

Deepening Liberal Democracy

Bhikhu Parekh

Liberal democracy represents a remarkably ingenious attempt to reconcile and integrate into a harmonious whole the two different and partially incompatible principles of liberalism and democracy. In this paper, I examine how it does this, what tensions that creates, and how these can be overcome.

I

In the West, both the idea and the practice of democracy were first developed in classical Athens. For the Athenians, democracy was not just a form of government or even a manner of constituting the polity, as many commentators have argued, but a way of organizing individual and collective life. It sprang from and was nurtured by a particular view of man and society, which I shall call a democratic vision of the good life. The vision was articulated in terms of the three closely related ideas of community, equality, and active citizenship.¹

Briefly, the democratic vision was based on the belief that the individual was embedded in and profoundly shaped by his political community. He derived his values and ideals from it, defined his identity in terms of his membership of the community, and realized his full potential within it. The community was not a transcendental entity enjoying an independent existence but a body of men united in terms of a common structure of public authority, common interests, affections, self-understanding, beliefs about the nature of the good life, and the corresponding moral and social practices and public rituals — in short, a shared way of life. The community existed and flourished as a particular kind of community only when and insofar as its members lived by their shared beliefs and practices. It was basically what they said and did, and had no reality save through their way of life. The individual and the community were inseparable, and neither made sense in isolation from the other.

Members of the community were all equal. They enjoyed legal and political status and made equal claims on each other and on the wider community. They were also equally important to the survival of the community as a particular kind of community, for if any of them failed to live up to its norms and ideals, the community was diminished to that degree. It mattered to each member how the others lived, for that vitally affected both their collective and individual lives. Since all members of the community were of equal value and had equal status, the community had a duty to ensure that they enjoyed the basic material and cultural conditions necessary to become its equally effective members. If some of them were poor, neglected, or marginalized, they lacked the disposition, the independence, the capacity, the resources, and the leisure to play their full part in the life of the community and to discharge their share of communal obligations. What was more, if the community had no regard for its members' well-being, it could not expect them to care for it either. Although the relations between the two did not rest on an explicit contract, they were informed by a spirit of reciprocity and interdependence that generated certain legitimate expectations on the part of each.

In the democratic vision of the classical Athenians, the equality of citizens did not rule out inequality of wealth and income. Inequality often had beneficial social consequences and, since individuals differed in their abilities and efforts, it was also just. However, there were clear limits to its extent and depth. It should not be so great as to place some at the mercy of others and undermine their

independence and equality of status, value, and well-being. Nor should it be so deep as to undermine the community by fragmenting it into neatly separated groups leading different kinds of life and sharing no common experiences, interests, loyalties, and affections.

In the democratic vision, members of the political community conducted their collective affairs themselves. They actively participated in public deliberations on common matters and held public offices. They did so for several interrelated reasons. Since they were equal, they demanded an equal share in taking decisions that would be binding on them. Not to participate in public life was to allow others to decide things for them, and thus to be ruled by them and lose one's freedom. Citizenship, again, was a highly prized public status, a source of one's sense of dignity, and it was a matter of honor that one should assert that status by actively participating in public affairs. Political participation was also a way of affirming membership in the community and showing solidarity with fellow citizens. And it was a way of nurturing the community and promoting its well-being by contributing ideas and experiences to collective deliberation. For the classical Athenians, democracy represented the perfection of the highest realization of the constitutive principle, or inner nature, of the polis. Unlike other forms of social organization, the polis was unique in being governed by its citizens, and democracy realized its full potential by extending citizenship to all adults.²

Citizens strove to deserve their community and competed with each other in being its good members. They were guided by such sentiments as *chresimos* (the desire to be of some value to the community) and *philotima* (zealous ambition on behalf of the community). Citizenship was not confined to the narrowly political arena. The political community was a partnership in the good life and covered all areas of life. Public deliberation about its collective affairs was obviously crucial, for it represented an activity in which the community attained its highest level of self-consciousness and took collectively binding decisions. Citizenship, however, was at work in other areas of life as well. It informed the citizen's roles as father, husband, son, farmer, neighbor, artist, or philosopher, to all of which he brought to bear his responsibilities and obligations as a citizen and whose narrow demands he viewed in a wider communal context. A good citizen sought to excel in his various roles and to enjoy the *kleos* (respect and recognition) of his fellow-citizens for *arete* (skills and virtues) in being a good man.³

The democratic vision of life as sketched above was novel and audacious. It cherished the community but ensured that the latter did not become collectivist and oppressive, and it cherished the individual but defined him in communal terms and avoided becoming narrowly individualist. It valued privacy but insisted that it should be informed by public spirit and social responsibility and not regarded as an arena in which one did what one liked. The democratic vision had great faith in the political capacity of ordinary men to deliberate about and govern their affairs and encouraged them to aspire for and occupy high public offices. It viewed economic life from a political perspective and judged economic interests, practices, and inequality in terms of their ability to promote active citizenship, a vigorous public life, and collective well-being.

From the moment of its first appearance, the democratic vision of classical Athens had its fervent champions and fierce critics. Despite disagreements, both were agreed on what democracy stood for, namely a strong sense of community, equality, active citizenship, and the primacy of public life. For the defenders of the democratic vision, these and other related ideas were fundamentally sound and worth fighting for. For its critics, democracy was at odds with human nature, subversive of social solidarity, and politically dangerous. Democracy-, they argued, ignored the obvious and ineradicable inequality of talents and discouraged excellence. It placed no limits on the volatile and unregulated will of the masses, encouraged them to develop false notions of their ability and political possibilities, and provoked adventurist policies whose chaotic consequences paved the way for tyrants and dictators.

Democracy threatened private property, passed legislation against the rich, and provoked civil wars. It lacked stability, predictability, and historical continuity, for what the people willed today they could just as easily reject tomorrow. In such a climate of permanent uncertainty in which nothing could be planned, any form of civilized life was impossible.⁴

II

Modernity saw the rise of liberalism, which is not just an economic doctrine nor a form of government but, like democracy, a vision of the good life at both individual and collective levels. Although it has undergone important changes during the three centuries of its existence, liberalism's core ideas of the individual, liberty, equality, and civility have remained constant.

In the liberal vision, human beings are, above all, individuals, that is, independent and unitary centers of self-consciousness occupying physically self-contained and demarcated bodies. Every human body represents an individual, and is naturally endowed with the distinctively human powers of rationality, choice, will, and others associated with these. Individuals are the ultimate and irreducible units of moral and political life. Institutions, communities, nations, and states have no intrinsic value or existence independent of the individual, and matter only insofar as they subserve individual well-being. Individuals have certain fundamental interests without which they cannot lead the good life. These interests are derived from human nature, which all liberal writers presuppose in one form or another, and include such things as life, liberty, control over their lives or self-determination, and property or ownership of the fruits of their labor. Individuals are their own masters in the sense that they own and are at liberty to dispose of their physical and mental powers as they please. Some such notion of self-ownership (Locke), sovereignty in oneself (J. S. Mill), or self-mastery (Kant) is a recurrent feature of the liberal understanding of the individual's relation to himself, and is the basis of the liberal view of liberty. The freedom to make one's choices is an expression of and a way of asserting mastery of oneself. The individual should be free to choose and run his life because his life, body, capacities, and so on are all his own, and what happens to them is his business in which others can at best have only an instrumental and indirect interest. Since all individuals are "by nature" masters of themselves and share certain basic needs, interests, and capacities in common, they are all equal. Equality is not a status conferred by society but inherent in and a universally shared feature of what it is to be human. And similarly, liberty is not derived from society but inherent in humanity. Liberty, equality, and the pursuit of fundamental human interests are therefore claims that all human beings qua human beings make on each other.

In the liberal vision, the political community is a voluntary association of individuals and is derivative in nature. It is therefore not the community that explains or helps us make sense of the individual as the democratic vision insisted, rather it is the individual who explains and provides a coherent account of the community. This does not mean that the political community is consciously created by individuals at a definable point in time, but rather that its nature and structure are constituted by their consensual acts. The principal task and *raison d'être* of the state is to maintain the system of basic rights by either enshrining them in a constitution or finding other ways of giving them a privileged status, and thereby placing them above both volatile public opinion and the state's own arbitrary exercise of power. The state is only concerned with those interests and rights that all its citizens share in common. Since religion, ethnicity, culture, and so on vary from individual to individual, they are private matters of no public significance and of which the state takes no cognizance. Individuals do, of course, have rights to their religion, culture, and so on, but these generate no claims on the state's protection and support. For liberalism, the state is essentially a coercive institution. Since the role of

coercion in human life should be minimized and since political power is always liable to misuse, liberalism insists on the constitutional regulation and separation of powers, the limited state, and leaving as many areas of life as possible to the voluntary cooperation between individuals.

In the liberal vision, individuals are unique in their nature and find their fulfillment in different activities and forms of life. They should therefore be left free to lead their self-chosen lives so long as these do not affect others adversely. Their relations with each other are governed by mutual respect, noninterference in each other's private lives, due regard for each other's rights, respect for the law and rules in general, tolerance, and so on — in short, by the culture of civility. Politics, the conduct of the common affairs of the community, is an activity of limited value and importance. Since the state is largely concerned with maintaining a system of rights and a climate of civility, and since a constitutionally limited state can be relied upon to do so, there is little need for active citizen involvement in the conduct of its affairs. Furthermore, individuals have other legitimate priorities and find such involvement an unnecessary distraction. It is, of course, essential that the government be based on their consent and be held popularly accountable, both of which are ensured by the mechanism of election. Citizens therefore have no political duty other than to vote, and are even exempt from this obligation if they are satisfied with the general conduct of the government.

III

The liberal and democratic visions of life sketched above share several features in common.⁵ Both value equality, cherish human dignity, stress social interdependence, are alike opposed to the collectivist glorification of the community and the subordination of the individual to it, and so on. However, they arrive at and define these common ideas differently, and diverge in several other respects. Liberalism takes the individual as its starting point, whereas democracy begins with the political community. Liberalism takes an instrumental view of the value of the political community, whereas democracy sees it as an important value in its own right. For liberalism, the political community is largely voluntary and based on common subscription to a shared structure of authority. For democracy, it is based on a shared vision of the good life. For these and other reasons, liberalism is uncomfortable with the premodern language of community and prefers instead to talk of society and civil society with their voluntarist and consensual associations.

The liberal vision is fearful of the masses and all forms of collective action. The democratic vision has faith in the people and their capacity for moderation and self-correction. The liberal vision values equality of civil and political rights, has little if any interest in reducing economic inequality, and until recently did not see the value of social and economic rights either. By contrast, the democratic vision insists on ensuring full political equality, minimizing economic inequality, and giving all citizens equal access to the conditions of the good life. The liberal vision judges the state on the basis of its ability to maintain civility, protect rights, and ensure prosperity. The democratic vision makes a vibrant political community and active citizenship its primary standards of judgment and evaluates nonpolitical institutions in terms of these. The liberal vision privileges the personal and associational areas of life over the political, sees little intrinsic value in political participation, and aims to foster such civil virtues as mutual respect, self-restraint, respect for the law, and tolerance. The democratic vision sees political participation as intrinsically valuable, a way of affirming solidarity with fellow citizens, sustaining the spirit of community, and contributing to its well-being, and regards nonparticipating citizens as morally deficient. It prizes and seeks to cultivate such political virtues as love of the community, public spirit, mutual concern, public service, a sense of honor, and the spirit of equality. The liberal vision

fears the state, minimizes its social role, and concentrates on protecting the individual against it. The democratic vision stresses the emancipatory potential of collective action and seeks to control the state by imposing the community's will on it.

The liberal and democratic visions of the good life, then, share certain features and differ in others. In principle, either can exist without the other. Classical Athens was democratic but not liberal, and a liberal society can exist under monarchy and, indeed, developed in modern Europe by supporting the monarch in his struggle with the feudal aristocracy. In practice, however, the two visions could not ignore each other. Championed by the middle classes and their theorists, liberalism began to consolidate itself from the 17th century onward. From around the last three decades of the 18th century onward, the organized working classes began to appear and make political demands, using the moral vocabulary of the democratic vision to justify these. Liberalism could no longer ignore the moral and political challenge of its rival, democracy, and had to find ways of coming to terms with it. For their part, the democratic critics of liberalism could not ignore its reality and moral appeal either. It was in this context that the "project" or the idea and practice of liberal democracy first made its historical appearance toward the end of the 18th century.

The liberal and democratic visions could be combined in one of three ways. First, one could privilege the former and incorporate as much of the latter as was consistent with it or was historically unavoidable. Second, one could do the opposite and privilege the democratic vision, absorbing as many liberal ideas as were attractive or too deeply rooted in contemporary consciousness to be ignored. Third, one could undertake a dialectical critique of each in the light of the other and develop a genuinely synthetic vision based on a harmonious integration of what one thought to be the best in both. Liberals opted for the first, and democrats for the second. Since the third approach was theoretically most demanding, it was least explored and limited to such writers as Hegel and the British idealists. Since all three approaches seek to combine liberal and democratic visions in different forms, they could all be called liberal democratic, and their preferred society liberal democracy. However, since only the first approach privileges liberalism and upholds its basic principles, the term *liberal democracy* in its narrow sense has come to refer to it alone, and that is how I shall use it in the rest of this paper. The second approach which privileges democracy could by contrast be called democratic liberalism, and the kind of society it advocates social democracy.

IV

Liberal democracy is liberalized democracy. Liberalism is the dominant partner and, as such, sets the terms of their cooperation and determines the limits of democracy. Liberal democracy is committed to such fundamental liberal ideas as individualism, individual liberty, the constitutional protection of basic rights, the limited state, separation of powers, and so on, and incorporates only those democratic ideas and practices that either support the liberal vision or are too deeply ingrained in modern consciousness to be dropped. It is primarily committed to civil and political rights but, unlike the classical liberals, it accepts the democratic idea of social and economic rights either to give meaning to the former or to ensure social stability. Unlike the democrats, however, it sees nothing inherently wrong in great social and economic inequalities and makes no attempt to redress these.

Since it fears the state, liberal democracy incorporates such democratic devices as elections, plural political parties, pressure groups, and peaceful public protest, which check the misuse of power, articulate individual consent, increase the range of citizens' political choices, and hold the government popularly accountable and responsive. However, since it fears the masses and doubts their commitment to individual liberty, it limits their power by placing certain rights above their reach

and giving the judiciary pride of place in its constitutional arrangement. Liberal democracy sees little value in participatory democracy and replaces it with representative or what John Stuart Mill called "rational" and "well-regulated" democracy. In a representative democracy, people elect and alienate their sovereignty to representatives who, as distinct from delegates, are left free to follow their own judgment and take whatever decisions they consider proper. Representative democracy is not the same as representative government. The former is government *by* elected representatives, the latter is government by the people themselves *through* their representatives.⁶ Unable to meet and exercise political power directly in large modern states, people in a representative government do so through their representatives, who are given clear mandates, may be recalled, are subject to popular referenda, and expected to stay in constant touch with their political masters. By contrast, representative democracy reduces people to a largely passive and subordinate role and transfers effective power to their representatives. Since it does not value active political participation, representative democracy does not provide a system of interlocked and institutionalized public spaces for it.

Liberal democracy represents a remarkably novel form of organizing the political community. It is not a degenerated form of classical democracy as some Helenophiles maintain, but a historically distinct form of democracy that needs to be understood in its own terms. It is what the premodern writers called a mixed form of government, and which they preferred over those resting on a single principle. As its very name indicates, it enshrines at its very heart two distinct principles, which between them represent different human aspirations and visions of the good life and are capable of regulating each other's excesses. Thanks to the creative tension between the two, liberal democracy has the conceptual and institutional resources to open up new spaces of thought, create new political possibilities, and expand society's moral and political imagination.

In practice, however, liberal democracy is unable to exploit these theoretical and political advantages because it assigns a hegemonic position to liberalism and emasculates the radical potential of its democratic component. Its virtues are derived from its liberalism and its consequent capacity to control the excesses of democracy. Liberal democracy has the great merit of cherishing the individual, protecting his or her basic human dignity, safeguarding the individual's fundamental rights, guarding against the pathology of political power, respecting diversity of views, nurturing dissent, and fostering criticism of established ideas and institutions. It is, as a result, better able than any other form of government to guard against crude populism, intolerant majoritarianism, the imposition of social conformity, and moral dogmatism.

The limitations of liberal democracy are derived from the fact that it marginalizes the democratic vision and consequently is unable to regulate the excesses of liberalism. Thanks to its commitment to individualism, private property, the market economy, and so on, liberal democracy generates great economic, social, and political inequalities and lacks the moral resources to provide a critique of them. The inequalities are both interlocked and intergenerationally transmitted and congeal into an oppressive structure or system of inequality that makes it all but impossible for most individuals to break out of its vicious circle. The equality of opportunity and the cultivation of the culture of merit and excellence that the liberal cherishes have therefore little practical meaning. Society gets fragmented into classes and groups that lead vastly different lives and share little self-understanding in common. As a result, the genuinely deliberative democracy that the liberal advocates remains an unfulfilled dream. Political life in liberal democracy is disfigured by clashes of organized interests and the powerful passions aroused by them, and the calm play of reason and the spirit of sympathetic dialogue cherished by the liberal are the obvious casualty. Dominant groups set the general tone of society, and their values and ways of life become the dominant norms. Other values and ideals are devalued and marginalized, creating the very culture of conformity and consumerism the liberal is anxious to avoid. Liberty is reduced to a choice of lifestyle and different forms of consumption, and there is

little interest in critical reflection on the prevailing form of life and its values. Large corporate interests with the power to paralyze the economy and destabilize society severely restrict the state's scope for independent action. In the absence of a vigorous participatory culture and an organized countervailing power of active citizens, the state has no capacity to restrict corporate domination. Since it does not pursue, or is at least widely perceived as not pursuing, general interest, its legitimacy declines, its authority is subjected to constant formal and informal challenges, and citizens feel free to circumvent its laws, pressure and blackmail it to serve their national interests, and in general to get their way by whatever means they can. Liberal ideals of the neutral state, culture of civility, respect for the law, pursuit of common interest, and so on have little meaning in such a society.

Great inequalities, corporate domination, atomized individuals, a volatile underclass, apathetic citizens, a remote government, corruption of the very process of the formation of public will by manipulative media characterize all liberal democracies. The coincidence is too striking to be attributed to the contingent failings of this or that liberal democratic state. These evils have deep structural causes, one of the most important being liberal democracy's failure to give adequate weight to the democratic vision and mobilize its egalitarian, community-building, power-generating, and socially transformative potentialities. The democratic vision has its obvious dangers, and liberal democracy is right to hold it in check. However, it also has great strengths which the liberal vision lacks and without which it remains unstable. In its own interest, liberal democracy needs to find ways of giving greater voice to its hitherto marginalized democratic component.

There is also another respect in which liberal democracy needs critical reconsideration. Liberal democracy is committed to a particular vision of the good life. At the individual level, it cherishes choice, enterprise, self-determination, competitive pursuit of interests, autonomy, and so on. At the collective level, it advocates a political community in which individuals abstract away their ethnic, cultural, religious, and other differences, enjoy an identical basket of rights and obligations, and deliberate and act as citizens. The state is expected to be concerned only with what is common to them as citizens, and to take no account of their cultural and other differences. Since this vision of the good life lies at the basis of liberal democracy, the latter requires all its members to share it and uses its considerable moral and institutional resources to ensure that they do.

This creates problems in multicultural societies, which all liberal democracies have increasingly become. Liberal democracy privileges the liberal vision of the good life, embodying it in its public and other institutions and giving it state support and encouragement. Nonliberal ways of life, though not suppressed, lead a shadowy existence, are subjected to different degrees of ridicule or marginalization, denied public recognition and support, and either disappear or become dogmatic and inward-looking. Liberal democracy's assimilationist thrust is unjust because it denies nonliberals the freedom to lead their self-chosen ways of life that the liberal himself enjoys, unwise because it denies the liberal access to the riches of other ways of life or at least the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with them, and also dangerous because, feeling besieged, nonliberal ways of life become insular and resistant to the normal process of change.

Liberal democracy therefore needs to show greater respect for cultural diversity. While insisting that all its constituent communities should respect certain basic principles in their internal affairs and mutual relations, it should allow them secure spaces for growth, respect their differences, apply its general laws to them with due sensitivity to their cultural differences, appreciate that equal treatment does not mean identical treatment, and in general should institutionalize intercultural dialogue in all major areas of life. This calls for concepts of equality, common citizenship, the public realm, the state's relation to culture, the basis of national unity, and so on different from those found in the current conceptions of liberal democracy.

When the conceptual and institutional architecture of liberal democracy is revised in light of all this, we move toward a highly complex society that both is and is not a liberal democracy. It subscribes to liberal and democratic visions, and is therefore a liberal democracy. However, it also introduces the third multicultural vision. As a historical project that began two centuries ago, liberal democracy aimed to reconcile liberalism and democracy. It now has to reconcile three visions, a most challenging task. Like the different ways of reconciling liberalism and democracy discussed earlier, the reconciliation of the three visions can take many different forms. One might privilege any one of them and judiciously incorporate some aspects of the others, or one might see them as equal conversational partners. Different liberal democracies such as Canada, Australia, the US, the UK, and France are currently trying out different forms, each representing a different way of defining and reconciling the demands of liberalism, democracy, and multiculturalism, and each with its characteristic strengths and weaknesses.

Just as classical democracy was replaced by liberal democracy to take account of new circumstances, self-understandings, and moral dispositions, liberal democracy now seems to be giving way to a new form that is multiculturally oriented. This new form lacks a widely accepted name, and its contours are not yet clear. But we catch glimpses of it in the emergence of new beliefs and practices such as regionalism, subnational autonomy, asymmetrical federations, differential citizenship, multiple nationality, group rights, hyphenated identities, state-society partnership, and public role for faith-based communities. Some of these beliefs and practices are suspect and represent hasty responses to misconceived demands; others deepen and enrich liberal democracy. In any case, a wholly new and somewhat untidy three-dimensional form of political community is being gestated in the womb of liberal democracy. It is too early to say whether its birth will be natural, caesarean, or more likely a mixture of both. While the world of politics is full of new challenges and possibilities, much of contemporary political theory remains indifferent or blind to them. Unless it catches up with reality and develops concepts and questions appropriate to its complexity, it is unlikely to have the capacity to guide it.

Bhikhu Parekh. Deepening Liberal Democracy. In: Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, Octavio Zaya (ed.): Democracy Unrealized. Documenta11_ Platform1. Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit. 2002, pp. 55-66.

References

- 1 For good accounts, see Lionel Pearson, *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), ch. 5 and 7, and Victor Ehrenberg, *The Greek State* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), ch. 2; Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), provides a rich and detailed account of the workings of Athenian democracy.
- 2 Ehrenberg, *The Greek State*, pp. 43, 51.
- 3 A good citizen was supposed to love his parents and care for their graves, honor his guests and gods, pay his taxes, put his wealth at the disposal of the polis, and so on, and in general, aim to be a "good man." Resolutions passed by the Athenian assembly in honor of public-spirited citizens declared them "good men" who deserved to be emulated. See Ehrenberg, *The Greek State*, p. 68, and Pearson, *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece*, p.181.

- 4** For these and other criticisms, see Cynthia Farrar, "Ancient Greek Political Theory as a Response to Democracy," in *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey, 508 BC to AD 1993*, ed. John Dunn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- 5** For a fuller discussion, see my "The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy," *Political Studies* 40 (1992), pp. 160-175.
- 6** Mill observed that the "substitution of delegation for representation" was a great danger in democracy. See John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Politics and Culture* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), p.197.