

# Assess the strengths and weaknesses of pluralism essay



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It is difficult to give specific definition to pluralism because it consists of various ideas that are constantly changing together with the different societies. Pluralists consider the individual as the most important element in the society and protecting of his rights is fundamental characteristic of the theory. Locke points out that all people are created equal and their prerogative is to follow and maintain a moral code based on peace and equality (Laslett 1991).

This essay will try to explore the different aspects of the pluralist theory and will attempt to explain to what extent the theory could be applied to practice. It will try to examine the flaws and the strengths of the theory in relation to different types of human nature and historic developments. The essay will conclude with arguments that suggest, that pluralism is the most advanced theory to attempt to examine and to affect the constantly evolving relations between individuals and states.

Maybe the most problematic aspect of every theory including pluralism is the question about human nature. Locke portrays the individual as self aware, positive and independent minded. He creates an image of a righteous and strong person whose nature is generally peaceful, but whenever his freedom is threatened by an aggressor he “ may destroy a man who makes war upon him” (Laslett 1991: 279).

His ideas outline radical distinction between good and bad, and describe a fundamental characteristic of the human nature, which is the will to freedom and independence. Even Machiavelli points out that a conquered city needs to be destroyed because “ such a city justifies itself by calling on the name

of liberty and its ancient institutions, never forgotten despite the passing of time and the benefits received from the new ruler” (Machiavelli 1995: 16). He also says “ there is no surer way of keeping possession than by devastation”.

Locke’s idea of “ State of perfect equality” (Laslett 1991: 272) together with his condemnation of aggression as “ The injury and the crime is equal, whether committed by the wearer of a crown or some petty villain” (Laslett 1991: 385) portrays a modern individual who considers himself equal to everyone and judges people by the way they affect other people’s lives, rather than their social status. Perhaps the first strength of the pluralist theory is this image it creates of human nature and the role of the individual in the society.

It is an image that challenges the perceptions of the individual of himself and the society he lives in. Hobbes has a different view on human nature, it seems that to him it is something static, which could be described in explicit detail (Hobbes 1979). The strength of the pluralist theory is that it does not seem to attempt to explain human nature but to have an impact on it, to focus on its positive side. And the impact that Locke’s ideas had on the American constitution is a good sign that a major characteristic of human nature is that the individual can learn, change and progress.

The constant evolution of human nature has led to the development of a complicated structure of groups of individuals who have different roles in the societies they live in. Pluralists consider the competing interests of these groups crucial to the proper functioning of the society and ensuring the

common good. Although it is acknowledged that not all interest groups have the same influence on the political process, pluralists believe that because the power is widely dispersed, even small groups can have impact on the government's policy making (Lindblom 1968).

Dahl agrees that these groups have significant power to affect the policy-making process and therefore their influence is crucial to the policy decisions (Dahl 1958: 465). It is not quite sure whether the competition between different groups leads to the common good and what are the best conditions for constructive competition. This brings us to the question of moral and the role of the state in mediating the competing interests. Carr says that "The state is the repository of political power and there is no authority above the state capable of imposing moral behavior on it" (Carr 2001: 146).

The controversy behind this notion underlines another strength of pluralist theory, which is the ability of different groups and individuals to affect the conduct of the state and respectively its moral. Carr points out "there is a strong tendency to make the imperativeness of moral obligations dependant on the reasonable expectations of the performance of the same duty by others"(Carr 2001: 146). These statements together with Locke's vision of the individual outline a progressive framework for interactions between individuals and interest groups, and the state.

According to such a framework the expectations of the performance of moral duties would go both ways between individuals and the state, which would ensure the preserving and the progression of moral values in the societies. The role and the power of the interest groups could vary in different

societies, but there seem to be a constant interdependence between the well being of the society, the power of the interest groups and the power of the state. In Russia for example after the communism collapsed and democracy was implemented, theoretically there was a ground for the development of a modern pluralist society.

But with a weak state under Boris Yeltzin the interest groups in Russia developed faster than the rest of the society and the competition of their interests didn't seem to work for the common good but rather against it. The role of the state at that time was to help empowering and enriching the interest groups with no regard for the needs of the society, which led to the financial collapse of the country. When Putin came to power he invited twenty-one of the country's new oligarchs to a Kremlin meeting to tell them to stay out of politics if they wanted to keep their status.

Three years later he sent to prison Mikhail Khodorkovsky - Russia's richest oligarch on charges of tax evasion, grand theft, fraud, forgery, embezzlement and extortion. He and his company Yukos have been acting "as if they were sovereign powers"(Goldman 2008: 111) by signing a twenty-year oil-delivery contract with China and campaigning to build a pipeline through Siberia to China. From pluralist point of view this could be seen as brutal oppressing of the interest groups and therefore limiting the prospects of a properly functioning democracy.

But also from pluralist point of view this could be a defining of the roles, initiated by a strong state, in order to ensure the development of a properly functioning democracy, which would work for the benefit of all. In his

Democracy in the United States, Dahl has a whole chapter devoted to analyzing the possible ways of influencing the government. It reads like a handbook for people hungry for influencing the government and there are no signs that Dahl thought about the common good in the outlining of his ideas (Dahl 1967: 445-458).

There are good evidences that many prominent Americans have been influenced by Dahl's ideas and have found ways to influence the government without clear idea why they are doing it and who benefits from that other than them. Dahl's work and the recent history in America and Russia help us indicate a weakness in the pluralist theory, which is that without strong central power based on moral values and regard for the common good, the competition between interest groups becomes destructive, their power grows weakening further the power of the state, and the concern for the common good fades away.

That is not to suggest that Putin is a highly moral person, but he was definitely needed. Another important aspect of the pluralist theory is the access of individuals and interest groups to the policy making process. Dahl argues that, " rule by the people is impossible and in practice every political system, whatever its forms, is ruled by an elite" (Dahl 1967: 39). If we make a slight change to that statement it would read as follows " performing of surgery by the people is impossible and in practice every hospital, whatever its specialty, is run by doctors".

Dahl emphasizes the existing political inequality and the limited access to resources needed to influence the government. If we look at it in a different

way, there don't seem to be any actual restrictions imposed by the government to stop people from influencing it. Good support for this statement would be a quote from Barack Husein Obama's victory speech. He said " If there is anyone out there who still doubts, that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is still alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer".

Perhaps the biggest strength of the pluralist theory is that it resembles modern open source software that is available for everyone to use, and its source code is open to anyone who has the will, the skills and the time to improve it. Pluralist system provides initiatives for people not only to compete in different areas, but also to compete in changing the system, if they have ideas how to make it better. The characteristics of the pluralist theory make it very well suitable for the modern days.

The strengths of the theory come from its acknowledgement of the diversity and the contradictions incorporated in human nature. The foundation of this theory and its core strength is the assumption that human nature is fundamentally positive and constructive and that there is a desire in every person to have an impact on the society he lives in. The pluralist system has an advanced design, which works for the cultivation of the positive human side and tries to make the negative one work for a good cause, through constructive competition.

The pluralist theory creates a sense in the individual that he is a co-developer in a commonly shared system and the nature and extent of the

impact he has on it depends on his skills and determination. The theory recognizes that diversity in viewpoints and approaches is crucial to the functioning of the society and makes it possible for unity and individuality to coexist in the same time. The weaknesses of the pluralist theory come from the very same human nature where all the strengths come from. Negative human nature will be always present and will be always trying to infiltrate the system.

Pluralist theory doesn't seem to address that fact. It doesn't seem to acknowledge the need of collective effort not only to compete and work for the common good, but also to identify and prevent negative human nature from working its way up the social and political ladder. The creation and development of pluralist system depend on the existence of certain type of individuals with the skills to become leaders and the qualities to act as a moral corrective of competing interests. Without such individuals no society can develop and sustain properly functioning pluralist system.