

Democracy and Identity; Liberal Virtue and the Hybrid Individual

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Introduction

Democratic politics, at the dawn of the 21st century, is faced with new and seemingly insurmountable problems. The declining significance of national sovereignty, the growing pervasiveness of human, political and social rights abuses and the increasing appeal of exclusionary identities are posited against the rise of transnational political actors and trends, the globalization of economies and the expansion of global networks of information and media. These developments have seriously challenged existing conceptions of individual and collective identity and the ways in which they interact.

In his article on political liberalism, Clause Offe tackles these issues head on (Offe, 2002). Offe, as always, manages to strike at the core of complexities. He focuses on what he terms the “moral resources”, necessary for the stability of liberal democracy, defining them as the values of trust, toleration and solidarity (TTS). It is their pervasiveness, he argues, which allows for the application of democratic principles and it is their waning which besots the future. The question he poses is: how can these resources be generated without the “supportive context of some shared and overarching identity, national or otherwise”.

Offe’s analysis is stimulating and provocative linking a profound discussion of the development of democratic theory with an insightful contemporary political analysis. In response, I would like to argue three points. First I take issue with his description of democratic development and argue that the exclusionary nature of democracy is, indeed, not a new phenomenon. Second, I suggest that his idea of “liberal virtue” is enriched by considering the increasing hybridity of contemporary individuality. Third, I illustrate the relevance of the notion of hybridity while considering Offe’s discussion of group rights. I conclude with a discussion of group rights in Israel arguing that the implementation of cultural group rights offers only partial solutions.

1. Moral Resources and Democratic Development

In his discussion of the development of democracy, both as an historical phenomenon and as a political construct, Offe provides us with a very eloquent interpretation of the liberal conception of reciprocity inherent in the democratic project. Accordingly, each developmental stage adds an additional dimension of liberty and, hence, of security and sets off its own “logic of fear”. The logic of fear is based on the idea that each individual is naturally suspicious of other individuals’ inclination to respect his or her liberty. The distribution of civic, political and then social rights are, therefore, accompanied by the emergence of the values of TTS which enable individuals to overcome this suspicion. TTS constitute what Offe terms moral resources. Societies lacking in these resources will find it difficult to support a stable democratic polity.

This leads to Offe’s main thesis. Accordingly, the principle threat to the effectiveness of the democratic political arrangement is the increasingly conflictual and often violent relationships played out between “national” majorities and “internal minorities”. The identity of these minorities, associated with former imperial, external powers has, as a result, become ethnicized and marginalized. The relationship between these majorities and minorities has, thus, come to be characterized first and foremost by fear and suspicion leading, in many cases, to the exclusion of these minorities from the equitable (and democratic) practice of equal distribution. Hence, difference – ethnicized and politicized – defies solidarity.

While this analysis is compelling, it is incomplete. The so-called moral resources of democracy were always limited in their scope. Since the dawn of the democratic age in the 18th century, TTS were mostly extended to members of the “inner circle.” Increasingly, with the formation of the national state and the rise of nationalism, this inner circle was identified with the “nation” – whether ethnically, *or* civically defined. Moral resources were produced as public goods, available only to members of the nation. Indeed, up until the latter part of the 20th century, this “inner circle” was very exclusive indeed. For example, since the liberty of African Americans in the United States was not *tolerated*, liberty was not extended to them; since the political judgements of women were not *trusted*, they were denied the right to vote; and since there was little empathy and *solidarity* for the welfare of migrant workers, they lacked, (and often still do), adequate health care. Thus, different minorities were always excluded from these “goods” and democratic stability was maintained not *despite* their exclusion, but because of it (Kook, 2002).

However, if democracy was always a limited project, then what has changed in the 21st century? Here Offe is, again, an acute observer. He argues that even the myth of homogeneity, characteristic of the “inner circle”, is gradually disintegrating and that the notion of the “political community” based on an

overarching national identity, is no longer coherent enough to facilitate the reciprocity of moral resources. Acute differences of interests, ideas and identities divide societies rendering the “conception of who “we” are ... exceedingly difficult to put to work” (Offe, 2002: 7) In short, the inherent heterogeneity and diversity of the periphery, has come to permeate the core. The “mosaic” of multiculturalism in the US, the “idea” of unification in Europe and the changing demographic constitution of the new/old states of Eastern Europe are all testimony to this change.

This leads to my first point: the formation of the nation state, supported by a homogeneous cultural unit (i.e., an overarching national identity), was facilitated and accompanied by the constitution of “identity” as a coherent entity. The advent of the French, German and American nations were accompanied by the constitution of the “French”, the “German” and the “American” individuals. The declining significance and power of the nation-state, in both its role as a focus of identity, as well as its ability to enforce norms of behavior, is both cause and effect of the fragmentation of this type of identity.

Thus, it is neither the sudden absence of an overarching national identity nor the sudden appearance of exclusionary polities that has sparked recent ethnic violence. Minorities have always been excluded from the democratic project and national identity has always been exclusionary by definition. The outbreaks of ethnic violence reflect the fact that economic and political globalization in the form of transnational movements and centers of authority have weakened the sovereign authority of the state. At the same time, the increasingly global world system has not, as yet, provided alternative protective or sanctioning structures. It is precisely within the “global system” that Offe seeks to base his alternative solution.

2. Liberal Virtue

Offe’s first alternative solution (and the preferred, I think) is based on the idea of “liberal virtue”. Liberal virtue proposes that TTS be extended to individuals regardless of their political (or national) affiliation. The idea of liberal virtue demands, however, recognition of the hybridity of contemporary individuality, i.e., the fact that so many of us – victims and non-victims alike, majorities and minorities - cannot be shoved into neat “categories” of identity. (Bhabha, 1995). Contemporary individual identity has been constituted through a myriad of political, social and economic realities and experiences, reflective of and constituted by the different globalizing processes of the post-colonial reality. Hence, identities in Eastern Europe, for example, are simultaneously framed within the context of post-Soviet politics, local resurgent nationalism and

European community post-liberal values. Similarly, identities in the Middle East reflect and represent local nationalist tendencies, pan-religious ideologies and neo-liberal values as well. In short, the “mosaic” of multiculturalism, as Offe puts it, has come to characterize not merely the identity of the collective, but the identity of the individuals themselves.

Hence, the meaningful implication of a universal liberalism lies in the way it interacts with individual – and not merely with collective – identity. The idea that individuals would be able to extend TTS to other individuals described as “strangers” by Offe is made possible when one recognizes that in fact these “strangers” are, in reality, *no less* related to us than our “fellow compatriots”. Seen this way, this type of solidarity requires no more abstraction than solidarity between blacks and whites in the US, Jews and Arabs in Israel, or between Albanians and Serbs in Yugoslavia. It is, if you want, Anderson’s *imagined community* stood on its head.

The difficulty, however, is not with the notion of liberal virtue, but rather with the way in which Offe relates it to institutional mechanisms. While the need to provide a “practical” or “feasible” solution to the problem, is clear, “global policing” as a means of enforcing the implementation of trans-national human and political rights seems to be inadequate. The terror of *Al Qaeda* and the recent American massive bombardment in Afghanistan is just a case in point: whose rights were being protected, and whose rights were abused? The contemporary global arena, characterized by transnational movements and authorities, a proliferation of non-state actors, the advent of local information systems, and the emergence of additional sets of boundaries that have rendered the duality of domestic/foreign anachronistic – all these phenomena render the designation of the national-state as the power to sanction human rights problematic, to say the least. Contemporary states do not sanction the rights of individuals, they sanction the rights of groups; groups whose identity seems most akin to their own. Hence, global policing was unavailable in Rwanda and Somalia but was enforced in Afghanistan and in Kuwait. Global policing has proven the supremacy of political interests *nationally* defined rather than the supremacy of human rights *universally* defined.

3. Group Rights

According to Offe, rejection of the above solution leaves no alternative but the conception of group rights which is, in his opinion, far inferior. He suggests, and I agree, that the politics of identity involves the intensification of differential identities, and not their elimination. Indeed, this would appear to be the constitutive idea behind defining individuals as members of “identity groups” and decentralizing political authority to the level of the group. For this

to work, however, we must presuppose that “groups” have an inherent respect for the rights of other “groups” (as opposed to the rights of individuals), a presupposition that enjoys, as Offe makes strikingly clear, inconsistent empirical validity. There is little reason to suppose that the resources of TTS denied to individuals *as individuals*, will be afforded to those individuals as part of the group. This has led feminist theorists such as Okin, or multiculturalists such as Parekh, to propose pluralist arrangements as means of equalizing the rights of discriminated groups. (Okin, 1999; Parekh, 2000).

I would like to bring up an additional difficulty with regard to the political notion of group rights. To this end, I re-posit the question: what conception of the individual corresponds to the idea of group rights? It is, apparently, a conception of an individual whose entire “identity” is defined by a neat and formulated notion of identity, based on a singular characteristic: Woman. Arab. Muslim. Jew. The tragedy of Bosnia was the tragedy of the hybrid: individuals whose identities were defined and redefined by a multitude of post-colonial legacies were at once victimized as part of a homogenous collective group. The reason is clear: group rights, while based on the understanding that society is composed of difference, constitute their own identities based on sameness, and not on diversity. Hence, the politics of group rights lock individuals into closed and defined categories, imposing definitions of homogeneous cultural identity upon individuals whose identities are far more complex. The political reality which is produced by this network of cultural frameworks is often far more abusive than the reality it set out to solve.

Group Rights: An empirical example

Israel, like many Eastern European states, has an “internal” minority of Palestinians, who constitute approximately 18% of the population. They, like other internal minorities, are closely associated, at least in the perception of most Jewish Israelis with the larger Arab and Palestinian nations *outside* of Israel, with whom Israel is in a state of protracted war. For this reason, amongst others, Offe’s “moral resources” are not extended to members of this group. Hence, they are excluded from many of the fundamental democratic provisions available to the Jewish citizens of the state. (Yiftachel, 1999).

At the same time, for a variety of historical and political reasons, the Palestinian citizens of Israel are afforded language rights, which are legally sanctioned through two mechanisms. First, Arabic is recognized as an official language and second, Palestinians educate their children in Arabic language schools. Elsewhere I have argued that basically the politics of language rights in Israel serves not as a mechanism of liberation, but rather as an additional mechanism of control which enhances the mistrust and lack of solidarity

between the two groups. (Kook, 2000) Essentially, this is for two reasons. First, despite the official status of the Arabic language, it is very haphazardly implemented. Hence, the Palestinian citizens see this as another policy in the realm of neglect and abuse. Second, because the right is implemented in the field of education, Palestinians have few alternatives to Arabic language schools that, similar to other “separate but equal” public facilities once maintained in the US, on the whole suffer from low budgets and overall poor academic performance. As a result, the Hebrew language skills of most Palestinians are often below par compared with their Jewish counterparts. They are, as a result, less adept at functioning in an essentially unilinguistic (Hebrew) society.

Thus, language policy in Israel impacts on its Palestinian citizens in a complex way. While it affords them a potential realm of cultural autonomy and freedom, it also coercively imposes upon them a strict definition of “group identity” that reflects, only in part, the complexity involved in *being* a Palestinian in Israel. The identity of Palestinians in Israel is constituted through a variety of frameworks and influences: imposing the usage of a language in education (much as defining them as “Arab” in their identification cards) disregards these very complexities and serves, ultimately, to simplify the identity of the Palestinians, making it more comprehensible to the Israeli policymaker.

Conclusion

This type of “orientalizing” emerges from a policy of group rights, which at once ignores the hybridity and complexity of contemporary identity, while serving as a mechanism of power. To rectify this situation, Palestinians in Israel need to be afforded far more input into the determination of language policy. First, I would suggest, the coercive dimension of group rights needs to be removed, allowing Palestinians the right to choose in which language to educate their children. This way, education in Arabic will become a “right” rather than an “obligation.” Secondly, Palestinians should be afforded far more autonomy in determining the content and structure of their education, enabling them to design an educational curriculum which would be culturally authentic and intellectually relevant. These suggestions might result in lower attendance at the Arabic language schools, but also in a far higher quality of education.

Thus, the real “solution” to problems generated by ethnic diversity and its “logic of fear” can only be arrived at through recognition of the complexity of contemporary collective and individual identities and the consequent restructuring of political institutions accordingly. The idea of liberal virtue suggested by Offe provides us with a good starting point.

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