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The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy

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Liberal democracy is liberalized democracy: that is, democracy defined and structured within the limits set by liberalism. The paper outlines the constitutive features of liberalism and shows how they determined the form and content of democracy and gave rise to liberal democracy as we know it today. It then goes on to argue that liberal democracy is specific to a particular cultural context and cannot claim universal validity. This, however, does not lead to cultural relativism as it is possible to formulate universal principles that every good government should respect. The paper offers one way of reconciling universalism and cultural diversity.

In the aftermath of the collapse of communism in the erstwhile Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, many in the west have begun to argue that western liberal democracy is the best form of government discovered so far and ideally suited to the modern age. Some even think that as the 'moral leader' of the world the west has a duty to encourage its spread and to create a new world order on that basis. This western triumphalism has aroused deep fears in the fragile and nervous societies of the rest of the world, especially those which were until recently at the receiving end of the western civilizing mission. The nature and universalizability of western liberal democracy has thus become a subject of great philosophical and political importance. My intention in this paper is twofold: to elucidate the inner structure of liberal democracy and to assess the validity of the universalist claims made on its behalf.

I

In the history of the west, Athenian democracy, which flourished between 450 BC and 322 BC, was the first and for nearly two millennia almost the only example of democracy in action. This period of approximately 130 years saw many institutional changes and revealed both the good and ugly aspects of democracy. During its glorious period it produced stable governments, brought out the best in its citizens and fostered great developments in all areas of life. Towards the end it lost its vitality and lacked stability, creative imagination and political moderation. It thus left behind a mixed legacy, which was interpreted and assessed differently by different writers. The Athenian experience as described by Herodotus and Thucydides and theorized by Plato, Aristotle and others gave rise over time to a tradition of discourse on democracy.

Liberal democracy is a historically specific form of democracy arriving on the scene nearly two millennia after the disappearance of its Athenian cousin.

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Although democracy preceded liberalism in western history, in the modern age liberalism preceded democracy by nearly two centuries and created a world to which the latter had to adjust. Liberal democracy is basically a liberalized or liberally constituted democracy; that is, democracy defined and structured within the limits set by liberalism. Liberalism is its absolute premise and foundation and penetrates and shapes its democratic character.

Liberalism is a complex body of ideas which began to gain intellectual and political ascendancy in different parts of Europe from the seventeenth century onwards. Unlike the Greeks, and indeed all the pre-modern societies which took the community as their starting point and defined the individual in terms of it, liberalism takes the individual as the ultimate and irreducible unit of society and explains the latter in terms of it. Society 'consists' or is 'made up' of individuals and is at bottom nothing but the totality of its members and their relationships. The view that the individual is conceptually and ontologically prior to society and can in principle be conceptualized and defined independently of society, which we shall call individualism, lies at the heart of liberal thought and shapes its political, legal, moral, economic, methodological, epistemological and other aspects.

The concept of the individual is obviously complex and presupposes a theory of individuation. By the very conditions of his or her existence, every human being is inseparably connected with other human beings and nature. To individuate a person is to decide where to draw the boundary between that person and other persons and nature. Individuation is thus a matter of social convention, and obviously different societies individuate human beings and define the individual differently. The ancient Athenians saw the human being as an integral part of nature and society and believed that a man taken together with his land and political rights constituted an individual. Almost until the end of the Middle Ages a craftman's tools were believed to be inseparable from him such that they constituted his 'inorganic body' and were just as much an integral part of him as his hands and feet. To deprive him of his tools was to mutilate him, and he was not free to alienate them. For the Hindus the caste into which a person is born is not an accident but a result of his or her actions in a previous life. It is an integral part of the person's identity and determines his or her rights and duties as well as the value of the person's life. The Chinese view of the family as an indissoluble organism linking ancestors and descendants into a living union gives rise to a highly complex conception of the individual. For reasons which we cannot here consider, liberalism defines the individual in austere and minimalist terms. It abstracts the person from all his or her 'contingent' and 'external' relations with other people and nature, and defines the person as an essentially self-contained and solitary being encapsulated in, and unambiguously marked off from, the 'outside' world by his or her body.[1]

[1] That human beings have the capacity to rise above their circumstances and critically to reflect on themselves is not in question. What is in question is the liberal view that this capacity alone constitutes human essence and that everything else is merely contingent. Michael Sandel is right to criticize this view, but goes to the other extreme. Although he does not deny the human capacity for self-transcendence, he treats it as a free-floating faculty and assigns it no ontological or moral role, with the result that his concept of the radically situated self remains unstable and even incoherent. Besides, how does the self know that it is radically situated? And how does its capacity for self-transcendence impinge on and restructure its social identity? See his *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982), Ch. 1. See also Bhikhu Parekh, *Marx's Theory of Ideology* (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), Ch.2.

In the liberal view each individual is distinct and easily distinguishable from others, unassimilable, and leads a separate existence. Individuals define their individuality in terms of their separateness from others and feel ontologically threatened and diminished when the boundary of their individuality gets blurred or their selves overlap with those of others. Their constant concern therefore is to preserve their separateness, to construct all kinds of high protective walls around themselves, and to ensure that nothing enters, let alone settles, in their being without their knowledge and scrutiny. In one form or another the idea of self-enclosure, of a bounded self accessible and available to others only to a severely limited degree, is an integral part of the liberal view. Liberal individuals seek to run their lives themselves, to make their own choices, to form their own beliefs and judgements, to take nothing for granted or as given. Since they necessarily begin life as socially conditioned beings, their goal is gradually to decondition themselves, to become ontologically transparent, to reconstruct and recreate themselves, and thus to become autonomous and self-determining. They are therefore suspicious of, and feel nervous in the presence of, feelings and emotions, especially those that are deep and powerful and not fully comprehensible to reason or easily brought under its control. Not warm emotional involvement, which leads to overlapping selves and compromises autonomy, but the relatively cold and distant principle of mutual respect is the liberal's preferred mode of governing the relations between individuals.[2] How an open society can be created out of closed selves is a paradox to which no liberal theorist has paid much attention. Unless the self learns to open itself up to the thoughts and feelings of others and maintains *both* an open mind and an open heart, thereby creating the basic preconditions of a genuine dialogue, society can never be truly open.

In one form or another the idea of self-ownership is also inherent in the liberal conception of the individual. Since individuals are defined as choosers, they must obviously be separated from their choices, including their values, goals and ways of life, raising the question as to how they are related to them. Again, in the kind of society imagined by the liberal, individuals must be able to alienate their labour, capacities and skills without alienating themselves and becoming another's property during the period of alienation. They must therefore be separated from them, and the consequent self-bifurcation or inner duality raises the question of the nature of the self's relationship with them. Individuals' capacities, qualities of character, deepest beliefs, goals, loyalties and allegiances obviously cannot be conceived as their modes of being, their ways of existing for themselves and for others, but only as their properties, as their primary or secondary qualities rather than the constituents of their innermost being or substance. For the liberal the individual is a 'master' of himself or herself, owning his or her body and having proprietary rights over its constituents. As such, individuals' lives are their own to do what they like with, and the products of their labour are theirs to enjoy as they please. They relate to their thoughts, feelings, opinions, rights and so on in similar proprietary terms, and define liberty, equality, justice and obligation accordingly.

Since in the liberal view the individual is conceptually prior to society, liberty is conceptually prior to morality. Individuals are moral beings because they are

[2] Unlike almost all pre-modern writers, hardly any liberal has given emotions an ontological and epistemological status; that is, regarded them as constitutive of humanity and playing a vital creative role in the constitution and pursuit of knowledge.

choosing beings, and it is their choices that give their conduct a distinctly moral as distinct from a 'merely' conventional or customary character. Since morality, including moral rules, principles and ways of life, is a matter of choice, there is and can be no substantive general agreement on the kind of life the individual and the community ought to live. In the liberal thought morality therefore comes to centre around secondary and behaviourally orientated virtues, which tell human beings not what they should ultimately value and what ends they should pursue, but rather how they should pursue whatever ends they choose. The individual's central moral concern is twofold, to maintain his or her personal independence and autonomy and to live peacefully with others by respecting theirs. Each leads to a complementary set of secondary virtues. The former calls for such qualities of character as self-discipline, self-reliance, prudence, the ability to live within the limits of one's moral and emotional resources, planning, foresight, moderation and self-control; the latter calls for such qualities as reliability, cooperation, keeping promises, the conscientious discharge of one's obligations, the spirit of compromise, civility, respect for the law and tolerance. Some liberal writers did stress the need to cultivate refined feelings, a 'beautiful' soul free of mean and petty impulses, the spirit of self-sacrifice and the pursuit of noble ideals, but they had difficulty grounding them in their conception of the human being, demonstrating their social relevance, and integrating them with the secondary virtues. The proper relation between the right and the good, and at a different level between liberty and morality, has continued to elude liberals and explains the inner tensions of their thought.

Although different individuals value different things and pursue different ways of life, the liberal thinks that they share several interests derived from our common nature. These include the security of life, liberty, property and so on, and at a different level, the development and exercise of their powers of reason, will and autonomy. Since these interests are deemed to be inherent in our humanity and demanded by our nature, they are considered basic or fundamental. Some liberals called them natural rights, while others eschewed that language, but all alike were agreed on their vital importance. For the liberal the concept of interest overcomes the vast distance he postulates between the self and the other, and builds bridges or bonds between otherwise unrelated men and women. The civil society, the liberals' greatest invention and deeply cherished by them, is the realm of interest and choice *par excellence*. It stands for the totality of relationships voluntarily entered into by self-determining individuals in the pursuit of their self-chosen goals. It is a world created by individuals who, though strangers to one another, have nevertheless found enough in common to bring and to hold them together for varying lengths of time and with varying degrees of mutual commitment.

For the liberal the state shares some of the characteristics of civil society, but it is basically quite different. Like civil society it is based on interest and has largely an instrumental value. However, unlike civil society, the state is a coercive and compulsory institution, coercive because it enjoys the power of life and death over its members, compulsory because its citizens are its members by birth and may not leave it, and outsiders may not enter it, without its approval. The state is also a formal and abstract institution. In civil society human beings meet as bearers of multiple and changing identities. In the state they are expected to abstract away these identities and to meet only as citizens; that is, as equal bearers of formal and state-derived rights and obligations and being guided solely by the interest of the whole. The abstract state and the abstract citizen complement and entail each other.

For the liberal, the government's primary task is to create and maintain a system of rights and to undertake activities required by this. Under no circumstances can it be justified in pursuing large-scale social, economic and political goals, such as creating a classless, egalitarian, fully human and compassionate and caring society. Different liberals advance different arguments in support of this view, but the following five are most common. First, the government owes its existence and authority to the fact that its subjects are self-determining agents wishing to pursue their self-chosen goals under conditions of minimal constraints. Its task therefore is to maximize *their* liberties and to facilitate *their* goals, which by definition it cannot do if it pursues large-scale goals of its own. Secondly, citizens of a liberal society do not all share a substantive conception of the good life. There is therefore no moral source from which the government can derive, and in terms of which it can legitimize, its substantive goals. Whatever goals it chooses to pursue are bound to be disowned by, and thus to violate the moral autonomy of, at least a section of them. An attempt to create a 'better' or 'more humane' society flounders on the fact that its citizens deeply disagree about the underlying criteria. A government that goes beyond laying down the necessary framework of formal and general rules therefore compromises its subjects' humanity and risks committing a moral outrage.

Thirdly, a government engaging in a programme of large-scale economic redistribution or radical transformation of the social order uses some of its citizens as instruments of its will and treats their interests as less important than others', violating the principles of human dignity and equality. Since it is unlikely to enjoy their consent, it is also bound to be oppressive and risks forfeiting its legitimacy. Fourthly, such a programme implies that the government has something to distribute, that it is the owner of what it seeks to redistribute. For the liberal, this assumption is wholly false for property belongs to its owners and not to the government, and is a product of their labour not its. It is entitled to claim from them, with their consent, only that portion of their property which is necessary to help it undertake its legitimate and collectively agreed activities.

Finally, for the liberal almost all social institutions are grounded in and propelled by specific natural desires. This is as true of the economy as of the others. People work hard, exert themselves, accept privations, and save up for the future because they are driven by self-interest and the desire to better their condition. The dynamic interplay of these impulses creates the complex economic world with its own autonomous logic. Government interference with the economy, as with other social institutions, runs up against the inescapable limits of human nature and the inexorable logic of the economy, and is ultimately counter-productive.

All this does not mean that the liberal government is committed to a policy of *laissez-faire*. The liberal attitude to the government's economic role has varied greatly over time. Almost all of them have agreed that it has a variously derived duty to help the poor and the needy, and some have gone much further. But all of them, including the interventionists, remain deeply hostile to the radical redistribution of wealth, to the curtailment of the right to private property, to the restriction of individual choices, to measures likely to weaken the ethic of self-discipline and self-help or to interfere with the basic structure and processes of the economy, and to the attempt to subordinate the economy to the larger considerations of moral and political good. Thanks to this hostility, which is built into the very structure of liberal thought, even those liberals who are deeply

critical of, and morally embarrassed by, the social, cultural and other consequences of capitalism have been able to do little.

II

Having briefly and rather hurriedly sketched some of the basic features of liberalism, we may ask why and how democracy as traditionally understood on the basis of the Athenian experience enters the liberal world-view and whether the latter has a conceptual space for it. Liberalism obviously represents a very different view of human beings and society to the one lying at the basis of the Athenian democracy. The latter was grounded in a sense of community; liberalism is individualist and finds it difficult to offer a coherent account of the community. The Athenians were keen to deserve well of their community and to enrich it by giving it their best; liberal citizens are anxious to pursue their self-chosen goals and cherish privacy. The Athenian democracy was informed by a view of freedom that demanded active political participation as its necessary expression. The liberal defines liberty in individualist rather than communal terms and sees little value in active political involvement. Democracy in the Athenian sense does not satisfy liberal individuals' deepest aspirations and has at best only a marginal place in their conception of the good life. The Athenian democracy trusted the masses; as we shall see, the liberal is deeply suspicious of them. For these and other reasons liberalism can neither accommodate nor has a need for classical democracy.

Yet it does need *some* kind of democracy for at least two reasons. First, in the liberal view all individuals are free and equal 'by nature' and masters of themselves, and no one can have authority over others without their consent. A liberal polity therefore needs some mechanism by which the people can give their consent to and thereby confer on the government the authority to govern them. Secondly, as we saw, the liberal expects the government to set up and maintain a system of rights based on the principle of maximum liberty. But the government might not set up such a system or, having set it up, violate it. A liberal polity therefore needs a mechanism by which the people can control and compel the government to fulfil its trust.

The liberal turns to democracy to provide both these mechanisms and defines it in terms of them.[3] Democracy is seen not as a form of collective existence, but as a mode of constituting and controlling public authority. That is, it is not a way of life but a form of government. For the classical Athenians, democracy was grounded in a passionate desire for freedom defined in participatory and communal terms. For the liberal it is grounded in an equally passionate desire for liberty defined in protective or negative and individualist terms. For the classical Athenians democracy was a vehicle of collective self-expression and self-determination. For the liberal it is a device for keeping others at a safe distance and protecting the individual in the exercise of his or her self-chosen goals within a legally secured private space. For the liberal, democracy therefore basically means a form of government in which the people wield the ultimate political authority, which they delegate to their freely chosen representatives and which they retain the right to withdraw if the government were grossly to violate its trust.

[3] This was how John Locke first formulated the problem. If Hobbes has the honour of being the first to articulate the philosophical basis of *liberalism*, Locke must be credited with first formulating the basic structure of liberal *democracy*.

Since democracy as understood by the liberal is grounded in, and derives its legitimacy from, sovereign individuals, it is conceptually prevented from violating individual rights as defined by the liberal. Thus a government violating the right to liberty, property or freedom of expression is considered not only illiberal but also undemocratic. In other words liberalism is built into the conceptual structure of liberal democracy. Liberalism specifies what rights are basic and inviolable and must be guaranteed by law. The majority may have altogether different views on the subject, but these have no relevance and are to be fought if they fall foul of liberalism. In a liberal democracy liberalism is the dominant partner and exercises a hegemonic role. Moral paternalism and some form of political authoritarianism lie at the heart of liberal democracy.

Democracy as defined by the liberal raises two important questions. First, who constitute the people and wield the ultimate political authority? Secondly, what is the relationship between the people and their representatives? The answers to the two questions are closely related.

As for the first question, liberals were for a long period deeply uneasy about granting the universal franchise. Some of their arguments were the same as those of the Greek opponents of democracy; others were new. First, liberals argued that the masses, mostly consisting of the poor, were hostile to the rich and to the institution of private property in general. The association of the universal franchise with some form of socialism was also shared by socialists, including Marx. Secondly, some liberals argued, especially after the publication of de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, that the masses sought equality in all spheres of life and that their rise to power was bound to lead to cultural homogeneity, intolerance of diversity and the tyranny of public opinion. Thirdly (a variation of the second argument), the masses preferred the sleep of ignorance and habit to the light of critical reason and were hostile to the spirit of critical inquiry, freedom of expression and the pursuit of truth, all of which liberals cherished both as intrinsically valuable and as vehicles of progress. The death of Socrates at the hands of the Athenian democracy was frequently invoked in this context. Fourthly, the right to vote presupposed and could only be granted to those possessed of rationality, the capacity for reflection, knowledge of social and political affairs, and so forth. Since the masses lacked these, they could not be entrusted with the conduct of public affairs. Finally, in a democracy the community as a whole was in charge of its collective destiny, whereas universal suffrage limited political power almost exclusively to the 'brute' majority, thereby virtually disenfranchising the minority. Democracy implied that all significant social groups and bodies of opinion should enjoy access to power. Far from being identical with democracy, the universal franchise threatened it. A 'truly' democratic polity must establish parity between the majority and the minority by either restricting the franchise or somehow compensating the minority for its numerical inferiority. Hence the popularity of such ideas as plural votes for the elite, some form of proportional representation, and a suitably strengthened upper chamber among a large number of nineteenth-century liberals.[4]

Once the liberals realized that the democratic tide was irreversible, they turned to finding ways of containing it, evolving a tripartite strategy. First, they developed such devices as constitutionally guaranteed rights which virtually put them beyond the reach of the majority, parliamentary as opposed to popular

[4] For a discussion of this peculiar and ideologically biased view of democracy, see John Roper, *Democracy and its Critics* (London, Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 145ff.

sovereignty, and elitist theories of representation and political parties. Secondly, they turned to state-sponsored and often state-controlled compulsory education as a way of suitably educating the masses into the principles of liberalism. And thirdly, they sought to extend the fruits of capitalism and the gains of colonialism to the masses in order to give them a stake in the capitalist economy.

As for the second question, the relationship between the people and their representatives, two different answers were possible. It could be argued that since the people cannot directly run their affairs in the large modern state, they should do so indirectly through their elected representatives. They should give clear instructions to their representatives, keep a keen eye on them, and in general treat them as their delegates. This is 'representative' or 'indirect democracy'; that is, popular self-rule through the mediating agency of the elected representatives. Such a representative or indirect democracy was unacceptable to the liberals. As J. S. Mill put it, the 'substitution of delegation for representation is the one and only danger of democracy'.[5] Since the liberals did not trust the masses, they saw in this type of democracy a serious threat to all they valued, including and especially private property. Besides, the atomized and fragmented liberal society lacked the communal basis necessary to enable people to form coherent collective views on public affairs. Furthermore, representative democracy required a participatory culture noticeably absent in the liberal society.

For these and other reasons (especially the first) the liberals, including the most enlightened among them, opted for representative *government*; that is, a government of the people *by* their representatives. Representatives were to be elected by the people, but once elected they were to remain free to manage public affairs as they saw fit. This highly effective way of insulating the government against the full impact of the universal franchise lies at the heart of liberal democracy. Strictly speaking liberal democracy is not representative *democracy* but representative *government*. As J. S. Mill put it, liberals advocate a 'well-regulated' or 'rational democracy', one ruled by 'an enlightened minority accountable to the majority in the last resort'. The elitism of Mill and other liberal leaders sat ill at ease with, and emasculated, the significance of their advocacy of political participation.[6]

Liberal democracy then represents a highly complex theoretical and political construct based on an ingenious blend of liberalism and democracy. It is democracy conceptualized and structured within the limits of liberalism. Broadly speaking, liberalism constitutes its theory of the state and democracy its theory of government. Liberalism determines the nature of the state (formal, abstract), its structure (separate from the autonomous civil society, a clear separation between public and private), its rationale (protection of the basic rights of its citizens) and its basic units (individuals rather than groups or communities). Democracy specifies who constitutes the legitimate government and wields the authority inherent in the state (the elected representatives), how they acquire authority (free elections, choice between parties) and how they are to exercise it (in broad harmony with public opinion). Although in liberal democracy liberalism is the dominant partner, democracy, which has its own independent tradition and

[5] Gertrude Himmelfarb (ed.), *Essays on Politics and Culture by John Stuart Mill* (New York, Anchor Books, 1962), p. 197.

[6] For a valuable discussion, see Amy Gutman, *Liberal Equality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 48ff.

internal logic, has from time to time revolted against the liberal constraints. People have demanded new or different kinds of rights or questioned the degree of importance given to the rights to liberty, property and the freedom of enquiry and expression. They have also questioned the separation between the state and the economy and the individualist basis of the state. No liberal democracy therefore is, or has ever been, without tensions. By and large, however, liberal democracy has managed to retain the structural design it evolved in the latter half of the nineteenth century and to keep the democratic impulse under check.

The liberalization of democracy occurred differently in different western societies, depending on their history, traditions and social structures. Hence liberal democracy has taken different forms in different countries. In some, such as Britain, liberalism has long been a most dominant partner and democracy has more or less accepted its subordinate status, while in France democracy gave in less easily and not without extracting significant concessions. The US, Canada, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Australia and others represent yet other forms of liberal democracy. In spite of their differences they are all constituted along liberal democratic lines and share in common such features as individualism, elections, majority rule, multiple political parties, a limited government, the autonomy of the civil society, fear of political power and the familiar mechanisms for regulating it, the absence of mediating institutions between the individual and the state, the law as the central means of social regulation, the abstract state and its correlative the abstract citizen.

Although liberal democracy bears some resemblance to its Athenian counterpart, the two are, as we saw, quite different in their ideological bases, structures and central concerns. Since each arose within a specific historical context and culture, this is hardly surprising. Liberal democracy cannot therefore be considered a degenerate form of 'true' democracy as the nostalgic Helenophiles maintain. Athenian democracy can be a source of inspiration and a useful corrective for us, but neither a model nor even a standard of judgement. Like all new historical forms, liberal democracy both misses out some of the important insights of its classical cousin *and* adds new ones of its own. It rightly fears unrestrained popular sovereignty but goes to the other extreme and disempowers the people. It rightly stresses the importance of non-political interests but fails to appreciate the true significance of public life. It rightly cherishes individuality and privacy but ignores the communal soil in which alone the individual can flourish. Although it fragments the community, it gives democracy the element of universality it had hitherto lacked. One person, one vote is basically a liberal idea. Even when the liberals resisted it in practice, they knew that it was inherent in their individualist view of humanity.

Although liberalism defines rights in narrowly individualist, elitist and bourgeois terms, it gives democracy moral depth by insisting on the inviolability of basic human rights and on the protection of minorities and dissenting individuals. While it fails to appreciate the creative potential of political power, it is intensely alive to its pathology and guards against it in a way that classical democracy did not. As many of its critics have pointed out, liberal democracy is open to serious criticisms. But if the criticisms are not to be anachronistic, they must be grounded not in its alleged failure to conform to the classical 'model', but in its inability to satisfy the deepest urges and aspirations of the *modern* human being and to meet the challenges of the *modern* age.

III

Having briefly highlighted the basic features of liberal democracy, we may ask if the liberal democrat is right to claim universal validity for it and to maintain that all political systems failing to measure up to it are to that extent improperly constituted and defective.

As we saw, liberal democracy defines democracy within the limits of liberalism and represents one way of combining the two. There is no obvious reason why a political system may not combine them differently. It might assign them *equal* importance and use each to limit the excesses of the other. While continuing to insulate the government against popular pressure, it might provide ways of making it more responsive. Without damaging the government's right to govern, it might provide a greater network of channels for popular participation. And while recognizing the importance of protecting basic human rights, it might define and limit them in the light of a constantly evolving democratic consensus.

Or a political system might be democratically liberal rather than a liberal democracy, making democracy the dominant partner and defining liberalism within the limits set by it. Like liberal democracy such a political system cherishes and respects individuals, but defines them and their rights in social terms. It establishes a healthier balance between the individual and the community, aims at a fairer distribution of the opportunities required for full citizenship, extends participation to major areas of economic and political life, and opens up new centres of power. The early socialists, the young Marx, C. B. Macpherson and many European socialist parties today advocate such a democratically constituted liberal polity in preference to liberal democracy. Democratic liberalism is fairly close to social democracy and represents a partial transcendence of liberalism.

How a polity combines liberalism and democracy or how liberal and democratic it chooses to be depends on its history, traditions, values, problems and needs. A polity is not a chance and fluctuating collection of individuals but has a history and a character, and needs to work out its political destiny in its own distinct way. As we saw, the Athenian democracy could not be revived in the modern age, and modern western societies had to evolve their own distinct forms of democracy. What is true of the west is equally true of the rest of the world. To insist on the universality of liberal democracy is to deny the west's own historical experiences and to betray the liberal principles of mutual respect and love of cultural diversity. It imposes on other countries systems of goverment unsuited to their talents and skills, destroys the coherence and integrity of their ways of life, and reduces them to mimics, unable and unwilling to be true either to their traditions or to the imported norms. The cultural havoc caused by colonialism should alert us to the dangers of an over-zealous imposition of liberal democracy.

Liberal democracy is a product of, and designed to cope with, the political problems thrown up by the post-seventeenth-century individualist society. As such there are at least two types of polity where its relevance would seem to be considerably limited, namely cohesive polities with a strong sense of community and multi-communal polities. Let us take in each turn.

There are polities in the world which have a strong sense of community based on a widely shared and deeply held conception of the good life. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and several Middle Eastern and African polities belong to this category. They define the individual in communal terms and do not regard the atomic liberal individual as the basic unit of society. A poignant recent example illustrates the point well. A middle-aged Bangladeshi entitled to settle in Britain

had two sons whom he was at liberty to bring into the country. When the immigration officer asked him if they were his sons, he replied in the affirmative. It later transpired that they were his dead brother's sons. Since they were not *his* children, the officer accused him of making a fraudulent claim. The Bangladeshi argued that his dead brother was not 'really' separate from him, that their children had all grown up together as brothers and sisters entitled to the equal attention and affection of all adults, that each adult in the family had a moral obligation to look after the children of all them, that this was how his society was constituted, and that he had additionally given a pledge to his dying brother to treat his children as his own. Since he saw no difference whatsoever between his own and his brother's sons, he chose to bring in the latter. When the bemused officer proved unrelenting and insisted that the Bangladeshi could only bring in his own two sons, the latter offered to bring in one of his own and one of his dead brother's sons. Since the quota of two children was not exceeded, he could not understand why it mattered to the British government how it was made up. He also argued that his 'selfishness' would not be forgiven by his community and his dead brother's family, and nor would he be able to live with himself, if he did not bring in at least one of his dead brother's sons. In this conflict between the two different conceptions of the self, neither side could make sense of the other. Being used to the liberal view which he regarded as self-evident, and convinced that it was his duty to enforce the law, the immigration officer deported the Bangladeshi back to his country with the instruction that he was never to be allowed into Britain.

The point of this example is that different societies define and individuate people differently. They also therefore define freedom, equality, rights, property, justice, loyalty, power and authority differently. For example, in a traditional Muslim society every man is required to consider a portion of his property as belonging to others. He has a duty to use it for their benefit and is not allowed to deny food or shelter to a hungry man or to a stranger. The latter does not have a *right* to food or shelter, but the host has a most stringent *duty* to provide these. No one talks of rights, yet almost everyone's needs are met. No one uses the language of 'justice', the term for which some of these societies have no equivalent words, but most of their members receive their due and the distribution of goods is generally equitable. In short, the liberal principle of individuation and other liberal ideas are culturally and historically specific. As such a political system based on them cannot claim universal validity.

The non-liberal but not necessarily illiberal societies we are discussing cherish and wish to preserve their ways of life. Like most pre-modern societies they are communally orientated and believe that their members' 'rights' may be legitimately restricted in the larger interest of the traditional way of life. Most of them allow freedom of speech and expression, but not the freedom to mock and ridicule their sacred texts, practices, beliefs and rituals. They restrict the right to property and to trade and commerce lest it should undermine the ethos of social solidarity and the ethic of communal obligation lying at the basis of their ways of life. They restrict travel, immigration and the freedom to buy and sell land for basically the same reasons. Liberals find such restrictions unacceptable, but most members of traditional societies do not. Unless we assume that liberalism represents the final truth about human beings, we cannot indiscriminately condemn societies that do not conform to it. This is particularly so today when the liberal societies are themselves beginning to wonder if they have not carried individualism too far, and how they can create genuine communities without

which individuals lack roots and stability. Community implies shared values and a common way of life, and is incompatible with the more or less unrestrained rights of its members to do as they please. It is striking that many a communitarian theorist has suggested restrictions on pornography, freedom of expression and immigration that are not very different from those characteristic of traditional societies.

It is, of course, true that some traditional societies have grossly outrageous practices and customs which obviously need to be changed, preferably by internal and, when necessary, by a judiciously applied external pressure. The question we are considering, however, is not how to improve their ways of life but whether they must adopt, and be condemned for refusing to adopt, liberal democratic institutions. It is difficult to see how this question can be answered in the affirmative. As long as their forms of government are acceptable to their people and meet the basic conditions of good government, to which I shall return later, they must be at liberty to work out their political destiny themselves.

We have so far talked about cohesive communities. We may now briefly consider multi-communal societies; that is, societies which comprise several cohesive and self-conscious communities each seeking to preserve its traditional way of life. Several third world countries belong to this category. Neither the Athenian model, which presupposes a community, nor the liberal model, which presupposes none, applies to such multi-communal societies, with the result that the theoretical problems raised by their experiences have received little attention in much of western democratic theory.

The point will become clear if we look at the case of India, one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse societies in the world. The colonial state in India left the long-established communities more or less alone, accepted their 'laws' and practices, and superimposed on them a minimal body of mainly criminal laws. Unlike its European counterpart, it permitted a plurality of legal systems and shared its 'sovereignty' with the autonomous and largely self-governing communities.

Post-independence India only partially rationalized the colonial state and remains a highly complex polity. It has a uniform body of criminal but not civil laws. Muslims continue to be governed by their own personal laws, which the state enforces but with which it does not interfere. The tribals too are governed by their separate laws, and the state has committed itself to making no changes in the practices and laws of the Christians without their explicit consent and approval. The Parsis are subject to the same civil laws as the rest of non-Muslim Indians, but the interpretation and application of the laws is in some cases left to their *panchayats* or community councils. Thus the ordinary civil courts will hear a Parsi divorce case, but leave it to the Parsi *panchayat* to decide on the machinery of reconciliation and the amount of alimony. The Indian state is thus both an association of individuals and a community of communities, recognizing both individuals and communities as bearers of rights. The criminal law recognizes only individuals, whereas the civil law recognizes most minority communities as distinct legal subjects. This makes India a liberal democracy of a very peculiar kind.

It is tempting to say, as many Indian and foreign commentators have said, that the Indian state is too 'deeply embedded' in society and too 'plural' and 'chaotic' to be considered a properly constituted state or a state in the 'true' sense of the word. But such a view is obviously too superficial and ethnocentric to be satisfactory. There is no reason why we should accept the view that the modern

western constitution of the state is the only true or proper one, and deny India and other non-western societies the right to indigenize the imported institution of the state and even to evolve their own alternative political formations. Rather than insist that the state *must* be autonomous and separate from society, and then set about finding ways of restoring it to the people, we might argue that it should not be separated from society in the first instance. And rather than insist that the state *must* have a uniform legal system, we might argue that it should be free to allow its constituent communities to retain their different laws and practices, so long as these conform to clearly laid down and nationally accepted principles of justice and fairness. Thus the law might require that a divorced wife must be provided for, but leave the different communities free to decide whether the husband, his family, or his community as a whole should arrange for her maintenance, so long as the arrangments are foolproof and not open to abuse and arbitrary alternation. If the multi-communal polities are to hold together and to avoid the all too familiar eruptions of inter- and intra-communal violence, they need to be extremely sensitive to the traditions, values and levels of development of their constituent communities, and may find the institutions and practices developed in socially homogeneous liberal societies deeply subversive.

Like the concepts of the individual, right, property and so on, such institutions as elections, multiple political parties, the separation of powers and the abstract state too cannot be universalized. Elections of the western type impose a crushing financial burden on poor countries and encourage the all too familiar forms of corruption. In an ethnically and religiously diverse society lacking shared values, or in a society unused to discussing its differences in public and articulating them in neat ideological terms, elections might also prove deeply divisive, generate artificial ideological rigidities, release powerful aggressive impulses and channel them into dangerous and unaccustomed directions. Such societies might be better off sticking to or evolving consensual and less polarized ways of selecting their governments and conducting their affairs. What is true of elections is equally true of other liberal democratic institutions and practices.

This is not to say that liberal democratic institutions have no value for non-western societies, rather that the latter have to determine the value themselves in the light of their cultural resources, needs and circumstances, and that they cannot mechanically transplant them. As a matter of fact, many third world countries have tried all manner of political experiments, some successful and others disastrous. Thanks to the profoundly mistaken belief, partly self-induced and partly encouraged by western governments and developmental experts, that their experiments were 'deviations' from the 'true' liberal democratic model and symptomatic of their immaturity and backwardness, they often undertook them without much zeal and self-confidence and abandoned them prematurely. Their political predicament is very like their linguistic predicament. They abandoned their traditional languages, which they well knew how to speak, in favour of the 'proper' and 'respectable' languages of their colonial rulers, which they could never adequately master.

It would appear that the democratic part of liberal democracy, consisting in such things as free elections, free speech and the right to equality, has proved far more attractive outside the west and is more universalizable than the liberal component. Millions in non-western societies demand democracy, albeit in suitably indigenized forms, whereas they tend to shy away from liberalism as if they instinctively felt it to be subversive of what they most valued and cherished. This is not because it leads to capitalism, for many of them welcome the latter, but

because the third world countries feel that the liberal view of the world and way of life is at odds with their deepest aspirations and self-conceptions. As they understand it, liberalism breaks up the community, undermines the shared body of ideas and values, places the isolated individual above the community, encourages the ethos and ethic of aggressive self-assertion, rejects traditional wisdom and common sense in the name of scientific reason, and weakens the spirit of mutual accommodation and adjustment. Non-western societies wonder why they cannot import such western technology and expertise as they need while rejecting some of its liberal values and suitably indigenizing some of its democratic practices. They might be proved wrong and may suffer as a result. But forcing them into the standard liberal democratic mould is not without its heavy human cost either.

To reject the universalist claims of liberal democracy is not to endorse the crude relativist view that a country's political system is its own business and above criticism, and that western experiences have no relevance outside the west. In an increasingly interdependent world every country's internal affairs impinge on others and are a matter of general concern. The dissidents, the oppressed minorities and the ill-treated masses the world over appeal to international public opinion for support, and we cannot respond to them without the help of general principles to guide our judgements and actions. Thanks to the widening of our moral consciousness, we feel morally concerned about human suffering even when our help is not directly asked for. And thanks to the increasing demystification of the modern state, we are beginning to realize that its citizens are not its property, that it is accountable to humankind for the way it treats them, and that it must be opened up to external scrutiny. All this calls for a body of moral and political principles that are both universally valid and capable of accommodating cultural diversity and autonomy. We need to work out the minimum conditions or principles of good government and leave different countries free to evolve their own appropriate forms of government compatible with these regulative principles.

Since we cannot here pursue this large and complex question, a few general remarks will have to suffice. Universally valid regulative principles cannot be laid down by western governments, let alone by a philosopher, both because they are bound to be infected by an ethnocentric bias and because they can have no authority over the rest of humankind. It is easy to be prescriptive, but such prescriptions have no meaning and force unless they resonate in the lives of, and evoke sympathetic responses in the minds of, those affected by them. The principles of good government can be genuinely universal (in their scope and content) *and* binding only if they are freely negotiated by all involved and grounded in a broad global consensus. It would be wholly naive to imagine that all governments and all men and women everywhere will ever agree on them. What we can legitimately hope and strive for is a broad cross-cultural consensus commanding varying degrees of universal support. As individuals and groups in different parts of the world invoke it in their internal struggles, and as the rest of the world responds to them, the consensus acquires depth and vitality, becomes an acceptable political currency, strikes roots in popular consciousness, and acquires new adherents. This is broadly how almost all our moral principles have evolved and acquired authority. And this is also how the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights has acquired its current appeal. A pious statement of good intentions when first formulated in the aftermath of the second world war, it was increasingly invoked by the leaders of colonial struggles for

independence and oppressed minorities, and over time became an important part of domestic and international morality.[7]

The UN Declaration is a complex document and articulated at three different levels. First, it lays down the general principles every government should satisfy. Secondly, it translates these principles into the language of rights and lists different kinds of rights. Thirdly, it lays down institutions and practices that alone in its view can guarantee and protect these rights. The last two parts of it have a liberal democratic bias, the second part because of its use of the language of rights and the kinds of rights it stresses, and the third because the recommended institutions and practices presuppose and are specific to liberal democracy.

As for the general principles of the UN Declaration, they fall into two categories. Some are distinctly liberal and culturally specific; for example, the more or less unlimited right to freedom of expression and to private property, and the insistence that marriages must be based on the 'free and full consent' of the intending spouses. Other principles relate to vital human interests valued in almost all societies and have a genuinely universal core, such as respect for human life and dignity, equality before the law, equal protection of the law, fair trial and the protection of minorities. Liberalism does, of course, deeply cherish and place great value on these principles, but they are not unique to it. They were found in classical Athens and Rome and many a medieval kingdom, are emphasized in the sacred texts of all great religions, and were widely practised in many non-western societies. Indeed the record of some non-western societies in such areas as respect for human life and the protection of minorities, including Jews, is not only as good as but even better than that of the liberal west.

Evidence that the second category of principles laid down by the UN Declaration commands considerable universal support is threefold. First, the UN Declaration was signed by a large number of governments representing different cultures, geographical areas and political systems. Secondly, when the newly liberated Asian and African countries joined the UN they demanded amendments to its Declaration, which were accepted after much debate and embodied in the two International Covenants of 1966. The latter documents rejected the right to property and to full compensation in the event of nationalization, toned down the individualistic basis of the 1948 Declaration, and endorsed the occasional need to suspend individual rights in the national interest. However they not only left untouched but even strengthened what I have called the genuinely universal principles of the 1948 Declaration. Thirdly, people the world over have frequently appealed to these principles in their struggles against repressive governments. For their part the latter have almost invariably preferred to deny the existence of unacceptable practices rather than shelter behind relativism and cultural autonomy. In their own different ways both parties are thus beginning to accept the principles as the basis of good government, conferring on them the moral authority they otherwise cannot have. In other words, the principles are increasingly becoming 'a common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations' as the UN Declaration itself had hoped.

[7] For a good discussion of universal rights, see James W. Nickel, *Making Sense of Human Rights* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987). For a cross-cultural perspective, see Leroy Rouner (ed.), *Human Rights and the World's Religions* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), especially Parts III and IV. For a good discussion of the problems of minorities in a plural society, see Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991). See also Bhikhu Parekh 'The Rushdie affair: research agenda for political philosophy', *Political Studies* 38:4 (1990), 695–709.

As such they provide a most valuable basis for a freely negotiated and constantly evolving consensus on universally valid principles of good government.

Within the limits set by these principles, different countries should remain free to determine their own appropriate forms of government. They may choose liberal democracy, but if they do not their choice deserves respect and even encouragement. After all, liberals have always held, and rightly, that diversity is the precondition of progress and choice, and that truth can only emerge from a peaceful competition between different ways of life.