

## The Left Egalitarian Embrace of Equal Opportunity and its Problems

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“So, is it good to be rich?’ ‘Yes, if you make it the hard way ... It’s not for me to pass moral judgment.”

“While there’s capitalism, there’ll be socialism, because there is always a response to injustice.”

Ed Miliband, leader of the Labour Party, From an Interview, *Daily Telegraph* Sept 15, 2012.

In an interview from 2012 Ed Miliband leader of the British Labour Party displays the fundamental problem in the recent embrace by left parties and left political leaders of equality of opportunity. On the one hand Miliband articulates the defining principle of the left politically—an awareness that capitalism leads to injustice and inequality of assets and control while the socialist argument has always centered on a defense of equality of distribution and the treatment of all members of society with equal respect separate from the roles that they play. On the other hand, he embraces the notion that there is a way for individuals to become rich, through effort and hard work, which is morally neutral. The essence of this seemingly muddled view is an attempt to square the circle between the justice of equality of distribution of essential goods and an embrace of equal opportunity of a certain kind—one that is beyond moral judgment because the competitive process is ostensibly open and fair and the outcome the result of initiative and effort. This embrace of equal opportunity simultaneous with an acknowledgment that socialism points to the injustices of capitalism seems to rest on a further questionable distinction between getting rich the hard way, presumably purely by one’s own

effort and talents and thus deserved, and getting rich the easy way, presumably by good fortune or good circumstances, or through non-productive activity such as speculation and thus undeserved. As so many critics of this view have pointed out, it assumes we can discern what way was lucky or the result of good social circumstances and what form was purely the result of effort—or for that matter, it assumes that there is even a form of getting rich “purely” by one’s own effort and without the help of others and much good luck. And once we have discerned that success has indeed been achieved purely by one’s own effort, moral judgment ceases: the assumption is that there is such a thing as acquiring wealth in the “hard” way beyond moral approval and disapproval, a form of acquisition that is acceptable from the viewpoint of an impersonal observer.

Miliband, of course, is seeking to reshape the Labour Party in a more communal and egalitarian direction by cobbling together a political ideology acceptable to a very diverse majority part of which is worried that the revenue of its hard work will be redeployed to support what it takes to be an underserving part of the remaining population but the whole of which wants public services guaranteed equally to all citizens and an increase in wages that have steadily been falling. And the glue holding together these two conflicting principles—the principle of unequal desert based on rewarding work and effort and an egalitarian principle of fairness and justice—is a call to recover a one-nation social patriotism of an earlier vintage quite at odds with the “New Labour embrace of a market driven meritocracy” and rejection of explicit redistribution: “With millions of people feeling that hard work and effort are not rewarded, we just can’t succeed as a country. And with so many people having been told for so long that the only way to get on is to be on your own, in it for yourself, we just can’t succeed as

a country. Yes friends, to come through the storm, to overcome the challenges we face, we must rediscover that spirit. That spirit the British people never forgot. That spirit of One Nation. One Nation. A country where everyone plays their part. A country we rebuild together” (Miliband 2012). Here he calls for a collective effort in which looking out for oneself will be self-defeating and everyone throughout the social ladder has something to contribute and yet this is linked to a concept of equal opportunity in which “hard work and effort” will be rewarded. Needless to say, Miliband’s political ideas are not meant to achieve analytical rigor but rather to persuade enough voters to enable him to retake the reins of government from the Conservatives for whom austerity and inequality is portrayed as a necessary step to weed out the parasites from the productive members of society. And so demanding analytic consistency here is demanding what might appear to be politically self-defeating.

But I would argue that the reverse may in fact be the case: that the very analytical dilemma of the Miliband remarks is also a dilemma for producing an effective political ideology of the left, even if inconsistency may produce short-run political rewards. Indeed, I will argue that every attempt to square the circle between equality of distribution and equal of opportunity, no matter how broadly equality of opportunity is defined—and whatever short term political advantage is achieved by keeping its meaning vague—will create a point at which either the appeal to equal opportunity has to be superseded through a principle of equal citizenship, equal status, equal political membership as a ground for redistribution, or it will provide a new opportunity for conservative critics of left equality to capture the principle of becoming unequal “the hard way” from a left that wants to keep it in within bounds. To avoid confusion, I am not arguing that it is theoretically or practically unsophisticated for a left

political actor to embrace equal opportunity as an ideological screen to press against unjust inequalities. Rather I am arguing that even if we acknowledge the sophistication of cobbling together an effective political ideology capable of mobilizing large numbers within civil society and gaining state control, the internal logic of this particular ideology will create the opportunity for opponents on the right to shift the language of equal opportunity in their direction as a way to usher in a retrenchment of the very egalitarian outcomes equal opportunity in its broadest forms may bring about.

### **The Left retreat back to equal opportunity from broader expansive demand for equality**

While there has never been one authoritative left egalitarian theory, equality has been and still is the core concept for the left around which a number of approaches have rotated. Norberto Bobbio has rightly argued, though not without controversy, that the left is still defined by a commitment to equality across civil, political, and social spheres precisely because positions within politics are still identified across a right to left continuum based on conflicting positions on vertical and horizontal distribution, and even deviations from this continuum are defined by their attitude toward equality (Bobbio 1996, 58,65–66). Likewise, T. H. Marshall famously argued that civil and political equality provided principles for the expansion of equality as social citizenship through an expanding set of public services, income supports whose aim is not merely to produce a steadily expanding welfare state but above all a steadily diminishing role for market price as the register of social status (Marshall 1965, 121–122). The aim was to achieve equality of status across all three spheres so that byproduct inequalities in specific areas such as education and housing would no longer define one's social and political

standing. R. H. Tawney famously explicitly addressed the relation of equal standing to equal opportunity arguing that socialist equality assumes that being treated with equal dignity trumps a constant drive for each person to be recognized for some way they surpass others. And this claim of equal dignity is coextensive with the claim that we are all equal as citizens in consenting to political authority and holding directly accountable those who exercise power in our name: "Socialism accepts, therefore, the principles which are the corner-stones of democracy, that authority, to justify its title, must rest on consent, that power is tolerable only so far as it is accountable to the public and that differences of character and capacity between human beings, however important on their own plane, are of minor significance compared with the capital fact of their common humanity. Its object is to extend the application of those principles from the sphere of civil and political rights, where at present, they are nominally recognized to that of economic and social organization, where they are systematically and insolently defied" (Tawney 1965, 197). In all three cases the guiding principle of equality was equality of treatment based on the equal dignity of persons above and beyond any roles or titles based on unequal differences. And the sense in which this is true of the left is that every political demand for the left impinges on the way people will be treated across all dimensions in which inequality defines one's worth—income, assets, educational and professional accomplishment, position within organizations, classes, and statuses. One might want to argue that Bobbio's reasons for defining the left right distinction along the dimension of equality and inequality has even more support precisely because political conflict in modern democratic regimes is above all over how its members are going to be treated quite apart from the specific policies or principles being debated. G. A. Cohen adds to this equality of equal regard or

dignity with the argument that socialism produces an equality of shared liberties within community of equals who have agreed to share benefits and burdens (Cohen 1994, 6, 11). It thus rejects the distribution of fundamental goods through the market.

The history of the democratic left was in large part an attempt to go beyond the liberal notion of offices open to talent. Politically and ideologically its initiatives consisted of a constant attempt to translate both the principle of political equality as equal status, equal treatment, and equal political rights into the social and economic spheres, and then reshaping civil society so that cooperative relations would supersede the inequalities deriving from contract and private property. By the same token, this extension of political equality, of equal political rights, as a register of equal status and belonging, was leveled against the identification of social mobility with meritocracy. It was the program of “liberal” reformers who promised equal opportunity as a way for those who displayed effort and talent to push past the majority to higher status and economic and social benefits—offices open to talent—with the implication that those who did not succeed deserved their place in the distribution of advantages and resources. And it was the criticism of the left that such schemes benefited those with built in advantages, and that even where such advantages were compensated for, these schemes provided only a minority with an “escape route” from undesirable jobs, living conditions, and income (Hattersley 2006, 5). Meritocracy—though the words used were “merit” and “desert”—was a way of appearing to challenge entrenched hereditary privilege by replacing traditional hierarchy with a hierarchy of imputed winners and losers whose opportunities to win and lose were at least equal even when the objects of the competition were restricted. In policy this allowed politicians to distinguish the deserving and underserving poor—the hard

working versus the slothful—and it was precisely the use of these categories for justifying inequality of income and the inevitability of the poor against which the left criticism was directed. The left attack was not against differences of ability but the identification of social worth with competitive success across society at large. For the left differences of contribution were viewed as compatible with a society in which all related to one another as having equal worth and possessing equal dignity.

But, I would argue, as this concept so central to the democratic left was attacked during the more recent counter-movement by proponents of the market, a significant portion of the left strategically retreated to defending equality as equal opportunity—or seeking to reconcile it with equality of standing and status. I will further argue that precisely because what counts as equalizing an opportunity can be left vague, parties of the left could define it in a variety of ways: as bringing everyone up to the starting gate by abolishing the widest number of natural and circumstantial barriers to competition across society, or as creating the conditions for a meritocratic society in which procedures for fair competition would be instituted with attention to removing circumstantial barriers but emphasizing free choice as to whether to take risks or not, or as giving everyone a fair chance at middle class well-being by providing public services through market mechanisms. This variety of meanings can be defined in a more or less egalitarian direction depending on political circumstances and the groups one needs to mobilize. And the temptation to exploit these ambiguities, I will show, is often overwhelming. But I will also argue that in the long run the political benefits of this studied ambiguity may also prove self-defeating, providing openings to opponents within the political ideological struggle

over the definition of citizenship reintroduce inequality of opportunities under guise of equality of opportunity.

In speaking of “equal opportunity,” I will be focusing on two meanings and excluding another. The first meaning is the general claim that we set up a form of competition for a scarce good in which all who are qualified may participate—the procedure itself is not necessarily market driven but is relative to the good being distributed such as admission to university place or a tryout for a theatre part or a place in a musical ensemble . The second refers to a market driven notion and selects out people for jobs, income, and institutional roles largely on success in the market and even defines merit on this basis, even though there are critics who claim that merit and market success are not identical, or even that market success has nothing to do with merit at all. The third meaning is related to the fact that we find many accomplishments meritorious in relation to others engaging in the same activity, say becoming a great musician or finding a new literary style, or making a brilliant film all of which require the practitioners have the opportunity to develop the relevant abilities or to participate in a cultural setting that leads to these achievements. I will not discuss these last forms of accomplishment in relation to the equal chances to engage in a meritorious activity because they relate to standards of worth that have little to do with social and political worth, though they may be indirectly affected by the other two meanings. But I often will be referring the other two together when their logic is the same, though at other times I will see them as distinct.

### **The Incoherence of Equal Opportunity as Political Opportunity**



In his classic piece seeking to define the concrete meanings of equality in our everyday understanding, Bernard Williams lays bare an analytical problem of equal opportunity accounts of merit whose logic leads us to a fundamental political dilemma of left politics (Williams 1973). Williams argues that the object to be distributed under the principle of equal opportunity has a peculiar property compared to a collective good such as health care distributed according to need or the recognition of irreducible features of our common humanity that requires we treat persons with equal respect: namely that what is distributed under equal opportunity is not just the good itself according to some standard of merit, but also the opportunities or access to apply for that good. And Williams points out that this opportunity or access to compete for the good is not equal if it applies merely to one section of society: "It requires not merely that there should be no exclusion from access on grounds other than those appropriate or rational for the good in question, but that the grounds considered appropriate for the good should themselves be such that the people from all sections of society have an equal chance of satisfying them" (1973, 244). But to make sure all sections of society, not merely those with the characteristics which are part of the grounds for allocating the good, have access to it, we have to abstract from the identity of the competing agents all disadvantages deriving from bad luck or circumstance so that the inequalities of the environments such as social and family background no longer play a role in defining the identity of the persons competing for the scarce good. This logically would include in addition to environmental barriers, all genetic endowments if it were possible to equalize them as well. At this point, as Williams points out, "where everything is controllable, equality of opportunity and absolute equality [equality of persons abstracted from environmental and inborn

disadvantages] seem to coincide...” (1973, 247). A similar argument can be made for the outcome side of meritocratic schemes, namely equality of opportunity depends for its continuation on producing equality of outcome if the starting gate is to remain equal, but its goal is to produce inequality of outcome and so it is always in danger of undermining itself unless it neutralizes the very inequalities it is meant to select for (White 2007, 74). So the logic of equal opportunity both on the input and on the output side leads to the logic of equality of persons and equal respect (and the equal distribution of resources necessary for such treatment), the very principle which asks us to forego judging people by the goods achieved through equal opportunity (Williams 1973, 248). At the same time, precisely because the aim of equal opportunity is to deliver a goods unequally, such as scarce jobs, academic places, and professional statuses, it treats people as unequal with regard to expertise and social roles and so conflicts with equal treatment and equal recognition of persons. It is precisely this incoherence in the logic of equal opportunity along with its tendency to reward individuals for arbitrarily acquired characteristics that the left concepts of equality have always sought to overcome.<sup>1</sup>

### **The political temptations of “equal opportunity.”**

Nonetheless, as both left parties and left egalitarian have retreated from their own expansive egalitarian principles, they have found the very logic of equal opportunity and the appeal to equalizing the conditions for equal competition both in the market and for various non-market goods as a way of challenging existing inequalities while mobilizing the broadest number of people to its cause. The reasons are not obscure. There are a number of political

advantages of appealing to equal opportunity as a stand-in or replacement for original left account of equality.

First, because the logic of equal opportunity assumes we are getting rid of indefensible barriers to achieving a scarce goal or acquiring a scarce good, both political actors and those they are trying to mobilize can read into this principle as much or as little redistribution downward and as much or as little elimination of unequal conditions in the social and political environment as they desire. For a politician of the left, it provides the widest latitude in the political ideological use of equality against inegalitarian opponents on the right. On the one hand, it enables him/her to appear as an egalitarian over and against his/her conservative inegalitarian opposition without having to defend determinate egalitarian principles, such as expanding political rights into effectual citizen participation, state provided collective goods, or redistribution of economic assets downward—one need merely portray oneself as an enemy of existing unearned hierarchies of privilege. Alternatively, it allows a politician of the left to argue the reverse, namely in favor of fundamental left egalitarian principles such as expanding equal political rights and resources, state provided collective goods, or redistribution of economic assets—or for that matter renewed regulation of economic institutions such as banks and investment firms—all in the name of giving all citizens a fair chance of competing to join the middle class or be successful in their own terms. More recently this has taken the form of embracing the claim that we must reduce the inequalities of income assets and political influence of large corporations and finance and an appeal to the organic view of the nation in which everyone's contribution counts so that everyone has fair chance of success whether in the form of Theodore Roosevelt's "new nationalism," or Disraeli's "one nation" or Social

Democratic “social solidarity.” Here the aim is one of restoring equal opportunity as a communal goal.

Second, left politicians find in equal opportunity a way of attacking unjust inequalities while allowing their followers to read into their appeal that their efforts will be rewarded but those of the undeserving will not. Thus equal opportunity viewed ideologically becomes a principle that allows parties and politicians to mobilize majorities of disparate constituencies under the principle that effort will be rewarded once we provide certain equally shared public goods like education, health care, job opportunities in the public sector, and income supports; but these goods will not be provided to those sections of society who ostensibly do not put in the effort commensurate with an ideal of merit. So under the rubric of equal opportunity reducing inequalities of distribution can be combined with public resentment against the irresponsible and the non-contributing. And rhetorically this attack can be deployed downward against those who do not fulfill their responsibilities to work or upward against those who irresponsibly invest in the short-run at the cost of the productive economy.

Third, equality of opportunity as political ideology works for times when in Rousseau’s language, *amour propre*, self-love and vanity, and desire for that which others want simply because they want it, supersedes, *amour de soi*, a healthy love of self that combines independent sense of self-respect with sympathy for others, and solidarity with the community at large (Rousseau 2011, 62–63). At times, the expansive concept of left egalitarianism assumed something like the latter notion of equality as its foundation: specifically the claim that the principle of equality of persons as equally worthy of dignity served both as the basis for

the equality of political citizens and the basis for social provision under the principle of social solidarity and a cooperative view of political society. This socialist view echoed Rousseau's account of communal solidarity as a condition for a healthy sense of respect enjoyed by all citizens as equals. However, in periods when citizens think of themselves as consumers, desiring goods and positions because others desire them, and willing to risk their own life chances in competition for limited goods, prestige, and social roles, the embrace of equal opportunity becomes a way for left parties and left political actors to cut their political ideological losses, so to speak, and insert an appeal to equality that coincides with a cultural moment when mediated desire is rampant. State intervention to make public goods more available or redistributive taxation can now be justified under the claim that individuals and the nation at large will be more able to compete than before, that mobility will once again be open for the talented and the industrious—this redistribution under the rubric of equality to compete has often been described, especially as applied to New Labor in the UK, as “redistribution by stealth” (Jackson 2009, 233). Ironically this can occur both after periods when the traditional left demands for equality as civil, political, and social citizenship have successfully been met and when ordinary citizens are disappointed at the way they have been met. In this situation, citizens, in particular those who have been raised from lower to middle class status feel confident enough to risk their livelihoods, assets, life opportunities on competition for scarce goods (See Runciman 1996, 54, 56–60).

Fourth and last, though this follows directly out of the previous attempt to adapt equality to periods heavily influenced by mediated desire, it would appear that equal opportunity becomes something of a political default position even for those on the left who

would want to argue for a society imbued with social equality as equal status across civil, political, and social spheres. The reason for this is that a society in which we all regarded one another of equal worth and no longer based on classes or superior and inferior statuses seems to ordinary citizens an ideal full of risk to their present statuses. Both those members who feel that they have superior status due to claims of meritorious accomplishment and those who lack such status and often feel inferior as a result also fear what they might lose if we all treated one another as equals and thus would rather hold on to the belief that talent and accomplishment will be rewarded even if the avenues for such rewards are restricted—and the members know they are restricted. The difficulty in such circumstances of pressing for a society of reciprocity among equals is that one would have to already have had to experience its benefits before one would be willing politically to fight for it. And in an odd way, the political appeal of bringing everyone up to the starting gate allows every member of society who suffers from inequalities of income, assets, education, health care to imagine him/herself to as the potential winner of a fair competition, even if there would be larger number of losers. This last reason for political parties and actors on the left to place redistribution of incomes, jobs, positions under the principle of equal opportunity reflects the very motives of the citizens they are trying to mobilize, the fear of taking great political risks of presenting a bold coherent principle of equality when an appeal to a basically incoherent but reassuring principle seems the path of least resistance and greatest short-term political benefit.

**The theoretical temptations of equal opportunity.**

The apparent short-term political advantages of this appeal to equal opportunity as the reward for unequal merit seems to have also shaped a strand of analytic theories of equality, especially those most recently labeled “luck egalitarianism.” Luck egalitarianism to be sure seeks to solve a fundamental problem in the analysis of equality: what should be the currency or metric, the “of what” when we seek to assess how far equality has been achieved in a society (Cohen 1989, 906). However, the way it seeks to solve this problem, not unlike the left political response discussed above, betrays a loss of confidence in the persuasive power of equality of treatment, of persons, and of respect as part of a community of members all with equal standing trumping the inequalities of effort and will. Indeed, it inverts R. H. Tawney’s claim that even with the recognition that people are unequal in talents and accomplishments would want the opportunities to exercise them, we may want to live in a society in which we are all treated with equal dignity and not feel the constant pressure to supersede one another (Tawney 1965, 108). I do not intend here to discuss the vast and copious literature on this strand of moral philosophy much of which is focused on debating the right metric for distribution—resources, primary goods, welfare, or capability sets. But I do want to discuss the political meaning (and the political dilemma) of one of its fundamental analytic claims: namely, the claim that a commitment to equality requires that we distribute resources and/or welfare as equally as possible to overcome inequalities produced by chance and circumstance, but that we need not compensate for inequalities produced by conscious choices. In the latter case, we are solely responsible for inequalities and disadvantages that stem from our conscious choices and cannot claim that the political order should provide us with resources or aid to overcome the barriers we ourselves have created. G. A. Cohen claims that the advantage of this approach is that it

takes one of the fundamental assumptions of anti-egalitarians of the right and renders it subservient to a strong egalitarian argument for distributive equality (1989, 934)

To demonstrate this to be the case, Cohen, argues the broadest metric to decide what disadvantages should be equalized due to bad luck—both material resources such as income, jobs, and wealth, and opportunities for development and welfare such as individual unhappiness or capacities for enjoyment. He also has directly addressed the most problematic aspect of this approach to distributive equality, what counts as a “genuine choice,” arguing that it just may rest on a metaphysical problem that “may be impossible to answer,” that is the problem of free will (Cohen 1989, 934). So he offers instead a mental test of our intuitions to determine what we would call “a genuine choice”: “When deciding whether or not justice...requires redistribution, the egalitarian asks if someone with a disadvantage could have avoided it or could now overcome it. If he could have avoided it, he has no claim to compensation, from an egalitarian point of view. If he could not have avoided it but could now overcome it, then he can ask that his effort to overcome it be subsidized” (Cohen 1989, 920). This, however, shifts the question to what he means by “could have avoided it” or “could now overcome it” and so leaves us even more deeply mired in the intertwined relation between choice and circumstance. And he admits this by arguing that the question ultimately rotates around the “degree” of genuineness in the choice (Cohen 1989, 934). The problem here is that it is precisely this increasing ambiguity as to how to prying genuine choice from circumstance that puts us back into the political problem of whether equality for left arguments should rest at all on allowing a space for equal opportunity based on autonomous choice. For similar to the ambiguities in the left political embrace of equal opportunity, it reduces the



debate on equality to what I would call a sliding scale between a left that would want wide area of compensation and a right that would want a minimum one centered upon each side defining the more or less of “genuine choice” versus the luck of circumstance according to its political aims behind which stands a fundamental disagreement on the very nature of equality itself and the political struggle over it.

Understanding the dangers of right that would seize on the inequality due to bad luck versus inequality due to responsible choice distinction for its own political advantage, G. A. Cohen has sought to extend luck egalitarianism into a socialist concept of equal opportunity,” arguing that a high level of compensation for unwilling inequalities so that everyone has roughly equal resources corresponding to their liberties still allows inequalities based on trade-offs between variety of equal choices for example to exert effort and leisure, inequalities based on attentiveness and neglect, and above all and most dangerous inequalities resulting from choices of agents with equal resources to gamble on outcomes that produce arbitrary differential benefits and burdens (a form of option luck). Cohen admits that the latter even where non-market conditions prevail inequality of benefits and burdens could become cumulative thus undermining the original widely shared equality of resources, goods, and positions that form the basis for responsible choice (Cohen 2009, 24–36). His response is to propose a solution that should be there from the beginning: “the sway of socialist equality of opportunities must be tempered by a principle of community...,” one whose members care for the welfare of each other and under the principle of “communal reciprocity” are willing to mutually serve one another (2009, 36, 37, 43). And so we are back at the original problem posed by aligning equal opportunity with a left account of a society of members all with equal

dignity and common status. We must assume a community or society that treats its members as having equal status and equal dignity simply by dint of membership both as the backdrop and as the outcome of the principle of equal opportunity, though now in a socialist setting. As Samuel Scheffler has argued, equality is only secondarily a distributive ideal and is instead “a moral ideal governing the relations in which people stand to one another” (2003, 21). Viewed this way, equality describes not just a way we treat each other but also engage with one another in political, social, and economic institutions. Distribution is instrumental to this relational view of equality. This would hold true of equal opportunity as well, except for the fact, as we already have seen, its logic merges with the relational view while its aim undermines it.

### **Can we have our cake and eat it too?**

One way of dealing with the problem of the open-ended demands of equal opportunity or the attempt to keep a space for it through separating willfully produced disadvantages from unwilling circumstantial ones is to admit the criticism of incoherence, but argue that for pragmatic reasons we need to try to adopt schemes of competition based on meritorious selection but do so in such a way that they do not systematically undermine our recognition of the equality of persons worthy of our respect and sympathy within a view of society as reciprocity. This was Bernard Williams’ solution when he argued that society has a need for a variety of basic skills and the human desire for some prestige or recognition all of which may require some scheme of equal opportunity, and so we “should seek, in each situation, the best way of eating and having as much cake as possible” (1973, 248–249). Aiming to give some

specificity to Williams dual approach David Miller has argued, partly echoing T.H. Marshall, that if we combine a strong concept of equality of citizenship across civil, political, and social spheres, as the foundation for the recognition of equal status with Michael Walzer's claim that no person should be able to convert inequality of advantages or benefits from one social sphere to another, we can reconcile legitimate recognition of desert with an overriding shared equality of status or standing among citizens (1997, 94–97). And he argues we could do this so that “people's different deserts were properly recognized, but there was still overall social equality, or...equality of status” (1997, 97)—a proposal he maintains is more realistic than simple embrace either of a maximalist version of meritocratic equal opportunity or of equality of outcome but still compatible with the left commitment to equality.

It would be hard to argue that the desire for prestige of some kind is not typical of human conduct—even if we need acknowledge the difference between a healthy sense of self and the obsessive desire for constant recognition by others. Likewise it would be unrealistic to argue that we would not want to distribute some offices and roles according to talent if simply because we need a variety of skills in complex society (to say nothing of simply enjoying the accomplishments of others) even if we want an adequate level of basic goods and resources to guarantee to citizens equally. However, the Miller supplement to Williams' pragmatic argument for combining these conflict notions on a case to case basis contains within it a fundamental political dilemma that reinstates the tension he hopes to overcome. Specifically, if equality of status requires above all that citizens be equal not merely in possessing formal civil and political rights but in the opportunity to make fundamental binding decisions and that we need a large basket of social entitlements and low income differentials so that inequalities in

the market are not convertible into political influence (Miller 1997, 94, 97), it would seem that preventing convertibility of resources and advantages of one sphere into resources and advantages in another might undermine the derivation of social equality from political standing. The reason is that citizens under Miller's definition can only have equal standing as citizens across the three spheres above if indeed certain forms of "equality" in different spheres were convertible into political equality to offset the dangers of convertibility of inequalities among the spheres. So for example, unless we have a range of benefits equally distributed as entitlements in the economic sphere or a fair amount of democratic control over the workplace in the sphere of production, or the possibility to convert civil rights into political participation, we would not have equal standing politically in the very substantive sense that Miller argues is necessary for a genuine (left) "social equality." If this is correct, his solution to contain unequal prestige, public honors, or office that either are necessary or legitimately deserved within each sphere so that they cannot affect social equality would require an authority that would prevent the translation of desert-driven inequalities into political and social status while allowing the equality promoting resources of the different spheres to travel across boundaries. This follows from the all too simple fact that democratic political influence depends on convertibility, and so the Walzer concept of maintaining inequality in some spheres such as higher education while requiring equality in others such as ownership of the firm as long as there is no convertibility of resources from one to another cannot do the work Miller wants it to--unless it were possible to somehow separate unequal resources arising from desert claims that we would not want to be convertible, for example in higher education, from resources which typically and inevitably are and we would want to be because they promote equality of status.

A more promising direction for bringing relational equality of status and equal opportunity together has been suggested by Brian Barry in his account of “The Continuing Relevance of Socialism” (Barry 1990) and his attempt in *Why Social Justice Matters* to defend equal opportunity and choice as a goal that is only fully realizable at the point at which we have achieved relational equality (Barry 2005). Rather than try to isolate deserved achievements based on a competitive process from equality of political status, Barry defines all distribution of incomes, wealth, and well-being as subservient to a citizenship concept of socialism: “socialism is above all a theory of citizenship” and is “concerned with “empowering citizens to act collectively in pursuit of interests and ideals they are share with one another can only be realized through collective action” (1990, 529). On this citizenship notion of equality the thing being equalized is control over the collective fate and collective goods of society. Socialism based on the political equality of citizens for Barry is about the expansion of collective goods over and against private goods—that is goods of cooperation rather than goods of consumption—and overcoming the anti-egalitarian consequences of aggregated individual interest, especially resulting from the market. Of particular importance for his argument is that the market cannot register the will of citizens as political equals, in particular the desire of citizens for a particular distribution of income; it cannot register the willingness of citizens to pay for having a service available that does not pay for itself such as parks, libraries, public transport; health care; it cannot register the citizens’ desire to preserve access to consumption that would be damaged if left to private preference such as preserving a coast line or an old building; and above all it cannot register the citizens’ desire for public goods. The reason is that these goods can only be chosen by collective decision of citizens as citizens not consumers since

only citizens can give collective consent (Barry 1990, 533–534). It is only within the framework of citizen equality in the choice of collective action that the notion of equality of opportunity as the choice to compete for a good or position becomes valid for Barry

Specifically, in *Why Social Justice Matters* Barry attacks the argument for meritocracy and luck egalitarianism with its emphasis on personal responsibility by arguing for a genuine equal opportunity based on ending “unfair” cumulative inequalities. He does this by postponing the point at which equal opportunity and meritorious competition can occur until the equality of persons and equality of opportunity as defined by the luck egalitarian become just short of identical. This point involves neither simple redistribution of a set of goods like wealth, income, educational opportunities, and health care, nor immunizing meritorious accomplishments from citizenship status, but rather the abolition of the whole interconnected set of social and economic barriers to the enjoyment of public goods and a decent life. The ground for this broad definition of “unfairness” is that inequalities are intertwined. For example people in poverty also live in more polluted areas, suffer greater ill health, can spend less time on furthering their children’s education endure more crime, have inferior housing, and have diminished political influence. And as these causally interrelated disadvantages cumulate over time the society at large suffers from what Barry calls, “pathologies of inequality” (2005, 169–185). So getting rid of barriers to free choice of a life plan and enabling individuals the opportunity to choose to take risks must be comprehensive across society at large. That is, for Barry we cannot even start to conceive of equal opportunity as voluntarily competing for limited goods until genuine social justice defined by as removing inter-dependent barriers to equality of treatment and of opportunity are achieved. Thus for Barry

we can only hold people responsible for self-incurred risks if all barriers to equal treatment in family life, education, geographic location, health not just health care, environmental exposure, income, assets, political influence and membership, and generational responsibility are removed. Otherwise, equal opportunity in fact is unequal opportunity masking as the former.

This approach is on the face of it more sensitive to the internal logic of equal opportunity arguments. However, it quite explicitly assumes for its realization the kind of socialist egalitarian citizenship and collective control of public goods that it needs to bring about so that the conditions for genuine equal opportunity can in fact be created. In other words, it assumes the struggle for political equality as citizens exercising collective authority over the state and forcing it to implement public goods against the destructive tendencies of individualism has been won as a condition for routing out the intertwined pathologies of inequality, pathologies that stand in the way of an actual equal distribution of opportunities to choose one's life plan and take risks in making such choices. And even at that point we are still left with the fact that most forms of equal opportunity register in Rawls's terms "deep inequalities" of endowment and chance (Rawls 1971, 7).

We are thus still left with Williams' ambiguous claim that we should try at the political level to gain as much inequality of desert as we need compatible with as much equality of personal dignity and human equality as we can. This, as Williams indicates, is not a problem of political philosophy but of politics, indeed, I would add, a problem of political ideology in a field of conflict. As such the attempt to bring these two principles together is closer to the problem that opened this paper, namely the political difficulties and dangers for left political actors of

forging a political ideology combining equal opportunity with a relational equality of persons as parts of a cooperative society when the latter aim is strategically subsumed under the former.

**Conclusion: Equal opportunity vs. left equality: collective goods and reciprocity as political ideology:**

In closing I would propose that we view the problem of finding a place for equal opportunity as part of a more general though unfinished struggle over whether or not equality of political status and membership should serve as a guiding principle for the organization of civil and social life. It is, in short, in politics that the tension between equal opportunity in its market and non-market forms and a relational view of human equality that supersedes the various inequalities we all bring to society is fought out. It has been the contention of this paper that the attempt to advance a relational view of equality under the rubric of equality of opportunity—either as meritocratic competition across society or as the market as instrument of deserved reward—promises short term political rewards with long term political damage for proponents of left equality. Specifically, I hope to have demonstrated at least partly and from various viewpoints that shading the former into latter gives the anti-egalitarian right an opening by allowing it to claim that the left has prevented opportunity while claiming to further equality. And this attack is recurrently available for a wide variety of different anti egalitarian positions on the right because both as a logical and practical matter equal opportunity cannot make good on its own opportunity concept without undermining itself. Or to put the matter from the opposite side of the spectrum, left political parties and political leaders are able to exploit the principle of equal opportunity as a short-term political promise, but since equal



opportunity is not achievable by its own inner logic except as it starts to approach absolute equality of treatment and the neutralization of all barriers to equality of persons, they always risk the danger of incurring long term disappointment in so far as most measures passed to produce equality of opportunity in time lead to new forms of inequality of opportunity. They do so for the simple reason that unless the programs and policies introduced under the claim of equal opportunity replicate the equality produced by collective goods—for example Barry's version in which we do not reach actual equal opportunity unless a series of intertwined inequalities are replaced by collective goods that treat all equally at a high level of goods—the equal distribution of occasions to compete still means there will be more losers than winners.

Thus it may indeed be the case that when a left political actor to appeals to a broad definition of equal opportunity , she or he gains the short term benefit of mobilizing large portions of the population because many different parts of the population can view themselves as potential winners if only they were given the chance against entrenched privilege. Moreover, even if this were not the case, there is as Jeremy Waldron has argued, the need to appeal to the fact that “people value the sense that their economic prospects depend to some extent on their choices and action and...we value those features of an economic system that are sensitive to effort, and... deplore those features that guarantee success for some at the expense of systematic insensitivity to the choices and efforts made by others” (Waldron 2002). It indeed seems appropriate as well as effectual to mobilize this sense that the economic system should register the choices and efforts of all, and this in turn seems to coincide with the belief that our successes result from our own choices—though rarely our failures, only those of others. But since in the long run equal opportunity schemes even when they have spread opportunities

widely through a society to the point that we might say all with interests and relevant abilities are able to compete, there will almost always be more losers than winners. And these losers or even partial winners are ripe for mobilization by a right opposition that claims it represents the illegitimately excluded against the new elite of the winners who arrogantly claim their unequal rewards to be merit-based and thus fairly acquired, reflecting talent and effort in contrast to those whose contributions were not up to snuff. And a clever right opposition can tie this populist attack on meritocratic elitism to a demand to bring back the market in the place of the various non-market schemes of equal opportunity through which meritocratic elites have advanced. This occasion for a counterattack can at least partially be thwarted through a political strategy of arguing the contribution of *all* members of society to public and social well-being is part and parcel of a full citizenship of equals and thus an expression of equal worth—in short collapsing equal opportunity into equality of contribution. And in turn this entails rejecting a concept of social and political membership, of citizenship, which relies on the distinction between first class contributors who win the equal opportunity game and second class ones who do not. In sum, even if the promise of short-run political gain tempts left political actors to play the equal opportunity card, this temptation will prove self-defeating if the card turns out to be the trump card of one's opponent.

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<sup>1</sup> There is an additional irony of equal opportunity at the practical level. When equal opportunity as competition to select those with superior merit is located in a capitalist market, it appears that “the more one presses the ideal of equal opportunity, the more it seems to justify the gross inequality of the outcome” (Marris 2006, 160). For where one ends up in both occupation and income share is selected according to shifting standards of productivity and demand. Thus the aim of equalizing the starting gate by removing socially structured barriers to engage in the competition is thwarted by the market because the actual qualifications for being at the starting gate are constantly shifting with changes in what counts as productivity, what is produced, and above all effectual demand—and one might add that the latter depends on government policies of demand stimulation and public investment. It would seem then that principle of equal opportunity in a market society is both analytically and practically defective and practically defective because it is analytically incoherent.

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