



Discursion in Defense of Deficit Democracy

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Abstract

Recent advancements in ICTs, especially the internet, has been revolutionizing the way we understand democracy. General understanding of the concept of democracy is limited to representative democracy, and this representative democracy is understood, by many critics, as deficit in its domain; both in terms of inclusiveness in representation and in dispersing the benefits of the democratic power in an egalitarian manner. The concept of representation itself is under severe pressure as the demands to democratize democracy has been on rise with the advent of internet, and these demands are presumed to transform the nature of democracy. Hence, an evaluation of the present liberal democratic system may help us understand its strengths and weaknesses, and the modulations, mutilations, or adaptations that need to be made to address the democratic deficit that the internet has exposed. This paper attempts at deciphering the concept of present liberal democracy by looking at its foundations on which it stands. Different aspects related to different forms of liberal democracy like the general understanding of the concept itself, different axioms that support this particular version of democracy, functional limitations that force the present liberal democracy to take a particular shape, causal explanations for the emergence or development of this particular shape, power politics behind its promotion, survival mechanisms that the present system has adopted, and ways or methods employed by it to confine the alternatives to present liberal democracy etc. are critically looked at.

Keywords: Axioms, Deficit Democracy, Disengagement, Functional Structures, Legitimacy, Representative Democracy, Uniformitarian Rationality.

Introduction

The fundamental assumptions of democracy is rooted in the belief that people constitute the core in exercising the power, and power is presumably derived from the people in a democratic manner. This democratically derived power is presumed to be exercised by the people themselves in various ways. The practice of democracy varies significantly from the theoretical presumptions, as a look at various democratic practices around the world shows us that the power is 'democratically' derived from the people, but not exercised by people in a direct manner. Different indirect ways of exercising democratic power makes mockery of democratic theory i.e., the presumption that power is exercised by people in a democratic manner¹. In theory, in a democracy, people are presumed to take the decision for themselves, but in practice, decisions are taken by a small groups of 'elected' or 'selected' representatives on behalf of the people, by using various representation methods. This leads to different types of questions that question the democratic nature of present democracy as questions like who takes the decisions on behalf of who pops up. Are the decisions taken by all the people for all the people or are the decisions taken by some people to accommodate the interests of some people? What is the decision making mechanism? Are people consulted all the time or are they consulted on some 'important' occasions only? If people are consulted on important occasions only who decides the importance of such occasions? Public at

large? Civil society? The ruling government? On what basis the importance of an issue is decided? Based on government's priority? The ruling party's ideology? The dominant sections in the society? Public opinion? The fact that we are asking a variety of questions pertaining to who exercises the power in a democracy, and how this power is exercised itself reflects the fact that democracy is not rule by the people². These questions indicate that democracy is rule by some people over all others in a 'legitimate' way. These few people who rule the rest in the name of democracy enjoy all the privileges and the resources that the democratic power gives them, and leaves the majority of people to feel that they are 'legitimately' not eligible to exercise the democratic power. Practical definitions of democracy gives us a glimpse of how the concept of democracy really works. Democracy is defined as a mechanism where certain type of institutional setup is established to make the elite compete for the opportunities to rule the people³. These elite are elected or selected in a routine, circular and periodical manner by the people. Once elected to the positions to exercise democratic power, these elected representatives stay in office for a fixed period and exercise the democratic power on behalf of the electorate.

Deficit Democracy

Democracy, in its present form, can be conveniently called as deficit in nature i.e., the democratic power is not exercised by

the people directly, and are excluded from the decision making process in a systematic manner – by citing the legitimate consent that they have given for the elected or selected representatives to rule them². The government, on behalf of the people, comes up with all legislations that are presumably endorsed by the people. Governments, elected representatives, bureaucrats, select committees or expert committees etc. take the decisions on behalf of the people presuming that what these representatives or committees think is what people usually think. The decisions are defended by using public opinion as a basis for the decision, and the public opinion is manufactured in a manner that befits the governments or elected representative⁴. Hence, it can be argued that the democratic practice points to the fact that decision are taken by the few people – very few people indeed – on behalf of the others. The rest of the people i.e., the vast majority of masses are ‘legitimately’ bound to follow these decisions. Democracy is defined as “*the conduct of public affairs for the private privileges*” (P-4)⁵. This quotation rightly points to the fact that the democratic power is derived from ‘all’ the people, but is used in a ‘legitimate’ manner by ‘few’ people for their own interests. Public power is used in a ‘legitimate’ manner for the private gains of those who exercise it. Democracy is also defined as the “*the worst form of government, except for all the other forms*”(P-4)⁵. Thus, democracy can be called as a best form of government vis-a-vis other forms of governments. Grafstein defines democracy as an attempt to “*equate legitimacy with stable and effective power, reducing it to a routine submission to authority*”(P-22)⁶. This definition of democracy sounds appropriate to the democratic practice that we have been witnessing around the world. Yes, democracy can be defined as an attempt to legitimize and stabilize the power of the ruling elite by creating an illusion among the people that it is they who have consented for the power to be exercised by a particular set of people¹. Different studies on democracy reveal that the trust on the democratic institutions has been on decline continuously². This decrease in the trust on democratic institutions or practices is leading to democratic deficit.

Axioms in Defense of Deficit Democracy

The concept of representative democracy itself seems to be framed in a deficit manner. The foundations of representative democracy is rooted on certain axioms which intrinsically makes us to believe that it is the only form of government that allows people to exercise their power. According to Barber, the concept of democracy rests on certain axioms that act as a defense mechanism to the structures of representative democracy. Barber says that “*the axioms sets up materialism as a pre-theoretical base, while the corollaries deal with atomism, indivisibility, commensurability, mutual exclusivity, and sensationalism*” (P-32)⁵. The axioms that form the pre-theories that are required to support the arguments in favor of liberal representative democracy are constructed in a well-structured manner to support representative democracy. Materialism as a basis of life is projected as the primary attitude or fact of life,

and pursuance of these material facts are given priority, making the people to freely compete with each other and with the public at large, pushing themselves to be individually centered in terms of their goals and aspirations. This material outlook limits the individuals to concentrate on what they can get personally – personal preferences or advantages are replaced with public interests. Individuals are made to measure themselves with others on the same scale, using particular methods of calculation only i.e., people are made to look at certain aspects only, and in a particular lenses only⁷. This limits the alternatives, or curtails the alternatives to representative democracy thus effectively forming a fixed defense mechanism in support of the representative democracy. The axioms are also developed in a manner to make the individual feel that the individual is mutually exclusive i.e., she is different from others, she is special, and she should maintain her own exclusive domain that is thought to be different or exclusive from the public realm. This orientation makes an individual feel that she needs to protect her domain from others, and that the individual realms of each and every individual is different from that of others, and all the individual realms of all the individuals are different from the public realm that all these individuals are part of. This orientation effectively isolates the individual and makes her feel that maintaining certain degree of isolationism, or disengaging from the rest of the society is quite natural and important for her individuality.

The axioms or pre-theories on which the concept of democracy rests, are basically hypothetical in orientation, presuming that conceding power to the public at large will lead to anarchy or chaos, and that the only way to protect the democracy from crumbling is to protect it from the masses i.e., by excluding the masses in a systematic manner from the decision making process, and limit them to the level of consenting to the decisions of the small elite who are elected or selected by the masses. These axioms usually start with a hypothetical situation and ends with a hypothetical answer, as is apparent from the question itself, which starts in a hypothetical manner⁵. These hypothetical questions, or solutions to these questions usually make us feel that the ordinary folks cannot understand all these aspects, hence, are not eligible to be part of the decision making process. Things that are grounded in practice, and are not easily decipherable, are usually presented in a particular line of argument – starting from one particular point, and usually leading to a particular conclusion, which the people cannot avoid defending after going through all the process of hypothetical problems and solutions. This theoretical process usually puts the people on the track of “*uniformitarian rationality*”(P-31)⁵. Different liberal philosophers like Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Rawls etc. fall under the category of these theoretical philosophers who seem to defend a particular version of government or political mechanism. The conclusions that these thinkers have produced make us think that there could not be a better position than the ones presented by these philosophers, and this acts as deterrence to alternatives that could possibly come from the public. These hypothetical

theories fill the public sphere, and these ideas influence or form the core of discussions of it. All the ideas that the public sphere is filled with will be ideas from certain axioms or theories that defend the status of a particular change, to a particular extent. The nature of the public sphere also depends on the state and the societal environment in which it is located. This limits the public sphere to a particular set of accepted ideas that are supported by its surrounding environment, the government or ruling class in power, or the mainstream or dominant ideas that are prevalent in the public sphere. Thus, the public sphere can be said to be heavily dependent on the state and the environment, and it takes shape under the shadow of the state – despite its opposition to the state⁸. Hence, the axioms supported by the ruling classes, state, or dominant sections tend to define the possibilities and impossibilities about democratic practices in a definitive dimension.

Nurturing and nullifying of ideas in this public sphere simply depends on the ideas of certain sections. Certain ideas find natural acceptance and are nurtured carefully whereas some ideas find immaculate, yet indeterminate opposition from this public sphere. The ideas that find nurturers are usually ideas that support the nurturer's position, orientation or version of truth, whereas, the ideas that vanish or meet with severe resistance are the ideas that question the dominant sections in the public sphere⁹. To put it simply, nurturing of ideas in the public sphere depends on the nurturer's capacity to defend it, and the capacity to form such defense usually rests in the hands of the ruling elite. Hence, ideas that the ruling elite nurture become the dominant ideas, whereas ideas that do not find strong nurturers, usually vanish, after getting labeled as 'weak' ideas. This process goes on reinforcing for generations leading to a chain of ideas formed in a particular socio-economic and political context, and nurtured in a particular manner, in support of certain mechanisms. This process insulates the ideas of the public sphere from potential new ideas that could possibly thwart the existing ideas that the public sphere is in support of. The present public sphere is filled with ideas that support a particular model of democracy – representative democracy. It prefixes the people to stick to a particular variant of democracy by citing the structural and functional possibilities and limitations, and by appealing to the 'rational' minds that are part of the public sphere. This process effectively acts as a step to rest the individual from taking all the pains of participating in the decision making process. The modern liberal man, according to Barber, "*regards it a liberal ideal; man at rest, inactive, nonparticipating, isolated, un-interfered with, privatized, and thus free*" (P-36)⁵. The basic assumptions of the representation, that a person can be represented by another person, and the assumption that an alternative to representation becomes untenable encourages the individual to stay away from the political process. These forces the individuals to be free and act in a privatized manner, thus, effectively disengaging themselves from the 'democratic' process.

Competing parties or ideologies try to disengage the people of the opposite ideologies or parties so as to reduce the support base for their opponents. This demobilization tactic is followed by both the sides leading to disengagement on both the sides¹⁰. Many political thinkers hold the individuals to be responsible for their disengagement from the political process. Thinkers like Schumpeter think that the people are not disengaged from the political process because of the democratic setup but because of their own indifferent attitude to the political process³. According to him, the inactive public sphere is a byproduct of citizen apathy, and not the other way around. Thus, the theories that support representative form of democracy usually defend or try to vest the democratic power in the hands of the few individuals. Different variants of liberal democracy like anarchism, realism, and minimalist versions defend limited democracy by citing many reasons like individual autonomy and individual interest⁵. These variants present the idea that individuals are individualistic in nature, and are unique and different from the rest of the society. The seeding that individuals are individualistic in nature, as presumed by different variants of democracy, makes the individual to behave in an individual centric manner. This not only isolates the individual from the larger society but also makes her to be up against the society all the time. Individually militant orientation towards the society becomes a common phenomenon and convergence of paths of the individuals and the society is viewed by individuals as an attempt of the state or society to intrude into the 'private' affairs of the citizens. This 'disengage-as-much-as-possible' orientation of the individuals lead to a free ride of the society by a few individuals who cooperate among themselves to exploit it.

All the minimalist dispositions of liberal democracy enjoy significant support base in the form of different theories by 'prominent' scholars, and these scholars define democracy as an institutional mechanism to arrive at certain decisions by gaining consent of the masses. Schumpeter's understanding of the masses that they choose policies among the options presented to them by the elite says it all³. The masses are expected to pick one party or ideology to rule over them. Schumpeter claims the public reasoning as unreasonable, untenable and is heavily influenced by the manipulation of the small elite¹¹. This sounds true if we were to look at what political parties, newspapers, textbooks, and television channels usually do to create, subvert, or manipulate the public opinion¹². Scholars like Lippmann and Berelson assume that the masses, who are 'incapable' of looking at objective realities, should not be given the responsibility to exercise democratic power, instead, the elite should try to induce change in a steady manner³. According to these thinkers, the masses do not have the privilege of leisure to think about different nuances of the public affairs, but these thinkers do not explain why the masses do not have time, whereas a small section of people, a few elite, have got time to think about public issues. These types of projections about the public at large makes the masses believe that they are not competent enough, or they do not have time to think about the whole

society in general, and that it is better to take care of their own lives and nothing else is important. As soon as the masses arrive at these conclusions, legitimacy for limited form of liberal democracy shoots up, and people are tuned to submit the decision making power to a small group of elite 'elected' once in a while. This small elite 'represent' the masses in a liberal democracy.

Functional Structures in Defense of Deficit Democracy

Representation in literal sense means to re-present. As the meaning indicates, it is the process where something gets presented again. In democratic theory, representation indicates presentation of one person's ideas or interests by other persons. The concept of representation started gaining prominence during the 17th century, especially with the writings of Thomas Hobbes¹³. Hobbes did not discuss about representation in a direct manner but his writings intrinsically paved to the understanding of what representation are. According to Hobbes, representation means 'acting for' others. Hobbes was in favor of unrestrained power to the representatives as is obvious from his writings in Leviathan. Hobbes advocated submission of individuals to the ruler in an unquestioning manner, suggesting full autonomy to the representatives. The political environment in which Hobbes was writing the Leviathan suggests his way of thinking and why he was supporting the state or representatives in an absolute manner. Locke understood representation in a broader sense than how Hobbes has presented it. According to Locke "all legitimate authority must rest on the rational consent of individuals, and what any of us will rationally consent to is limited by what each of us has a right to – our lives, our liberty and our estates – and consent is required at the inception of a legitimate state, in choosing the representatives to give consent on their behalf" (Pp. 30-31)¹⁴. Locke is advocating the necessity to gain consent of the people at every stage; at the inception of the state, and while choosing representatives etc. J. S. Mill seems to have understood representation in a much broader sense than both Hobbes and Locke in the sense that he holds the representatives to be responsible to the people¹³. The utilitarian version of representation extends the arguments of Mill by adding the numerical component to the representation. According to the utilitarian version of representation, the representatives should represent the good or wishes of the majority of the populace. In other words, the representatives should try to take care of the ideas or opinions of the maximum number of people¹⁵. This idea of representation can be called as an extension of the utilitarian principle – greatest good for the greatest number of people. This form, or understanding of representation sounds fair as the representative is presumed to represent the ideas of the maximum possible majority, but the problem with this type of representation is that it neglects the ideas of the minorities in a legitimate way.

Different thinkers have presented representation in different ways, and significant disagreement can be seen in their ways of

understanding the concept of representation, but all these thinkers have one thing in common – representation. The apparent conclusion of all these thinkers is that representation is unavoidable, hence, it must be made as representative as possible. Now, how to make representation process truly representative? Representatives, especially in modern days, take decisions on 'n' number of issues, and in the process of taking decisions, they do not consult the people all the time. This leaves significant degree of discretion in the hands of the representatives, in fact, the degree of discretion is so much that they are held responsible for their acts once in a while only, and consultation with the public takes place on 'important' issues only. Most of the times the representatives take the presumed stand that her electorate would have taken if she were to be in the shoes of the representative¹⁵. Sounds good in a theoretical sense, but in practice, it is difficult to guess the interests of the people, and we cannot be sure that the stand taken by the representative is a true reflection of the stand of her electorate. It is even difficult to assess who is getting represented, whether all the electorate, or only some active electorate, or whether the position of the representative is getting represented in the name of the electorate. Hobbes adds complexity to these questions by distinguishing the human beings into natural persons and artificial persons based on their capacity to think independently. According to Hobbes, natural persons are those who act on their own, independent to the external influence and are conscious, or are aware of their senses, whereas artificial persons are those who gets influenced by their surrounding environment and shed their originality to the external pressures¹⁵. Believing in Hobbes distinction of natural and artificial persons makes the concept of representation very complex, and we may lose trust in the concept of representation itself as it is difficult to distinguish between natural and artificial persons, especially in the era of communication wars where manipulation, propaganda, hegemony, political socialization etc. concepts play a predominant role¹². Shunning yourself from the communication may keep you in the darkness about various issues, and getting to know about these issues may make you an artificial person, thus making you ineligible to be represented, according to Hobbes.

The axioms or pre-theories that we have observed so far makes us infer that there is no alternative to liberal representative democracy. Alternatives to representative democracy do not seem to have a chance of withstanding the presumptive problems that the axioms that support the representative democracy have to say. Apart from the axioms that form the defense of representative democracy, certain functional structures that it follows like different representative mechanisms, voting methods, decision making methods etc. are also planned to defend it from critiques of representative democracy. All these analysis points to the inevitability of representation – at least, this is what we were made to believe in. Now a look at representation may help us understand how deficit is representative democracy. Arguments in favor of representative democracy apparently point to one established

goal – to hand over the power to a small group of persons who are presumed to ‘represent’ all the people. Hence, all the modern democracies seem to be right in choosing representative democracy to all other forms of democracies or non-democracies.

How far a particular political system is representative simply depends on the nature of representation it allows or follows to represent its people. The legitimacy of a system is also derived from the institutional mechanism it chooses to accommodate representation. If the representative mechanism of the system is strong then the legitimacy of that particular system commands legitimacy. Contrary to this, if the representative mechanism of a particular system is not strong, or if the system is not based on any representation at all, then that system apparently faces legitimacy crisis that can make the political system weak. Critics of liberal representative democracy argue that a strong legitimacy to the political system through ‘proper’ mechanism for representation does not make that particular system automatically democratic. Instead, they argue that the people in this particular system are tuned in sync with the arguments that favor representative democracy over other forms of democracies, and whatever ‘representative’ representative methods that the system has created is nothing but a scheme to appropriate the democratic power of the people in a ‘legitimate’ manner, and exercise it – usually done by few people – with ‘informed’ ‘consent’ of the people¹². This creates the necessary illusion among the electorate that they have chosen something and that they have consented or dissented to something, which makes them feel that things are in their hands¹. The critics of representative democracy argue that the so called inclusive representative mechanism that a political system follows to get consent from the people is apparently planned to ‘generate’ consent from the people. All the so called ‘representative’ representative mechanisms are apparently designed to generate legitimacy for limited rule or rule by few over the masses. Different assumptions of representative democracy are repeatedly pushed on the people. The voters in a representative democracy are usually applauded for ‘consciously’ ‘electing’ representatives, who, according to the people, are the best possible people to represent them⁴. The voter is credited with reason in applying her choice to choose a representative, but explanations regarding why an electorate has to contain her with choosing a representative is usually avoided. It is presumed that the representative that the electorate has elected represent her interests.

Defense to representative mechanisms usually comes from two basic presumptions; one – difficulty in bringing people together to discuss and take decisions, and two – not all the electorate are capable of making good decisions. Both the presumptions push us to the same conclusion – some form of representation has to be practiced to practice some form of democracy. The first presumption is related to the lack of functional structures that makes it difficult to practice direct forms of democracy, and the second presumption points to the understanding that people or

electorate are not equal in their capacities to understand everything, and that only a small section of people with natural intellectual caliber can understand these things². Hence, representation should be practiced to practice pragmatic form of democracy. Different political thinkers supported representation in different ways. J. S. Mill defended representative democracy saying that it allows small elite, who are intellectual in nature, to rule the masses. According to Mill, the masses cannot understand the nuances of the ruling; hence, they should allow the intellectuals to rule them³. Joseph Schumpeter also defended representative democracy saying that “*those with inborn capacity for leadership, including intellect and moral character, would naturally comprise a ruling class, from which viable candidates would promote themselves or receive support from a political party, providing that enough citizens participated in the elections of their representatives, the democratic method would work most effectively if elected leaders were left to make decisions without any need to be accountable to the public, until next elections*”(P-11)³. While thinkers like J. S. Mill felt that the electorate should be allowed to question their representatives, thinkers like Schumpeter thought that the representatives should be left alone and their discretion should not be questioned by the masses. This allows unquestionable powers to the representatives and makes them unaccountable for their actions or decisions. If we were to accept the version of Schumpeter, people fall into the trap of representation once they are done with the election procedures. This leaves the people with only one choice i.e., they can change or overthrow representatives only in the next elections, till then, they have to suffer the consequences of electing incompetent or bad representatives.

Critics of representative democracy dismiss the concept of representation altogether. According to G. D. H. Cole, representative democracy is not a democracy at all³. Cole disagrees with the idea of representation itself saying that the concept that one person can be represented by other person is completely unreasonable, and it is nothing but taking away the rights of the represented person, or altogether nullifying the independent existence of that person. Representative democracy, according to Cole, limits the available choices to the choices of the representative i.e., the ideas that are generated in a representative democracy are usually restrained to the ideas of the representatives, and that it is not a reflection of ideas of the whole society. The apparent argument of Cole is that if the represented person is to take her own decision or if she is to be allowed to present her own ideas, then her ideas would be totally different than the ones presented by her representative on behalf of her. This sounds true in the present circumstances where the representatives are allowed to take too many decision on behalf of the electorate, on too many issues, some of them not related to the electorate at all. Certain decisions that the representatives take keeping in view certain issues may not sound like issues at all if the same issues or decisions were to be taken by the represented. The concept of representation takes diversion in the beginning itself i.e., from the stage of selection of issues itself. Hence, the representative democracy can be said

to be far away from representing the people, and the concept of representation itself can be said to be a failure, or as an institutional mechanism to create illusion among the masses by making them to think that they are in charge of their own affairs¹.

Conclusion

Liberal democracy, in all its forms, disengages the public from the political process. The axioms or pre-theories that support representative democracy are in fact formed with an orientation to keep the democratic power in the hands of the few people. Different functional aspects are cited as reasons for representation to be the approximation of the society in general, but in reality, the approximation stands wide off the mark of what people actually think. Consent is taken from the people once in a while, a list of few things are shown to the people in the form of manifesto, and consent to these ideas are manufactured using various electoral methods that limit the participation process to collection or generation of consent, and the citizens are disengaged immediately from there onwards. The idea of representative democracy itself is nothing less than an attempt to control the citizens with as many restrictions as possible. Hence, liberal democracy can be called as an attempt to limit the ideas that can be generated by the people. Creation of alternatives are restricted, and are made to fit the representative format of liberal democracy, and then citizens are accused of being apathetic to the political system. Hence, we can conveniently come to the conclusion that citizens are 'democratically' disengaged in a deficit democracy.

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