

## Equality and the politics of care

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*This post is a draft of an idea I have been working on. I deliberately flag that this is not the finished article as yet, and more a work in progress, seeking to reconcile theories of justice with the practical politics of care. It is in part a reaction to discussions on Saturday at the Scottish Festival of Economics.*

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I have been thinking about what equality must mean if a politics of care is to be taken seriously.

Care is, of course, a known concept in our current society, around which differing understandings exist. Discussion of care might arise in the context of health, education, social security, resilience and participation in a community. I have suggested it might underpin politics and what I call an economics of hope. However, care has no meaning unless we are clear about what standard of equality we are using to measure its delivery, and I am not convinced that approaches to equality currently in use are adequate for this purpose.

Current discussions of equality focus upon people having rights, opportunities, or access. These claims dominate modern economic and political thinking. Debates on outcomes rarely arise. Instead, modern thinking on equality runs from Friedrich Hayek's claim that justice is secured when the same rules apply to all, through to John Rawls' attempt to design a society that would be judged fair whatever position we might find ourselves in. These are not the same arguments, and they lead to very different policy prescriptions. They do, however, share a common starting point that is rarely acknowledged. Equality is defined in both cases by the system's rules.

That sounds plausible. It is also profoundly misleading, because rules do not deliver outcomes. They create the conditions within which outcomes might arise, and as such, they are important and must be well chosen, but they do not guarantee them. And if we are talking about care, it is outcomes that matter. Rules are not enough in that case.

In fact, if equality is reduced to the claim that everyone faces the same rules, then all that is really being said is that people are permitted to take part in society, but that, too, is not enough. Permission does not guarantee the ability to access that for which permission is held, and in any case, the language of access, which is also a part of the debate on equality, is no better.

The suggestion that there might be equality of access tells us that services exist. It tells us that people can, in principle, use them. But it tells us nothing about whether those services deliver what people need, or whether people are in a position to benefit from them. This is not a minor technical flaw. It is a fundamental failure in how equality is understood.

The point has, of course, been made before. Amartya Sen demonstrated that rights, underpinned by rules, and resources, to which permission of access is granted, are not the same as real opportunity. What matters is what people are actually able to use these resources. Two people with the same formal rights and the same nominal access to services can have entirely different lives because of differences in income, health, security, or social circumstance. Capability, not permission, is what mattered, according to Sen's view, and that was a major step forward.

But even that insight, important though it is, does not go far enough if we stop there. That is because capability itself depends on systems of provision. It depends on whether the structures that surround people are designed to deliver the conditions for a decent life, or, as I would describe it, well-being.

Let me explore this argument using some examples.

You can be permitted to buy a house. You can have access to the housing market. But if you cannot afford to actually participate, you are not housed. The rules granting permission exist. The access exists. The market exists. The outcome does not.

Similarly, you can supposedly have access to education. But if your family circumstances limit your ability to study, and if you cannot afford the costs associated with learning, then you are not meaningfully educated. Again, the formal condition of access is met. The real outcome is not.

Likewise, you can be entitled to healthcare. But if waiting times are excessive, services are inaccessible, or if insecurity delays treatment, then you are not cared for. The right to care might exist, but the care itself does not.

These are not exceptional cases. They are the routine experience of many people in our society. And they expose the weakness of the prevailing concept of equality.

So, to be clear, permission granted by rules cannot establish equality, although they might be a precondition of it. Nor is a right of access sufficient to deliver equality. And

whilst the capability of access as promoted by Sen is important, it is still not enough unless it is reliably delivered.

The reason these insufficient concepts persist is not hard to identify. They shift responsibility long before they get to capability. In particular, if rules exist that deliver superficial equality, then inequality of outcome can be attributed to the individual. And if access exists, then failure to benefit from it can be explained as a matter of choice or effort. The system is absolved. That has been one of the central ideological achievements of neoliberal economics. Systemic failure is attributed to individual weakness, by design.

But an economy is not described by philosophical rules. It is a system for meeting needs, and if we take that idea seriously, then the questions we ask about the nature of equality change.

We should not only ask whether people are allowed to participate.

And nor should we limit ourselves to asking whether access is in principle available to services that exist.

What we should ask is whether provision is actually made. The question changes in that case.

We have to ask, are people housed? The question is not about theory, but about practice. Do people, as a matter of fact, have secure, affordable accommodation that meets their needs?

And, are people fed? Do they, every day, have reliable access to adequate nutrition without insecurity or dependence on charity?

Do they also receive healthcare when they need it, delivered in a timely and effective way?

Importantly, do they have access to education to the extent they want, and does that education equip them to participate fully in society in a way they might wish, accepting that this will not be the same for everyone?

And, as a result of the provisions, are people able to work if they wish to do so, in conditions that are fair and secure?

And do they have social security available to them that provides stability when work is not possible?

Vitality, do they have security in old age or when they can no longer work?

If the answer to these questions is no for any significant part of the population, then

equality does not exist, whatever the formal rules might claim, and this is the key test

This is what equality means in the context of a politics of care. *It is equality of provision*. The test is not based on theory, whether that theory be political, economic or philosophical. It is pragmatically based and tests whether the reality of ensuring that the conditions of well-being are met for all has been achieved.

That is a much more demanding standard than anything offered by the language of rights, opportunity or access.

It requires systems that are designed to deliver outcomes.

It requires collective provision.

It requires investment, planning and commitment.

And it requires us to judge our economy not by abstract indicators, but by whether it actually works for the people who live within it.

This also changes how we think about hope.

Hope is not the claim that individuals might succeed if they try hard enough within a system that routinely fails many of them. That is not hope. It is wishful thinking.

Hope is grounded in the knowledge that the system itself is designed to work and that the essentials of life are secure, meaning that housing, healthcare, education, income and security are not contingent on luck or market success, but are available, as a matter of course, to all, when nothing less will do.

That is what makes hope rational rather than aspirational.

So I am increasingly convinced that we need to change the way we think about equality. Most existing concepts, including the now-rarely-discussed issue of income equality, set the bar far too low (in this case, by failing to consider whether the income target is sufficient). As a result, they allow pragmatic failure to deliver to be excused. They shift responsibility away from where it belongs, within society, onto individuals whose inability to negotiate the system they face is considered a personal failing

If we are serious about a politics of care and an economics of hope that has substance, then we need to be clear about this. *The purpose of an economy is to provide well-being*. Equality only exists when it does. And to achieve that goal, existing theories of equality are not enough.

What a politics of care actually requires is that we approach the hierarchy of equality like this:

**Step 1: Permission.** People must have the right to use services. The rules must be in place.

**Step 2: Access.** Services must exist and be available. Otherwise, permission to access them is meaningless.

**Step 3: Capability.** People must be able, in purely practical terms, to use the services required to deliver well-being.

**Step 4: Outcome.** The system must actually deliver well-being.

At present, most policy stops at Step 2. A politics of care must reach Step 4. That is what makes it radically different.

The politics of care, coupled with an economics of hope, has to be based on the provision of the means that underpin well-being. Nothing less will do. Only when that well-being is available to all can equality be said to have been delivered, and it is delivery that matters.