Which Equalities Matter?

Anne Phillips
Taking Difference Seriously

The transformations of recent decades reflect a negative experience of socialist collapse: the rightwards shift in the political consensus, and delighted abandonment of issues of economic equality. On the left, the changes reflect more positive developments: the anti-racism that developed so powerfully from the civil rights movement in the USA; the resurgence of feminism through the 1960s and 1970s; the more confident insistence on the rights of minority groups in what are increasingly accepted as multi-ethnic, multicultural societies. Through much of the twentieth century, inequality was understood as a primarily class phenomenon, something associated with the distribution of income and wealth and the effects of private property. Inequalities between male and female, between white and black, or between one country and another also generated important political movements, and it would be poor history to suggest that these inequalities were only recently discovered. But through an era dominated by the big ‘capitalism versus socialism’ question, inequality had an inescapably class dimension and equality was conceived as a substantially economic affair. Subsequent developments have significantly modified this. One consequence is that equality is now thought to be a matter of politics or culture as much as (if not more than) one of the distribution of economic resources. Another is that difference has begun to displace inequality as the dominant concern of progressive politics.

On the face of it, the revival of feminism and anti-racism hardly explains a movement from economic towards political issues, for the position of women and members of ethnic or racial minorities is very much bound up with economic indicators, and problems of unemployment, poverty, or low pay have figured prominently in the political movements associated with these groups. The shift from a predominantly class understanding of inequality to one that focuses on gender, ethnicity and race reflects the less forced reassessment of achievements in that ‘merely’ political field, bringing issues of civil and political equality more prominently to the fore. As its name suggests, the civil rights movement exposed the complacency of those who thought that civic and political equality had already been achieved, and that the only outstanding problems were those associated with economic inequality. As late as the 1960s, African Americans still lacked the political rights of suffrage, and were still being denied what should have been the basic civil right to travel freely on public transport or eat in the restaurant of their choice. One of the successes of that movement was the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that guaranteed the equal right to register and vote; one of the effects of that legislation was that it created a framework within which to campaign for more minority representatives in legislative chambers. The meaning of political equality was extended to include the equal right to elect a representative of one’s choice, and this right was increasingly interpreted as the right of minority citizens to be represented by minority politicians. No longer regarding political equality as a simple function of economic equality (something that could only be further advanced by changes in the economic structure), many then turned to the politics of redrawing constituency boundaries so as to raise the proportion of black and Latino representatives.

Similar developments can be tracked in the politics of contemporary feminism. In the early years of the contemporary women’s movement, much of the activity was devoted to women’s economic situation: supporting strikes for equal pay, campaigning for better employment protection for part-time women workers, or for the childcare provision that would enable women to re-enter the labour market. But much was also devoted to the misrepresentations of women in the media, the sexual harassment of women, the denial of their independent capacity to take out mortgages or sign hire-purchase agreements,
the bullying and violence of their husbands, or the patronage visited on women in political meetings and parties. Despite their formation in a counter-cultural movement that despised the conventions of establishment politics, feminists eventually turned their attention to women’s exclusion from the conventional political arena, and increasing numbers of political parties have been pressured into adopting measures of affirmative action to secure the election of more women representatives. Though some have derided this as capitulation to a more moderate ‘liberal’ feminism, it is better understood as part of a reassessment of citizenship that has queried the supposed achievements within the political realm. Where earlier generations had given the impression that all was now fine on the political front (women did, after all, have the right to vote) but pretty depressing in social and economic life, contemporary feminists have argued that sexual inequality pervades the very definitions and practices of politics as well as the conditions of economic life. It is not just that those fine-sounding civil or political equalities are superimposed on deeper social and economic inequalities. There is an important sense in which women have not been recognized as civic and political equals.

Specifically political issues then came to occupy a more central place on the radical agenda. Much of the earlier literature had focused on the gap between formal and substantive equality. This suggested that individuals were indeed recognized as equals, enjoying the same political and civil rights, but were obstructed in the equal deployment of these rights by background conditions relating to social and economic inequality. Though obviously intended to challenge the self-image of democratic societies, even this now appears unduly complacent. Quite apart from the overt inequalities that have persisted in supposedly democratic societies (the denial of political and civil rights to African Americans, the anachronism of the House of Lords), the conventional understanding of equal citizenship also skews matters in favour of dominant groups. The formal equality is wanting, well before we address substantive conditions.

Equality and difference

The central theme that has developed in discussions of this is the relationship between equality and difference. Feminist analyses of the liberal democratic tradition have drawn attention to the way seemingly innocent notions of freedom, equality or consent were founded on an equation between the citizen and the male. This was most apparent in the formative literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where exciting new ideas about government being based on consent were welded on to less thrilling ideas about men as the ‘natural’ heads of their households, and the emerging discourse of free self-government came to be premised on sexual subordination. Similar deformations have continued right through the twentieth century. The rights of citizenship have been variously associated with the responsibility to fight for the defence of one’s country, or the dignities and responsibilities of labour (both defined very much out of a masculine experience); and as late as the 1970s, one still finds political theorists writing as if the individual is a male head of household, whose rights can be discussed in abstraction from gender relations.1

Left to itself, such evidence of male preferentialism might point towards a more genuine gender-neutrality that no longer discriminates between the two sexes. In much of the feminist literature, however, the critique of male bias has been combined with a more challenging argument that treats gender-neutrality itself as the culprit. All democracies now present themselves as indifferent to sexual difference, proclaiming their citizenship as equally available to both women and men. This very indifference is part of the problem. ‘To become a citizen is to trade one’s particular identity for an abstract, public self,’ and this trade-in can be said to be peculiarly advantageous to men. Consider the different balances men and women have had to strike between their public and private lives, and the far greater ease with which men detach themselves (both practically and emotionally) from their private or domestic concerns. In the ‘male’ norm of democratic politics, the boundaries between public and private worlds are relatively well policed, and those who stay across these boundaries (taking their babies to political meetings, letting their emotions ‘intrude’ on rational debate) will be
regarded as disruptive or peculiar, as failing to abide by the standards of democratic life. These standards are of course presented as neutral – the same criticisms would apply equally to a woman or a man – but since social characteristics are gendered, what passes for neutrality turns out to be preferential treatment for men.

Under the banner of gender-neutrality, sex would have to be treated as an irrelevant consideration. One consequence is that it would be difficult to argue for affirmative action policies designed to raise the proportion of women elected as political representatives: if sex is meant to be irrelevant, why should it matter whether our representatives are women or men? In a world that is patently not neutral between the sexes, proclamations of gender-neutrality then have the effect of affirming the status quo. We carry on with business as usual, which means carrying on with politics monopolized by men. Under the banner of gender-neutrality, it also becomes difficult to tackle deep-rooted assumptions about the nature of justice and rights. One argument developed by feminists is that the ethic of impartial justice needs to be supplemented by an ethic of responsibility or care, and that the impersonal implementation of abstract rules of justice can make us less attentive than we should be to the concrete circumstances of different people’s lives and the responsibilities we owe to others. It is probably a mistake to equate the ‘ethics of justice’ with men and the ‘ethics of care’ with women, but there is an important gender component here and easy proclamations of gender-neutrality make it harder to get at the issues.

Feminists have taken issue with supposedly sex-blind versions of equality that require women to simulate the activities of the men who constructed these norms. Black activists have developed similar arguments against the race-blindness that makes equality depend on simulating the language and conventions of those who are white. When people have been denied jobs, education or housing because they are black, it does of course seem right that employers or landlords should be required to ignore the skin colour of applicants and block out the ‘accidents’ of ethnicity or race. But that kind of race-blindness can also be deeply insulting. It gives the impression that racial identity is incidental to an individual’s sense of self; worse still, it can send a message about ‘blackness’ being a problem, something others will live with only when they are able to pretend it away. The suggestion that white is normal and black an unhappy deviation is part of what has been challenged in recent decades.

Despite overtly good intentions, the notion that we make people equal by ignoring or suppressing their difference easily turns into a statement of inequality: a bit like saying ‘I regard you as my equal despite your peculiarities, despite those surface characteristics that mark you as my inferior.’ The idea that equality depends on everyone being treated the same can also be regarded as an inequitable assimilationism that imposes the values and norms of one group on those who were historically subordinate. Consider the much discussed example from Canadian politics, which arose when the prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, decided to tackle the unequal status of indigenous peoples by dismantling the reservation system that had protected the First Nations from assimilation. The reservation system enabled native Indians to retain control over reservation lands, setting limits to the mobility, residence and voting rights of non-Indians in Indian territory. But when the majority of Indians still lived in (impoverished) separate reserves, this also limited their participation in mainstream Canadian life. The government concluded that ‘separate but equal’ was no guarantee of equality and – in an impeccably liberal move – decided to abandon all differential legislation and treatment. What looked like neutrality was, however, perceived as imposition, and the policy was withdrawn six months later in the face of almost unanimous Indian opposition.

Representatives of indigenous peoples have criticized the assimilationism that requires all peoples to conform to the constitutional preferences of the victorious settlers, and have argued for forms of self-government that will respect traditional practices and customs rather than imposing another group’s norms. In similar fashion, migrant communities have sometimes looked askance at the legal equalities that promise identical treatment regardless of one’s culture or religion, arguing that exceptions should be made in respect of particular practices that are embedded in the traditions of their group. The resulting emphasis on equality through difference is probably the most distinctive feature of contemporary thinking on democracy. The idea that
equality requires us all to be the same has long been considered a breach of individuality, and the depressing conformism associated with this was challenged more than a century ago by John Stuart Mill. The idea that equality means treating everyone the same has survived for much longer, as has the related idea that equality is to be promoted by eliminating at least some of the differences.

When class was the paradigmatic example of inequality, the notion that equality meant bracketing out or else getting rid of difference seemed more plausible than it does today. One can treat workers and capitalists as equals by discounting the difference between them (what Marx described and criticized as the political annulment of difference). This is what is supposed to happen in the law courts or in the allocation of the same number of votes to each. Or one can go beyond the traditionally liberal understanding of equality to attack differences themselves: abolish private property, abolish the distinction between capitalist and worker, abolish those differences that just can’t be discounted, and then let us talk of equality. Difference, in either case, is treated as a problem. In the first scenario, differences in status have to be ignored in order to guarantee people their equal civil and political rights. In the second, they have to be eliminated in order to make people genuine equals. The disagreement is about how much has to be changed in order to prevent difference having its deleterious effect.

Once attention shifts to other forms of group difference that are not so amenable to erasure, it becomes less appropriate to treat difference as always and inevitably a problem. It is clearly inappropriate to make sexual equality depend on sex-change operations that convert all the men to women or all the women to men, or to make racial equality depend on mass programmes of racial intermarriage that produce a uniform world population. And if those differences must remain – must be made in some way compatible with equality – why should it be so difficult to articulate a vision of equal citizenship that is premised on continuing differences in culture and practices and beliefs? As many now argue, treating people as equals does not have to mean treating them the same; indeed, when treating people the same means subjecting everyone to the norms and institutions that were developed by only one of many groups, this is the opposite of equal treatment. These considerations draw us back (rightly, in my view) into unfinished business around the nature of equal citizenship. It is not just that political equality is being subverted by economic inequality. We need a more adequate understanding of political and civil equality that recognizes and respects our differences.

It may be, to give one widely discussed example, that equality of citizenship requires different groups of people to have different kinds of rights. Legal exemptions that recognize valued practices within minority communities are reasonably commonplace in modern democracies: in Britain, the exemption of Sikh men from legislation compelling all motorcyclists to wear safety helmets, or the exemption of Jewish and Muslim abattoirs from some of the legislation regulating the slaughter of animals. What of more troubling cases, like exemptions from laws banning clitoridectomy or polygamy? Does equal citizenship depend on all citizens being subject to the same civil codes and identical structures of government? Or does it depend on a wider diversity of institutional arrangements that can promote the collective goals of linguistic or cultural communities, or give substantive recognition to the claims of cultural minorities and indigenous peoples?

Once we move beyond the simpler reaches of the suffrage – where it may seem obvious enough that treating people as equals means giving them exactly the same number of votes – the precise meaning of political equality is not transparent. Despite the usual formulations of anti-discrimination law, it is not obvious that political and legal arrangements should always be premised on identical treatment, regardless of sex, race, religious beliefs or cultural traditions: that it should never be legitimate to practise affirmative action on behalf of groups who were historically subordinate; or never appropriate to exempt certain groups from regulations imposed on all others. In some contexts identical treatment is right, in others it will make people less equal, and there are difficult questions still to be answered about what falls into each category. One of the benefits of the current turn towards politics is that these tricky questions are more widely acknowledged.

The other question that is more easily raised is whether tolerating people’s peculiarities really counts as equal treatment. Liberal democracies have tended to treat equal respect as a
matter of leaving people free to do as they wish in their private domain, respecting them their privacy, but always on the understanding that their strange practices or beliefs should not intrude too prominently into public life. A good liberal would want to decriminalize homosexuality, guarantee the freedom of religion, protect the civic rights of linguistic minorities; and would adopt a strong stance of tolerance towards practices she personally regarded as distasteful so long as these did not interfere with the freedoms of other citizens. But the tolerance that depends on keeping one’s head down can be viewed as inequitable (why are some groups allowed to flaunt their practices in public while others have to keep them to themselves?), and does not do much to address the basis on which a group has found itself disparaged or despised. One early defence of homosexuals turned on the notion that people were simply born that way, and that it made no more sense to lock people up for their sexuality than to lock them up for being born with an extra toe. A related defence of religious dissidents turned on the notion that beliefs are not beliefs if they can be changed at will, and that while governments can shut down churches or ban what they see as heretical practices, they cannot seriously expect to ‘make’ people true believers. Both arguments have proved reasonably effective in promoting more liberal legislation and practice, but neither bothers to question whether the deviants really are so weird. Maybe, by implication, we should regard homosexuals with fear and distaste; maybe the religious dissidents really are benighted, superstitious, heading for the torments of hell. If they can’t be changed they must be accommodated: this is as far as the argument goes.

Tolerance of this sort can easily coexist with ignorance and can certainly coexist with contempt. Those who have agreed to tolerate may feel themselves absolved from any further moves towards better understanding; and since majority groups rarely conceive of themselves as requiring equal doses of tolerance from the minority, they may come to wear their toleration as an additional badge of superiority. The ‘live and let live’ strategy then looks profoundly inequitable, and threatens to leave the bases for intolerance untouched. The alternative strategy (underlying much recent identity politics) has looked towards recognition rather than tolerance, and has attached as much weight to public activities and contestations as to the protections of the private sphere. Sometimes the main objective is challenging stereotypical distortions: getting people to see that one group’s practices are no more peculiar than any other’s, or that the newspapers have misrepresented a particular group’s characteristics or beliefs. Where such initiatives are successful, they can dissolve the very need for tolerance by dissolving the initial suspicions or distaste. At other times, the movement ‘beyond tolerance’ involves a public affirmation and celebration of differences even to the point where stereotypes may be gleefully reclaimed. If we consider the impact of gay pride marches, for example, we can see both elements at work together. Some of the impact comes from the fact that such a cross-section of society participates in the marches and that gays and lesbians then turn out to be not so very different after all. But much of it comes from the extravagant ‘camping up’, the celebration and exaggeration of difference, the refusal to keep peculiarities behind closed doors. Where calls for greater tolerance might minimize the impact of any proposed change (this won’t really affect you, you’ll hardly notice they are there), calls for recognition often insist on the qualities that make people so different and distinct. Equality then becomes more than an accommodation or modus vivendi. It means being able to see people as both different and equal. It also means recognizing that what we term ‘the public’ is made up of many different groups.

Raising the stakes from toleration to recognition could, of course, produce a more intolerant society, generating a backlash against ‘uppity’ minorities and increasing the hostility towards minority groups. People who happily tolerate their unassuming gay neighbour may object strongly to educational programmes that encourage pupils to regard homosexuality as an equally legitimate sexual choice; while those who couldn’t care less about their neighbours’ religious practices or beliefs may become overtly antagonistic if their government decides to fund separate religious schools. The use of differential rights to protect minority cultural traditions raises difficult questions, and so too does the idea that societies can abandon the ‘lesser’ reaches of toleration for the fuller egalitarianism of recognition. I discuss some of the standard liberal objections later in the chapter. The point I stress here is simply that democracies should be prepared to
debate these issues, and that a tradition which took social and economic equality as the condition for ‘genuine’ political equality made it hard even to formulate the questions. One of the benefits of the current politics of difference is that such issues are more widely discussed.

**The power of politics**

When differences are located in a political, cultural, or legal domain, it is apparent enough that societies can revisit their political or legal arrangements in order to address the resulting inequalities. Political and legal arrangements have also come to the fore as a way of addressing inequalities more obviously situated in social and economic life; and here, too, difference has become central to the debate. This is the second point I want to stress: that even when inequalities are closely bound up with social and economic conditions, it is through politics we make a difference. I do not just mean that we have to act and therefore have to be political. My point, rather, is that where inequalities are bound up with group difference, political (and legal) arrangements can have considerable remedial force. Political reforms cannot substitute entirely for economic and social ones, but can certainly provide the enabling conditions.

In the context of an unequal society – and with the aim of making it more equal – we seem to face one of two choices. We can say that political equality is good but limited, and concentrate our energies on making people economically equal. If we choose this course of action we will have little time to waste on campaigning against political abuses or political inequalities, for we will regard these as the inevitable consequence of an unequal distribution of economic power. Attack the cause not the symptom – or to put it in terms popularized by generations of Marxists, don’t go for the superstructure but straight for the base. The other approach sees political equality as a way of countering structural inequalities, and looks to it to compensate for social and economic inequalities. Anyone who argues for the specific representation of marginalized groups or supports quota systems to remedy the under-representation of women and ethnic minorities is opting for this second line of action. She may or may not regard these measures as solving all problems; she is certainly saying much can be done through political arrangements while pending more thorough-going equalization in social life.

There are three good reasons for pursuing this second course. The first is that the empowerment of the currently disadvantaged is often a prerequisite for, rather than a consequence of, more equitable social policies, for until people become active participants in the policy process, the policies adopted cannot be expected to reflect their needs. This is part of what David Marquand means when he says that the struggle for political citizenship has to be waged anew, and that only a more active and empowered citizenry is going to be able to promote greater social equality. It is also what lies at the heart of current discussions about including previously marginalized minority groups, where the recognition of radical plurality and commitment to giving all groups a political voice has become a major theme. The second (more pragmatic) reason is that the culture of liberal democracy is more responsive to pressures for political than economic equalization, and that it is proving easier to persuade people to act against a demonstrated political inequity than against an economic one. The third (perhaps less an argument than an expression of impatience) is simply that people are fed up with waiting for ‘more fundamental’ social change.

One of the key arguments in Iris Young’s *Justice and the Politics of Difference* is that normative political theory has tended to treat questions of social justice as a matter of what people have rather than what they do. Against this, Young makes the empowerment of hitherto oppressed groups the predominant issue. In her analysis, the search for the correct principles of distribution (often conceived as a process of rational enquiry that each individual can pursue on her own) generates a politics from on high, a politics without the politics, in which different social groups play no part in defining the principles of justice. Young argues that such an approach skews the results of the enquiry, delivering us to an idealist fiction that represents the partial preoccupations of currently dominant groups as the last word in impartial, general interest. The alternative is to start from a rigorous understanding of the heterogeneous nature of the contemporary public. Correct principles of justice can only be
arrived at when all social groups, including those currently excluded, marginalized and oppressed, are enabled to participate in the formulation of such principles.

Policies on affirmative action, to give one obvious example, will look different from different perspectives, and what is considered economically equitable is likely to vary between those groups who have been historically excluded from certain types of employment and those who have enjoyed a previous monopoly. The empowerment of the currently oppressed then appears as the first necessity, for failing that empowerment, what counts as economic equality or economic justice will be what makes sense to already dominant groups. It is not that empowerment matters more than economic equality, or that democracy has become more important than having enough to eat. The point, rather, is that there is no impartial 'view from nowhere' from which the great social theorists – or not-so-great politicians – can deduce what ought to be done. Young then proposes special representation rights for oppressed groups: public funding to enable them to meet together and formulate their ideas; the right to generate their own policy proposals that would have to be considered by decision-makers; and veto powers for oppressed groups over matters that are most directly their concern.

Though less concerned with the specific institutional arrangements, Jürgen Habermas pursues a related line of argument in *Between Facts and Norms*. He sets up a contrast between the classically liberal paradigm of private law and its subsequent social-welfare transformation. The first operated as if individual self-determination were adequately guaranteed by a certain set of (what we could call 'formal') rights. The second insisted on the 'factual' conditions for the exercise of autonomy, and the welfare entitlements necessary to secure it. But the social-welfare paradigm, in Habermas's view, falls foul of the problem of paternalism, and this becomes particularly evident in what he calls the 'postmetaphysical condition' that provide us with no reference point for legitimacy beyond what emerges from 'the discursive opinion- and will-formation of equally enfranchised citizens'. The social-welfare paradigm presumes that it (they, somebody) already knows what we need for freedom and equality, and then sets about establishing the necessary forms of social intervention to meet these requirements. Both the liberal and the social-welfare paradigm 'lose sight of the internal relation between private and political autonomy, and thus lose sight of the democratic meaning of the community's self-organization'.

For Habermas, as for Young, there have to be procedures of political inclusion that will enable all those affected by decisions to engage in the political debate. 'Rights can be “enjoyed” only insofar as one exercises them.' Or more specifically: 'Rights can empower women to shape their own lives autonomously only to the extent that these rights also facilitate equal participation in the practice of civic self-determination, because only women themselves can clarify the “relevant aspects” that define equality and inequality for a given matter.' The argument is partly that the most well-intentioned paternalism will still get things wrong (there being no reason to believe you have got things right unless all possibly affected persons have had the chance to participate in and contribute to the discussion), and partly that the normative key is autonomy rather than well-being. Politics then becomes all-important – which for both Young and Habermas means politics in a broader sense than just participating in elections.

In my own work on political representation I have focused more narrowly on the equitable representation of women and people from ethnic and racial minorities in decision-making bodies, and argued for affirmative action to secure fair representation. This shifts attention from transformations in the sexual or social division of labour to what its critics regard as 'political fixes': in recent European politics, the use of gender quotas to raise the number of women selected as parliamentary candidates; in post-1965 American politics, the creation of voting districts in which racial minorities form the voting majority and can secure the election of representatives from their own group. In both cases, the existing under-representation is self-evidently linked to patterns of social and economic inequality. If one wants to explain why so few women, for example, end up as political representatives, it is obvious enough that their positioning in the sexual division of labour is the major culprit. As long as women continue to shoulder the main responsibility for caring for the young, sick and old, it will be harder for women than men to envisage a full-time career in politics and less likely that they will present themselves as candidates for political office. We do not have to fall back on anything peculiar to female psychology, or
demonstrate an age-old male conspiracy to hold on to political power; all we need is the banal observation that women look after children more often than do men. If this is what accounts for women’s under-representation, critics may say, then the obsession with gender quotas is just another bad case of putting the cart before the horse: far better to concentrate on more nurseries, shorter working hours for parliamentarians, or getting the men to do their equal share. The problem with this is that it fails to consider seriously enough the conditions under which policies change. Calling for new policies without ever asking what would get these in place, it leaves the old cycle to continue as before.

Base-superstructure models convey a message of political despair, for why should one anticipate policies devoted to either sexual or racial equality from representatives who are almost exclusively white and male? How, indeed, are such representatives to know what policies are most appropriate if programmes for action are being worked out with minimal input from politically excluded groups? However causally correct the analysis that says women have been excluded from political activity because of the responsibilities they shoulder for care, it is inconceivable that a legislature composed primarily of men would undertake the necessary upheavals to alter this structural imbalance. What, in their knowledge or experience, would drive them to regard this as such a priority? Of course political inequalities reflect patterns of social and economic inequality: if overt discrimination has been banned and its incidence is reasonably well policed, any remaining differences in levels of participation or representation must arise from something in the structures of social life. (The only other explanation is that the differences are genetic, but I leave that to the geneticists to prove.) The big question is how to alter this pattern – and changing the people who formulate the policies looks a promising start.

Even when inequalities are grounded in social and economic conditions, there is then a strong case for political intervention. There is also, to bring in the second argument, more room for manoeuvre on the political than the economic terrain. Contemporary culture has become astonishingly fatalistic about economic inequalities, regarding them either as undesirable but inevitable, or even as positively fair. Political inequality, by contrast, is regarded as at odds with the principles of modern demo-

ocracy. Despite its late and much contested arrival, political equality has established itself as part of the common sense of contemporary societies, achieving an almost foundational status. Confronted with evidence of political inequality or political exclusion, people are more likely to register this as an immediate and disturbing problem than when confronted with evidence of economic and social inequality. The interest in political equalization as a means of remedying or compensating for economic inequalities is partly a reflection of this.

Liberal critiques

One criticism of the above arguments is that they encourage a ‘groupiness’ that is at odds with individualism. Another is that the obsession with difference turns people in on themselves and away from ideas of a common good. We can agree, perhaps, that in a well-functioning democracy every (adult) member of the society would be equally included in the processes of political deliberation, and that there would be no category of people (women, blacks, the poor) left out. The key addition proposed in recent theories of democracy is that this equality will be arrived at only when currently marginal groups have been explicitly incorporated into the body politic. It is not good enough to say that there are no barriers to their inclusion, for if there are no barriers, how is it that members of these groups are so absent from the scene? Nor is it good enough to bring them in on condition that they leave their own group preoccupations behind, for if women are not permitted to speak from the experiences and perspectives of women, or black people from the experiences and perspectives of those who are black, who on earth is going to address their experiences and concerns? The point repeatedly made by critics is that this gives the impression that individuals are entirely defined by their sexual or racial or religious identities. Most people, they point out, do not define themselves narrowly by some group characteristic; and those who do should surely be encouraged out of exclusive identities rather than left mired in their own limited affairs.
The idea that democracies might be expected to employ public resources to support and sustain minority cultural identities has proved particularly controversial, as has the related idea that they might exempt certain groups from legislation that otherwise applies to all. In both these cases, the main objection is that group characteristics or identities are being privileged over individual rights: either that individuals are being deprived of important and legitimate life-choices because of some supposedly over-riding community concern; or that certain individuals are being excused from obligations that will continue to bear on people elsewhere. The standard example of the first is the language legislation adopted by the Parti Québécois in 1977, which set strict limits to the public provision of English-language education and required commercial signage to be exclusively in French. Individuals who had previously been guaranteed the right to choose either French- or English-language schools for their children now had to rely on education in French, and the rights of the individual were then restricted in order to sustain the vitality of French language and culture. Examples of the second include legal exemptions granted to members of minority religious groups (like the exemption of Sikhs from legislation that requires motor-cycle riders to wear a crash helmet) that allow something to members of minority groups that is not permitted to the majority. In this case, group membership seems to carry with it certain favours: you get more freedom of movement by belonging to a particular minority than by belonging to the majority group.

This last complaint is, in my view, particularly misguided. Where such exemptions have been agreed, they are normally defended as necessary to enable members of minority groups to enjoy the same rights as the majority: in the above example, not to be prevented from riding motor-bikes because their cultural/religious conventions require them (but not other aspiring bikers) to wear a turban. The objective is not to give members of minority groups some extra rights or freedoms not enjoyed by the majority, but simply to enable them to have the same as their peers. This formulation is, in fact, a fairer description of all initiatives that could be said to provide extra rights or facilities to a particular sub-group of citizens, including cases where governments agree to provide additional resources to sustain a minority language or culture. When a group (or region or province) lays claims to a different schedule of rights or resources, it is always because it regards this as necessary to guarantee its equality with the others. When women, for example, campaign for special provisions to ensure the selection of more women as parliamentary candidates, they are not saying they want something more than is available to the men. They are saying that without those special provisions, they have no hope of getting the same. Or when Iris Young argues for special representation rights for members of oppressed groups (and not for others), she is not saying that people with a past experience of oppression should be compensated for their years of unhappiness by the chance to get more than the rest. She is saying that, without those special representation rights, oppressed groups have no hope of approaching an equality of influence.

A great deal of nonsense is talked about differential rights, as if these fundamentally subverted the very egalitarianism that has inspired them. There are difficulties, but these are largely to do with application rather than basic principle. Commenting on the criticisms of Quebec's language laws, Charles Taylor has said that 'there is a dangerous overlooking of an essential boundary in speaking of fundamental rights to things like commercial signage in the language of one's choice.' Though I would probably disagree with Taylor on where to place the boundary, the general point seems right to me. I cannot get terribly agitated about the affront to individual freedom that comes from being obliged to read notices in French, though I do think that a country that is officially bilingual should provide children with access to schools in either language. (I also cannot get terribly agitated about the affront to individual freedom that comes with being denied access to a place of work when all the unionized employees are on strike, though I do think that a democratic society should allow people to choose whether or not to join unions.) Some things matter more than others, and refusing to consider (on principle) any curtailment of individual rights or any modification of equal treatment ignores what may be important differences of weight. A policy that curtails individual freedoms in order to promote collective concerns may or may not be defensible. We can hardly know which it is without establishing how
important the particular freedoms and how shared the collective concerns.

Consider the argument that a ban on clitoridectomy appeals to the values of one cultural group to regulate the traditions of another, and that this imposition of liberal values on non-liberal cultures is inegalitarian and culturally imperialist. The problems with this argument include the following: (1) that the physical and emotional harm done to girls whose culture supposedly 'requires' their genital mutilation is severe, not trivial; (2) that as minors in a patriarchal culture, girls are in no position to indicate whether this practice really is important to their own sense of themselves; (3) that what are being presented as the shared values of a particular culture are, in this case, the values of its men. Compare this with the argument that requiring all motorcyclists to wear a protective helmet sets considerations of health and safety above considerations of religion and culture, and indirectly discriminates against those whose culture requires them to wear a turban. I can imagine circumstances in which I would be equally dismissive of the second argument: I might not have much time for it if the mortality figures for those without helmets rose to 100 per cent, or if it turned out that the majority of Sikh men no longer bothered to wear turbans; I might then say Sikhs must choose between riding bikes and wearing their turbans. If (as it happens) I find the second argument perfectly acceptable, this is not because I have adopted a principled position about equity between cultural groups always trumpping other considerations – any more than my objection to the first argument was premised on a principled position that differential treatment is always at odds with equality. In both cases, one needs to know something of the circumstances in order to judge. Since knowing something of the circumstances depends on who gets to speak and influence decision-making processes, this brings us back to the conditions for political inclusion.

The other criticism often levelled against the politics of difference is that the importance attached to representing 'group' concerns or perspectives can exaggerate the role of ascribed characteristics in the formation of political identities, and encourage a sedimentation of group differences that are better understood as fluid and shifting. It is one thing to say that democracies ought to be able to deal with women as women, not just as abstract citizens or surrogate men. It is still the case that women are not 'merely' women, but have formed their values, priorities and objectives out of unique combinations of experience that make each woman different from everyone else. (Nor are they 'merely' middle-class heterosexual white women, for adding in more precise specifications of the subgroup still exaggerates the role of ascribed characteristics.) Important as it is to challenge the false homogeneity that represses or denies group difference, it must be equally important to challenge the pressures of the group on the individual, and the way these can force people into a straitjacket of 'Irishness' or 'blackness' or 'femaleness' that represses differences between individuals. Many now talk of identities as hybrid, and see this as making a nonsense of simpler notions about 'black identity' or 'Asian identity' or 'female identity'. Even apart from these considerations, it is hard to see why defining oneself exclusively through one's group should be regarded as such a great achievement.

As applied to particular theorists, the criticism is largely misplaced, for most of these writing in this vein have been careful to distance themselves from 'essentialist' notions of what constitutes a group. If, moreover, the critique is meant to imply that we should ignore evidence of group exclusion because the proposed remedies are worse than the disease, this hardly strikes me as an adequate response. There is still an important issue here. Nancy Fraser makes the point that much of the politics associated with women or racial minorities has been about putting 'gender' or 'race' out of business altogether – ending the feminization or racialization of the economy and abolishing those distinctions that place women or black people in the ranks of the over-exploited or under-paid. Claims for equality of recognition seem, however, to have the opposite effect. If the arguments developed in this chapter are right, tackling the under-valuation and/or exclusion of women and members of racial minorities will sometimes require more rather than less group differentiation: more emphasis on what makes the group distinct and different; less willingness to subsume these distinctions in grand notions of humanity or 'man'. As Fraser points out, this sets up a tension within egalitarian politics, part of which looks towards the dissolution of difference while the other seems to want difference
more fully acknowledged. So do egalitarians want more difference or less? On the face of it, they seem to want both.

The main point I would make here is that there is a distinction between including/representing/revaluing 'a group' and including/representing/revaluing its members; it is the failure to make this distinction clearly enough that has generated much of the subsequent critique. Consider the example of political representation. Where subordinate groups can legitimately claim an under-representation in legislative chambers or decision-making bodies, the requirements of political equality suggest that 'their' level of representation should be raised. But who are 'they' in this case? If we mean the group qua group, this suggests a corporatist system of representation in which people will serve as representatives of their group, will be expected to speak on and for group issues, and will presumably be held accountable to members of that group. Such 'group' representation might be achieved through establishing separate electoral rolls for different groups (this is part of the mechanism for Maori representation in New Zealand); co-opting leading figures from the organizations that came on behalf of the group; or asking the group to generate its own representatives (through whatever mechanisms it chooses), who are then invited to join the decision-making body. As far as accountability is concerned, any of these looks reasonably promising, for all provide some mechanism through which members of the group can influence the policies pursued by their representatives. All of them, however, make the process of representation a specifically group affair. Representatives become spokespeople for group interests and perspectives; this is what they are there for, not any wider franchise.

The alternative is to say that the people marked by a particular group characteristic are under-represented (not then the group but those bearing group characteristics), and that we need to elect more representatives who share the markers and experiences of that group. It is this, rather than 'group' representation, that is being proposed in most of the current initiatives around raising the proportion of female or minority representatives: not a corporatist system of group representation that requires representatives to refer back to and speak for their group, but a more equitable distribution of representative positions between different social groups that brings a wider range of perspectives into play.

As compared with the first option, this offers very little in the way of accountability. If they are not elected by their group or linked in some formal way to group debates on priorities and policy, there is no obvious way of ensuring that Maoris will speak for the needs or concerns of Maoris, women for the needs or concerns of women, or African Americans for the needs and concerns of African Americans. There is no chain of accountability requiring these 'representatives' to follow group policies or concerns. The downside, then, is that people might be elected by virtue of their sex, ethnicity or race without this having much noticeable impact on the kinds of policy they decided to pursue. But while the second option is looser, less predictable, and less accountable, it is also less likely to lock people into narrowly bounded political identities. It does not treat people as if they are exclusively defined by group characteristics assigned to them or learnt, and it does not expect individuals to view everything from a narrowly 'group' point of view. The sense in which it is still about group representation is that it continues to recognize the crucial effects of group experience on political identities and aspirations, and insists on the importance of including people with different group experiences at the point where decisions are made. As a case for representation of the 'group', this would be vulnerable to criticism for exaggerating the power of ascribed characteristics or intensifying divisions between different groups. Understood as a case for raising the representation of group members, it is only vulnerable to criticism from those who think difference should not matter at all.

The hegemony of difference

Criticisms of the politics of difference are often based on misrepresentation and/or complacency, and while I see problems in many versions of identity politics, I do not regard the standard liberal reservations as decisive. The more serious difficulty, from my point of view, is that the hegemonic status of difference makes it hard to address inequalities that don't fit the picture. The shift from equality to difference does not indicate a lack of interest in equality, for discussions of sexual, racial, cultural, linguistic or ethnic difference are always framed by analysis of the
unequal power relations that have denied people full membership or recognition. And yet with the best of intentions, difference is not a category that can capture all relevant inequalities. Nancy Fraser's question about whether the movements contesting gender or racial subordination are aiming at more or less difference is based on this point. Where social recognition is at issue, it may be that groups need to assert and/or celebrate their difference, for they need others to be willing to accept them as equals while still accepting them for what they are. Where equality in the labour force or housing market is at issue, assertions of difference may be just the opposite of what such groups need.

Fraser's point is that 'difference' captures some but not all injustices experienced by women or black minorities in a white-dominated society, and that an exclusive emphasis on difference will obscure some important inequalities. The further point is that the hegemonic status of difference in contemporary social and political thought can make it very difficult to talk about class. Diana Coole argues that 'economic inequality is bracketed out of discussion of difference', which focuses by preference on identity groups. We can of course talk about working-class culture, but we cannot plausibly present the working class as a cultural group fighting for recognition of its distinctive traditions and culture. As Coole notes, celebrations of difference or 'open-mindedness towards the Other' make little sense as applied to class inequalities, for wherever people are positioned in the vertical hierarchy of the capitalist economy, they will mostly agree that it is better to be higher than lower. Currently dominant discourses of difference (whether these flow from feminism, post-modernism, multiculturalism, or liberal traditions of tolerance and respect) do not apply so readily to class as to gender, ethnicity or culture. If all the problems of inequality are subsumed under a general rubric of difference, this will leave class out in the cold.

In left politics, the hegemony of difference is illustrated by a 'radical pluralism' that always finds a place for class in its list of oppressed or subordinated groups, but derives its categories of analysis from the newer social movements that developed around gender, sexuality or race. In most discussions, class then seems as much of an afterthought as 'women, blacks and gays' used to be in socialist discourse of the 1960s and 1970s. In liberal theory, the hegemony of difference is illustrated by the shift from questions of distributive justice to ones of cultural pluralism, a shift exemplified by the work of John Rawls. A Theory of Justice generated a substantive thesis about the requirements of equality: the idea that inequalities in the distribution of primary goods were justified only when this distribution turned out to be of most benefit to the least advantaged. Rawls's later Political Liberalism is almost exclusively preoccupied with the plurality of religious, philosophical, or moral doxologies that seem, on the face of it, to make it impossible to agree shared principles of justice. Liberalism has become increasingly troubled by accusations of cultural imperialism or the coercive imposition of liberal views: how to deal with difference then takes over from what kind of (economic) equality justice requires.

In this chapter, I have woven together what strike me as interrelated developments: the turn towards politics as something important in itself; and the reformulation of equality as depending on a recognition of difference. The two projects are not always connected. When David Marquand argues that the post-war emphasis on social rights encouraged a complacency about political and civil rights, making people think they already enjoyed their democratic equals and only needed the jobs or hospital or schools, he can be taken as illustrating the renewal of politics. Marquand does not, however, reach this argument through an analysis of social pluralism, and has little to say about gender or racial difference. The connection between the two is not universal. Yet when put together, the combination has proved peculiarly inhospitable to economic concerns.

The implications of political equality are being stretched in much-needed directions, and I hope it is clear from what I have said that I welcome most of this development. Over the same period, analyses of economic equality have been pushed off into a separate realm, largely inhabited by theorists who have little sense of current debates about democracy or difference. This separation is itself symptomatic, and part of my aim in the next chapter is simply to bring some of that discussion of economic equality back into connection with democratic theory. The more specific objective is to consider whether economic equality matters in itself, before going on to discuss whether it should figure as a democratic condition.