

Reform Liberalism Reconsidered

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I

The liberal-communitarian debates, which became prominent in social and political philosophy during the 1980s, continue to be waged in those disciplines and in politics today with even more fervor, and this time, both the '80s and the '90s are called forth as bleak and sorry evidence for one side or the other. The current scene is reminiscent of some of the '60s ideological disputes, especially the reformist critique of conservatism within liberalism. And that dispute itself is reminiscent of yet another, the one from whence it derived, John Dewey's well-known opposition of new and old individualism.

The reformists of both the 1930s and 1960s would be considered communitarians today. But assuredly, they would be communitarian liberals rather than simply communitarians. One could never drop-off the appellation of 'liberal' in naming them, for, no less than conservatives, reformists champion individual freedom, individual initiative, and creativity. Reform liberalism, for that matter, upholds the basic values of capitalism and liberalism but, as the prefix of the term, 'reform' indicates, it attempts to implement those values through the intervention of the state which acts as a liberating agency whenever and wherever it is necessary to do so. That is, the state takes on the role of liberating agency whenever private citizens are unable to possess or act upon those values themselves.¹

Reform liberals do not conceive of big government, *ipso facto*, as a frightening behemoth. Big government is good or evil depending upon its functions. It can be good when it provides those conditions which foster the achievement of a better quality of life for the majority of its people, including those minorities whose voices are often lost in majority concerns. Big government is good when it delivers its citizens from want, fear, unnecessary sickness, and ignorance. The state is a benign moral force when it serves citizens by providing them with access to moral and intellectual materials with which they can meet their needs and actualize their potentialities. Reform liberalism's aim is to widen the scope of equal opportunity so that it is available to every citizen. It recognizes that there must be a palpable balance between freedom and equality, and ultimately it is the attainment of that balance that it seeks.

Much of the liberal-communitarian debate today centres around the question of whether priority should be placed on individual freedom or on equality for all. Each side accuses the other of holding extremist – sometimes even rather bizarre and unrealistic – views regarding human nature. And while each camp denies holding extremist views, there are always fringe groups to the right or left of their respective ideologies who do indeed argue for the extreme points on the continuum, and it is often these groups who influence policy. Reform liberalism, however, does not subscribe to the view that humanity is made

up of either individuals or of collectives. Rather, reform liberals take a dialectical view: human beings are neither solely, or even, chiefly, individuals nor are they collectives, they are both, and they are so in ways that are intricately labyrinthine in their interdependence.

The term liberalism does not simply refer to a theoretical stance in economic or political thought. It is far more than that; liberalism's conceptualization in economics and politics is based upon the role it holds in a broader conceptualization of the nature of being human and the consequent human activity which follows. In the current debates, communitarians repeatedly identify liberalism as subscribing to an atomistic view of human nature. Communitarians have gone on record as describing liberals as seeing the individual as outside of society and of being opposed to any notion of the common good.² And while many liberals deny this, the conservatives of their number maintain that individualism is in the best tradition of liberalism and it is their avowed duty to safeguard it. Free-market theories are representative of this notion, and the so called neo-liberalism that has found its way to developing countries via the recent economic crisis and the IMF also encourages the introduction of a competitive market system by way of limiting the role of the state, and giving reign to a competitive individualism.

II

There are many critics who would say that neo-liberalism is simply revived old-fashioned, economic liberalism, and it means unbridled individualism in the market place, and in the political arena where unfettered individualism allows the economically élite to effectively maintain a position of power. Neo-liberalism came into being in the 1980s during the Reagan and Thatcher years and it is worth noting that the term is little used, even today, in the United States, because in common political parlance 'liberal' has, especially since Roosevelt's New Deal, been associated with progressive as compared to conservative thinking and policies. Neo-liberalism went by the name of Reaganomics and Thatcherism during the '80s in the U.S. and, more recently, might be said to abound in 'The Republican Contract' which aims to curtail social programmes in that country. By whatever name, however, neo-liberalism's economic and political goal is to end the welfare state and any collectivist or 'public good' notions and to replace these with a notion of 'individual responsibility' which may be construed as urging prosperous individuals to be charitable to those who are less well off by giving gifts or assistance, and it may also be construed as placing on the poor the responsibility to help themselves.

Those political theorists who have been concerned for some time that Earth's resources cannot continue to support welfare states, and who assert that the definition of human and civic rights must be scaled back rather than expanded, claim that neo-liberalism in advanced capitalist countries was responsible for greater growth and prosperity for the nation states who embraced it. And, while the poor of those nations disagree, the growth of prosperity on the faces those nations presented to the rest of the world was writ large enough. But ostensible prosperity was not the fate of those Third World countries which withdrew state intervention. The face those nations now present to the world is swelled with the increased and increasing impoverishment of low-income groups.³ Quite apart from its limitations in conserving resources in already developed countries, new-liberalism has serious limitations as a development theory. Without any kind of social policy, Third World

countries are in no position to provide opportunities so that their citizens might become self-sufficient and self-reliant. Without state intercession in the lives of those without health care or housing and schooling, modernization of society is inconceivable.

If neo-liberalism, broadened and polished to a neo-liberal development ideology, is responsible for this state of affairs, is the communitarianism which rose to combat it in the 1980s the alternative for the floundering developing countries? We might answer that question by noting the failure of real socialist regimes, which one might call communitarianism in earnest (the communitarians of today are not socialists at all, though they do advocate some socialistic practices such as using community ostracism to repress individualistic behaviours). Real socialism failed both as a response to the unbridled individualism which inspired its conception, and as a means to assure equality regarding the use of limited resources. Socialism's crushing failure might well signal that any lesser form will not serve as a viable alternative to neo-liberalism either. Societies just now in the process of trying to move out of an agrarianism that has long since ceased to serve their needs, would hardly be encouraged to change via the self-awareness of individuality if they are asked only to look at themselves in terms of their agrarian traditional values and life styles. Communitarianism may well assist those in developed countries in finding those values and paths which had been lost to cut-throat, irresponsible individualism, but it will not assist those emerging nations which have not been allowed to experience individualism or entrepreneurship in locating them within communitarian praxis, for that praxis is meant to be in opposition to, and a replacement of, individualism. In such cases, surely another alternative to neo-liberal development theory must be sought?

In so far as neo-liberalism places such high value on the initiative and autonomy of the individual, it does serve to explain the tremendous cultural upheavals which accompany the structural changes at every level in the wake of industrialization and urbanization. But neo-liberalism, transplanted to developing countries which have no rhetoric developed to combat its likes, sanctions, even more than it does on its 'home' soil, the wrenching from roots and the devaluing of community mores. Neo-liberalism's stand on competitive individualism contradicts the way in which individuals are related to the world around them. There is no universal validity to neo-liberalism's theoretical conception of the individual as being intrinsically possessive and competitive.

Many of the world's developing countries are as yet in a post-traditional stage and most have made it abundantly clear that they want to be players on the global scene and they want the benefits of globalization. But they are not coming from welfare states, nor are they coming from anything like a background of classical liberalism, and certainly they are not coming from any kind of background of reform liberalism. To impose neo-liberal practices and philosophy upon these nations is quite simply to give them more of the worst they want to leave behind, for the ideology of possessive individualism justifies economic inequality by rendering it inevitable and provides means to widen the ever-growing gap between rich and poor even more. In these societies, of course, there are always those who will benefit from neo-liberalism and a free market. As those segments of society have done in the past in other countries, they will quickly adapt to and embrace neo-liberal ideology and the power therein. In much the same way, authoritarian regimes in Asia often conjure up 'Asian values' as a moral pretext to maintain their authoritarianism. But surely developed countries can do better than confine emerging market economies to their pasts.

Rather than the neo-liberalist views and practices which have been forced upon emerging market economies in these recent crises, reform liberalism would better assist developing economies in entering the world market on a more equal footing, and one which would lend integrity to their aspirations and their realities. Reform liberalism may not be a panacea for post-socialist and post-traditionalist countries but, in that it adheres to basic liberal values and capitalism, as well as to equality, it is surely a choice to be re-examined. The people in emerging economies of the world do not want to end capitalism, they want to engage in it. But they do not want to themselves become 'products', and that is precisely what happens when workers rights are eliminated, or never granted, and when health and education are not guaranteed rights.

Neo-liberalism is nothing more than a return to what economic liberalism had become by the 1930s – a guiding theory which failed capitalism and failed the majority of the world's free people. Yet, since its birth more than two hundred years ago, liberalism has been considered an open system of thought, and reform liberalism stands on this founding principle. Inherent in it is the notion that history will end only when all of humanity is liberated. Until then, liberalism must undergo unremitting self-improvement. It must always be 'reform liberalism', that is, it must always be in a state of reform, always be in a process of examination and change.

III

The premise that human beings are neither alone nor collective, but, rather, that they are both, is central to reform liberalism. It is this crucial ontological definition that drives the reformists to champion individual initiative on the one hand while, on the other, they steadfastly insist that opportunity for all must be guaranteed by public mediation. Dewey would have none of the competitive individualism which the conservatives had come to identify with liberalism. He labelled it an old doctrine, outmoded and dangerous to the social environment of the 1930s. In place of the old conceptualization of the individual, he proposed one which was more in keeping with the ones being propounded in a variety of fields from philosophy to psychology.

Dewey was sceptical of the transcendental notion of the self as an independent and solitary entity. To be sure, to be human is to be rational, he maintained, but rationality comes from societal interaction. In fact, it is in association with others that one's individuality comes into being. 'Selfhood,' he asserted, 'is not something that exists apart from association and intercourse.'⁴ In societal life, an individual makes choices and is a creature of will, he is never merely one with a group, that is he is not, in any entire way, formed by a group, nor can he feel and think in absolute concert with a group for prolonged periods on various subjects. But, on the other hand, an individual is not pre-formed, not even genetically, to stand in a realm outside of society. Individuality, in all its manifestations, simply does not exist outside of society. And in so far as human societies progress, so too do the individuals born into those societies, and they do so in every way, in intellectual capacity, in observation, imagination, judgment, and invention.⁵ The shape and form of an individual's very uniqueness is a result of interaction within a community.

Dewey saw the associations of life in democracy as the best breeding grounds for his vision of individuals as social and unique, and as having opportunities to reach the

heights of their potential in society, but he felt that the capitalistic society of his day hampered participatory democracy and the kind of democratic action that he considered to be essential to self-improvement. And so, in search of a democracy to be manifest in what he called the 'Great Community', he set about to reconstruct liberalism.⁶

The notion of the dialectical relatedness of the individual and the social permeates that reconstruction as does the notion of equal rights. In liberalism's reformulation he saw an apparent potentiality for filling the gap between liberal ideals and the harsh reality of capitalistic society.⁷ In what he called 'Renascent Liberalism'⁸ he also saw a possible radicalization of democracy that would institutionalize communal life as the means of free individual development. Thus Dewey viewed his reform liberalism as a liberalism 'committed to an end that is at once enduring and flexible: the liberation of individuals so that realization of their capacities may be the law of their life.'⁹

People live in association with other people, not only of the present but also of the past, and this association affects their relations to one another as individuals.¹⁰ It is through social relationships that individuals come to possess the communicative competence needed for building and keeping the Great Community. Conceptual categories like peace, unity, division, conflict, destruction, creativity, co-operation, and communion are abstracted from the many forms of human co-existence, and such abstractions constitute a meaning base of our pre-understanding. By virtue of such pre-understanding, individual subjects can carry out intersubjective communication with one another. To be sure, our meaning bases change and expand in the interactions of our lives, but they are always what we use as we interpret the events and social phenomena about us. Within the common framework of these categories, worlds can be shared, differences can be imagined, and understandings forged, and the subjects of the Great Community, who are all equal, realize an unfolding of their potential abilities.

To establish a Great Community, reform liberalism operates to revitalize such values as individual initiative, civil liberties, faith in the capability of all subjects for rational judgement, and citizen participation in the political processes. And it does this by strengthening social policy so that all people can enjoy equal opportunity in sharing social resources. It is especially at this juncture that reform liberalism parts company with communitarians and neo-liberals, for neither of them would ever endorse strengthening social policy to embrace a true guarantee of equality by attempting to give all citizens equal opportunity. Dewey's dream of a Great Community as the essence of democracy and his notion of reform liberalism were responses to the modernist dilemmas of his time, manifest in the Great Depression caused by the degradation of economic liberalism and competitive individualism. Yet because Dewey's reform liberalism and his vision of the Great Community both insist on equality and on a plurality in the texture of social intercourse to insure, not only the development and actualization of individuality, but also a richness and comprehensiveness of societal life, both (and particularly reform liberalism) provide ways to pose viable alternatives to the dilemmas confronting Third World countries today. Neither neo-liberalism with its emphasis on individuality at the expense of the welfare state, nor any of the various strands of communitarianism which harks to a sense of community and deliberation but which excludes those who do not share the same communal traditions, are adequate to move these countries to the places they need to be if they are to be solid players in the global community.

Most Third World countries which have come into the democratic arena do not have a large civil society or ones with a tradition of deliberation or influence. Many of these countries are rife with social forces that resist change and engage in repression of those who attempt to bring about democratic reforms in society, and they resort to spurious interpretations of such ideals as freedom, equality, and human rights in order to better dissemble their vested interests.

How, then, can social change be effected? The tactics of the reform liberals in the 1960s provide some guidelines. In the absence of popular participation for whatever reason, the coalition politics of various civilian groups should exert radical pressure on the established political process.¹¹ The first step toward empowerment of the people has to be taken over by an alliance of the newly emerging middle strata and intellectual groups such as teachers, professors, clerics, writers, artists, and journalists. The roles these groups have played in the past in oppressed countries give much reason to hope that they can carry out the tasks of raising consciousness in the matter of fundamental freedoms and rights where such consciousness had not been allowed to exist before. For the reform liberal, education has always been the key to change. The intellectuals who act as agents here have world-wide expertise, as well as assistance to call upon in the many NGOs which have developed expertise, in order to develop meaning-generating communities wherein it becomes possible to foster self-reflection and a conceptualization of the self as both connected and separate, so that dissent and change become possible. The middle strata of which I speak are neither to be seen nor are they to see themselves as an élite group that knows what is best for the masses. It is not for their safety alone that they call upon the NGOs, it is to safeguard them from being blind to the limitations of their own knowledge and knowing, so that they do not find themselves imposing their will. The plurality represented by the membership of most NGOs concerned with human rights should be beneficial to the activists of a particular country in this crucial matter.

The meaning of the term development has indeed become manifold since it first came to be used by social scientists as they studied the Third World. In spite of this, it is clear that economic development is considered the top priority by most developmental theorists. Many theorists, though not those who are concerned with sustainable development, have argued that neo-liberalism can be a prescription, even though not the best, for the Third World. Neo-liberals ostensibly advocate the withdrawal of state interference in the market mechanism to that it can develop according to its own laws, or the natural laws of a free market. And some point to instances in advanced capitalist countries where such a measure seems to have produced desirable effects, though, again, one must note that those concerned with the environment and sustainable development are critical of even these claims. But such an ideology would rather create more problems in those countries where civic culture is still in an embryonic stage and an authoritarian form of government still lingers. In such circumstances it would be more prudent to form a countervailing power that could oppose those forces which benefit from the absence of a civil society. The role of countervailing power could be formed by a coalition of civilian groups. Therefore, those who would assist developing countries should give their allegiance and support to newly emerging civic groups who will direct, by way of imposing radical pressure, the state toward democratic policy-making regarding the sustainable development of ecological resources, the distribution of social wealth, and the promotion of human rights.

Reform liberalism, working to bring the existing political processes of society toward democratization, moves toward the extension of material benefits to wider and wider populations so that they may be in a position to realize their intellectual and artistic aspirations in life.¹² It is, however, no less concerned with individuality than is neo-liberalism. But, by stressing and reaffirming equality, reform liberalism declares its true emphasis to be in terms of the actual social and economic condition of people's lives rather than simply in terms of the individual's right to compete in the economy.¹³ Reform liberalism would serve to reduce the harsh results that neo-liberalism has brought about with its emphasis on competition and privately generated solutions to the distribution problems of wealth and resources.¹⁴ Because it is more comprehensive by virtue of its position on the dialectic of the individual and the social, reform liberalism offers a more qualitative redefinition of freedom and rights, and hence is able to present more comprehensive solutions to the serious problems associated with capitalism. Inevitable as those problems are, they have for some time now been seen to be more open to solution, and in the end less devastating to the human spirit than other forms of government and interaction.

In the reform liberals' sights, history can not yet be seen to be nearing its end and may well never be so seen, not even in the farthest future. There is still strong yet justifiable pessimism as to the prospects of capitalism in some corners of the world. That is not to say that reform liberals have given up hope for humanity. Humankind, up to this point in history, has made a successful evolution, and will continue to do so. The contradictions inherent in our most cherished values will always be with us, and so too will be our attempts to reconcile them, for history is a never-ending challenge.

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Notes

1. Kenneth Dolbeare (1971), *American Ideologies* (Chicago: Markham) p. 85; Andrew Hacker (1961), *Political Theory* (New York: The Macmillan Co.) pp. 237–8.
2. Tom G. Palmer (1996), 'Myths of Individualism,' in *Canto* 28/5. Palmer quotes Amitai Etzioni's address to the American Sociological Association as printed in the *American Sociological Review* (February, 1996). Palmer, a libertarian, also cites prominent communitarians Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel, who claim that classical libertarians see individuals as self-sufficient.
3. Frans J. Schuurman, ed., (1993), *Beyond the Impasse: New Directions in Development Theory* (London: Zed Books) p. 11.
4. John Dewey (1980), *The Theory of Moral Life* (New York: Irvington) p. 163.
5. John Dewey (1966), *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press) p. 297.
6. John Dewey (1954), *The Public and its Problems* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press) p. 145 ff.
7. Robert B. Westbrook (1991), *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press) p. 431.
8. John Dewey (1981), *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press) p. 643.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 644.
10. John Dewey (1954), *op.cit.*, p. 97.
11. Arnold Kaufman (1968), *The Radical Liberal* (New York: Simon & Schuster) p. 72.
12. John K. Galbraith (1968), *The New Industrial Society* (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin) p. 376.
13. Dolbeare, *op.cit.*, p. 88.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 89.