

20. Equality Of Opportunity And Equality Of Outcome

Equality of opportunity in the sense of identical opportunity for all individuals is impossible.

"One child is born blind, another with sight. One child has parents deeply concerned about his welfare who provide a background of culture and understanding, another has dissolute, improvident parents. Children at birth clearly do not have identical opportunities in relation to abilities or environment ." (Milton and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose*, New York (1980) pp 131-2).

What follows in the next few paragraphs and the distinction drawn between "*equality of opportunity*" and "*equality of outcome*" owes much to the analysis of the Friedmans.

Equality of opportunity is best expressed in the phrase - career open to talents. No arbitrary obstacles should prevent people from achieving those public positions which their talents fit and which their values lead them to seek. Neither birth, nationality, colour, religion, sex nor any other equivalent characteristic should determine the public opportunities that are open to a person - only talent and achievement. Thus, equality of opportunity simply spells out the concept of equality before the law. And it has meaning and importance precisely because people are different in their genetic and cultural characteristics, and hence both want to and can pursue different careers. It is important to note that such equality of opportunity does not present any conflict with freedom. Quite the opposite. Equality of opportunity and freedom are two facets of the same basic concept.

Equality of opportunity means freedom to pursue one's private interest or vocation without arbitrary restrictions based on irrelevant personal characteristics. It does not include a power to force others to pursue their private interests or vocation in a certain way (eg, affording equality of opportunity of participation in those pursuits to others). A practical example may be taken from the field of matrimony. Equality of opportunity requires that no individual should be arbitrarily prohibited from marriage but it does not demand that the object of his matrimonial hopes should be compelled to afford him an equal chance of taking her hand. In business, equality of opportunity means freedom to engage in a trade. It does not mean a right to compel someone else to afford you an equal chance of participating in his trade.

Equality of outcome is a radically different concept. Equality of opportunity provides in a sense that all start the race of life at the same time. Equality of outcome attempts to ensure that everyone finishes at the same time. To slightly change what the Dodo said in *Alice in Wonderland*, "*Everybody must win and all must have prizes*". That is the goal of radical socialism. Everyone must be a winner, everyone must be equal. Socialists do not really point towards absolute equality but they point to vague ideas of fairness and justness.

This concept differs radically from the idea of equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity provides scope for freedom and is, in fact, complementary to freedom. On the other hand, government measures to achieve "*fair shares for all*" reduce equality. Government attempts to promote equality by positive action and discrimination have many undesirable consequences. Three consequences may be noted.

1. If rewards are based not on achievement and effort but on fairness, what incentive is there to work?
2. Who is to decide on fairness?
3. What are the criteria of fairness?

In recent times, the liberal idea of equality of opportunity has been subverted and transformed into a concept which may be termed equal opportunity. Equal opportunity departs from the orientation upon personal freedoms which is inherent in the liberal concept of equality of opportunity. Equal opportunity

means an equal chance of participation in any activity, public or private, where there is any opportunity of participation. The compulsory imposition of anti-discrimination programmes upon private firms is an example of equal opportunity in action. It will be seen that equal opportunity is actually inimical to the liberal concept of equality of opportunity because it interferes with the freedom of others to pursue their vocations or private interests as they see fit.

There is an inescapable, inevitable and fundamental conflict between the ideal of fair shares and freedom. Action for equality must necessarily involve government regulation and reduce liberty. Government regulation must necessarily restrict liberty.

The consequence is that there is a difference between the ideal and reality. Government measures to promote equality are drafted and implemented through politicians and bureaucrats with all their human failings. There is a wide gulf between theory and practice wherever equality based policies have been tried. The end result of a movement towards equality of outcome in the hardline communist countries has been a state of terror. Russia, China, with evidence provided by the trials of the Gang of Four of atrocities within China, and the genocides in Ethiopia and Cambodia, offer clear and convincing evidence. And it must be emphasised that even terror has not equalised outcome. There are studies which establish that there was more inequality in the Soviet Union and the other communist countries than in the western representative democracies.

The less extreme measures taken in democratic socialist countries in the name of equality of outcome have shared the same fate to a lesser extent. Where they have succeeded beyond equality of opportunity, governments have restricted individual liberty. They have failed to achieve their objectives. They have failed to establish fair shares.

The most important reason for the failure of equality based policies is that such policies invariably mean government control which diminishes freedom. Experience shows that restrictions on economic freedom inevitably affect political freedom. One of the myths of radical socialism is that it is possible to preserve political freedom while destroying economic freedom. Experience proves this claim to be false. Popular ownership is the ideal. Government ownership and centralisation of power is the necessary consequence.

Equality based policies aim to impose equality but, in fact, increase inequality. This is not merely because they directly attack equality of opportunity in the sense of freedom to pursue an interest or vocation, but because by destroying incentive they inhibit that individual initiative which has been responsible for modern economic progress, growth and development. Modern economic development has systematically raised the lot of the ordinary man to a level of prosperity undreamed of in past ages, when such prosperity was confined to a few. This development was the direct result of individual initiative and endeavour within a system which allowed individual incentive and free activity. By directly impinging upon individual incentive and free activity, egalitarian policies and programmes actually inhibit the process of economic growth and development, thus inhibiting the only mechanism in history by which inequality has been systematically, successfully and continuously ameliorated on a large scale.

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