

## LIBERAL/DEMOCRACY

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**Abstract-** Throughout recent history, the political ideologies of liberalism and democracy have been closely associated with each other. Despite this common association, there is a continuing tension between the two systems. The cause of this tension can be best summarized as the distinction between negative and positive liberty, made famous by Isaiah Berlin. Liberalism, with its emphasis on individualism and support of restrictions on state intervention in personal and economic affairs, comes to represent negative liberty. On the other hand, democracy comes to represent positive liberty by its emphasis on communitarianism and its articulation for the need of group consensus to realize a shared understanding of the public good. As a result of this tension, liberals and democrats are forced to argue whether political discourse should focus on the distribution of individual rights (liberal view) or answer the question posed by democrats of, "what is the ideal way of life?" Over the last twenty years, individuals in affluent western societies are becoming more concerned about quality of life issues and less concerned about material gain or scarcity of resources. Because of this new post-materialism, individuals are increasingly preferring the positive liberty-oriented solutions that democracy has to offer over the negative liberty of liberalism that is firmly entrenched in western culture by the political and business elite.

The term "liberal democracy" seems to imply a symbiotic combination of two sets of demands, one private and one public. I intend to show that the two ideologies are not always in harmony, and in fact, may even conflict with one another. Liberalism may be distinguished from democracy on four counts. 1) The former protects negative liberty, while the latter promotes positive liberty. 2) One concentrates on the individual, while the other stresses the community. 3) One favours legal rights, while the other includes political negotiation. 4) Public decision-making in one is more procedural, while in the other it is more substantive. So far, liberalism/ capitalism has won over democracy. However, there is empirical evidence that within the most developed liberal democracies, people are starting to question the status quo and are demanding more participation in the decisions that affect their lives.

### NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE LIBERTY

Liberalism and democracy seem united in their call for freedom. There is a difference, however, in the kind of freedom each demands. In "Two Concepts of Liberty," Isaiah Berlin (1969) distinguished between two kinds of liberty.

One he called negative and the other positive. Negative liberty was freedom from interference. "If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree." (p. 122) Positive liberty was defined as being one's own master, not controlled or manipulated by outside forces. Aside from Berlin, the common use has been to contrast negative and positive liberty as "freedom from . . ." and "freedom to . . ." This sense of freedom is the ability to accomplish something positive rather than the absence of restraint.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote that man could be forced to be free. For those who believe in negative liberty this would be nonsense and self-contradictory. In so far as one is being forced, one is to that extent not free. While Rousseau had a knack for turning an ironic phrase, he was in this case being sincere. He was saying that we should be made to take control of our lives. This would be the positive freedom to self-actualize. An example would be the kind of "tough love" where parents force a child out of the house at a certain age in order for them to become self-reliant. It is a measure taken to ensure the young adult becomes more mature; to force them out of their non-age or adolescence. Maturity would include the responsibility to regulate oneself according to law.

Laws are necessary. We need rules by which to coordinate the activities that take place in a modern society. To call for negative liberty is not asking to do whatever we please. Such things as stopping at a red light may deter us from going forward, but this would hardly be an infringement on our freedom because it is so trivial. Theft or assault are things that no society can permit. Liberals like John Stuart Mill have justified such limitations on one's options by saying that we should be free to do whatever we want as long as it does not harm anyone else or interfere with the ability of others to do what they want. A democracy would demand the positive liberty to set its own standards. Self-determination means that a polity should be able to enact its own laws, rather than being forced to do it by someone else. This is the self-mastery to draw up legislation. To secure negative liberty we need laws, and this entails the positive liberty to set those laws. Here liberalism and democracy complement each other in their demand for freedom. This harmony is precarious, however, because the different demands may try to override each other.

Isaiah Berlin feared that with positive liberty the state would go too far in demanding conformity. John Stuart Mill called this the 'tyranny of the majority.' A liberal would fear that without the protection of a strong negative liberty, minorities might be discriminated against. For example, a Protestant state might force all its Catholic citizens to abandon their religion. The liberal has demanded a clear line be drawn between the private, where the state has no say, and the public, which is open to policy. If a state is not to devolve into a totalitarian regime there had to be constitutional limits placed upon its power. According to C. B. Macpherson (1976), the biggest fear the liberals had in opening up democracy to universal franchise was that since the poor were the greatest in number, there might be pressure for the government to produce class legislation. Capitalists wanted their property rights to be free from socialist policies. Property was declared private and corporations were given the legal

status of individuals. In promoting negative liberty, liberals have always been concerned with protecting the private individual from the interference of the state. In serving positive liberty on the other hand, democracy has involved the decisions of groups and communities to forge their own agendas, living standards, and legislation.

### **INDIVIDUALISM AND COMMUNITARIANISM**

Liberals and Democrats hold contrasting psychological and sociological theories. The former takes as its model the 'economic man.' The individual's needs are taken as exogenous. They are a 'given' and not up for dispute. Desires are pure data. They are neither right nor wrong, true nor false. They just are. An agent is self-defined and knows what he wants before entering any transaction. There is a pre-given reason why anyone would do anything. The economic man is a rational utility maximizer. People are seen as seeking the most pleasure possible, while avoiding as much pain as possible. They want to get as much as they can for as little as they can. They aim to do little work for big rewards. This is called efficiency. Exerting effort is not the only disutility; however, there is also opportunity cost. To buy one thing a person has to forego another, given a limited budget. In order to participate in one activity, one has to give up doing something else at the same time. Given present wants, one needs to decide whether it is worth the trouble, or whether there is something else he'd rather have. Having made a decision one can then choose to enter into a transaction, aiming to get as much out of it as he can. This is called instrumental reason. A relationship may have commitments but one has already consented to them by choosing to enter into it in the first place, and if he later finds that it is not worth the hassle he can opt for something better. Since one is self-sufficient before any social contact, he can see whether it is meeting his needs or choose other means that are more appropriate. An economic transaction would not occur unless both parties were likely to benefit. We have what the other wants and so we trade; if there's a better deal elsewhere we'd go there. With each seeking the most satisfaction, the better off everyone is, theoretically. This ideal scenario does not take into consideration the bonds people have with one another as members of a community.

Communitarians, on the other hand, would say that people are what they are because of the social roles they play. People are defined by the interactions they live. Without a social context within which to orient themselves they would be lost and without identity. One can be a parent, friend, academic, or a citizen because these roles pre-exist as possibilities in society; defining who people are. One tries to give his best to the larger whole, which is what gives meaning to life. It is what makes one worthy of being valued by ourselves and others. This is not to say that he would not have human dignity without these interactions, but that his existence is richer because of them. This is contrasted to utility maximization because the more one puts into activities the more one gets out of them. One would not be using people for his own ends, because he is fulfilling himself through caring for the needs of others. In democracy, he can

become a participant of the group in making a decision, proud to benefit his neighbors. He can belong as a member, and be at home among his peers by exercising his freedom.

Referring back to the two concepts of freedom, it can be said that negative liberty allows for maximum outcome by letting each individual get what he can for the best deal he can. Positive liberty exercises the potential to contribute as part of a team in making a difference to how a person lives. In negative liberty the individual is free to buy the selections offered, while positive liberty may open new possibilities by putting alternative agendas on the table. The economic man takes the options given by those who produce products, but this is alright since they are catering to needs that are already there. A lobby group tries to ensure that there are more avenues available than the status quo, or objects to projects that are demeaning. Thereby they have a say in what options are available, and can change what people think they need. Rather than accepting values as irrational data, they can be publicly articulated and debated--in such things as social welfare, public goods, and constitutions, for example. Thus it is important how people communicate with each other through public facilities, whether in courts or assemblies. One is based on the discourse of rights; the other is a path toward consensus.

## RIGHTS AND NEGOTIATIONS

There have been different ways in which rights have been justified. If we start with man as a rational maximizer then, like John Stuart Mill, we may try to use utilitarianism to determine rights. The state, for example, should not impose a preferred way of life because Mill believed general welfare would be better off in the long run. However, this justification leaves rights vulnerable. For example, Mill also thought we should give the educated more votes so the result would be more informed. If most people would be much happier at the expense of only a few, then rights could be in jeopardy.

Avoiding reliance on anything contingent and fallible, Immanuel Kant thought that our rights could be determined from conditions of rational thought. To avoid the fundamental error of contradiction, we must will our acts as if they were universal. We would need to ask ourselves "What if everyone did that?" This would mean that the rule of law applied to everyone equally. The second condition was that we don't use people but treat them as ends in themselves; capable of determining their own goals and values. This is described as the right of autonomy. Rights would be more secure as assumptions of fair play than as tools to increase our utility. Rights would have priority over any conception of the good life. To be just, the state must not impose what it thinks is good. It must not be biased. This is the precondition of equality of rights which enables the possibility of an ethical society and discourse. Reason determines out of itself, by its own bootstraps, the idea of self-entailed freedom. Just as the choosing-self is prior to the inclinations it chooses, the right is prior to the good for all autonomous individuals. Without appealing to the way things are, however, Kant is left with a criterion that is vacuous. There is no way to decide what

society should be like, other than harmonizing the wills of rational maximizers. With the contentless notion of autonomy--freedom from all external influences, desires, traditions, and authorities--we would renounce everything and end up in total destruction. Such rights, freedoms, and imperatives are purely formal, and people need a more concrete direction to guide and justify their actions.

In contrast to the individualism of Kant, Hegel would say that people get the concept of a concrete ethic from the customs that are a part of the community within which they are situated. Since human beings are what they are because of the society in which they live and the social roles they perform, they are called upon to accept an obligation to the good of the community they inhabit. Social values help define the individual, his rights and corresponding duties. 'Human rights' which include education, a decent standard of living, and medical treatment, are an ideal conception of how life ought to be and favors the development of specific capacities. A life that fell short of these conditions would be inhumane. In contradiction to Kantian thought, the good is prior to the right. One's rights are supported by the commonwealth of which one is a citizen. In turn, our duty is to support the world we enjoy. We need to negotiate a partnership where the goal of the individual should be to contribute to the greater good, while the role of society would be to empower its members. There needs to be give and take between valued and respected parties. One may have the right not to help out, but that would not make it right not to do so. One may be called upon to compromise or even sacrifice, for things such as taxes and war. Morally, the common good has some priority over rights. People need to live up to standards other than their own self-interest. Individuals partake in a social life, which is going on anyway, but people help to realize its value and make this actual through living their lives. It is when our institutions, which embody certain ethical world views, are no longer seen as justifiable, or have become travesties, that men become alienated and turn to themselves for their identity. That is when society would disintegrate and would have to reason out a new legitimate form of public rationality, so that people could identify with a new set of virtues. Hence, the importance of freely forming public opinion would be to develop a social life by which we could abide. The liberal could retort that "community" is a metaphysical entity, which does not exist, and such talk is merely propaganda. Community is just an abstraction made up of individuals with their inalienable natural rights.

The actual list of fundamental rights has been problematic and somewhat different for each constitution. Locke defined our rights as "Life, Liberty, and Property." The American Declaration of Independence affirmed rights to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." The Canadian Constitution Act of 1982 has declared that "everyone has the following fundamental freedoms: (a) freedom of conscience and religion; (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication; (c) freedom of peaceful assembly; and (d) freedom of association." Constitutions essentially clarify the boundaries of the state, defining its role and separating it from the economy and civil society.

Besides declaring property as private and developing an economy separate from government, a healthy liberal democracy has also needed free public space in order to develop a strong civil society outside the tutelage of government. The negative logic of the liberal and the positive logic of the democrat, however, would disagree about the relationship society should play in regard to the state. The former would argue that the job of those outside the government would be to blow the whistle when government was corrupt or when it overstepped its bounds, hence the scandalous news clips and the rising demand to be able to recall public representatives. On the other hand, democrats would argue that a free society outside government control is necessary to form public opinion. The first is the role of watchdog, the second is to facilitate discussion. The Fundamental Freedoms in the Canadian Constitution were made for ensuring open debate--to critique and improve the government, thereby making it more responsive to the people. The first agenda would keep guard over the just state, protecting the autonomy of individuals. The second agenda follows Hegel in trying to give direction to the state through the freedom of rational thought to determine the 'good life' in ongoing debate. The American system of rights protects the negative liberty of the individual from the threat of being killed, from governments stepping on freedoms, and from interference with the Pursuit of Happiness, however that's understood. Canadian fundamental freedoms promote the positive liberty of freely forming public opinion.

In "Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere" (1995, p.276), Charles Taylor said that . . .

The conditions for a genuine democratic decision can't be defined in abstraction from self-understanding. They include (a) that the people concerned understand themselves as belonging to a community that shares some common purposes and recognizes its members as sharing in these purposes; (b) that the various groups, types, and classes of citizens have been given a genuine hearing and were able to have an impact on the debate; and (c) that the decision emerging from this is really the majority preference."

Taylor wrote that in a society of mutually disinterested individuals all we could hope for was (c) and maybe (b). With each individual into their own life plan, why would they listen to another's point of view? However, (b) would be greatly affected by (a). A sense of being heard depends upon a feeling of being valued and respected by other groups. Conciliation is destroyed by conflict. Taylor argues that rights enhance discord through emphasizing the importance of judicial review. In court, there are clear winners and losers, where winners take all and there is no opportunity for compromise. In discourse, to declare something a right is to end debate. The possibility of forming majority coalitions can disintegrate into a variety of narrow interests designed to mobilize litigation more effectively. Fragmentation can frustrate the formation of a common purpose and the power to carry that out, making it seem like a waste of time.

Alienating people into individualism would, in turn, exacerbate the problem of undermining solidarity. This problem makes some tough issues harder to resolve. Areas where we may need to come to a consensus, where there is some give and take and some sacrifice involved, are harder to achieve because of a lack of sympathy and fellowship. Cooperation may be imperative but not forthcoming, if people don't care enough to reconcile their differences.

To avoid fragmentation, some democratic writers of the past have believed there should only be one class or no classes. While this may not be possible, some countries have tried to curb the extremes of wealth and poverty through effective redistribution of income, thereby lessening the division between the well-off and the less fortunate. These measures toward equality could be a way of creating a more cohesive society, but can be seen as infringing on the rights of the wealthy.

In comparing this kind of equality with that of Kant's we may call the latter, formal equality before the law and the former, equality of condition and political power. As we have seen, liberal capitalists wanted their private property protected from class legislation, and human rights have demanded a decent standard of living. In "Democracy and Capitalism" (1987), Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis have explained the clash between property rights and personal rights as the main contradiction of modern social thought. Yet, equality in the way we combine our interests is essential to the formation of public decisions.

### **PROCEDURAL AND SUBSTANTIVE DECISION MAKING**

Following liberal logic, democracy is reduced to a formal procedure for making public choices among given alternatives. Voting gets input from each individual separately through a secret ballot and compiles them to see which option has the highest count. Rousseau called this the 'will of all' and contrasted it with the 'general will' which was the result of the combined effort of everyone to come to an agreement. Hegel called aggregative elections the result of a 'heap,' or shall we say a mass society. It would not be differentiated into clear rational articulation. Agreement does not have to mean that we are all the same, think the same, and that, for purposes of collective debate, we have to be treated the same. Our differences can be recognized and incorporated into a more complex understanding of the public good.

With a group of mutually disconnected individuals there can be a lack of support for public goods. A public good is one that benefits everyone. A lighthouse helps all ships, but is not able to charge each one for its services. Rational maximizers would then avoid paying wherever possible, shifting the burden for its preservation onto others. This is called the free rider problem. It is evident in low turnouts at elections. "Other people are making the decisions anyway so why should I bother?" It seems so little to ask that one wonders why people avoid it. Being able to vote every few years to see who will run the country, as in our representative democracy, allows for very little input and members of society need to see that they are having an effect. Sustaining a true



democracy demands civic virtue and this cannot be extracted from isolated uninvolved individuals. To get people more interested and participatory, governments have tried processes of integration to get people working together toward agreements.

Integrative processes involve coming to a consensus, there is give and take, but it demands a rather profound knowledge of the area under discussion. The possible resolutions are open-ended. This means that career politicians must be authorities on the matter. The process tends to be elite driven and therefore limitedly accessible to the common man. However, it has been possible to send experts into communities for input and get agreement from the populace, such as the town meetings on the Charlottetown Accord. This involves decentralizing power so that democracy functions from the grassroots up. The danger with this process is the possible fragmenting of local groups from the centralized national level. In the end, aggregative and integrative processes are merely means to achieve decisions.

More is demanded from democracy than merely coming to conclusions. Liberals try not to prejudice the good life; by following the rules of the right method one will arrive at the correct answer. Kant thought that all we needed were the correct formal procedures involving the rule of law and equal rights. Hegel criticized this for not giving more content to the good life of the community. Democracy is more substantive because it is a way of life, preferable to other procedures because it brings people together. To have freely negotiated public opinion involves a concrete standard about the quality of life we share. It can even imbue the whole of society with justice by addressing the way we treat each other, outside the narrow focus of government. Power is not homogenized but comes in many forms, from the patriarchal father to the greedy employer. Anywhere that people can have input into the decisions that affect their lives is theoretically open to democratic influence, from the family to the workplace. People seem increasingly to demand more empowerment to effect change, and this requires that we listen to each other with respect and consideration. Democracy may even assume a standard by which to judge some of the conclusions we reach, since the content of the good life includes community, human rights, and the equality of condition. Thus, the difference between liberalism and democracy can be radical.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed many ideas about liberalism and democracy, but in one sense it is very simple. The contrast is between the protection of autonomy of individual choice versus the empowerment of community decision. On the other hand, these two world views have very deep differences with vast implications. In practice, we call ourselves a liberal democracy, but this has been more liberal than democratic. People have had their power truncated, allowing political and business elites to determine their lives for them. This is called representative democracy, however people's expectations have been changing. In "The Decline of Deference" (1996), Neil Nevitte has used World Values Surveys which report



results from more than forty countries, covering over seventy percent of the world's population. Concentrating on the most advanced nations of Europe and North America, he has been able to show interesting changes in people's attitudes. Over the last twenty years there has been a declining reliance on primary resources and manufacturing, and a rising increase in knowledge-based and technological services. We may call these countries post-industrial. For those born after the Second World War, scarcity has been less of an issue and people are more concerned with quality of life. Nevitte calls this post-materialism. People are becoming more assertive and less compliant. There has been decreasing confidence in governments and a corresponding rise in support for the free market. Old style socialism may be currently passé, but capitalism is not entirely secure either. An increasing willingness to pursue unconventional forms of political action such as signing petitions or joining boycotts have been strongly correlated with a demand for a stronger voice in workplace decisions. This is closer to participatory democracy. The final result is impossible to determine, but it is suggestive of the desire for change.

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