

Can Universal Liberalism be Effective without Collective Rights?

A Response to Offe

AS'AD GHANEM

Political Science Department, University of Haifa

Claus Offe's article "Political Liberalism, Group Rights, and the Politics of Fear and Trust", deals with one of the most complicated problems facing world politics today and will continue to do so in the future – Ethnic groups' politics. In my opinion, this issue will occupy the center of world politics at all levels (local, regional and international) in the coming decades; groups will raise their various demands and will be prepared to struggle in order to fulfill their needs. While I do agree with Offe that liberal rights compose one side of the answer to groups rights, I additionally claim that *collective rights are equally important* and must be included in any format for effectively dealing with the serious challenge of political stability in fragmented societies.

In the following pages I will briefly develop two main arguments, claiming that:

- a. Liberal arrangements based on the establishment of political communities the members of which are equal as individuals, but unequal as members of wider groups - are untenable at the outset of the 21st century or, indeed, in the foreseeable future; and:
- b. Liberal arrangements frequently tend to function as a thin cover for group domination in fragmented societies.

1. "Group" and "Collective" identities as formative elements for stability in fragmented societies

The processes of group crystallization which were strengthened with the help of modernization, the rise in the level of education, the development of mass media and a considerable rise in the grasp of the rights of individuals and groups, have reached a revolutionary change following the collapse of the Communist bloc. These factors have led to a situation in which the members of the group are not willing to relinquish the collective factor, as it is both significant and essential to the resolution of their status as individuals and as a group.

The post-Cold War era revealed developments bearing witness to activities of states opening up to one another. Though they still fulfill important roles, the

political weight they bear is declining. The new situation has encouraged the claims of minority groups, which are constantly demanding more. These demands have spurred other groups, which up until now have been dormant, stimulating them into preparing their own lists of demands. This has inevitably led to the outbreak of inter-group conflicts in almost every place in which minority groups exist. An examination of the international context, following the termination of the Cold War, will reveal that the only violent conflicts in the world today are those based on inter-group disputes, such as those taking place today in Southern Sudan, Kurdistan, Chechnya, Palestine/Israel, etc. All these groups have sought aid from the West and the United States in particular in their battles against the states and/or other oppressive groups.

The beginning of the 21st century is also witness to a widespread communications revolution. This revolution, indeed, has its roots in the earlier inventions of printing, radio and television, but differs radically from the previous era of communications. The communications media occupy a wide range of fields thus affecting the intensification of ethnic conflicts in two major areas: first, by transmitting information, values, inventions, norms, etc. among the various regions and populations of the world and thereby contributing towards group identities. As population groups grow more similar in so many fields, the obsessive search for what differentiates them from other groups also intensifies. The media, thereby, contribute towards the sharpening of these differences, which take on an added importance in view of the communications domination and the similarity in external characteristics such as norms, values, standard of living, political and social behavior.

Second, in the post-Cold War era, communications have intensified the discriminated groups' determination to fulfill their needs, just as those of other dominant groups whose situations are described in the media. In this way they contribute towards enhancing group adhesion and its level of demands, while also providing a convenient tool to express the views and desires of the group's members and leaders bringing them directly to the tables of governments, international organizations, conferences, universities... The communications media have, hence, become a very important and powerful factor contributing towards shaping the conflicts and areas of inter-group cooperation.

On the one hand, this growing similarity motivates the ruling groups to seek perpetuation of their rule and superiority, and on the other, it moves the subordinate groups to develop a greater awareness of the gaps between themselves and the dominant groups. This, in turn, enhances the desire to close the gap or, in other words, to achieve equality. This struggle, of course, comes up against a very limited amount (claimed by the dominant groups at least to be limited) of political and economic resources. For their members, population groups in a

pluralistic society seek the political resources of power, status in the ruling hierarchy and domination over such focuses of power such as the army. They seek the economic power of control over production or natural resources, higher-income positions and even employment at all levels in societies with high unemployment rates.

The result is intensifying group conflict. The dominant groups begin to formulate strategies and methods to preserve their control over contested resources; the groups that were deprived until now open in a race to obtain those same rewards enjoyed by the dominant groups and are occupied in seeking methods and strategies with which to eliminate the other groups' dominant situation and attain firm equality. Among these struggles and competitions, there are cases of cooperation crossing state or group borders in order to achieve maximum control over the rewards. Minority groups are prepared to accept the aid of foreign forces, as in Bosnia, South Africa, Northern Iraq and many other places. In many cases, groups cooperate with each other acting against the other groups, for example, the Moslems and the Croats against the Serbs in Bosnia, the Singhalese and Moslems against the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and even in Turkey, where Turks and Kurds are cooperating against another section of the Kurds.

All these developments have worked towards enhancing the awareness of fundamental rights, equality and freedom. Minority groups developed leaderships and spokespersons raised their demands for the rights of their members as individuals and as groups. The issue eventually became so widespread that one might say, in a sweeping statement, that most ethnic groups and particularly most minorities throughout the world, have voiced their demands. These have become the focus of debate, competition, and even conflict among the different groups. From many points of view it may be claimed that the disintegration of the Eastern block and the termination of the Cold War were, at least, some sign of the ripening processes, which will continue to accompany us and grow stronger in the post-Cold War era.

2. Liberal democracy as a cover to group dominance in fragmented societies

Liberal democracy is generally presented, as in Offe's paper, as the ultimate answer to freedom and equality, which are the pillars of democracy. While it is

true that in liberal democracy the citizens' rights are protected at the constitutional level, it is still correct to claim that most liberal democracies are subjected to the dominance of one ethnic/national group. The United States, France, Germany and central European states (the post-Communist states) are a few examples of one ethnic/national group dominance under the cover of "liberal democracy" and "equal citizenship".

Canada, until the 1960s, and Israel are two cases that I have studied in depth. In both cases, liberal democracy is declared as the official regime type. These two examples display the ultimate example to support my claim that this type of regime is a "soft cover" for one ethnic group's dominance, to an extent that places these two cases outside of the democratic continuum. In both cases, the state structure and political operation is controlled by one ethnic group and it grants superiority to serving this group's needs over serving the other groups.

With regard to the relation between democracy and ethnicity, one cannot categorize Canada, until the 1960s, and Israel today as democracies. In practice, they should be classified instead as ethnocracies (regimes that facilitate the expansion, ethnicization and control of a dominant ethnic-nation, often termed the 'titular group', over contested territory and state) as in Turkey, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia; all these states are described by some scholars' literature as 'liberal democracies', but, in fact, they should be classified as ethnocracies (For further details on this discussion, see: Ghanem, 1998; 2001; Rouhana, 1997; Yiftachel, 1999). In these states, minority group members are offered limited rights and integrated to a limited extent in the states' politics, society, economy and media, although by no means on a par with the Majority; meanwhile, a long-term policy of control and supervision reigns, guaranteeing the preservation of the majority's dominance and marginalization of the minority.

Israel, for example, on the one hand, permits its Palestinian citizens to realize their basic rights such as suffrage and the right to run for office, along with freedom of expression, movement and association. On the other hand, it safeguards Jewish primacy in all spheres, including the laws of the state. On the one hand, Israel sustains democratic norms of government on the institutional level, and implements the practices of regular elections, peaceful changes of regime, separation of powers, separation of the military and politics and the like. On the other hand, it does not satisfy the substantive requirements for democracy. Israel, as a state, is identified with one ethnic/national group, the Jews, and it adopts many methods so as to avoid including its Palestinian citizens as equal citizens who receive full benefits on a par with those received by its Jewish citizens. In practice, Israel preserves the inferiority of the Palestinian citizens vis-à-vis the Jews, while discriminating against the former in a broad

variety of spheres and at various levels, in order to maintain the status quo and prevent the Palestinian citizens from achieving equality.

The Palestinian minority's demands are extremely revolutionary in light of the state's ethnic character and the fact that the Jewish majority supports the continuity of this character and generally grants priority to continued discrimination against the minority. The combination of the state and the majority's support of the minority policy suggests that the latter will encounter an "iron wall" of institutional and public opposition to its demands (see: Ghanem, 2001).

The ethnic character of Israeli nationalism (Jewish and Palestinian) and the absence of equal citizenship or territorial nationhood that may unite all the citizens, do not leave many options for future development, and confront the state's majority and minority with difficult decisions concerning the nature of the partnership that can satisfy the demands of the majority, and the personal and collective aspirations of the Palestinian minority.

A Final Word

Many states fail to achieve substantive democracy based on equality in the eyes of the law, freedom and universal citizenship, though some have a formal democracy consisting of rotating governments and external separation of authorities. The lack of a real democracy in these states creates struggles between the groups, which may deteriorate to violence and the massive use of force in order to preserve political stability. These states' moment of truth lies in a deeper process of democratization in the context of group relations, which must rely on equality both between the citizens as individuals and between the groups as collectives. As such, the right for group self-determination is a basic condition for reconciling minority groups with the system and for ensuring their wish to belong to it, rather than to aim for irredentist separation and the establishment of new entities or for joining neighboring states.

My basic claim is that liberal arrangements where citizens are equal as individuals, but not as members of wider groups, are untenable at the beginning of the 21st century. The processes of group crystallization experienced by ethnic and national groups since the end of the second world war, have led to a situation in which the members of the group will not be willing to give up group affiliation, seeing it as significant and essential to their status as individuals and as a group. Therefore, I believe the only remaining option for democratic settlements is the possibility of establishing communal (consociational) democracies. These arrangements can and should be based on a wide coalition of the

groups' elites and on institutional and legal settings which will guarantee a mutual veto, proportional representation in decision-making forums and autonomy for internal affairs.

References

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