

The Rise of Citizenship and Rights Post the Advent of Enlightenment

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Abstract

Capitalism is essentially an unequal system dividing the society into the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. It is today seen as the greatest challenge to realizing the basic human right of equality. However if we trace the history of capitalism, it emerged as a result of a revolt against the feudal system and the inequality perpetuated by that system. Further, simultaneous to the development of capitalism was the development of modern citizenship and democratic rights - at least in the country where capitalism first originated i.e. England. The aim of the paper is to analyse how a system which itself was a mark of revolt against oppression and which led to the development of rights has become the greatest perpetrator of oppression and greatest threat to human rights. The paper begins with a brief history of the rise of citizenship followed by that of capitalism as a response to feudalism. Through T H Marshall's "Citizenship and Social Class" the paper tries to analyse the contradiction between the rise of citizenship and capitalism and then goes on to discuss the future of citizenship in the current neo-liberal capitalist society.

Keywords: Capitalism; Marshall; Neoliberalism; Rights

Introduction

Citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed. There is no universal principle that determines what those rights and duties shall be, but societies in which citizenship is a developing institution create an image of an ideal citizenship against which achievement can be measured and towards which aspiration can be directed [1].

While citizenship is generally seen as an age old concept finding its origins in the classical societies of Greece and Rome, it was then necessarily an exclusionary concept. The honour of being a citizen was bestowed only on a handful of inhabitants of the land. To be a citizen of a state was a privilege rather than a right. Women, children, and slaves were essentially removed from such a setting. Such an understanding of citizenship underwent a massive change post the Enlightenment which culminated in the French Revolution.

At different points of time in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, many nations and cultures witnessed a shift in attitudes pertaining to scientific and religious beliefs, understanding of politics and society, and the way authority was perceived. This phenomenon of changing beliefs is referred to as the Enlightenment. The thinkers of this time were primarily concerned with "clearing away mysteries, obfuscations, the clutter of outmoded ideas and institutions that impeded man's progress, prosperity and happiness" (Dent 2005). The aim was to replace the Church's hegemony over education, law, governance and the social and private life of the people with a system that was "transparent in its rational purpose and functioning" and would lead to the liberation of man (Dent 2005). With its focus on rationality, equality and freedom of every individual, Enlightenment was an era of inclusion, an era which questioned the subjugation of a majority of the society by the Monarchs and the feudal landlords. It was the emergence of man from his "self-imposed nonage" [2]. Advocating democracy, enlightenment celebrated the individual. It was

in such a context that the modern nation state and the corresponding modern notion of citizenship came into existence.

The Rise of Capitalism as a Response to Feudalism

Feudalism as a socio-economic system, "a system under which the economic status and authority were associated with land-tenure, and the direct producer was under obligation based on law or customary right to devote a certain quota of his labour or his produce to the benefit of his feudal superior" [3] was necessarily a hierarchal system based on the subjugation of the labourer by the landlord. After much revolt, this system eventually gave rise to capitalism - a system based on the fundamental principle of freedom. While the transition from feudalism to capitalism has been much debated in literature from the two being called mutually exclusive (Sweezy) to one causing the other (Dobb), it is safe to say that the transition from feudalism to capitalism involves - a) a change in the ownership of means of production b) commodification of labour c) freedom to interact in a market. While the origins of capitalism can be traced back to the fifteenth and sixteenth century, capitalism in its full force - industrial capitalism - came into existence after the industrial revolution. With huge surplus being produced there was tremendous scope for market to expand.

Capitalism, argues Marx, essentially leads to the division of the population into two antagonistic classes - the capitalist class (bourgeoisie) who owns the means of production and the labour class (proletariat) who sell their labour in exchange of wages. This division of the people into two classes is the source of oppression that is so fundamental to capitalism [4]. And it is this aspect of capitalism which does not sit quite well with the simultaneous rise of the idea of citizenship based on the enlightenment principles of rationality and equality of individuals.

Two sets of questions thus arise. Firstly, how did citizenship and the notion of equality come into existence simultaneously with the development of capitalism - the greatest perpetuator of inequality? Was capitalism initially based on equality and something went wrong later? Or was there an inherent contradiction between the two from

the very beginning? Second, how has a system which was a response to prevalent inequality in the society itself become a perpetuator of inequality? It is this contradiction that T H Marshall looked to understand in "Citizenship and Social Class".

Compatibility of the Rise of Citizenship and Capitalism

T H Marshall's analysis

T H Marshall's work on citizenship is considered to mark the beginning of the contemporary theoretical development on citizenship. Marshall developed his theory on citizenship at a time when the National Health Service was being created, when higher education opportunities were being expanded in Britain, when pension and welfare provision resembling "cradle to grave protections" were being provided to the citizens and when the government was beginning to nationalise basic industries [5]. The development of a welfare state thus forms the background of Marshall's political thought.

Taking Britain as his starting point, unlike some Marxists who see the notion of equality in citizenship as an illusion, drawing from the economist Alfred Marshall, T H Marshall believes in the legitimacy of the modern society's propagation of equality. At the same time, he also recognises the inequality that is perpetuated by a capitalist society. In his political thought, Marshall tried to resolve the tension between the two contradictory principles. Writes Marshall, "I shall suggest that our society today assumes that the two are still compatible, so much so that citizenship has itself become, in certain respects, the architect of legitimate social inequality" [1].

Marshall divides citizenship into three parts – civil, political and social. The civil element of citizenship deals with rights which are a prerequisite for the freedom of human beings and have courts of justice as their corresponding institution, the political element deals with rights related to political power – the right to be both a member of a political authority or to elect a political authority for oneself – and have parliaments and councils of local government as their corresponding institutions. The third element of citizenship – the social aspect – deals with rights related to the well-being of individuals and corresponds to the institutions of educational system and social services [1]. The three elements of citizenship, for Marshall, developed in a unilineal manner in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. Marshall's thesis thus has a teleological character to it. Tracing the development of citizenship T H Marshall looks to analyse how citizenship, a concept fundamentally based in the concept of equality developed simultaneously with capitalism – a system which primarily needs inequality to flourish.

The contradiction between capitalism and citizenship rights is apparent. In actuality, instead of conflicting with the inequalities of capitalist society, Marshall explains, rights were necessary for the maintenance of inequality perpetuated by capitalism. The apparent contradiction can be explained by the fact that at that particular point of time in history, the core of citizenship was composed of civil rights [1]. And civil rights are a requisite for a competitive market economy. Giving each person the power to engage in the economic struggle, they absolved the state from any role in the well-being of the individual. The modern contract between the members of the society thus developed, is essentially a contract between individual equal in status – though not in power.

Status was not eliminated from the social system. Differential status, associated with class, function and family, was replaced by the single

uniform status of citizenship, which provided the foundation of equality on which the structure of inequality could be built [1].

Citizenship thus, instead of being a danger for capitalism, was the very foundation to capitalism and a free market economy. Civil rights, while provide each individual the legal capacity to possess what they desire, never guarantee the possession. "A property right is not a right to possess property, but a right to acquire it, if you can, and to protect it, if you can get it" [1]. While superficially such a right may seem to be built on the principle of equality, it is downright absurd to compare and equate the property rights of a poor individual to those of a millionaire. Marshall draws a similar line of argument in the case of freedom of speech. While every individual may be entitled to such a right, it is only a limited few who have access to education and can actually make use of their rights. The rest by virtue of being illiterate, though having the same right are never able to make use of it. The inequalities which thus result, says Marshall are not due to any defects in civil rights, but due to the lack of social rights which took another two centuries to develop. Given such a state of affairs, The Poor Law served as an aid and not a menace to capitalism. All the industry was now required to do was honour the contract of employment without being socially responsible for its workers.

At this stage in history, argues Marshall, though citizenship had not taken any steps towards eradicating inequality, it "had helped to guide progress into the path which led directly to the egalitarian policies of the twentieth century" [1].

However, it was only once the political and social elements of citizenship came into picture that cracks could be seen between the apparent synthesis of citizenship and capitalism. Marshall argues that citizenship requires a sense of loyalty amongst community members. It involves both a struggle to gain rights and enjoyment of the rights once won. Such a scenario can be seen in the eighteenth century, when along with the birth of modern civil rights there was a simultaneous origin of modern national consciousness and the recognition of democracy as the model to proceed forward [1]. Such an awakening of public freedom however did not impact class structure and social inequality in any way since political power was still far from the grasp of the common man. It was only after political power came in the hands of people, that traces of inequality perpetuated by capitalism first came to be realised. Fashioned by the upper class, modern democracy was handed down to the lower. Newspapers were made available for all those who could read, leading to both, a sense of awareness and national consciousness among people. Marshall argue that at the early stages of development of the political element of citizenship, the upper class – who were perpetuating such rights – did not realize the potential danger such rights comprised of. Unlike civil rights, political rights would give real power to the lower class, who, once learnt how to utilise such rights to full capacity could bring about a change in the inequalities prevalent in that period. This inherent power to challenge the course of capitalism was not realised by the upper class who assumed that once the working class became educated would internalise the ideas already prevalent in the society. The power of collective bargaining which follows political rights was not foreseen by the short-sighted profit-oriented upper class.

Once the second element of citizenship was achieved, it was only a matter of time before social element would come into play. "Social rights imply an absolute right to a certain standard of civilisation which is conditional only on the discharge of the general duties of citizenship" [1]. The demand was no longer to have a right to free speech, but to have the ability to make use of such a right. A minimum

economic and social standard of living was expected for every individual. While for Marshall it took almost two centuries to make a transition from the first to the third stage of development of citizenship, it was in this stage that capitalism and citizenship stand at loggerheads. While one is based on the concept of equality, the otherwise giving an illusion of “freedom” essential thrives on inequality.

Going by Marshall’s thesis, rise of social citizenship and welfare state coincide with each other. Social citizenship for Marshall, not only takes forward the process of social inclusion started by the civil and political rights, but also takes them to their logical conclusion, thus highlighting the teleological nature of his thesis. Social citizenship promotes equality outside of the political realm thus taking the idea of equality far beyond the formal concept of equality amongst citizens. While civil and political rights did nothing to challenge the essentially unequal nature of a capitalistic system, the rise of social rights in the twentieth century brought to focus the war that exists between citizenship and capitalism. Marshall however sees the potential in citizenship to “modify the class structure and counteract some of the most deleterious consequences of inequality.” [5]. This ‘modification’ however it should be remembered does not mean an end to class structure, just a subdued version of it.

However, class abatement does not mean the end to social classes or to inequality. In terms of classes, it means that class distinctions are no longer as salient today as they were in the past. Here Marshall is clearly speaking about British society’s rigid class structure and its concomitant in tense class-consciousness. The goal of the welfare state is “not a classless society, but one in which class differences are legitimate in terms of social justice...”. In terms of inequality, it means that the inequalities predicated on the privilege of background will be reduced, but in their place a new- and legitimate – type of fine quality will emerge based on merit. The goal is not equality of outcomes, but rather equality of opportunity [5].

Capitalism, Inequality and the Loss of Freedom

Having thus understood the contradictions between the rise of citizenship and capitalism, we now come to our second question. How did a system which was a revolt against an oppressive, unequal system, itself become a system which essentially leads to ‘unfreedom’ and perpetrates inequality?

The answer perhaps lies in the lack of egalitarian origins of capitalism. While capitalism gave every individual the right to earn for themselves, it neither made sure that all individuals were on equal footing at the very start nor did it make sure that every individual got an opportunity to earn. Capitalism may have been a response to the existent oppressive system of regime fundamentally based on freedom, this freedom however did not mean equality. There was a sense of freedom and equality which provided every human being the opportunity to participate in a free market but it never gave every individual the capability to do so.

The oppressive regime of capitalist system can be understood in terms of “double freedom” [4]. While capitalism gave the labourer the freedom to choose his employer, it also freed him from his land. The result was thus two antagonist classes – one who owned the means of production and the other who sold their labour power and were subjected to economic coercion.

Emphasising on the essential “objectification” of individuals in a capitalist system, Prabhat Patnaik brings out the implications of such a process. He begins by pointing out that capitalism in its pure form never has and never will exist. Since the beginning of capitalism, the state has had a role to play in the sustenance of the system. It is the state that protects the private property of individuals which is a pre-requisite for capitalism to survive. First, argues Patnaik, individuals under a capitalist system have a twin character – they are on the one hand, “objects” in the economic realm, “mere mediations through whom the immanent tendencies of the system get played out” while on the other hand “they are, nominally at least, “subjects” in the realm of the polity, provided of course the polity happens to be a bourgeois democratic polity”. Second, continues Patnaik, that even this subjective role is necessarily constrained, not merely empirically but also structurally because of the presence of state intervention [6].

From the first two implications, Patnaik argues that the logical conclusion which thus follows is the fundamental restriction of democracy under a capitalist system – this restriction is not just the rampant prevalence of hunger and poverty as suggested by empirical evidence but the basic inability of people to break way from being “objects”. While individuals are essentially “objects” in the economic realm, the presence of state intervention takes away their “subjective” status even from the political sphere. Individual freedom thus, argues Patnaik, is incompatible with capitalism. Though this seems paradoxical since “bourgeois society is supposed to represent the acme of individualism, the ultimate arrival of the individual, the flowering of unfettered individual talent, while not only all pre-bourgeois societies, but even socialism, is supposed to bury the individual under the oppressive deadweight of the ‘community’” [6], Patnaik argues that it is precisely the “objectification” of individuals which leads to a denial of individual freedom. Since, capitalism will always entail such an objectification; it is only the transcendence of capitalism which will bring about true freedom for individuals. Patnaik then launches a full-fledged attack on democracy in a capitalist society.

The fact there are limits to political praxis arising from the constraints on State intervention, brings about in bourgeois societies a process of what one might call “destruction of politics”. Since political parties internalize these constraints, there is little to choose between them. And even if perchance they come with differing programmes before the people prior to elections, the behaviour of the winning party after the elections becomes no different from what would have been the behaviour of its opponents had they come to power [6].

What Patnaik is essentially saying is that while choice in the realm of politics is the very essence of democracy, given the abovementioned background, people necessarily are left with no effective choice in democracy in the political sphere. Further it essentially means relegating people as mere “objects” even in a realm where normatively they should be assigned the role of “subjects”.

Patnaik says that while it may be true that competing political parties may have diametrically opposed agendas – varying from neo-fascist and liberal to pro-bourgeois, such differences seldom manifest themselves in the economic realm. On the rare occasion that they do, such differences disappear post elections when the political parties come into power. “The choice, even when existent in short, does not touch the realm of the economy which continues to be driven by its own immanent logic” [6].

Current Scenario

Given such a history of capitalism, the question that needs to be asked is whether capitalism is fulfilling the ideals of enlightenment, whether it is delivering on its promise of equality and freedom in the world. Capitalism entails the formation of two antagonistic classes who are always in a state of conflict. Capitalism is not possible without either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. The myth of freedom sustains the spirit of capitalism.

Given the coming of neo-liberalism post the Reagan and Thatcher regimes in the 1980s, and the propagation "conviction not consensus", capitalism has revealed its ugliest face till date. Countries have been forced to adopt policies of liberalisation and privatisation and have been made to give up their role as a "welfare state". This has resulted in a tremendous increase in the rate of growth of inequality within and between nations. Given such a backdrop, there is now a need to re-examine Marshall's thesis.

Marshall's beliefs lie in between socialism and unbridled capitalism. Advocating a legitimate, functional form of inequality, class abatement for Marshall is not the complete collapse of the class structure. Further, for Marshall, seeing the importance he gave to the notion of equality in the concept of citizenship, a radical redistribution would be essential to bring in some form of egalitarianism [5]. However, the coming on neo-liberalism has led to a situation of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. The world has witnessed an increase in both inter and intra country inequality. The income gap between the fifth of the world's people living in the richest countries and the fifth living in the poorest increased from 30:1 in 1960, to 60:1 in 1990 and 74:1 in 1997 (Harvey 2005). The ratio of GDP per capita of the richest 20 countries to the GDP per capita of the poorest 20 countries rose from 54:1 in 1960-62 to 121:1 during the time period 2000-2002 [7].¹ The increase in intra country inequality can be seen from the fact that between 1975 and 2000, the share of the richest 1% in gross income rose from 8% to 17% in the US, from 8.8% to 13.3% in Canada and from 6.1% to 13% in the United Kingdom.

This trend has not only marginalised the poor, but has also made it increasingly difficult for the middle class to survive in a state with economic power being concentrated in the hands of a few. This has further made it difficult for people to run for office especially at the national level – thus challenging their political rights. Further, with the cutting of social security, privatisation of education, even the social rights of people have come into grave danger, thus making class abatement seem a far-fetched dream. Social exclusion – instead of inclusion – seems to be the trend.

Conclusion

While it is true that freedom, democracy and individual subjectivity cannot be achieved under capitalism, it does not imply that there exists

no difference between capitalism and the earlier modes of production, that it is yet just another system perpetrating "unfreedom". Infact, freedom, democracy and individual subjectivity were the very things that capitalism promised to people. This is the underlying difference between capitalism and the earlier modes of production. It was only and only capitalism which promised to liberate the people from the shackles of unfreedom. "And for that very reason capitalism is the first mode of production whose essence lies in a betrayal: it betrays its own promise; it inserts a "spontaneous system" that "objectifies" individuals in lieu of a system that is malleable enough to reflect the will of the people; it thereby betrays its own agenda which can be realized only through its own supersession by an altogether different system, socialism" [6].

However, notwithstanding this betrayal, capitalism by virtue of being the only system which was achieved through a struggle against shackles of unfreedom on mankind is an essentially important milestone in human history. The recognition of individual subjectivity, makes capitalism stand out in man's quest for equality and freedom.

It (capitalism) is based on a notion of equality that overcomes differences in status, in religion, in ethnicity and caste. No matter how unequal an actual bourgeois society may be, it is based on a notion of juridical equality that corresponds to the apparent equality in the sphere of commodity circulation, where all participants, whether buyers or sellers of labour power, stand on an apparently equal footing, and carry out transactions "ideally" on the basis of equivalent exchange. And it is the recognition of individual "subjectivity" as a principle under capitalism which obviously underlies the institutionalization of bourgeois democracy [6].

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¹ The data presented has been calculated by Nayyar from World Bank Development Indicators, 2003.