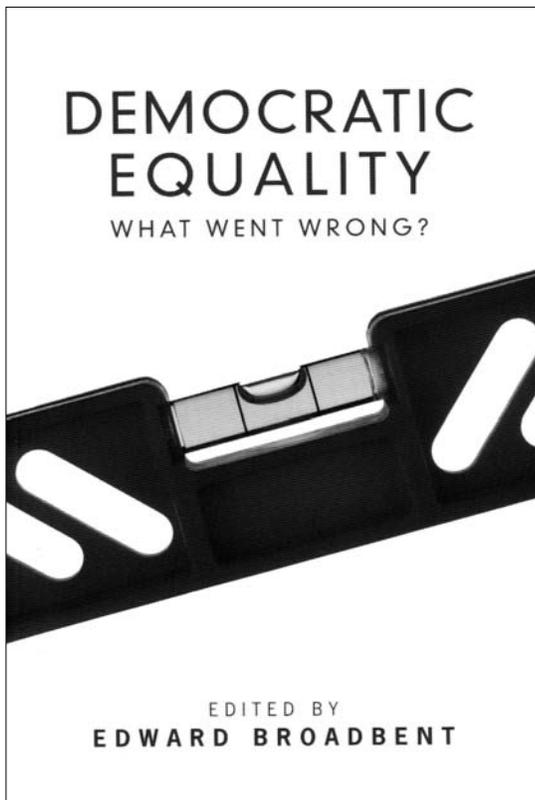


Democratic Equality: What Went Wrong?

In November 1998, the Institute and the J.S. Woodsworth Chair hosted a conference, "Equality and the Democratic State". Papers were solicited from international scholars, social activists and decision-makers. Issues discussed were the status of social, political, and economic (in)equality, with particular reference to Canada, Britain and the United States. Participants included: Edward Broadbent, Dietrich Rueschemeyer (USA), G.A. Cohen (UK), Ian Angus (SFU), Jane Jenson (Université de Montréal), Ruth Lister, Social Policy (UK), Barbara Ehrenreich (US), Armine Yalnizyan (CANADA), John Richards (SFU), Jim Standford (Canadian Auto Workers), Bo Rothstein (Sweden), Daniel Savas (Angus Reid Group) and Bob Hackett (SFU). The conference papers were edited by Edward Broadbent and were published by the University of Toronto Press.



From the introduction to Democratic Equality: What Went Wrong? by Edward Broadbent, University of Toronto Press, 2000. pp. xv – xviii.

... democratic governments throughout the North Atlantic region initiated myriad social and economic programs explicitly aimed at furthering equality and security. In most of these countries, pensions, health care and education came to be viewed as a citizen's right, precisely because they were established for all citizens regardless of income.

Although the most important ideology of social equality based on citizens' rights was social democratic (stretching back to the end of the nineteenth century, with Edward Bernstein's

concept of the new citizen), other important belief systems underlay the new broad-ranging political consensus on the positive role of the state. Conservatives could draw upon their idea of a 'social market economy,' which had always distinguished itself from laissez-faire capitalism; liberals in quest of a positive notion of freedom could invoke T.H. Green, Leonard Hobhouse, and, above all others, John Stuart Mill.

It was no accident that when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations in 1948, it contained not only the civil and political freedoms of the Western tradition but also the new egalitarian social and economic rights. The Canadian John Humphrey, who prepared the first draft of the Declaration, wrote that it "attempted to combine humanitarian liberalism with social democracy." Like Humphrey, most political leaders in most democracies had come to believe that without social and economic rights traditional political and civil liberties had little meaning for the majority. And without continuing intervention by national governments in the vagaries of unstable capitalism there could be neither social stability nor social rights.

When the contributors to this volume consider equality as a value of fundamental importance to democracy, they have at least one reasonably precise idea in mind: economic or material equality in substance or in outcomes. Thus when they advocate organizing society to ensure that a higher degree of equality prevails, they take into consideration the distribution of income and other forms of personal wealth, such as stocks, bonds and housing. They see more economic equality as being desirable for two reasons. First, those not separated by a wide gap in wealth are more likely to be able to communicate and empathize with each other

as citizens living in the same political structure. Without denying the importance of other significant differences which frequently result in other kinds of inequality—for example language, religious, ethnic, cultural, and gender differences—a significant gap in wealth not only weakens the general possibility of positive communication in society but also makes each of these other differences more likely to be seen as sources of conflict rather than forms of positive diversity. It is also the case that most liberal democracies have made significant progress in dealing with inequalities of these kinds, at the very time when economic inequality related to class has been on the increase. A second reason for favouring greater economic equality in outcomes as opposed to the classical liberal and neo-liberal (or neo-conservative) equality of opportunity, is that economic equality is seen to be fundamentally connected to the notion of free and participatory citizenship. This is particularly evident in a capitalist economy, grounded as it is on private property, differentials in market-based incomes, and the majority of individual choices being exercised in the context of purchasing goods and services.

In such a society, to make choices in exercising one's talents, capacities or interests is to participate in the market place, precisely because the means of their realization has to be purchased. Whether we are talking about going to a movie, taking a skiing holiday, acquiring a television set, having music lessons or deciding to take a day off from work, the vast majority of the choices we make to give substance to the abstract notion of freedom require money. The more choices we can make, the more freedom we have. Since choices require money, the more money we

have, the more free we are. In a market economy the rich not only have more money, they have more freedom. Thus equal citizenship in a market-based democracy, grounded in the notion of the equal freedom to make choices, necessarily implies that the state must take strong measures to achieve higher degrees of material equality than

It was no accident that when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations in 1948, it contained not only the civil and political freedoms of the Western tradition but also the new egalitarian social and economic rights. The Canadian John Humphrey, who prepared the first draft of the Declaration, wrote that it “attempted to combine humanitarian liberalism with social democracy.”

“Equality in substance” is a direct challenge to the neo-liberal “equality of opportunity” favoured by most non-social democratic parties and promoted by the mainstream media in most liberal democracies. What might be called the weak version of this liberal notion of equality of opportunity emphasizes the need for formal legal equality of all citizens as they confront real life in a capitalist democracy. If legal equality is provided by the state then any resultant inequalities in outcomes should be understood as just, that is, they result from differences in original capacities or effort in the market place. A stronger version of the liberal theory of equality of opportunity takes into account the need to compensate for inequalities of circumstance that individuals may be confronted with at birth or that result from market conditions.

would result from the market when left alone. Material inequalities cannot be left alone if the democratic goal of each citizen having an equal moral claim to the right of self-development is to be a reality.

