

Democracy versus Liberalism

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Résumé :

Si le libéralisme et la démocratie sont considérés par la plus part comme les deux systèmes les plus compatibles pour symboliser la liberté, l'histoire de leurs interaction a prouvé l'existence de certaines différences résidant dans la nature de la relation entre les citoyens et l'autorité qui les gouverne. L'objectif de ce travail est de démontrer que malgré la divergence entre la démocratie et le libéralisme dans les droits accordés aux citoyens en même temps dans les limites imposées en contradiction avec l'objectif primaire de la démocratie qui sous-entend « la liberté » ; il y a des points communs entre les deux systèmes permettant de trouver des racines libérales à la démocratie participative.

Mots clés : démocratie- libéralisme- pouvoir- interaction- antagonisme

Abstract:

If one may consider liberalism and democracy as the most compatible systems which symbolise freedom, the history of their interaction has not always been easy. This difficulty raises from their difference in priority supply i.e. the actions of individuals vis –a- vis the leading authority. This difficult relationship started probably at a moment when the will to make the individual participate in the management of collective affairs and interest has created a very strong power leading by contrast to a limitation of individual rights (which was far from being the objective). Is this a sufficient reason to believe that antagonism is obvious between liberalism and democracy? This question will lead the basic idea of the present article, of which the objective is to demonstrate that apart of this divergence, it would be

possible to find common points between both systems by finding the liberal roots of participative democracy.

Key words: Liberalism- democracy- power- interaction- antagonism

Introduction:

In order to analyse the relationship between liberalism and democracy, one may be obliged to trace back the history of political and economic thoughts. It will make it clearer why some economists as Hans Hermann Hoppe consider what seems as antagonism between the two concepts, liberalism and democracy, in perceiving the society. The former considered as a process of civilization (liberalism), and the latter as a process of “discivilisation” (democracy)¹. Hayek, who was less harsh in his critic towards democracy compared to Hoppe, views democracy as a good method to reach other objectives at the opposite of liberalism which represents an end in itself².

However, the most severe and at the same time pertinent critical analysis, of the functioning of contemporary democracies is the one of Buchanan and Tullock who demonstrated how the comportment of political leaders is motivated by the will to satisfy some interests permitting their re-election even though this requires an extra budget spending³. This analysis came as a reaction to the theory supporting market failure, at the same time it is not excluded that it tried to show that the normal functioning of a democracy maybe an obstacle to the market game. Recently, empirical studies Limogi (2000), Persson(2004) and others tried to analyse the sense of interaction between political liberalization and economic liberalization.

These studies and research have resulted in the following conclusion: Democracy has no influence on economic performance. This difficult relationship between both is based on the view of three prominent economists, who are: Alexis de Tocqueville, Benjamin Constant and John Stuart Mill. This critique is essential to be linked to

a historical context; that of post revolutionary French society more precisely to a particular vision of democracy, that of J.J. Rousseau. But before that, it is important to establish an analysis concerning the troubles in democracy as perceived by the liberal thought⁴.

Some scholars pro-liberalism make a direct link between this limitation and the urban expansion of the cities. The idea supported is that the co-habitation between the people, the power and the individual liberty was achievable when the cities were of a reduced size. Now, in great cities in France, the United States or England democracy was “transformed” from its direct form to how it is currently represented; because larger cities size means a rise in population and consequently more divergence in opinions, leading to conflicts and “tyranny”⁵.

1- Tyranny of the Majority:

This system of collective choice associated conventionally to democracy, has been the object of a critic from the part of liberal thought since the nineteenth century by both Tocqueville and J.S. Mill. However, this view could be seen as harsh and unfair towards a system whose first objective is to fight tyranny whether in Ancient Greece times or during middle-ages. Though, criticizing democracy is certainly justified in the sense that the best mode of choice for liberals is that of unanimity (the approval of all). The question that maybe asked here is: how can a system which represented the release of the peoples from the hold of dictatorship may contains “germs of tyranny”?

The answer to this question could be found probably in the tragic legacies of the French revolution of 1789, this was the major or the leading point of such a vision⁶. Scholars who lived in the period of post revolution felt the risk that democracy was moving out of its principal role in the society, the fact which led to the conduction of many studies. The philosophy which has inspired those at the origin of this revolution was mainly that of J.J. Rousseau. In his works Tocqueville made a profound analysis of this society basing his study

on a comparison with the American democracy. This analysis which led him to caution the potential drift of democracy to what he called “the tyranny of the majority”⁷.

Tocqueville couldn't conceive how minority rights continued to be neglected, more the minority of the minority which is the individual. This oppression, according to him, would lead to hostility in all cases. He says in his book “Of American Democracy” 1835:

*“What is then a majority if not an individual who has an opinion and interest usually opposite to another individual which may be named the minority? If you admit that a powerful person can abuse by his power against his opponents. Why don't you admit the something against the minority? Do people in gathering change? Do they become more patient in front of obstacles by becoming more powerful? For me: I can't believe that the power of doing anything that I refuse to grant to one person individually can be granted to a group of individuals”*⁸

According to Hayek, the most pacifist way to a change is by avoiding conflicts caused by the rule of the majority, according to him this is not put into question. It is that unlimited power granted to governments and parliaments to legislate representing the majority, which is not accepted⁹. This legislature is putting away the minority interest. This is what represents the danger of a power which gives itself the right to do anything under the protection of a legitimacy obtained by the choice of more than the half of the society. This opinion is also shared by Jean Stuart Mill and others defending the right of minorities to express their opinion and needs in a political space¹⁰.

This right is the only solution in a society with the risk of a majority tyranny. This majority opinion generally leads societies to live an economic, political and social stagnation. Because, according to Mill, change and renewal can't be reached only via contradiction and diversity¹¹. While governments elected by the majority will satisfy only the interests of this majority. In this figure, those who represent

the minority may feel themselves oppressed. A situation where tyranny is well represented ironically by the system which fought it most: "Democracy".

According to Hayek, the solution would be a limitation of legislative power of governments and parliaments, conventionally or commonly admitted by all individuals in a society. As according to him, it is unacceptable and inadmissible that a power issued by a momentary majority may decide of the future of a society¹². Though, it is recognized that the rule of the majority may avoid conflicts, however it is not an ideal in itself. This position forwards situating the critic of liberal concept in its context, what liberals criticize is the dysfunction created by this system. The critical view of democracy by liberals forwards submitting it and putting it nearer to its real ideals which constitutes the basis of our life: Freedom and Justice.

2- Democracy and Liberalism: Possibility of Convergence

Apart of their differences, democracy and liberalism may at least cohabit or even reinforce and empower each other mutually. First, it is necessary to know what is meant by liberalism. In the philosophical sense it is a doctrine finding its origins in the philosophical thought of the natural right. The one that considers that, every individual is his own master, having undeniable rights in his simple existence, the right to freedom, to justice and to property¹³. Then liberalism has become linked to any system making of individual freedom a supreme priority.

Liberty is considered by Hayek as a situation where the individual is not submitted to the arbitrary will of someone else or others. Mill considers it as: "A situation distinguished by the absence of any coercion. It is also well defined by article number 4 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as what consists in doing all what doesn't disturb or touches others..."

Economic liberalism is the doctrine of "Laissez faire" of Smith and Say; It prevents the state from the intervention in the economical

sphere regulated by “the market game” and the free circulation of goods and services. Much has been said about liberalism and volumes have been written about it. In this sense, the objective of this doctrine is the best protection that can be ensured to the private property and voluntary exchange. This vision may resume the privilege attributed to the private sphere on the public one.

There is a distinction between economic freedom, political freedom and political one, in other words, between liberalism and democracy concerning limiting the power of sharing freedom. The organization of life in a group in its extreme state may limit individual power in the private sphere. Consequently, it may be said that certain forms of democracy are criticized by the liberal thought and not the whole system. However, the question that may be asked here: Is democracy competitive with liberalism? Or are they complementary? What are the common points between them? The answers to these questions may contribute to the building principles for a real liberal democracy, where the respect of political liberty doesn’t disturb the guarantee of the economical one.

In the philosophical sense, there are many common points between democracy and liberalism since the basis of both systems is the promotion of individual freedom and resistance to coercion, and protecting people against autocratic abuse. That’s why, it may be said that only the states who witnessed liberal revolutions have seen the birth of democratic regimes. (Democracy remains the only solution for the preservation of fundamental rights of individuals)¹⁴. At the same time, liberalism in the economic sense has a common point with democracy as it permits the right to property. Coming from what has been said above, one may conclude that: A liberal society needs nothing more than a rightful state to function in the democratic norms.

This can be reached under three conditions:

- The supremacy of right rules and norms.
- Equality of all individuals even the state which is considered as a moral individual is submitted to the law.

- The separation of power and the guarantee of independence and justice.

The form of democracy which is closer to liberalism is a participative democracy; a system which makes of the individual the centre of collective decision. An individual less linked to the central power, and surely, freer to associate his efforts voluntarily with other individuals in order to manage their daily life. Consequently, participative democracy is the system that approaches more to democracy and its liberal ideal; by giving to the individual more freedom without denying his responsibility¹⁵.

Conclusion:

Liberal thought critic towards democracy based itself on the warning against the temptations of this system. At the same time, one may not assume that there is an irreversible antagonism between liberalism and democracy, as it has been demonstrated that the dis-functionning preventing the construction of a free society are linked to the philosophy of tyranny of the majority suggested by Mill and Hayek.

In this sense, it may be agreed on the fact that participative democracy comes to cover the two conditions which constitute the starting point of the divergence between liberalism and democracy, that of limiting the power and sharing it.

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² BUCHANAN, J. TULLOCK, G. (1962), *The calculus of consent. Logical foundations of constitutional democracy*, University of Michigan Press, p 94

³ *ibid*, p143

⁴ OLSON, M. (1987), *The Logic Collective Action*, CUP, p 97

⁵ MILL, J.S. (1990), *Of Liberty*, Poche, p 122.

⁶ GALLAIS, S. (1998), *Démocratie n'est pas Libéralisme*, Le Journal des Economistes et des Etudes Humaines vol 8 numéro 4 voir www.libres.org

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ TOCQUEVILLE, A.D. (1985), *Of American Democracy*, CUP, p 43

⁹ HAYEK, F. V. (1994), *The Road to Serfdom*, Routledge UK press, p123

¹⁰ Mill, op.cit., p 176

¹¹ ibid

¹² Hayek, op. cit., p 147

¹³ Ibid, p 152

¹⁴ HOPPE, H. H. (1993), *Time Preference, Government and the Process of Dé-civilisation*, Le Journal des Economistes et des Etudes Humaines, vol 5 n 2

¹⁵ PERSSON, T. (2005), “*Forms of Democracy, Policy and Economic Development*”, Working Paper 11171, National Bureau of Economic Research.