

Equality, Community and Democracy

Verteilungsgleichheit und Gemeinschaft als notwendige Bedingungen für Demokratie

In his case for socialism, political philosopher G. A. Cohen has argued that justice requires equality and that equality can only be sustained along with a shared value of community. In this essay, I shall build upon this argument in order to defend equality and community as values not only fundamental to socialist justice, but also to a functioning democracy. I argue that democracy, as a political system based on the ideals of political equality, collective self-determination and freedom, cannot work without distributive equality in a relevant sense and a shared notion of community. I thus argue that distributive equality and community are not sufficient, but necessary conditions to a functioning democracy.

(1) My *argument for equality* as requirement for democracy comes in two stages. First, I argue that *political* equality as a defining feature of democracy requires *distributive* equality. I state two reasons: This is (a) because significant differences in income and property allow individual citizens as well as groups of organized interests to disproportionately influence the political process and thus screw up the principle of political equality. I argue that political regulation, such as transparency requirements, aimed at rectifying political equality will always drag behind reality and/or be insufficient under a structural asymmetry of resources to organize influence. And this is (b) because, as a flipside, earners of low incomes not only relatively lack resources, but they also tend to lack social capital and self-consciousness in order to participate on a par in the political process.

In a second stage, I reject a potential counter-argument against equality and in favour of freedom, i.e. that some inequality, even though possibly disturbing to democracy's political equality, would have to be an evil to be accepted for the sake of freedom, as the latter was also fundamental to democracy. I endorse that freedom is also fundamental to democracy, but I argue that the counter-argument relies on a misuse of the concept of freedom. In what follows, I distinguish political freedom from economic freedom and try to show why none is, conceptually, in conflict with equality as a prerequisite of democracy.

Political freedom is not constrained by redistributive policies as long as these policies come by democratic means. One should note here that I am defending a value, not a strategy. Equality remains something to be reached by democratic means and it is a challenge for political campaigning within the democratic system to convince citizens of the superiority of this ideal. (It is to be defended against both right-wing "libertarians" and Rawls-type "liberals".)

Nor needs *economic freedom* be reduced by redistributive policies. The main point of this strand of the argument is to show that, conceptually, economic freedom in a relevant sense for democracy should be clearly distinguished from private property rights. This argument, taken from Cohen's writings on Robert Nozick's "Anarchy, State and Utopia", is aimed at the heart of the right-libertarian moral charging of property rights. It reminds us of the fact that private property in a thing per definition implies the non-freedom of non-owners concerning the thing owned. It remains up for debate, which system of property rights and, distinctly, which distribution of holdings qua these rights, maximizes the sum total of economic freedom, as well as which distribution is to be seen as just (a debate in which Cohen makes strong points in arguing (i) that the Nozickian justice as based on entitlements and voluntary transfers collapses at a close look, and (ii) that there is good ground to argue, against the Rawlsian position, in favour of strict egalitarian justice). But it suffices to rescue

political equality for democracy from the freedom-objection by revealing the “conceptual chicanery” (Cohen) of libertarians’ misuse of the concept of freedom, and by showing that equality need not in a relevant sense restrain economic freedom.

(2) My *argument for community* as requirement for democracy is split into two justifications. One is directly taken from Cohen, and it holds that *egalitarian justice* as distributive equality requires a shared sense of community in order for it to be sustained. Since I have argued that distributive equality is required for democracy, it follows that a shared sense of community is also required for democracy.

And secondly, I shall add that a shared value of community is a crucial requisite *for democracy itself*. This argument is rather detached from the preceding course of the essay and it concerns the question of the modern democratic state being confronted more than ever with the challenge to procedurally blend a diverse society democratically into one polity. It is the classic challenge of politics, the task of “e pluribus unum”. I argue that modern ‘Western democracies’ (potentially as much as other democracies, but with which I am not familiar enough to include them in my argument) face the challenge of increasing social differentiation, in as different areas of life such as workplaces, cultural identity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, ideas of a good life etc., coinciding with a decreasing relevance of classical institutions within a corporatist democracy (such as trade unions, political parties or the church). I argue that in contrast to distributive inequality, which for reasons of equality of freedom (and for the sake of justice) should be reduced, the latter dimensions of diversity indeed represent an increasing cultural freedom and should be welcomed. However, the increasing social differentiation as welcome as it is, poses a challenge for the one polity. I argue that only a shared notion of community can stabilize the democratic field on which a diverse society can create the policies and rules of self-government. I indicate that further thoughts should be spent on spelling out the yet rather vague concept of community (and on the question whether it might be better *not* to spell it out). One way ahead might be to incorporate notions of a “constitutional patriotism” (Habermas) and a shared understanding of basic human rights.