



RETHINKING THE CONCEPT OF EQUALITY IN LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Olalere Kunle Oluwafemi

Department Of General Studies
The Polytechnic Ibadan, Nigeria

Olaigbe Taofeek Adebayo

Department Of General Studies
The Polytechnic Ibadan, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Democracy is generally defined as majoritarian rule, that is , a political system where the populace are allowed to undertake a meaningful and qualitative role in the process of governance in any given state. The concept also epitomizes an undeniable existence of the infusion of a general will in the administration of a state in accordance to the wish of the majority of the members of a state. In contrast to the description above, liberal democrats argue that the tenets of democracy should not be described solely on the empowerment of the majority. They argue that democracy should afford every member of the state an avenue to exercise an equal measure of participation in governance whether in the majority or otherwise. This paper therefore examines the very idea of liberal democracy and the practicability of its offerings in a political system.

DEFINING DEMOCRACY

Democracy is etymologically derived from the Greek *demos*,” the people”; *kratein*, “to rule”. ‘Abraham Lincoln’s definition of democracy was derived from this etymological meaning as the government of the people, by the people, for the people”¹, by this he meant a political system in which the people of a country rule through any form of government they choose to establish. In modern democracies, supreme authority is exercised for the most part by representatives elected by popular suffrage. The representatives may be supplanted by the electorate according to the legal procedures of recall and referendum, and they are, at least in principle, responsible to the electorate.

Rule by the people played an important part in the democracies of the pre-Christian era. The democracies of the city-states of classical Greece and of Rome during the early years of the Republic were unlike the democracies of today. They were direct democracies, in which all citizens could speak and vote in assemblies. Representative government was unknown and unnecessary because of the small size of the city-states. Ancient democracy did not presuppose equality of all individuals; the majority of the populace, notably slaves and women, had no political rights. Athens, the greatest of the city democracies, limited the franchise or right to participate in its democratic process to male adults, unlike what obtains in present day democracies.

The major features of modern democracy include individual freedom, which entitles citizens to the liberty and responsibility of shaping their own careers and conducting their own affairs without unnecessary inhibitions from the government and thereby presupposing a form of equality where by each and every citizen is treated as peers, especially in view of their entitlements to single votes in the electoral process. The primacy of this individual freedom is evident in great historic democratic documents, such as the U.S. Declaration of Independence. “Another major feature of democracy is that it serves the interest the interest of the majority by bringing the citizens into decision making”².

Down from the times of the ancient Greek democracy the ideals of democracy have been widely professed but the practice and fulfillment of its tenet have been different in many countries due to the level of variation either in the culture of the adopting country or dictates of the particular epoch in question. The aforementioned will lead us into the task of this paper, that is the evaluation of the concept of equality in liberal democracy, but before we delve into it we

would briefly consider some variants of democracy in order to have an operational understanding of the task at hand.

SOME VARIANTS OF DEMOCRACY

Populist democracy: it is the brand of democracy which is based on the idea of people ruling themselves as free and equal citizens without an external power or self selected group of people who constitute a minority saddled with the power and authority of the state. According to Companion to Contemporary to contemporary political philosophy there are certain constraints built into the system in order to ensure a smooth flow of governance. These constraints include the followings.

Free speech, free press and association necessary for political freedom entrenchment of the rule of law as against the arbitrary will of some people. Formal voting equality which includes the enfranchisement of all qualified citizens. With these constraints as put forward by the proponents of this variant any constraint on popular will would be considered undemocratic. A major feature of this form of democracy is the fact that it equates populist opinion or will with democracy such that any position adopted by a substantive number of people is what prevails. Populist democracy however presents us with a situation in which we must admit that popular opinion is not always the best for the state in all instances, especially when those in the majority are not equipped with the wherewithal in deciding the best way of improving the lot of the people.

Participatory Democracy: This variant of democracy draws its inspiration from the ancient Greek setting where each citizen plays a role in the actual process of governance. It advocates a situation whereby citizens are encouraged to participate directly in decision making, it proffers a situation where citizens jettison their quest for private ends and join in the more collective political arena. This position is an opposing stance when compared to representative democracy. There are two predominant arguments put forward in favour of participatory democracy. The first states that participation in political activities is central to living the good life for human beings and it should be viewed as such because it affords us the opportunity to be part of decision making, while the second argument posits that wide spread participation in political activities reduces or prevents the abuse of power by public officials. Criticisms brought against this view such as the claim that it leads to unnecessarily slowing down of the machinery of

government by its cumbersomeness has been met with claims by contemporary participatory democrat that the mass media would be employed in certain instances in order to pass “informed comments on burning political issues”⁴

Social Democracy: Social democracy extends the logic of liberal democracy to realms that traditional liberals considered private and therefore not subject to democratic principles, Ronald Dworkin asserts that social democracy by implication posits that “if someone has a right to something then it is wrong for the government to deny it to him even though it is in the general interest to do so”⁷. The principled basis for democratisation is typically not the intrinsic value of participation but rather the avoidance of the tyrannical threat over individual lives that accompanies concentration of power. It espouses a situation whereby the power of the state is not seen as in anyway coercive but where the authority of the state is made residual in the hands of the proletariat that is, the people such that the benefits which accrue into the coffers of the state is distributed in such a way where every citizen, after contributing to the progress of the state reaps the fruit of his labour.

What is Liberal Democracy?

Liberal democracy is a particular form of democracy which is based upon a fundamental set of assumptions about the individual, the state and society. What are these basic assumptions and how far does liberal democracy succeed in its main aims? Liberal democracy demands free and fair elections, which are held regularly and in which all citizens (usually 18 years or older) are allowed to vote - but in addition, it requires all the core values of a typical democracy, the commitment to fundamental human rights, equality, rule of law, individual freedom and private property and a free market" Another important part of a liberal democracy is what is called 'separation of powers'.

A marked difference which separates liberal democracy from all other conceptions of democracy is that it denies that populist rule as seen in some variations of democracy, is the defining factor of democracy. Rather it posits that there is a “basic set of liberties that takes priority over popular rule and its conditions”⁵ These conditions are listed by John Rawls in his book Theory of justice to include freedom of thought, speech, press, association and religion, the right to own property, the freedom to vote and to be voted for, freedom from arbitrary arrest and seizure of property and so on.

The basic liberties include the ideal of free and equal human beings over the interest of the state or institutions as the case may be by giving priority to these basic liberties over democratic decision making and thereby entrenching a measure of liberty. Liberal democracy makes more principled room for checks and balances, separation of power and other means of affirming the liberty of the citizens in the state. Most liberal democrats recognize that various principled basis of the right to own personal property, such as securing the conditions for personal autonomy. A common ground for both classical and liberal democrats is the position that, human persons are entitled to a form of unrestricted liberty and consent which serves as the ground for dissent and this forms the opinion that a liberal man is that who believes in liberty such that he is wont to withdraw his allegiance to any institution or government at any time. According to John Locke, humans are naturally in a state of perfect freedom to order their actions as they think fit without asking leave or depending on the will of any other man. In the view of the above mentioned clarification, it is appropriate to say that liberal democracy abhors any form of constraint on individual liberty.

A person is at liberty if he is allowed to do what he wants to do without any external interference from other human beings or institutions. This is a negative conception of liberty. The negative conception of liberty assumes that an individual is a basic unit of analysis in politics. Individuals are free to choose their pattern of live, their occupation and the best arrangement that will promote their interest in all things that affect their lives⁶.

In Isaiah Berlin's opinion and other contemporary conceptions of liberal democracy as aptly represented in his book "Two Concepts of Liberty" Berlin argues that in the history of ideas, liberty has had two different meanings. In the first negative sense of the word a person is free to the degree to which no man or body of man interferes with his activities while in the second conception which is the positive sense of the word a person is free to the extent that he is his own master whose live and decisions depend upon himself and not upon external forces of any kind, this distinction notwithstanding the underlying fact of the two conceptions is their propagation of the freedom from constraint and only liberal democracy is true democracy but it

appears utopist when we consider certain anthropological factors which militate against its proper expression.

AN IDEA OF EQUALITY

One of the most controversial issues in political philosophy is the definition of the concept equality. It is a loaded and highly contested concept such that it is sometimes thought to mean justice in certain instances, its precise connotation is always difficult to grasp. For Richard J. Arneson, the ideal of democracy has led to a double existence in the society. In one guise the ideal has been at least very popular and incontrovertible and in its other guise the ideal has been attractive to some and repulsive to others. These two aspects of equality are equality of democratic citizenship and equality of condition.

The equality of democratic citizenship has risen in stature because so many of the twentieth-century regime that flouted this ideal have been termed despotic. The ideal demands that each member of the society equally should be assured basic rights and freedom. Different theorists conceive the status of equal democratic citizenship somewhat differently such that there is firm consensus as to exactly what rights are essential and fundamental to democratic citizenship or what should be the reach or limits of these rights.

In the abstract, however, it means that people who are similarly situated in morally relevant respects should be treated similarly, by eradicating the gulf or social differences between members of a society. The term equality signifies a qualitative relationship; it signifies a correspondence between a group of different objects, persons, and circumstances. According to John Rawls, 'the difference between a general concept and different specific conceptions may explain why according to various authors producing equality has no unified meaning or even is devoid of meaning'⁸, but equality in its prescriptive usage has a close connection with morality and justice in general and distributive justice in particular and this goes a long way to affirm the fact that throughout the course of history political philosophers have used the term justice to explicate certain cases of inequalities when it comes to the assertion of the features of a truly democratic state.

EQUALITY AS A BASIC FEATURE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

”Liberal democracy traces its origins and its name to the European 18th century, also known as the Age of Enlightenment. At the time, the vast majority of European states were monarchies, with political power held either by the monarch or the aristocracy. The possibility of democracy had not been seriously considered by political theory since classical antiquity, and the widely held belief was that democracies would be inherently unstable and chaotic in their policies due to the changing whims of the people. It was further believed that democracy was contrary to human nature”,⁹ as human beings were seen to be inherently evil, violent and in need of a strong leader to restrain their destructive impulses. “When the first prototypical liberal democracies were founded, the liberals themselves were viewed as an extreme and rather dangerous fringe group that threatened international peace and stability.”¹⁰

Liberalism, as the name implies, is the fundamental belief in a political ideal where individuals are free to pursue their own goals in their own ways provided they do not infringe on the equal liberty of others, affirming each individual's equality as contained in his or her fundamental human rights which the constitution of the state stipulates as genuine and non-violable.

Firstly, there is a commitment to fundamental human rights. Fundamental human rights, for example, are the right to human dignity, life, freedom from slavery, freedom of religion, freedom of belief, freedom of expression, freedom of association and so forth. Each of these human rights is debated to decide what its precise meaning is: the right to freedom from slavery is an absolute right that cannot be limited, But what about freedom of expression? A famous example of a limitation here is that one cannot allow people to shout "fire" in a crowded theatre when there is no fire. Doing so would cause a panic and people would get hurt trying to get out. However, liberals are usually very much against limiting freedom of expression, or censorship, because it is often used by governments to suppress people and views that differ from what the government wants people to believe or say, but of importance to the purpose of this paper is an examination of the concept equality in a liberal democracy.

Among the fundamental human rights is the right to equality. As with other fundamental rights, there is debate about what exactly equality means. All liberals will agree that equality means there can be no discrimination. In a court of law, for example, there can be no discrimination on the grounds of race (black or white) or gender (male or female) or religion

(Christian or Muslim). There are still places where, for example, what a woman has to say in a court counts only half as much as what a man has to say. This is clearly unequal treatment.

But does equality also mean that everyone must get the same salary or live in the same kind of house? Liberals will say 'no', but will demand that all people must have the same opportunities to improve their lives, the emphasis is on improving standard of living of every citizen by affording each individual the same degree of opportunities necessary for his well-being in that particular democratic setting. Liberals, in short, believe in equality before the law and equality of opportunity such that there is an egalitarian outlook to the style of governance. The concept of equality in a liberal democracy can be captured in four distinct ways and they are the following.

Firstly, there is the principle that people can own property. At its most basic, this means that each person owns him or herself and therefore cannot be owned by someone else, that is, no one can be a slave. Such a free person can own other property: clothes, books, furniture, land, houses, cars and even ideas, so-called intellectual property.

Secondly, owners of property must also be able to come together peacefully and sell their property and buy other people's property freely. Liberals believe that the state must interfere in this free market as little as possible. This goes together with the belief that everyone is entitled to free economic activity -the state should not tell me what job to take, what profession to learn or when to open or close a shop. I must be allowed to do what I think I can do best. Liberals ask how free a person really is, if he or she cannot make these kind of important decisions for themselves. This links up with the earlier points made about individual freedom, because it requires a free exchange of ideas and opinions.

Thirdly, many liberals doubt whether the state should be in business at all, since state-owned companies such as airlines, railways, water and electricity suppliers are usually run at a loss thereby using the tax paid by citizens in an unjustified way, since people's taxes are used to keep them going. Likewise, state-owned companies usually charge their consumers more than private ones, which have to compete for business and customers. Experience world-wide supports the liberal idea that only competition ensures good service and good prices in most commercial setting.

Fourthly, liberals accept that there is no equal access to the market. Believing in increasing equality of opportunity liberals therefore do not want to abolish the market; their aim

is to enable people to be part of the market and to benefit from it. They want to do away with bureaucratic and unnecessary restrictions and barriers people face, to give greater access to better education and training and to make the necessary information available to join the market.

From the foregoing it is evident that liberal democracy assumes that the state should interfere as little as possible within the personal sphere of an individual so as to endow them with as much freedom as possible to carry on their life in the way in which they want to do it, exerting their influence in their own section of 'civil society' free from unwanted interference by the state (but restrained enough not to interfere with the freedom of others). The assumption of a limited state however is not just based on liberal notions of freedom but is also necessary from a practical point of view, in that it is necessary for individuals to lead different lives with different values and opinions in order to avoid being swallowed up in an all-pervading opinion that the omnipresence of the state in the personal sphere might bring. i.e. there must be some 'breathing-space' for individuals so that they can manoeuvre against the wishes of the state.

In conclusion, unlike some other forms of democracy liberal democracy does not pretend to be 'scientific' and that one can measure how 'pure' a liberal is. Liberal democracy is a very dynamic, adaptable and pragmatic concept offering solutions for present day political problems. Liberal democracy is the best guarantee invented against abuse of power and the corruption that goes with it especially in the areas of reducing the domineering effects of the state as pictured in the socialist states that existed side by side with it.

REFERENCES

- 1) I. O Bamikole, *An Idea of Democracy* in Issues and Problems in Philosophy in Kolawole Olu-Owolabi (ed) (Ibadan Grovacs Network),. 2005 p.
- 2) Russell Harding, *Democracy* in Tom Honderich (ed) The Oxford Companion to Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2005) p.196
- 3) Amy Gutmann, *Democracy* in R.E Goodin ,P Pettit and T Pogge (eds) A companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy Vol .2 (New York: Blackwell Publishers 2007) P. 567
- 4) Ibid. p.568
- 5) Ibid. p.568
- 6) Bamikole Op. Cit p.233
- 7) Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*, (Massachusetts: Havard University Press 1977) 269
- 8) Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy p.5506
- 9) Liberal Democracy- Wikipedia
- 10) Ibid.