to prevent the right to subsistence from being violated, and also to fulfil the right wherever it remains unfulfilled.

## 1. What is a Corporation?

Corporations are not necessarily business enterprises. Churches, political parties and non-governmental organisations are all corporations. However, this paper is concerned only with business corporations: that is, corporations designed and run to make money. Such corporations can be identified by two characteristics. Firstly, their legal status. Corporations are formed from associations of people that wish to be granted a legal charter to become incorporated. Once such a charter is granted, the corporation is regarded in the eyes of the law as independent from the individuals of which it is comprised. The corporation is a separate and distinct legal person. Therefore it persists despite changes in directors, investors, managers and employees. Indeed, the legal status of a corporation will persist indefinitely. The second characteristic that defines a corporation is that its assets are not owned by its shareholders. Rather, a corporation owns its own assets. Shareholders are not involved

---

<sup>3</sup> O'Neill, O. (2001) 'Agents of Justice', *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 32 (1/2) pp. 180-195, p. 181, Kuper, A. (2004) 'Harnessing Corporate Power: Lessons from the UN Global Compact' *Development*, Vol. 47 (3), pp 9-19, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Winston, M. (2002) 'NGO Strategies for Promoting Corporate Social Responsibility', *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 16 (1), pp. 71-87, p. 72.



with the day-to-day operations of the corporation and bear only limited legal liability for the consequences of its actions.<sup>5</sup>

I am focussing solely on the responsibilities of multi-national corporations (MNCs). Multi-national corporations are corporations which are based in one country (home country); yet operate in a number of others (host countries).<sup>6</sup> I will concentrate on these corporations because of their enormous size, strength, wealth, and the number of people they have the ability to affect. MNCs are not only the largest and most profitable type of business; they also rival national economies in terms of their wealth. If we were to draw up a list of the annual GDPs of all the nations of the world, then combine it with the annual profits of MNCs, in terms of wealth generated an examination of the top hundred would show forty-nine to be states, and the remainder to be multi-national corporations. Indeed, the profits of the top two-hundred MNCs are larger than the GDPs of all of the world's nations combined, except for the most affluent ten.<sup>7</sup> The profits of the top ten MNCs in 2003 alone exceeded one hundred and twenty billion US dollars.<sup>8</sup> The nature of the way MNCs operate makes them peculiarly immune to regulation. If any one country tries to control MNC behaviour, MNCs can uproot and move to another nation with less stringent regulations. With Less Developed Countries (LDCs) eager to attract foreign investment, such nations are not hard to find. (for example, Brazil offers MNCs subsidies and tax incentives, particularly those involved in the automotive industry).<sup>9</sup> Although some control over MNC behaviour exists in the form of World Trade Organisation treaties and home country legal

<sup>5</sup> Crane, A., Matten, D. (eds.) (2004) *Business Ethics*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford), p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> French, P. (1995) *Corporate Ethics*, (Harcourt Brace College Publishers: Fort Worth), p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> Kuper, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> www.forbes.com.

<sup>9</sup> Hanson, G. H. (2001) 'Should Countries Promote Foreign Direct Investment?', *United Nations Conference on Trade and Development*, G-24 Discussion Paper Series, Vol. 9.

restrictions, concern is regularly raised over the extent to which MNCs can act without having to answer to any regulatory body.

## 2. Can A Corporation have Moral Responsibilities?

This question alone could form the basis of an entire paper. Therefore, in this section I will merely describe what is widely believed to be the most convincing argument for corporate moral responsibility. This is the argument of Peter French. I will briefly say why, subject to certain revisions, I believe his view to be correct.

Peter French claims that for a corporation to have moral responsibilities, it must be capable of being a moral agent. He gives the following three characteristics of moral agency:

- i) An agent must be able to act intentionally. It must be able to have goals that motivate some of its behaviour.
- ii) An agent must be rational, with the ability to make rational decisions and consider rational arguments about how to bring their goals into realisation.
- iii) An agent must be able to respond to events and criticism by changing its intentions and behaviour.<sup>10</sup>

Now, this account of moral agency is undoubtedly open to criticism. One might argue that rationality is not necessary for moral agency because children are not fully rational, yet we still assign at least some moral agency to them. However, this is not a problem for French. This list of characteristics gives us some sufficient, but not necessary conditions for moral agency. French acknowledges the existence of different types of moral agency, making a distinction between moral agency and moral personhood, the former being the type of agency attributed to collectives, and the latter being the type of agency attributed to persons. No doubt a case could be made for a third kind of moral agency that covers cases of limited rationality as found in children, but I will not attempt to do so here. In any case, the existence of such cases

<sup>10</sup> French (1995), p. 10-12.



does not affect French's argument. More worryingly, it is plausible that an agent could display all of these characteristics and still not be a moral agent, merely a rational one. I believe that a fourth characteristic is required for moral agency:

- iv) An agent must be able to recognise moral reasons (these being reasons that are required by morality, and are not necessarily in the self-interest of the agent), and be able to use them to motivate its decisions.<sup>11</sup>

Peter French argues that for a corporation to be able to act intentionally, it has to be able to form intentions separate from the intentions of the individuals who make up the corporation. French asserts that it is the Corporation's Internal Decision Structure (CID Structure) which enables corporations to form intentions in this way.<sup>12</sup> The CID Structure allows corporations to act as a collective, rather than as an aggregate of individuals. It subordinates and synthesises individual intentions into one corporate intention. The activities of the corporation are motivated by these intentions and therefore the corporation has the ability to act intentionally. Characteristics (ii) and (iii) of moral agents, the ability to be rational and the ability to respond are also to be found, according to French, within the CID Structure.<sup>13</sup> Corporations have goals, defined by corporate policy. The CID Structure is the way in which corporations decide on how their goals are best realised, thereby demonstrating rationality. The CID Structure also allows a corporation to deliberate on its goals, and enables it to change its goals or methods of realising them

<sup>11</sup> I acknowledge that what constitutes a moral reason and what it is to recognise a moral reason are the subject of extensive philosophical debate. I will not enter that debate here. I do not believe that the position one adopts in this debate is of significance for the discussion that follows.

<sup>12</sup> French claims that all corporations have a CID Structure. They comprise of: '(1) an organizational or responsibility flow chart that delineates stations and levels within the corporate power structure and (2) corporate decision recognition rule(s) (usually embedded in something called 'corporation policy').' French, P. (1979) 'The Corporation as a Moral Person', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16 (3) pp. 207-215, p. 212.

<sup>13</sup> French (1995), p. 12.

following events or criticism. For French this means that corporations display all the characteristics necessary to be a moral agent. It is therefore legitimate to ascribe them moral responsibilities.

However, I have stated that a fourth characteristic is necessary for moral agency. Do corporations display characteristic (iv)? On this matter I am taking a Kantian rather than a consequentialist stance. That is to say, it is not enough that some corporate actions are required by the demands of morality, if the motivation for those actions is merely financial self-interest. Agents in such cases are only 'accidentally' moral. For a corporation to be classed as a moral agent, its actions must be motivated, at least in part by the force of moral reasons.

It seems that corporations can recognise, and be motivated by moral reasons. In the 1970s the corporation Merck developed a drug to combat river blindness. This disease is found principally in developing nations. Consequently, Merck recognised that the potential recipients of the drug would be too poor to afford their product. Having failed to secure funding to develop the drug, Merck calculated that by pursuing with its development, they would inevitably incur a financial loss. Nevertheless, the corporation developed the drug, and today river blindness as a disease is almost extinct. The reasoning behind this somewhat 'unbusiness-like' behaviour can be found within a statement of Merck's corporate policy: 'We try never to forget that medicine is for the people. It is not for the profits.'<sup>14</sup>

It may seem that such selfless corporate sentiments are too good to be true. Could it be the case that Merck wishes to be seen as a 'caring-sharing' corporation in a bid to attract more customers, and ultimately make a profit? This is possibly, or indeed probably, the case, but this does not show that corporations cannot recognise the force of moral reasons. It only shows that such recognition can have foreseeable consequences which are in the self-interest of the corporation. Provided that morally desirable outcomes are, at least in part, the result of the recognition of the force of moral reasons, it is not problematic that a corporation is also motivated to bring about these outcomes due to considerations of self-interest. A corporation can still be seen as a moral agent. Therefore, it would seem that corporations can see the force of

<sup>14</sup> Werhane and Freeman in LaFollette, H. (ed.) (2003) *The Oxford Handbook of Practical Ethics*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford), p. 515.



moral reasons when deciding how to act. This, in conjunction with French's argument, provides the case for seeing corporations as moral agents.

It should be said that there are a number of other arguments for corporate moral responsibility other than this one. I have chosen French's as it is by far the most well-known and accepted such argument. Thomas Donaldson, whose view I will be discussing in the next section, grounds corporate moral responsibility on the idea of a social contract between a corporation and society. However, all that matters for the discussion that follows is that we do have good reasons for thinking corporations can be moral agents. That there is divergence of opinion over what these reasons are is not significant in the debate on the nature of multi-national corporations' moral responsibilities. It is to this debate that I now turn.

### 3. The Nature of Multi-National Corporate Moral Responsibility

One quarter of the world's population live in severe poverty. Five hundred million are chronically malnourished; One-point-two billion live without access to safe drinking water. One billion do not have adequate shelter. Eight hundred and eighty five million do not have access to health services.<sup>15</sup> Given these disturbing facts, the immense power and wealth of multi-national corporations, and that there are good reasons for thinking that MNCs can have moral responsibilities, what can be said about the moral responsibilities MNCs have to those without access to these basic necessities? Of those who have discussed this issue, there are two principal schools of thought. I have termed these the *Responsibility as Abstinence* view and the *Responsibility as Action* view.

#### (a) The 'Responsibility as Abstinence' View

The view of corporate moral responsibility currently favoured by corporations and business ethicists alike is the 'Responsibility as Abstinence' view.<sup>16</sup> It is essentially a negative understanding of the

<sup>15</sup> [www.undp.org/teams/english/facts.htm](http://www.undp.org/teams/english/facts.htm).

<sup>16</sup> Crane and Matten, p. 43.

nature of corporate moral responsibility. It holds that MNCs do not have a moral responsibility to act positively to aid the deprived. Rather, their responsibilities consist merely in refraining from bringing about the violation of the right to subsistence, either directly or indirectly. For example, MNCs are not to take food from those who already possess it. Neither are they to act in such a way that will foreseeably result in others becoming deprived of food (e.g. by buying land that was used for subsistence farming and then using it for cash crops, without taking measures to ensure that those displaced have means to feed themselves). Other than this, MNCs have no responsibility to aid the world's poor. This view then does not see MNCs as having any role to play in fulfilling the socio-economic (or positive) rights that are stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, they must respect the civic-political (or negative) rights to be found within that document. Thomas Donaldson best explains the way the Responsibility as Abstinence view sees the role of MNCs by asserting the existence of three types of duties:

#### *Type 1 Duties: To avoid depriving others of their rights*

(With reference to the right to subsistence, this means MNCs are not to directly prevent access to basic necessities from those who already have such access).

#### *Type 2 Duties: To help protect others from deprivation of their rights*

(MNCs are to take measures to ensure that their activities do not indirectly result in those who already had access to basic necessities being denied this access).

#### *Type 3 Duties: To aid those who are deprived of their rights*

(MNCs have a responsibility to fulfil the right to subsistence, providing access to basic necessities wherever and whenever access is currently denied).<sup>17</sup>

MNCs, says Donaldson, have Type 1 and Type 2, but not Type 3 duties. Donaldson does allow that in exceptional circumstances, such as those

<sup>17</sup> Donaldson, T. (1989) *Moral Minimums for Multi-Nationals* in Hoffman, W.M., Frederick, R. E. (eds.) (1995) *Business Ethics – Readings and Cases in Corporate Morality*, (McGraw-Hill: New York), p. 496.



following a natural disaster (the recent tsunami earthquake for example), MNCs may have a moral responsibility to fulfil the right to subsistence.<sup>18</sup> However, he seems to only have instances where the MNC is operating in the vicinity of the disaster, and where the short-term assistance required cannot be provided by the local government in mind. Such cases, he says, are analogous to situations we as individuals face. In the main, our duty to help those in need is imperfect, that is, it is desirable from a moral point of view that we discharge this duty, but not necessary that we do so. As such, who we choose to help is to an extent a matter of our own discretion. However, if we encounter somebody in dire need of assistance and we are the only person with the capacity to help, our duty to aid that person becomes a perfect one, in virtue of our unique position to do so. Fulfilling the duty is a requirement of morality that we cannot choose to ignore. Donaldson illustrates this point with the following example: I am walking in a remote mountainous part of the world and discover a hiker who has slipped and is at risk of falling off a precipitous ledge. It is no longer a matter of my own discretion whether to choose to help this person. As I am the only person who could rescue the fallen hiker, I should do so, provided that in doing so I am not seriously endangering myself. Likewise, if a MNC is in a unique position to bring short-term assistance to those affected by a natural disaster, it has a perfect duty to do so.

Therefore what Donaldson is referring to by the word 'exceptional' is not the scale of the deprivation of access to basic necessities. If Donaldson were referring to the scale of the deprivation by the word exceptional, the more widespread deprivation as a consequence of poverty would also be classified as exceptional, and Donaldson does not want to be committed to this. Rather, for Donaldson what is exceptional are the circumstances surrounding the deprivation. A tsunami is not a normal occurrence, but regrettably life-threatening poverty is the norm in many parts of the world today.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Donaldson does not say that it would be *wrong* for MNCs to use their wealth to assist the world's poor.<sup>19</sup> What is wrong is to ascribe MNCs a duty to do so. He says:

While it would be strikingly generous for multi-nationals to sacrifice some of their profits to buy milk, grain, and shelter for persons in poor countries, it seems difficult to consider this one of their minimal moral requirements.<sup>20</sup>

So why does Donaldson claim that MNCs do not have Type Three duties? His argument for this claim has two thrusts to it. Firstly, he argues that MNCs cannot fulfil Type Three duties, and secondly he argues that even if they could, they should not fulfil such duties. Donaldson claims that MNCs cannot fulfil Type Three duties to those without access to basic necessities because they lack the necessary competence to do so.<sup>21</sup> MNCs may well be powerful social organisations, but they do not have the knowledge required to fulfil the right to subsistence. Their area of expertise extends only to knowing how to make a profit, and so does not include knowing how to redistribute goods to those who need them. Therefore, ascribing MNCs the moral responsibility to do so is akin to ascribing a philosophy post-graduate the moral responsibility to perform open-heart surgery on anyone who needs it. Doing so is futile as there is no way that the responsibility can be fulfilled.

Donaldson's normative reasons for denying that MNCs have Type Three duties are more plentiful. He argues that even if MNCs did have the necessary competence to be able to redistribute goods to the world's poor, they should not have a moral responsibility to do so, as such responsibility belongs only to governments.<sup>22</sup> The very purpose of

<sup>19</sup>The economist Milton Friedman did make this claim in his famous *New York Times* article: 'The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits' (1970). He argues that the only moral responsibility corporations have is to increase their profits, and using their money for any other end is ethically wrong. Unfortunately I do not have the space here to discuss Friedman's arguments but needless to say I do not agree with him!

<sup>20</sup> Donaldson (1989), p. 496.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 497.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



governments, according to Donaldson, is to enhance the welfare of their citizens. MNCs on the other hand, are organisations created with the sole purpose of making money. Enhancing social welfare is not part of their mandate, and therefore we should not expect them to have moral responsibilities that contribute to this end.

Donaldson goes on to say that ascribing MNCs moral responsibilities which rightfully belong only to governments, is dangerous. This is because MNCs are not accountable to society in the way that governments are.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, they lack the proper authority to dictate how and to whom goods should be distributed. Not only are MNCs unaccountable to those receiving the goods, Donaldson also claims that MNCs would be unaccountable to those who would actually end-up paying for the goods. According to Donaldson MNCs would not end up bearing the cost of fulfilling the right to subsistence. In order to meet the cost of fulfilling everyone's right to subsistence, MNCs would raise their prices, thus passing the financial burden onto their customers. He says:

Thus we would witness the spectacle of consumer goods costing dramatic multiples of current prices, with the surplus collected by corporations, and then distributed for "the good of society" by corporate executives. It is, frankly, not a pretty picture.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, Donaldson's concern is that those bearing the cost of correcting a worldwide rights violation would not be those with the moral responsibility to do so. Consequently ascribing MNCs Type Three duties to fulfil the right to subsistence would be morally dangerous, because MNCs would in effect be taxing one group of people to provide goods for another, whilst remaining unaccountable to both.

Donaldson's worries about corporate unaccountability extend further. He claims that ascribing MNCs Type Three duties could well result in moral 'free-riding' amongst MNCs. Some MNCs could ignore their moral responsibilities to the world's poor and therefore keep their prices

<sup>23</sup> Donaldson, T. (1994) *The Perils of Corporate Largess: A Reply to Professor Jackson*, in Boylan, M. (1995) *Ethical Issues in Business*, (Harcourt Brace College Publishers: Fort Worth), p. 547.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 548.

low, attracting customers away from corporations who are fulfilling their moral responsibilities. He says:

This raises the even worse spectacle [than the one he describes above] of ethically upstanding companies (ones who are sincerely attempting to fulfil their duty of correcting human rights abuses by restoring the objects of rights to people) being driven out of business by unscrupulous competition.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, Donaldson tries to account for why some people do make the error of ascribing MNCs Type Three duties. He claims that the duties of people are the same regardless of who they are.<sup>26</sup> However, the duties of organisations vary depending on the organisation in question. Donaldson argues that those who ascribe MNCs Type Three duties assume that what applies to individual people also applies to organisations. That is, they assume all organisations have the same set of duties. They take the duties of governments to be the duties of all organisations. Therefore, although it seems reasonable to ascribe MNCs Type Three duties, doing so involves confusing the duties of governments with the duties of all organisations. It is perfectly legitimate to ascribe MNCs the moral responsibility to refrain from either directly or indirectly depriving others of their right to subsistence. However it is not legitimate to ascribe MNCs the moral responsibility to actively assist those who are already deprived.

#### (b) *The 'Responsibility as Action' View*

We have examined the case against ascribing MNCs Type 3 duties. Now it is time to assess the case for doing so. The basis for such an argument can be found in the work of Peter Singer. In his article 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' Singer states that:

If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Singer, P. (1972) 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 1 (3), pp. 229-243, p. 231.



To illustrate his point Singer uses the example of a child drowning in a pond. If we see a child drowning, we have a moral responsibility to pull the child out of the pond, even if by doing so we would ruin our clothes. Preserving our clothes is not of comparable moral worth to saving the child's life. Equally, if we know billions of people are dying through poverty, Singer says, we have a moral responsibility to use whatever means we can to assist them, so long as we do not sacrifice any thing of comparable moral importance. As there is very little of comparable moral importance to a human life, and that giving away our material wealth could save lives, Singer argues that we should give away our material wealth until giving away more would make us worse off than the recipients of the aid.<sup>28</sup> It makes no difference if others are not fulfilling their moral responsibilities. If others ignore the drowning child then we are not justified in also ignoring their plight. Equally we are not justified in ignoring the needs of the world's poor merely because so many others do so.

Singer's principle is intuitive. To allow the drowning child to die would be morally wrong. Allowing people without access to basic necessities to die is also wrong if steps can be taken to prevent their deaths. However, Singer's view seems extreme in terms of what it demands from the affluent members of the world's community. It would seem that if we are to get corporations to make any moves towards assisting the world's poor, what we ask of them has to be realistic. Therefore, maybe it would be better to modify Singer's principle. Instead of asking MNCs to give away their profits until bankruptcy looms, they could devote a certain percentage of their profits to aid the deprived. How could we calculate the amount that MNCs should give? Clearly they should not be the only agents bearing the cost of bringing the deprived out of poverty. Governments and wealthy individuals are also amongst the agents who should contribute to this end. Which agents should be expected to fulfil Type Three duties, and the relative proportions that each sort of agent should give, are difficult questions that need exploring. I will not attempt to do so here. However, it is clear

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

that because of their vast material wealth, MNCs will have to bear some of the cost. How much should each individual MNC have to give?

I suggest that each MNC should give the same proportion of their annual profits, such that the aggregate of these donations equals the amount of money set as the acceptable contribution from MNCs as a group towards the goal of fulfilling everyone's right to subsistence. This puts my position much closer to that of Liam Murphy. He argues that Singer's principle is unfair because it does not take into account the effect on moral agents of other agents not discharging their duties.<sup>29</sup> To accommodate the fact of partial compliance, and to make demands on agents fair, Murphy formulates the compliance condition. This states that an agent should not be expected to do more than would be asked of them under conditions of full compliance. Therefore, in the case of MNCs, we should ask no more from any one MNC than what they would be required to give if all MNCs were discharging their Type Three duties to the world's poor. This makes the demands on them both fair and realistic. Consequently, instead of Singer's principle, whereby MNCs keep giving for as long as the need is there, we have the fair-share principle:

(FSP): Each MNC should give the percentage of their annual profits to the world's poor such that, if all MNCs gave the same percentage of their profits, the appropriate amount of money would be transferred from MNCs to the world's poor.

This fair share principle would not require the radical economic changes that Singer's original principle would necessitate, but would still ensure that MNCs fulfil their responsibility to those dying through poverty. Importantly though, it is the ability to aid the deprived that provides sufficient grounds on which to ascribe MNCs the moral responsibility to do so. The crucial question, then, is do MNCs have this ability?

Donaldson of course denies that MNCs have the ability to aid the deprived. He claims that MNCs cannot fulfil Type Three duties because they do not have the appropriate knowledge. This claim makes the assumption that corporations can only fulfil their Type Three duties by getting directly involved in the distribution of goods to the world's poor.

<sup>29</sup> Murphy, L. B. (2000) *Moral Demands in Non-Ideal Theory*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford), p. 77.



This seems implausible. Why would we expect corporations to get involved directly rather than donate their money to some charity or international agency, like individuals do? If corporations are to provide for the poor in an analogous way to individuals, then the only knowledge required is the knowledge of how to write a cheque. The only reason that we would expect corporations to do more than make such donations is because they *can* do more than this, perhaps because of their size and power. But if corporations can get directly involved then surely they must have the competence necessary to do so. Therefore, Donaldson's objection is not a convincing one. MNCs can fulfil their duties by transferring money, a field they undoubtedly already have competence in.

I have shown that MNCs can fulfil Type Three duties to the world's poor and that Donaldson's claims about competence are insufficient grounds to deny this. I will now address his normative reasons for denying that MNCs have Type Three duties. Let us first consider Donaldson's claim that we should not ascribe Type Three duties to MNCs because doing so would cause an increase in the price of goods. There seem to be reasons for doubting that such price rises would occur. Donaldson's worry about the cost to MNCs makes the assumption that only MNCs will have Type Three duties and bear the subsequent financial burden. This is not what those wishing to ascribe Type Three duties to MNCs are proposing. Rather they are asserting that MNCs are one of a number of agents with such duties. Any agent with the ability to aid the deprived has the responsibility to do so. Therefore, the cost to MNCs may not be as large as Donaldson imagines. Furthermore, the fair share principle of aid may also silence Donaldson's worries about price increases, as it represents a limit to how much MNCs would have to give away.

It is also worth mentioning that recent studies estimate providing universal access to basic social services and transfers to alleviate income poverty would cost eighty billion US dollars.<sup>30</sup> The profits of the top twenty MNCs for one year alone reached almost two hundred billion US

<sup>30</sup> [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).

dollars.<sup>31</sup> Assuming that all MNCs do fulfil their duties, and given the number of MNCs there are, their combined wealth, and the fact the burden would be (or at least should be) shared with affluent Western states and individuals, the financial impact on MNCs should be minimal. All of this may reassure those, like Donaldson, who fear sky-rocketing prices. However, putting these empirical considerations aside, even if ascribing Type Three duties to MNCs were to cause prices to rise, this is not a good reason to deny that MNCs should be ascribed such duties. To invoke Singer's principle again – stable prices alone are not something of equal moral worth to human life. If customers have to tolerate price rises so that MNCs can donate their fair share to the world's poor – so be it.

I have been assuming thus far that all MNCs *would* give their fair-share to the world's poor. However, there are no guarantees that this would be the case, and here Donaldson's worries about free-riding come into play. Even if the financial impact on MNCs were minimal, economic theory dictates that partial compliance would result in morally responsible MNCs going out of business. Economic theory holds that we must assume that any factor which causes a competitive disadvantage for business will lead eventually to bankruptcy. The problem of moral free-riding is a perplexing and complicated one. I will not attempt to solve it here. I acknowledge that in ascribing multi-national corporations moral responsibilities such worries will inevitably arise. Perhaps some form of legal enforcement could help to solve the problem, but, as mentioned previously, corporations are almost impossible to regulate. In any case, that there is a risk of moral free-riding does not show that MNCs do not have Type Three duties. It only shows that there are practical concerns about the consequences partial compliance by corporations. It is also worth bearing in mind that in reality, bankruptcy as a result of partial compliance is fairly unlikely.

The remainder of Donaldson's concerns relies on an idealistic conception of government. He believes that governments are consistently able to meet their population's needs, and also are all directly accountable to that population. It is true that part of the proper role of government is to ensure their citizens have access to basic

<sup>31</sup> [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com).



necessities. However, this does not justify other agents such as corporations ignoring the plight of the world's poor. To use Singer's example again: imagine that when we see the child drowning in the pond, we also observe its parents watching from the shoreline. They are unable to rescue their child. Perhaps they are unable to swim, or maybe they are severely negligent parents. It seems intuitive that even though the welfare of the child should be the proper concern of the child's parents, we still do something morally wrong if we allow the child to drown. Equally, if corporations allow the poor to die when they can prevent these deaths, they do something morally wrong, even though governments are designed primarily to fulfil the rights of a nation's citizens.

Turning now to Donaldson's concerns regarding the accountability of MNCs' to those receiving aid, it is important to note that many of the governments of the world's poorest countries are also unaccountable to their population. Undoubtedly it would be better if the agents providing aid were accountable to those receiving it, but given the choice of dying through poverty or receiving basic necessities from an unaccountable source, I strongly suspect the world's poor would choose the latter. The unaccountability of MNCs may be a reason to limit their dealings with the governments of poorer nations, in order to avoid issues of moral imperialism and preserving autonomy. However, in terms of providing direct aid, unaccountability seems to represent the lesser of two evils. In time democratic government may replace MNCs as the distributor of goods in these poorer countries, but it seems wrong to allow millions to die until this eventuality comes about.

Andrew Kuper argues that there may be a way to see MNCs as democratically accountable. He distinguishes between agent-centred and system-centred democracy. Agent-centred democracy is the view that an organisation has to be directly accountable to the people. Clearly there is no electorate to grant MNCs their distributive role. However, if their role is sanctioned by a national government which is democratically elected then MNCs can be seen as responsive to the interests and needs of the people.<sup>32</sup> The system as a whole is democratic. Of course, not all

<sup>32</sup>Kuper, p. 16.

governments are democratic, but what Kuper's argument does show is that Donaldson is wrong to dismiss MNCs as *prima facie* democratically unaccountable. Indeed given that Donaldson seems to assume that all governments *are* democratically accountable, Kuper's point has all the more force.

Donaldson's explanation of why we have mistakenly ascribed MNCs Type Three duties seems ridiculous. No one seriously believes that all organisations have the same moral responsibilities. Otherwise, we would expect the same of the University of Sheffield's Philosophy Society as we would of the United States government. Rather we expect the same of organisations which have the same capacity to help. Therefore, some of the responsibilities of MNCs and governments will overlap. No one wants to ascribe all of the responsibilities of government to MNCs.

A final point against Donaldson's *Responsibility as Abstinence* view is that it gives no guidance on what MNCs are to do if they have not fulfilled their Type One and Type Two duties. Presumably if they lack the necessary competence to aid the deprived they cannot take remedial action, even if they wanted to. That this view implies that a moral agent cannot act to correct past mistakes is another reason why the *Responsibility as Action* view should be preferred.

#### 4. Philosophical Problems

I will now briefly consider some problems that the *Responsibility as Action* view will have to address. I have already mentioned that the *Responsibility as Action* view faces the problem of moral free-riding. In addition it faces the problem of moral imperialism. Whenever interference in the running of a sovereign state occurs, questions of moral imperialism, paternalism and the importance of national autonomy arise.<sup>33</sup> In aiding the deprived MNCs will need to take into account the potential dangers of imposing moral norms on those they help, or acting in such a way that may undermine national autonomy. The literature on the danger of state interference in the affairs of other states is enormous,

<sup>33</sup>Werhane, P. H. (1994) *The Moral Responsibility of Multi-national Corporations to be Socially Responsible*, in Kamm, J. B., Frederick, R.E., Perty, E. S. (eds.) (1994) *Emerging Global Business Ethics*, (Quorum Books: Westport), p. 139.



and one can only assume that similar concerns apply to interference by MNCs.

There is also the issue of what responsibilities MNCs have to those without access to basic necessities, but who do not live in impoverished states. Rather these people live in states with the will and capability to fulfil their right to subsistence, such as Britain or the US. Of course the poor in these affluent states will not experience the severity of deprivation that those in impoverished states experience. Nevertheless citizens without access to basic necessities can be found within affluent states. What exactly MNCs should do in these circumstances is a difficult question to answer. Maybe political lobbying is appropriate here, or the funding of charities that help the poor. However direct MNC involvement in the distribution of goods seems problematic because it seems to be more subversive of political will than when similar steps are taken in impoverished states. This is because in these affluent states the government in question is usually elected by, and answerable to the population.

Thirdly, there is a question of causal responsibility for the lack of basic necessities that so many experience. Arguably some violations of the right to subsistence are consequences of MNCs failing to fulfil their Type One and Type Two duties. Do MNCs have a responsibility to aid these people first? Do they have greater responsibilities to these people? The answer to these questions will greatly depend on one's view of what constitutes an MNC causing the violation of the right to subsistence.

## 5. Conclusion

I conclude that MNCs are moral agents with moral responsibilities. They have a moral responsibility to act positively to aid the world's poor because they can aid the world's poor. As such, they are one of a number of agents with the responsibility to fulfil some of the socio-economic rights in the Declaration of Human Rights. It is no longer reasonable to restrict this responsibility to being only that of states.

However, it is one thing to show that MNCs have moral responsibilities to the world's poor, it is quite another to make MNCs fulfil these responsibilities. At present, there exists very little international regulation to control the behaviour of MNCs, other than a

voluntary code of conduct. This is the UN Global Compact, created in 1999. Many corporations have signed up to this Global Compact, but they incur no penalties if they later go against its guidelines. Monitoring of the signatory corporations is performed by agencies employed by those same corporations, which hardly makes for impartial reporting of the behaviour of MNCs.<sup>34</sup> It is true that some MNCs do currently assist those in need without having their responsibility to do so being enforced by some international body. Phillip Morris, for example, fund aid agencies, support health education programmes, provide volunteers to areas of need 'in addition to other in-kind support'.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless it is clear that to ensure MNCs fulfil their moral responsibilities tighter regulation is required.

<sup>34</sup> Monshipouri, M. (2003) 'Multinational Corporations and the Ethics of Global Responsibility: Problems and Possibilities', *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 25 (4), pp. 965-989, p. 984.

<sup>35</sup> www.philipmorris.com.



Review:

## How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive

Alex Callinicos

EVERY NEW SEASON brings fresh catastrophes around the world. Some – such as the Indian Ocean tsunami of Boxing Day 2004 or the South Asian earthquake of October 2005 – have natural causes: they demand moral and political attention because of our duty to aid the victims and also because the human impact is mediated through social relations that, in this as in everything else, distribute advantage and disadvantage very unequally. But human intervention in nature appears to be playing a large, and growing part in other kinds of disaster. There is at least some evidence that the hurricanes that devastated the Gulf coast of the United States, Mexico, and Central America in the summer and autumn of 2005 are related to the process of climate change that just about everyone (except, of course, the Bush administration) accepts is anthropogenic. Other bits of evidence – for example, the accelerating

---

<sup>1</sup> Review of Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (London: Allen Lane 2005); 576pp.; isbn 0-713-99286-7; £20-00.

rate at which the Arctic polar icecap seems to be melting, in all likelihood initiating positive feedbacks that will increase the rate of climate change – suggest that we can expect to see many more such catastrophes.<sup>2</sup> So the collapse of societies – defined by Jared Diamond as ‘a drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time’ – looks like being a subject worth studying for immediate practical reasons, and not simply as a matter of historio-philosophical rumination about the fall of Rome or of the Maya.<sup>3</sup> And Diamond might look like just the person to take this theme on, as the author of *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, a splendid piece of applied Darwinian social theory, which argued persuasively that their physical environment, and the global distribution of plant and animal species conferred selective advantages to some human societies – notably those in western Eurasia – over others and hence produced the current world-wide configuration of wealth and power.<sup>4</sup>

*Collapse's* preoccupation with the present is indicated by a shift in structure compared with the earlier book. While *Guns, Germs, and Steel* took largely a narrative form, as a comparative history of the evolution of human societies in different parts of the world, *Collapse* is a cluster of case-studies, beginning with contemporary Montana, shifting back to look at a series of past catastrophes – for example, Easter Island, the Anasazi of northern New Mexico, the Maya, and Norse Greenland – before returning to survey some modern examples of actual disaster (Rwanda), conjoined failure and comparative success (Dominican Republic/Haiti), and potential breakdown (China and Australia) and to offer ‘Practical Lessons’. Diamond says that he uses the same comparative method in both books.<sup>5</sup> While this is true, their rhetorical

---

<sup>2</sup> Mike Davis paints an alarming picture of current trends in ‘The Other Hurricane: Has the Age of Chaos Begun?’, 5 October 2005, [www.zmag.org](http://www.zmag.org).

<sup>3</sup> J. Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> J. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (London: Vintage, 1998). Alan Carling and Paul Nolan subject Diamond’s argument to detailed critical scrutiny in their Review of ‘Guns, Germs, and Steel’, *Historical Materialism*, 6 (2000), 215-263.

<sup>5</sup> Diamond, *Collapse*, pp. 17-19.



organisation differs significantly. For example, *Collapse* contains far more autobiographical anecdotes than did *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, starting with the many references to Diamond's personal connections with Montana, and his friends there, in the lengthy opening chapter. No doubt this is the kind of thing agents and editors encourage star authors of even serious scientific books to do, but there is, I think, more going on here than such rather tedious demands of the contemporary culture industries.

Clifford Geertz refers to *Collapse's* 'monitory tones: so many societal *memento mori*, death-head reminders to the live and prospering'.<sup>6</sup> A more charitable way of summing up the discursive difference between the two books would be to say that Diamond has moved from the explanatory to the diagnostic mode. This is not to say that a lot of explaining doesn't go on in *Collapse* – on the contrary, the book is full of lists of different sorts of causes. But the point of this explaining is to help us to get a better grip of the perhaps imminent catastrophe that now confronts the whole of humankind. This is brought out best in the chapter on Easter Island. Diamond argues that competition among chiefs in this society divided both between chiefs and commoners and into rival clans led the upper class, motivated by religious belief and concern for prestige, to construct the giant stone statues for which the island is famous. The resources consumed in the process of carving, transporting, and erecting the statues helped to deforest the island. Easter Island happened to offer 'one of the most fragile environments, at the highest risk of deforestation, of any Pacific people'.<sup>7</sup>

Deforestation, completed between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries AD, deprived the islanders of the means to make canoes, and thereby to catch the porpoises that had been their main source of meat; it also promoted soil erosion that drastically undermined their ability to grow crops. 'The further consequences start with starvation, a population crash, and a descent into cannibalism.'<sup>8</sup> Easter Island's geographical

<sup>6</sup> C. Geertz, 'Very Bad News', *New York Review of Books*, 24 March 2005 (online edition), [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).

<sup>7</sup> Diamond, *Collapse*, p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

isolation – as the farthest east of the Polynesian islands – had given the islanders no incentive to invest in trade during their centuries of prosperity; it now prevented them from escaping. A civil war circa 1680 broke the power of the chiefs and the priests and undermined the hold of the religion that had legitimised the statue-building. The mutual ruination of the contending classes left the survivors vulnerable to the destructive effects of the slavers and the diseases that the Europeans started to bring with them a century later till in 1872 Easter Island's population – whose maximum is estimated at between six thousand and thirty thousand by archaeologists – had dwindled to one hundred and eleven.

For Diamond, 'Easter's isolation makes it the clearest example of a society that destroyed itself by overexploiting its own resources.'<sup>9</sup> He further comments:

The Easter Islanders' isolation probably also explains why I have found that their collapse, more than the collapse of any other pre-industrial society, haunts my readers and students. The parallels between Easter Island and the whole modern world are chillingly obvious. Thanks to globalization, international trade, jet planes, and the Internet, all countries on Earth today share resources and affect each other, just as did Easter's dozen clans. Polynesian Easter Island was as isolated in the Pacific Ocean as the Earth is today in space. When the Easter Islanders got into difficulties, there was nowhere to which they could flee, nor to which they could turn to help; nor shall we modern Earthlings have recourse elsewhere if our troubles increase. These are the reasons why people see the collapse of Easter Island society as a metaphor, a worst-case scenario, for what may lie ahead of us in our own future.<sup>10</sup>

The point – reiterated in Diamond's concluding chapter – that globalisation has increased our vulnerability to catastrophe (not just because we're on our own in space, but because greater cross-border integration means that the North can export hazardous chemical waste to and import Asian bird flu from its poorer neighbours) indicates that he is far from being a praise-singer of the virtues of the contemporary world.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.



His portrayal of Australia – one of the great havens of global tourism precisely because of its natural beauties – and China – whose spectacular accumulation process is currently keeping the global economy afloat – as environmental basket-cases provides further evidence of Diamond's distance from the simple-minded boosters of neo-liberal globalisation. But, for all the energy, intelligence, and scholarship that he throws into the individual case studies *Collapse* seems to me to be, by comparison with *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, analytically quite shallow.

Consistent with his earlier work, Diamond's explanatory focus is almost exclusively environmental. Societal collapse tends to take the form of 'unintended ecological suicide – ecocide'.<sup>11</sup> He lists no less than twelve different forms of environmental destruction – eight ancient, for example, the deforestation that caused the collapse of the Easter Island civilisation, and four additional modern ones – 'human-caused climate change, build-up of toxic chemicals in the environment, energy shortages, and full human utilization of the Earth's photosynthetic capacity'.<sup>12</sup> Diamond is nevertheless careful to avoid an exclusively environmental explanation of collapse and also to eschew the idea that environmental destruction inevitably dooms a society to disintegration – thus he discusses the cases of the Norse Icelanders and the Polynesian Tikopians who succeeded in successfully managing their resources in potentially highly adverse conditions (the Icelanders' case at least partly brought on by their own importation of Norwegian farming practices into the very different environment offered by Iceland).<sup>13</sup> He consequently adopts a looser explanatory framework, in which environmental damage is only one of five 'possible contributing factors' to societal collapse, the others being climate change, 'increased attacks by hostile neighbours', 'decreased support by friendly neighbours', and 'the ubiquitous problem of the society's responses to its problems, whether those are environmental or not'.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197-205, 286-93.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 14.

Despite this commitment to multi-causal explanation of societal collapse, Diamond's implicit focus remains on, at most, the first two factors listed. Those he makes a point of demonstrating that 'the overseas countries facing some of the worst problems of environmental stress, overpopulation or both' are also problem societies politically – or should we say actual or potential failed states?<sup>15</sup> He lists under both headings Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burundi, Haiti, Indonesia, Iraq, Madagascar, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Rwanda, the Solomon Islands, and Somalia, and goes on to elaborate on the mechanisms that connect environmental stress and political failure:

the best predictors of modern 'state failures' – i.e. revolutions, violent regime change, collapse of authority, and genocide – prove to be measures of environmental and population pressure, such as high infant mortality, rapid population growth, a high percentage of the population in their late teens and 20s, and hordes of young unemployed young men without job prospects and ripe for recruitment into militias. Those pressures create conflicts over shortages of land (as in Rwanda), water forests, fish, oil, and minerals. These create not only chronic internal conflict, but also emigration of political and economic refugees, and wars between countries arising when authoritarian regimes attack neighbouring nations in order to divert popular attention from internal stresses.<sup>16</sup>

That this kind of mechanism is sometimes responsible for political instability seems undeniable, as Diamond's detailed case study of the Rwandan genocide suggests. But its explanatory scope seems quite

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 515.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 516-17. It is worth noting that state failure thus defined is not the same as societal collapse, which, to recall, Diamond identifies with 'a drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time'. Nowhere, not even Rwanda, has in recent years met the first condition of drastic population reduction, while significant decreases in complexity may at most have occurred in some of the African countries that have suffered protracted and socially destructive wars (Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique) and more doubtfully in Iraq under Western blockade and occupation. State failures at best reveal the processes that might help to produce the more extreme collapse that Diamond seems to believe we now risk at the global level.



limited: it cannot, for example, account for the most important political transformation of the past generation – the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union (at most rapid population growth in the Muslim republics of central Asia may have stoked the fires of political instability in the region, exacerbating, but by no means causing the crisis at the centre). Moreover, the particular use that Diamond makes of environmental factors as causes of political instability doesn't stray far from the conventional wisdom of the Anglo-American foreign policy. There are many who would argue that a much more important example of politically disruptive environmental stress than the usual Third World suspects listed above is provided by the United States itself, and in particular by the Bush administration's efforts to use military power to maintain an economic model that Diamond eloquently argues is unsustainable.<sup>17</sup>

The greatest weakness of Diamond's argument lies, however, less in the specific way he privileges environmental destruction as a cause of societal collapse than in how he deals with one of the other general causes he distinguishes, namely how a society responds to its problems. He is careful to avoid environmental determinism: thus his study of Greenland contrasts the failure of the Norse settlers, who disappeared sometime in the fifteenth century some four hundred and fifty years after their first colony was established there, with the Inuit, who arrived in Greenland somewhat later but outlasted them. Diamond argues that the Inuit had already developed a lifestyle that allowed them to cope with the cooler climate brought on by the Little Ice Age that spanned the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries. The Norse, on the other hand, stuck with practices such as dairy farming that they brought with them from Norway and that were ill-suited to this harsher climate and promoted damaging environmental changes such as deforestation and soil erosion. These practices were, however, deeply embedded in their form of life:

<sup>17</sup>For an extended analysis of the Bush administration's global policy, see A. Callinicos, *The New Mandarins of American Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

Without those shared Norwegian values, the Norse could not have cooperated to survive in Greenland ... The Norse were undone by the same social glue that had enabled them to master Greenland's difficulties. That proves to be a common theme throughout history and also in the modern world ... : the values to which people cling most stubbornly under inappropriate conditions are the values that were previously the source of their greatest triumphs over adversity.<sup>18</sup>

Diamond expands on this theme in a lengthy chapter towards the end of the book entitled 'Why Do Some Societies Make Disastrous Decisions?'. Consistent with his general approach, he lists various kinds of bad decision-making – for example, failure to anticipate damaging consequences in advance, not perceiving problems once they develop, the paradoxes of collective action (free-riders, the tragedy of the commons, etc.), the costs of sticking to inappropriate values (as the Norse Greenlanders did). It is hard to muster much enthusiasm for this generalising typology. It's not so much that it's mistaken as that, without a much stronger sense of the social context in which these different kind of failures occur than Diamond succeeds in conveying, it offers little in the way of explanation. Geertz justifiably complains about 'how sociologically thin and how lacking in psychological depth' *Collapse* is, because of Diamond's failure to attend to

culturally and politically configured lifeworlds – singular situations, immediate occasions, particular circumstances.

But it is within such lifeworlds, situations, occasions, circumstances, that calamity, when it occurs, takes intelligible shape, and it is that shape that determines both the response to it and the effects that it has. However 'natural', 'physical', or 'material' they may be, and however unpredictable or intended, collapse and catastrophe, are, like coups and recessions, riots and religious movements, social events.<sup>19</sup>

Geertz's point bears on the causes of, as well as the response to catastrophes. Diamond sums up his discussion of collapse-inducing

<sup>18</sup>Diamond, *Collapse*, p. 275. It is a tragic irony that the warming of the Arctic now threatens the survival of traditional Inuit practices.

<sup>19</sup>Geertz, 'Very Bad News'.



'irrational behaviour' caused by 'clashes of values' with the following observation: 'Perhaps a crux of success or failure in a society is to know which core values to hold on to, and which ones to discard. In the last sixty years the world's most powerful countries have given up long-held cherished values previously central to their national image, while holding onto 'other values.'<sup>20</sup> The problem is how to get a handle on the processes through which values are dropped or held onto. Any set of values that captures the allegiance over numbers of people over a significant period of time is likely to be of sufficient generality to admit of different, and sometimes mutually incompatible interpretations. This means that carrying on a tradition is far from being an unproblematic, even automatic process: it may, on the contrary, be highly contested as rival ways of carrying on the tradition are offered, each claiming some legitimacy as an interpretation of 'core values'. One reason why it is important to attend to the socio-cultural context in the way that Geertz enjoins us to do is that it allows us to begin to fill in the background against which the selective process of maintaining, transmitting, and sometimes changing these values occurs. 'Values' then cease to be inert determinants of behaviour; the form their continuing influence takes becomes the result of often conflictual processes that, insofar as they involve clashes of interest among different groups, must be seen as essentially political.<sup>21</sup>

Now it is not that conflicts of interest do not figure in Diamond's argument. On the contrary, they play an important role in his studies of the Maya, Easter Island, Greenland, and Rwanda, leading him to identify as a more general phenomenon cases where:

the interests of the decision-making elite in power clash with the interests of the rest of society. Especially if the elite can insulate themselves from

<sup>20</sup>Diamond, *Collapse*, pp. 432, 433.

<sup>21</sup>It is perhaps worth stressing that bringing in interests and conflict carries no necessary commitment to any kind of value-relativism or to the doctrine that evaluative judgements merely express interests or state preferences. For much more on these matters see A. Callinicos, *Making History* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.; Leiden: Brill, 2004), esp. chs. 3-5.

the consequences of their actions, they are likely to do things that profit themselves, regardless of whether those actions hurt everybody else.<sup>22</sup>

But this phenomenon – and more generally those of social conflict and antagonistic interests – are simply included in Diamond's typology of failures of collective decision-making without much consideration of the broader explanatory role that they might play. Thus, he includes among the examples of 'powerful countries' giving up 'long-cherished values', the following: 'Britain and France abandoned their centuries-old role as independently acting world powers; Japan abandoned its military tradition and armed forces; and Russia abandoned its long experiment with communism.'<sup>23</sup> But the outcome of the Second World War – particularly once the partition of Eurasia between the Western and Eastern blocs had begun to develop – gave Britain, France, and Japan little alternative but to accept their reduced geopolitical position under US hegemony (though not, in the first two cases at least, to abandon all imperial pretensions), while the fall of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had at least as much to do with force majeure in the shape of Western economic and military competition as it did with any significant change in values, which in any case seems to have been highly partial and confined largely to elites. These are all processes of change central to understanding which are inequalities of power and conflicts of interests.

An advantage of thematizing these issues is that it would make it possible to avoid an obvious objection to Geertz's contextualist critique of Diamond's treatment of societies as collective problem-solvers, namely that the kind of thickly descriptive social anthropology that it commends dissolves the history of societies into a welter of local detail, rendering impossible the large-scale comparisons that Diamond seeks in both *Collapse* and its predecessor. One way of stating the problem with both books would be to say that, in Marxist terms, they focus almost exclusively on the productive forces, largely ignoring the social relations of production.<sup>24</sup> In other words, Diamond focuses on the techniques,

<sup>22</sup>Diamond, *Collapse*, p. 430.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>24</sup>Jerry Cohen's treatment of the forces and relations of production is close to definitive: see *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (rev. edn.; Oxford: OUP, 2000).



practices, and kinds of knowledge through which human societies relate to their natural environments in order to meet their needs, paying much less attention to the relations of economic power that determine which social groups have access to these techniques, practices, and kinds of knowledge and how the benefits of their use are distributed. But a virtue of the concept of the relations of production is that it gives us a way of theoretically generalising about how at least the economic interests of different categories of social actors are determined. One particularly creative use of this explanatory strategy is offered by Robert Brenner's concept of the rules of reproduction. He argues that actors' differential positions in class-divided social-property systems (his preferred rendering of the Marxian concept of the relations of production) makes it rational for them to pursue distinctive economic strategies designed to reproduce their material situation and social place. In pre-capitalist class societies, both lords and peasants had direct access to their means of subsistence and consequently no interest in introducing productivity-enhancing innovations that would raise the rate of economic growth. By contrast, the dependence of both capitalists and workers on the market gives them an incentive to seek the cost-reducing productivity increases that drive modern economic growth.<sup>25</sup>

Again, it is not that Diamond ignores some of the considerations involved in Brenner's concept of the rules of reproduction. Thus he concludes a lengthy survey of the sometimes damaging, sometimes beneficial environmental impacts of large corporations: 'environmental practices of big businesses are shaped by a fundamental fact that for many of us offends our sense of justice,' namely 'that businesses are not non-profit charities but profit-making companies, and that publicly owned companies with shareholders are under obligation to those shareholders to maximise profits, provided they do so by legal means.'<sup>26</sup> But this indeed self-evident truth quickly disappears in a lecture about the ultimate responsibility of the public for allowing environmentally-destructive business practices to flourish. Confusingly, Diamond

<sup>25</sup>R. Brenner, 'The Social Basis of Economic Development', in J. Roemer, ed., *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1986).

<sup>26</sup>Diamond, *Collapse*, p. 483.

eschews moralism, declaring: 'Invocation of moral principles is a necessary first step for eliciting virtuous behaviour, but that alone is not a sufficient step.'<sup>27</sup> In fact, however, *Collapse* becomes increasingly preachy as it nears its end, with the final pages making repeated calls for courageous decision-making and the like.

The trouble with this is not that it violates some dubious ideal of value-free science but rather that it fails to address properly the kind of task that the current environmental dangers that Diamond so eloquently evokes, for example, in his concluding chapter. It is no insult to his considerably qualities as a scholar and a writer to say that a very large number of school-students could also list these same dangers. We know, in increasing precision and detail, what the potential disasters facing the planet are. We have some idea also of the remedies. The difficulty – as the fate of the Kyoto Protocol shows – lies in the social, political, and economic obstacles to beginning seriously to implement them. Where social science can contribute – and, whatever his intellectual background, Diamond's environmental histories belong to social science – is a better understanding of the nature and causes of these obstacles so that they may become the objects of more effective political action. But this understanding requires at once an anthropologically and historically richer and a theoretically more extensive and rigorous grasp of how societies work than Diamond's primarily environmental focus offers. We could then address an issue that is only implicit in *Collapse*. Diamond's reliance on the comparative method implies that it is legitimate to treat all societies past and present as the basic units of comparison when seeking to identify the causes of societal collapse. But this begs the question of whether or not the appropriate scale of comparison has changed as a result of the integration of the entire planet into a single capitalist world system. Diamond touches on this issue when he considers how globalisation may have increased our vulnerability to catastrophe. But properly addressing it would direct our attention to the distinctive social properties of capitalism – and in particular on the way in which capitalists' rules of reproduction have unleashed an economic

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 485.



dynamic that is uniquely expansive and integrative but that also threatens destruction on an unprecedented scale.<sup>28</sup>

None of this diminishes the considerable value of *Collapse* and especially of the case studies it contains. Diamond is particularly effective in evoking images of the intense and destructive conflicts into which collapsing societies have often fallen – the remains of a cannibal feast in a house that fell victim to a war-raid during the disintegration of Anasazi civilisation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD, the evidence that the increasingly large statues built by rival chiefs in the last days of Easter Island society were often toppled, perhaps ‘in a quickly spreading paroxysm of anger and disillusionment, as took place at the end of communism’.<sup>29</sup> One doesn’t have to be an aficionado of catastrophist fiction to find it increasingly easy to imagine similar scenes as our own future. Diamond is entirely justified in calling us to action to ensure that it is a different world that becomes our actual future.

---

<sup>28</sup> Mike Davis’s recent work is exemplary in the way in which it interweaves this distinctive capitalist economic dynamic with the fluctuations of chaotic physical systems: see notably *Ecology of Fear* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998) and *Late Victorian Catastrophes* (London: Verso, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Diamond, *Diamond*, p. 111.

Review:

## Equality, From Theory To Action<sup>1</sup>

Steven R. Smith

IN MANY WAYS THIS BOOK is a remarkable achievement, in respect to the range of issues it explores, the inter-disciplinary breadth of its theoretical analysis, and its attention to the detailed political and social processes of implementing egalitarian policy and practice. The authors, John Baker, Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon, and Judy Walsh are from the University College Dublin’s *Equality Studies Centre* and together present a formidable argument for what they call ‘equality of condition’. That is, emphasising the structural character of domination and oppression across five dimensions of equality: respect and recognition; resources; love, care and solidarity; power relations; and working and learning. Through carefully attending to empirical evidence as well as to normative argument, the authors provide an in-depth

---

<sup>1</sup> Review of John Baker, Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon, and Judy Walsh, *Equality: From Theory To Action* (Basingstoke UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004) (£16.33: \$29.95 paperback), 323 pages.



analysis of the social, political, legal and economic contexts in which these domains of equality operate. In response to this analysis, they also recommend specific strategies for change that manage to be practical and non-utopian, but at the same time radically far-reaching.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I explores what the authors call 'the new equality agenda'. The main sociological premise is that the patterned character of inequalities across all five domains outlined above are derived from social divisions based mainly on class, gender, 'race' and ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation. Chapter 1 begins with an empirical tabulation of the vast inequalities that exist across the globe and within particular countries. Regarding resource inequalities and class divisions, the authors highlight that the richest in the world (dollar-billionaires) belong to a class whose income is almost entirely investment-based, and that the average-pay of high-level executives in the US, for example, is about fifty times the average-pay of US production workers (5). In respect to gender divisions, the book reveals that even in the most resource equal countries (such as Denmark and Finland) women's share of earned income is only about 70% of men (5). 'Race' and ethnicity divisions are also entrenched, so again in the US, African-American families receive on average less than two-thirds the income of non-Hispanic white-families (5). Inequalities of respect and recognition, and power relations are revealed in various statistics too. For example, gay sex is still illegal in more than eighty countries (5); and many European nation-states such as France, Greece, Hungary and Malta, have parliaments comprising less than 10% women (7). Inequalities of what the authors call 'love, care and solidarity' are highlighted. For example, 27,000 children in the UK are on child protection registers, with increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers being split from their families and excluded from social care provision (6-7). Inequalities of working and learning are also experienced across a range of social groups. Only 13% of African-Americans attend four years of college in the US compared with 24% of white-Americans. Disabled people too are poorly represented in mainstream education in many countries. For example, within third-level education in Ireland only 1% of students are disabled, with just 2% in the UK and Germany (8).

The book's long list of patterned inequalities raises a number of questions that the authors seek to address. Most notably: What are the best ways of explaining these inequalities? What are the central principles or objectives of equality? What are the best institutional frameworks for achieving equality in different spheres and contexts? Within particular institutional arenas, what policies would best promote equality? And, given understandings of the causes of inequality, what are the best political strategies for promoting equality?

Using the above questions as a framework for their analysis, the authors then make a distinction in Chapter 2 between 'basic equality', 'liberal egalitarianism', and 'equality of condition'. Their central argument is that whilst the former two conceptions are necessary components of equality, promoting, for example, human rights and the principles of universal citizenship and toleration, they are not sufficient for maintaining equality between individuals and groups. Briefly put, they fail to establish various conditions of equality across the five domains. 'Equality of condition' is therefore intended to fill this gap, challenging the structural divisions that exist in society, and providing a social and political platform for subordinate groups to engage in 'critical dialogue' with other more dominant groups. This dialogue in turn must always recognise ...

... the real effort that the privileged must make to understand the voices of members of subordinate groups and to open their ideas to critical interrogation. (35).

It is within this latter context especially that the book tries to negotiate the difficult leftist terrain of promoting solidarity across culturally diverse communities. This theme is further explored in Chapter 3 which incorporates recent leftist-trends, moving beyond the narrow bounds of class-based social and political analysis, whilst at the same time acknowledging the important heritage within egalitarian politics of applying Marxist/socialist theory to practice.

Following from the above, Parts II and III of the book are mainly concerned with putting egalitarian principles into practice, and outlining strategies for political and social change. It is during these parts especially that the authors adopt an inter-disciplinary approach for their analysis, critically evaluating the economic, legal and democratic mechanisms and other institutional practices that could be implemented



to ensure 'equality of condition'. That is, in the economy (Chapter 5), political decision-making (Chapter 6), the workplace (Chapter 7), education and training (Chapter 8), and in academic research (Chapter 9).

Part III then outlines and critically evaluates specific political strategies for change. In Chapter 10, an attempt is made to break away from what is understood to be the monolithic and hierarchical character of most Marxist political strategies that have emphasised the importance of the working-class acting in its own self-interest (191-194). Instead, the authors recommend a heterogenous political movement that is non-hierarchical, less motivated by a singular class self-interest, and so promoting interests across a range of groups and cultural identities, founded, in part at least, on a moral consciousness that challenges oppressive social structures (194-196). The ideological underpinning of this challenge is explored in Chapter 11, recognising the complex and interactive relationship between ideology and structure (214-216). Briefly put, a Gramsci-like position is adopted where egalitarianism (incorporating the five domains of equality) is regarded as a new mobilising counter-ideology or 'narrative', and therefore a force for social change. The assumption being that:

By creating new meanings and understandings, (egalitarian) ideologies become social forces in themselves, helping to shape social movements and determining the nature of the social relations that develop around them. (217).

Finally, in Chapter 12, the authors tie together well the main political strategies explored in the preceding chapters, by recommending what they call 'strategic pluralism'. The main virtue of this strategy is that it is intended to reflect the numerous 'voices' within the egalitarian movement promoting this plurality as its strength and not its weakness. In short, it is a strategy that is both robust and flexible, allowing for political pressure to be applied and co-ordinated in a range of ways (both moderate and radical) and on a variety of different fronts (social, political, economic, and cultural).

However, despite the many qualities of the book, there are some weaknesses centred mainly on what is perhaps an inevitable trade-off between analytical breadth and depth. Consequently, the authors often

ignore, or at least down-play, various debates that are pre-occupying many leftist egalitarian political philosophers, concerning (amongst other things) the way other values relate to equality. Most notably the values of self-ownership, individual choice and responsibility, as well as the possible conflicts that exist between the ethics of care and the ethics of social justice.

In respect to self-ownership and individual choice and responsibility, the authors make some reference to these values, being tied inexorably to right-libertarianism and other forms of neo-liberalism, arguing that this connection 'abuses the idea of freedom' (55). Nevertheless, they leave a number of important philosophical and political questions unanswered that many contemporary egalitarians are addressing. For example, left-libertarians explore the possibility of combining negative conceptions of freedom (emphasising individuals being free from government constraint) with positive conceptions (emphasising the state re-distributing resources to equalise particular individual capacities or powers).<sup>2</sup> Their main task is to combine these different conceptions of freedom in order to secure the value of full self-ownership. That is, promoting the idea that all individuals possess certain rights, which can only be guaranteed by a radical re-distribution of the world's resources, whilst severely constraining government intervention in respect to subsequent individual exchange-agreements. Of course, it is a highly moot point as to whether left-libertarians succeed in their arguments.<sup>3</sup> But it is hard to deny the significant contribution they have made to contemporary egalitarian thinking, and that this book does not fully acknowledge it is certainly an oversight.

Another related problem is the way the authors understand the values of individual choice and responsibility as found in their critique of liberal egalitarianism. The accusation is that liberal egalitarianism over-emphasises these values, which, although according to the authors ...

<sup>2</sup> For example, see P. Van Parijs, *Real Freedom For All: What (If Anything) Can Justify Capitalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). Also see P. Vallentyne and H. Steiner, *Left-Libertarianism and its Critics* (Basingstoke UK: Palgrave, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see my 'Left-Libertarianism and the Search for Consistency and Plausibility' in *Res Publica: A Journal of Legal and Social Philosophy* Vol. 10, No. 1, 2004, pp.79-89. Also see B. H. Fried, 'Left-Libertarianism: A Review Essay' in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* Vol. 32, No. 1, January 2004, pp.89-92.



... play(s) an important role in supporting the idea of equal opportunity ... tend(s) to ignore the extent to which people's choices are influenced by their social positions. (42).

Certainly, this accusation is consistent with many traditional leftist positions. Social conditioning has often been offered as an alternative explanatory paradigm of social behaviour to those explanations emphasising individual choice and responsibility. This has then allowed recommendations for radical social, political and economic programmes that seek to change, in the first instance, social structures rather than individuals. However, it is a move that buries a number of controversial issues that many contemporary egalitarians have sought to address – issues that are moreover extremely pertinent to the arguments presented in this book. For example, it is somewhat ironic that those political philosophers whom the authors openly associate with as promoting 'equality of condition', have often accused aspects of liberal egalitarianism of not taking seriously *enough* the values of individual choice and responsibility.<sup>4</sup> With the risk of over-simplification, the main normative position is that the left should conspicuously promote these values, given that the capitalist system unjustly penalises and rewards those individuals who do not deserve it. The claim, following from this, is that many Rawlsian liberal egalitarians, with their emphasis on redistributing resources from the 'fortunate better-offs' toward the 'unfortunate worse-offs' within the capitalist system, do not pay sufficient attention to systemic failures that leave relatively untouched the unjust characteristics of capitalist production and consumption processes. These characteristics in turn detrimentally impact on the ways

<sup>4</sup> See especially perhaps G. A. Cohen – for example, 'The Currency of Egalitarian Justice' in *Ethics* Vol. 99, July 1989, pp.906-44; *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and *If You're An Egalitarian How Come You're So Rich?* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000). The authors here, although acknowledge that there may not be wholesale agreement between them and commentators such as Cohen, nevertheless readily acknowledge the profound influence of Cohen on their ideas – see for example note 16 to Chapter 2, p.250.

in which individuals are able to legitimately choose and take responsibility for their lives.<sup>5</sup>

Unsurprisingly, as with left-libertarianism's argument for self-ownership, the contemporary leftist emphasis on individual choice and responsibility is certainly not without its critics.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, this 'turn' in egalitarian theory has had a profound impact on egalitarian debate. For my part, one of the most important contributions it has made is that it has allowed argument to develop, through moving off the structuralist ground traditionally occupied by the left, and encroaching on territory usually occupied by free-market apologists. By so doing, it has much more effectively undermined the internal moral case for capitalism. Given the book explicitly recognises the centrality of providing a moral argument against neo-liberalism and free-market capitalism, it is again a weakness that it does not address these issues more fully.

Turning now to the possible conflict between the ethics of care, love and solidarity, and the ethics of social and re-distributive justice. At various points in the book, the authors piggy-back on feminist theory and make a very convincing case for blurring the distinction between 'private' and 'public' matters in respect to issues of egalitarian justice (for example, see 28-29; 52-53; 164-168; and 220-224). More specifically, they argue it is in the former domain where inequalities of care, love and solidarity, are often experienced as emotional deprivation. To rectify this, public policy should acknowledge more fully how we are all living interdependently or dependently on others in emotional relationships – a social reality that (according to the authors) is often ignored in masculinised public debates, which tend to over-emphasise 'the rational' and 'the material'. For example, in Chapter 8 in relation to education policy, they argue that:

<sup>5</sup> See also Richard Arneson – for example, 'Discussion: Luck Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism' in *Ethics* Vol. 110, January 2000, pp.339-49; and 'Egalitarianism and the Undeserving Poor' in *The Journal of Political Philosophy* Vol. 5, No. 4, 1997, pp.327-50. The distinction between 'liberal egalitarianism' and those who promote 'equality of condition' can at this juncture become rather blurred, as in many ways Arneson could well be described as both a 'liberal egalitarian' and an 'equality of condition' proponent (and indeed, for many, so might Cohen).

<sup>6</sup> For a survey of these critics see M. Matravers 'Responsibility, Luck and 'The Equality of What?' Debate' in *Political Studies* Vol. 50, 2002, pp.558-72.



Because our emotions are as endemic to our humanity as is our rationality, it is necessary to develop educational experiences that will enable students to develop their emotional skills or personal intelligences *per se*, that is, as a discrete area of human capability. This area of education is particularly important in preparing students for care, love and solidarity work, given that all people live their lives in relations of dependency and interdependency, relations that are deeply emotional in character. (167-168).

Moreover, this stress on 'emotional intelligences' found within the ethics of love, care and solidarity is seen as countering the full-blown materialist assumptions found in much public discourse concerning redistributive justice. For example, in Chapter 11, the authors claim that:

Resistance to narratives of love, care and solidarity comes not only from those who regard such issues as private, unnameable, non-political matters, but also from those who fear that such narratives would distract from a necessary materialist analysis of economic and political relations. (222).

Instead, they recommend discourses that explicitly combine solidarity and materialist narratives:

What is all too often ignored is the materiality of love, care and solidarity: the affective and the economic are deeply implicated with each other ... We are not suggesting, therefore, that the solidarity narrative should replace the material, but that the two are complementary. (222-223).

No doubt there is considerable philosophical and political mileage in exploring the above recommendation for egalitarian theory and practice. However, the claim that these narratives are complimentary is more problematic than the authors seem to suggest. For example, even the values of love, care and solidarity do not always readily coincide. Love and care involves commitment to people we have intimate knowledge of; whereas, solidarity can spread its net more widely, including strangers as well as those we are close to. Of course, the moral obligations to strangers and those we are intimate with in egalitarian theory can overlap, but they are not the same, and often produce conflicts and

tensions. So, as an egalitarian you might be committed to a redistributive tax system that necessarily requires you to trade-off your loving moral commitment to enhancing the welfare of close family members who are relatively well-off, with a non-loving moral commitment to strangers who are in dire need. In this context, it seems more plausible to see the latter commitment as derived from a principle of universal solidarity with anyone who is in need, *regardless* of whether you love or care for them, rather than seeing the values of love, care and solidarity as coinciding. Indeed, it could be further argued that the moral force of universal solidarity is derived precisely from the fact that it includes those people who you do not love or care for. To put it another way, solidarity could be regarded as a universal commitment based on principles of impartiality, which ensures that the needs of strangers are met, even if this goes against the welfare interests of those who you are emotionally partial toward. These kinds of arguments, which problematise the ethics of impartial social justice and the ethics of partial care are hardly new,<sup>7</sup> but they do raise complex philosophical and political problems that the authors might have explored more.

In summary though, the strengths of the book considerably out-weigh its weaknesses. One of its most impressive qualities (apart from the breadth of subject matter covered) is that the authors consistently address two kinds of tension essential for all those who seek to effectively combine egalitarian theory and practice. The first tension is between theory and practice itself, given that abstract conceptions of equality (or any value for that matter) are not straightforwardly translated into specific policy or practice recommendations. Making such a translation, that does not compromise the stated conception, but at the same time does not retreat into overly-abstract policy generalisations is an awesome task, but is one the authors do not shy away from. The second tension is between recommending wider structural social and political changes and recommending more piecemeal policy reforms. Again, addressing this tension and so holding these strategies in tandem is an extremely difficult task, but necessary, to avoid the false dichotomy between making what could be long-term utopian-like demands, or

<sup>7</sup> For example, see B. Barry, *A Treatise in Social Justice – Vol. II: Justice as Impartiality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Also see T. Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).



short-term ad-hoc policies that, if promoted in isolation, may seem hopelessly co-opted. The authors, by refusing to choose between these strategies, and instead promoting both, realise well the importance of articulating a radical long-term political agenda that is also policy-specific and therefore 'doable'. That meeting this task produces more questions than answers, shows not only that egalitarianism is alive and well, but that the book has succeeded in opening-up new discourses and debates which both radically challenge existing social, political and economic relations, as well as offering vibrant alternatives. Given these qualities, it is a must-read text for all those committed to analysing and promoting egalitarian theory and practice.

## Subscription Information

You can now subscribe to *Imprints* by credit card. Holders of Visa and Mastercard can visit our website at [www.imprints.org.uk](http://www.imprints.org.uk) and follow the instructions there for online subscription via a secure server.

Our rates for one year (three issues) are:

European Union

£15 sterling individual

£20 sterling supporting subscriber

£30 sterling institutions

Cheques or Eurocheques made out to Imprints.

Rest of world

£20 sterling or \$30 US individual

£60 sterling or \$80 US institutions

Payment should be made by cheque, Eurocheque or International Money Order to Imprints.

Students and unemployed may subscribe at 2/3 of the standard rate (e.g. £10 sterling in the EU)

---

All subscription enquiries should be addressed to:

*Imprints*  
58 Wilmer Drive  
Bradford  
BD9 4AS  
United Kingdom



## Notes for contributors

*Imprints* is published three times a year in Summer, Winter and Spring.

Authors should send FOUR COPIES of papers to be considered for publication to the Editor, *Imprints*, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Reading. Whiteknights, Reading. Berkshire, RG6 6AH, United Kingdom. Submission of work to *Imprints* is taken to imply that the same material has not been previously published elsewhere and is not under consideration by any other journal. Material which forms part of a book currently in press should be submitted only with an accompanying note specifying the relationship between the submitted material and the book as a whole and giving full publication details. Authors will normally be expected to assign copyright in their contributions to *Imprints*.

Submissions should conform to the following requirements:

- (a) Length: Manuscripts over 7000 words will be considered only in exceptional circumstances.
- (b) Spelling and punctuation: Authors may employ either English or American forms, provided that style is used consistently throughout their submissions.
- (c) All notes should take the form of endnotes, collected together at the end of the article. These should be numbered consecutively and should contain all bibliographic information within them in the following styles:

Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 68.

Étienne Balibar, 'Man and Citizen: Who's Who?', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1994), p. 99.

John E. Roemer, 'The Possibility of Market Socialism', in D. Copp, J. Hampton and J. E. Roemer (eds) *The Idea of Democracy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 347.

- (d) All material should be double-spaced throughout.
- (e) Camera ready copy of figures, tables and charts will be required prior to publication.
- (f) Authors of submissions that have been accepted are required to either supply a copy of their submission on 1.44M 3 1/2 inch disk in Word for Windows, WordPerfect (5.0 and above) or RTF formats, or to supply their copy in one of these formats as a MIME attachment to an email message to [imprintseditor@gmail.com](mailto:imprintseditor@gmail.com)

### Decision procedures

Each manuscript will be screened by the editor or by one of the associate editors. Manuscripts deemed worthy of further consideration will then be sent to an outside referee. If the manuscript seems publishable it will be circulated amongst all the editors for a final and binding decision.

The editor may be contacted by email at:  
[imprintseditor@gmail.com](mailto:imprintseditor@gmail.com)



## Contributors to this issue

**Elizabeth Anderson** is Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies in the Department of Philosophy, University of Michigan. Her research has focused on democratic theory, equality in political philosophy and American law, the ethical limits of markets, theories of value and rational choice (alternatives to consequentialism and economic theories of rational choice), the philosophy of John Stuart Mill, and feminist epistemology and philosophy of science. She has published widely on these – and other – topics, and is the author of *Value in Ethics and in Economics* (1993).

**John Baker** is a member of the Equality Studies Centre in the School of Social Justice at University College Dublin. His research interests are in equality studies and particularly in relations between theory, practice and strategies for change. He is the author of *Arguing for Equality* (Verso, 1987) and a co-author of *Equality: From Theory to Action* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). He has also been active in a range of equality-related organizations and campaigns.

**Jenny Keeble** is currently completing a Masters degree at the University of Sheffield. Her research concentrates on questions of justice. In particular she is interested in global justice and the role nationality should play in our moral thinking.

**Alex Callinicos** is Professor of European Studies at King's College London. His research focuses on social and political theory (especially Marxism), philosophy, and political economy (especially of the advanced industrial countries and Southern Africa). He has written many books on these topics, most recently: *Resources of Critique* (2005, on social criticism), *The New Mandarins of American Power* (2003, on American power in global politics); *An Anti-capitalist Manifesto* (2003, on the anti-globalization movement); and *Against the Third Way* (2001).

**Steven R. Smith** is a Reader in Social Policy and Political Philosophy in The School of Health and Sciences, University of Wales, Newport. His research has focused on theories of equality and social justice, ideologies and practices of the welfare state, the disability rights movement, and the politics of identity. He has published in a wide variety of internationally respected journals, and is the author of *The Centre-Left and New Right Divide?* (1998) and *Defending Justice as Reciprocity* (2002).