

Review of: "The equality agenda: a clear case of smoke and mirrors"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Thank you for the opportunity to read and review this article. I was born in Belfast and left as a child in 1972 with my family because of 'The Troubles'. I have had a career long interest in equity. So for a combination of reasons, I appreciate the opportunity to review this piece.

The paper is beautifully researched, conceived and written, combining an astute synthesis of relevant background and history with deeply personal and relevant anecdote.

My suggestions are made to (1) clarify and strengthen your argument and (2) widen readership beyond those knowledgeable about politics of the North of Ireland.

As an expert reader - in terms of lived experience and knowledge of the North - and with a deep interest in equity and equality, I was able to follow the arc of the paper. That said, I found it hard to do so and had to read it twice and wait until the final paragraph to understand how it all came together. I think there are many who might not be able to follow the arc/argument without some changes to the paper.

I have highlighted some suggestions for your consideration below.

More attention is given to explaining the right wing view in section that ends with: 'Achieving this 'great meritocracy' included eliminating discrimination and expanding opportunity, with those on the left calling for 'equality of outcome' and those on the right, advocating for 'equality of opportunity.' I was left wondering what 'equality of outcome' means for you/ looks like and how it would be achieved. I think this is a gap in the paper.

The link between equality of outcome (through affirmative action policies) is also not yet made clearly enough, I don't think. You present clear evidence of the arguments against affirmative action but assume the reader agrees with you that they are poor and that the reader understands the link between affirmative action and equality of outcome – it is not obvious to everyone, as you show with the arguments against it. The link needs to be carefully spelt out and explained.

This is useful: 'Furthermore, relying on IQ as a gateway, conveniently ignores other relevant data such as the number of highly sought-after grammar school places versus local population statistics and the link between education and deprivation.' I think it would help non expert readers if it was earlier/at the start and not the end of the paper. I also think you could consider adding class, religion and context to 'education' so the links between these other aspects of the experience of those in the North and deprivation are drawn. For example, you make the point elsewhere around 'class

continuing to be subjugated to the politics of religion' but do not draw it out here.

'Smoke and mirrors': In the title, a heading early on and in the conclusion where you refer to 'smoke and mirrors surrounding the equality agenda', it not entirely clear what/which smoke and mirrors you are referring to. I think you are trying to say that things appear to be one way, ie that there is equality (of opportunity or outcome or both - unclear), but in fact, things are not as they seem, but it took me two readings to work that out. The reader would be helped by stating up front that this is the argument you are going to make.

This is helpful: 'The two-pronged approach to equality, seeks to expand opportunity and eliminate discrimination through equality of outcomes.' It, too, would be better earlier in the piece. But the claim that affirmative action is /leads to equality of outcomes needs to be argued and not assumed.

The paper ends with: 'To understand Northern Ireland's present and its troubling suicide and mental health statistics, the focus should not simply be about the legacy of violence generated by the Troubles but also about lost opportunities and unfulfilled talent, resulting from class divisions magnified by a mostly religiously segregated, selective, educational system that still persists to this day.'

While I wholeheartedly agree with your view, I was surprised to see it at the end of the article as I did not know that was the argument you were making until I read it in the very last paragraph. I think it would strengthen your paper to be up front (literally and figuratively) about your intended argument before you make it – and all the associated arguments. Your central argument is, I think, that a lack of equality (or equality of outcome?) has devastating effects on people/populations (who are then 'blamed' for that outcome?), and you use the North as an example of this argument. Again, the reader would benefit from knowing earlier on that this is what you are arguing.

Making it clear to the reader what you are going to argue up front would mean that the relevance of the various aspects of background and history of equality thinking, theory, policy and practice would be flagged for the reader as relevant to your central argument (and their relevance could be explained as you go).

In terms of widening readership, I would make the following points:

It is unusual to start the abstract with one scholar's argument and state disagreement with that scholar - is it not the case that you disagree with the position this - and other - scholars put? If so, why profile one person and not the position/argument they put? More broadly, the abstract should be a summary of what the article is about/the central argument. If my suggestions above are useful and adopted, the abstract will need to change and follow in terms of order and logic.

On a more minor point, in the abstract 'The work highlights the differences between the two countries and claims equality of opportunity, understood here as improved education, healthcare, childcare etc. and equality of outcome, are more rhetoric than reality.' - to what does 'etc' refer? I would suggest spelling that out or dropping it.

In terms of use of vernacular, I think the following terms could be explained for those who aren't familiar: CSE exams; the 'other side'; big Ian, RSA stage one, two and three; and Provo.

Is there a noun missing [here;] ‘...our aspirations denied by the hubris of an unkind, narrow-minded and uninformed religious [person] who had no business saying the things she did.’

I read the article twice as I said, a week apart. I found myself thinking about aspects of the article in the week in between and wanting to return to it, to understand what it was you were trying to say better. While I had a better grasp after the second reading, I do feel your work would be better understood by a larger and wider audience if you guided the reader a little bit more carefully through: outlining what you are going to argue, upfront; noting why particular discussions/sub-arguments are important to understanding the central thesis as you make them; and bringing it all together for the reader in the end.

Thank you for writing this and I look forward to seeing it in print.