

Liberal Democracy, Citizenship and Class: Unresolved Contradictions of Capitalism

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Abstract

With the post-war expansion of the welfare state, which provided a material basis for the adoption of social right as complementary to civil and political rights components of citizenship, there emerged an omnipresent conviction to assume that the institutionalization of citizenship in liberal democratic societies has not only deflected the threat of social instability but it has also eclipsed social class struggle from the plane of history. Contrary to this prevailing interpretation, which has failed to take into account the fragile nature of the social right component of citizenship, it will be demonstrated that the establishment of citizenship has not surmounted the inveterate contradictions of capitalist social relations.

Introduction

Since its entrance into political discourse as the central tenet of democratic theory, the concept of citizenship has continued to remain a subject of intellectual enquiry among analysts of different ideological persuasions. Citizenship has emerged as a key explanatory factor to elucidate the democratic nature of a society. The impact of the historical constellation of the elements of citizenship on social classes has been subject to diverse interpretations. Within the domain of sociological studies on the interplay of social rights, citizenship and class, there has emerged a ubiquitous assertion to assume that the institutionalization of citizenship in liberal democratic societies has not only deflected the threat of social upheavals but it has also removed social class struggle from the terrain of history. Contrary to this general interpretation, which ignores the structural contradictions lurking beneath the paradigm of citizenship, it will be argued that the entrenchment of citizenship has not conquered the intrinsic contradictions of capitalist social relations and that citizenship has in fact remained a strategic site of social struggle.

Prior to tracing the emergence of liberal democracy and dissecting the historical interplay of citizenship with working class politics, it is essential to reflect on the concept of democracy which has acquired a chameleon character depending on the context within which it is invoked. As John Schaar has pointed out, democracy has become “the most prostituted word of our age...” (Schaar 1981: 23). Due to its susceptibility to various interpretations, democracy has historically been employed as a rallying cry both for defying and protecting unequal power relations within the social order. While democracy has ideally continued to function as the nightmare of despotism and inequality, it has nevertheless been used as a liturgical necessity to lubricate the rationalization of exploitative power relations. Indeed, within the arsenal of American propaganda, democracy is used a weapon of intimidation to bring the non-submissive states (authoritarian and liberal democratic governments in the third world countries) into the American orbit and converting them into complaisant states.

The roots of democracy's vulnerability to contradictory interpretations emanate from the historical metamorphosis of its definition. In the course of its history, two definitions of democracy have continued to prevail in the terrain of political discourse. Within the classical parameters, democracy was apprehended as the direct exercise of power by people and the establishment of a social order within which no class or group could be permitted to live at the expense of others (Macpherson 1965; Manley 1983). This classical interpretation of democracy portended the eclipse of exploitation and oppression from the realm of social relation and subsequent emergence of a classless society (Manley 1983). After its fusion with liberalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, democracy was expunged from its normative élan and has since been used as a benchmark to measure the principles and procedures of governing institutions (Walker 1966; MacPherson 1965).

The amalgamation of democracy with liberalism known as liberal democracy has been praised as a simultaneous commitment to espouse liberty and equality within capitalist social relations which in fact have the potential to come into a deadly collision (Tinder 1986). Under the aegis of liberal democracy, liberty is construed as an unrestricted opportunity to appropriate, which is in a direct contradiction to equality understood as equal freedom for individuals to act as developers and exerts of their capabilities (MacPherson 1977; Manley 1983). The annexation of democracy to liberalism has been accompanied by an inveterate clash between equality and liberty in capitalist societies. The material ramification of liberty, which entails the transfer of power from many to few, is bound to curtail the scope of equality (MacPherson 1966). Elucidating the immanent tension between liberty and equality within the parameters of capitalist social relations necessitates tracing the historical trajectory of citizenship which has established itself as the cornerstone of liberal democracy.

The Evolution of Citizenship and Its Impact on Working Class Politics

Contrary to a widely held impression, which paints citizenship as the gift of nature bestowed upon humanity, its development had in fact run through three consecutive centuries of socio-political upheavals (Marshall 1965; Bendix 1964). Interpreted as the equal enjoyment and participation in the political life of community, the institution of citizenship is an ensemble of three conterminous but detached parts which encompass certain universalistic rights and obligations within civil, political and social spheres (Marshall 1965; Bendix 1964; Janoski 1998).

The principles of civil rights revolve around the paradigm of individual liberty and equality before the law which involve freedom of thought, speech, religious faith, voluntary contract and the right to acquire and dispose of property (Marshall 1965:78; Bendix 1964: 76-80). As the first component of citizenship, civil rights emerged out of the historical transformation of the feudal order into capitalist social relations that was triggered by the liberal bourgeois revolution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Marshall 1965: 92-93; Bendix 1964: 55-56). With gradual nationalization of common law and the concentration of disseminated politico-judicial jurisdictions into the institutions of the national state in the eighteenth century, civil rights acquired a national character (Marshall 1965: 79-80). The eruption of civil rights in the eighteenth century not only heralded a historical shift from servility to free labour but it also triggered a seismic pressure to de-link political life from control over land and hereditary or spiritual status which were striking dimensions of feudal social relations (Bendix 1964: 55; Marshall 1965: 84). Despite the inspiring promulgation of equality and liberty as the central tenets of civil rights that were waged by the liberal bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century, political participation was still attached to property (Bendix 1964: 63-64). During the eighteenth century, on the assumption of equal footing between employers and employees, the rights of the latter to combine in order to protect their interests were denied (Bendix 1964: 64). Even though civil rights provided a seminal ground for the development of working class associations, it was during the extension of

political rights in the nineteenth century that workers acquired the right to collective bargaining (Tilly 1995).

The emergence of civil rights in the eighteenth century was accompanied by the proliferation of political rights in the nineteenth century which was reflected in a gradual extension of the franchise to previously ostracized layers of the social order (Marshall 1965). Regardless of the social pressures for the democratization of the liberal state that had emanated from politically disenfranchised strata, the surge for the democratization of governing institutions was spurred by the intrinsic proclivity of capitalism to generate a "divided unity" within the ruling class which in the absence of a single centre "some kind of elective, deliberative and representative political machinery became necessary." (Therborn 1977: 26-29). Therborn's thesis of the emergence of liberal democracy as a response to the internal development of capitalism has in fact been corroborated by empirical evidence which indicates to the role of the intra-class conflict within the ruling class in the nineteenth century that functioned as an impetus behind the gradual extension of the franchise in many European countries (Bendix 1964). In conjunction with the imperatives of establishing a democratically representative governing entity as a means to surmount the dilemma of disunity within the elements of capital, the extension of the democratic franchise to lower strata was also a logical corollary of liberalism to replicate the principles of economic competitiveness at the political sphere (Macpherson 1965: 8-10).

The extension of the frontiers of the democratic franchise in the late nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries engendered a climate of ambivalence for social democratic and labour parties which had been torn along two opposing lines of the reformist path to socialism or the revolutionary restructuring of capitalist social relations (Schorske 1970; Przeworski 1985). Subsequent to a prolonged deliberation and internecine confrontation within the ranks of socialist intellectuals, the preponderant force of reformism propelled the political vehicles of the working classes towards the adoption of the electoral road to political power (Schorske 1970; Przeworski 1985). Within the reformist camp, the extension of the franchise generated an impression that through democratic means and without the necessity of extirpating the existing political institution, the liberal democratic state could be propelled in the direction of socialism (Schorske 1970). On the assumption of capturing political power through the ballot box which would accordingly be sufficient to turn the power of the state against the privileged strata, social democratic and labour parties came to believe that the cumulative force of social reform and the gradual democratization of political institutions would pave the way for a bloodless democratic seizure of political power (Schorske 1970; Przeworski 1985; Pierson 1991). In other words, reformist socialists assumed that the incremental democratization of the state and gradual application of social reform would inevitably forestall the need to resort to political insurgency as a lever to accomplish socialist goals.

In contrast to the revolutionary wing of social democracy, which envisaged electoral politics as a tool to intensify political agitation and working class mobilization, the reformist camp interpreted it as a secure road to socialism (Schorske 1970). Parliamentary democracy that had been envisaged by reformist socialists as an incantational formula to capture the bridle of governmental power became a guiding paradigm for social democratic and labor parties. Reformist social democrats held the view that the site of the parliament could not only be converted into a sensational theater to exhibit the injustice of capitalism but it could also facilitate the capacity of social democrats to trounce the political instruments of the bourgeoisie at "their own game" (Przeworski 1985: 16-17). In other words, it was the strong conviction of reformist social democrats that liberal democracy as the protective tool of the bourgeoisie could be translated into as destructive weapon to extirpate the edifice of capitalism and therefore exorcise the realm of social relations from the symptoms of exploitation and oppression.

The inclination of social democratic and labour parties to adhere to the rules of electoral Politics in late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries was based on an assumption that the numerical majority of the working class within each society would allow its

respective working class party to seize political power as a prelude to social democratic reconstruction of capitalist social relations. Contrary to this straightforward electoral calculation, by entering into the game of electoral politics, the political machines of the working classes encountered an excruciating but a brute fact of the formidability of forming majority government on their working class appeals. As Przeworski and Sprague (1986: 21) have pointed out, “the proletariat never were and would never become a numerical majority of voting members of their respective societies.” The quest of electoral victory and the logic of electoral competition propelled social democratic parties to extend their appeals beyond the frontiers of the working class which in turn was bound to obfuscate the salience of class and undermine the working class organization (Przeworski and Sprague 1986). According to this line of interpretation deployed by Przeworski and Sprague, the imperatives of electoral competition which necessitated social democratic parties to broaden their appeals beyond the boundary of the working class was not only conducive to culminate in ideological moderation and compromise but was also bound to alienate some sections of workers and fracture the basis for class identity (Przeworski and Sprague 1986). The ideological moderation of social democratic parties and their accommodation with the existing social order were manifested in their assiduous quest to seek the implementation of welfare programs (such as universal health care, publicly funded education and social assistance) that cumulatively constitute the third element of citizenship that gained momentum in the twentieth century (Marshall 1965; Janoski 1998). Social democratic parties’ overt espousal of social measures designed to ameliorate the predicament of marginalized strata was galvanized by the theoretical triumph of Keynesianism in the 1930s which provided a structural ground for the expansion of social programs in western societies (Przeworski 1985).

Keynesianism, Expansion of Social Rights and Social Class Settlement

Since Keynesianism was formulated to reconcile capital accumulation with the legitimation of capitalist social relation, it was conducive to provide a logical ground for the regulation of capital and the harmonization of public intervention in the economic sphere. Keynesianism therefore generated an auspicious political atmosphere for social democratic parties to act as the transmitters of social demand into the political goods. The structural potential of the Keynesian prescriptions to politicize the economic policy and depersonalize social responsibilities for economic outcomes mesmerized reformist social democrats to praise Keynesianism as means that could allegedly propel capitalism towards the gate of socialism without the recourse to the socialization of investment which entailed political confrontation. To reformist social democrats, the great strategic beauty of Keynesianism laid “in its promise of effective political control of economic life without dreadful social, economic and political cost that social democrats feared ‘expropriation of the expropriators’ would bring” (Pierson 1991: 27). The institutionalization of Keynesian demanded management (which countenanced the pursuit of full employment and the expansion of social programs) and was geared to bolster the position of reformist social democrats (Przeworski 1985). The adoption of Keynesianism, which became the horizon of significance for reformist social democrats, was destined to engender a perception that “...the state can turn capitalists into private functionaries of the public without altering the judicial status of private property.” (Przeworski 1985: 40).

With the theoretical triumph of Keynesianism which countenanced the expansion of social programs in advanced capitalist societies, social democrats began to assume that they have discovered the incantational formula which would secure the basis for the expansion of social rights of citizenship. The commitment to secure full employment and the proliferation of social programs that had been endorsed by the Keynesian prescriptions were extolled as means to advance the march of social citizenship (Doron 2001: 87-92; Pierson 1991: 26-28). The post-war

notions of social citizenship ostensibly conveyed the message that poverty was not always an individuals' fault and that all citizens had the right to basic standards of living (Brodie 1995: 56).

The extension of social rights reinforced by the Keynesian policies in the 1950s and 1970s generated a climate of exhilaration for anti-Marxist theoreticians and vulgar political analysts to unleash fierce assaults on the edifice of the Marxian panorama of the capitalist order (Panitch 1999). According to Reinhard Bendix, the extension of political equality to lower strata and subsequent institutionalization of social rights neutralized the transmission of social discontent into socialist revolution which he identified as "a clue to the decline of socialism" (Bendix 1965: 73-74). In parallel to Bendix's thesis of the eclipse of socialism from political agenda, Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan have also argued that the early extension of the democratic suffrage in countries such as the United State was a decisive factor in circumventing the development of a strong working class movement (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 21-22). According to this line of interpretation, the extension of social rights and the entrenchment of the working class parties in municipal and national governmental structures not only moderated ideological tensions but also consolidated the "domestication" of the working class within the parameters of the existing social order (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Progressive income redistribution and the expansion of welfare programs that became prevalent after the Second World War, was also conducive to generate an atmosphere of jubilation for neo-pluralists who have construed the institutionalization of the equality of opportunity as a nostrum to surmount the menace of economic inequalities to the functioning of liberal democracy (Manley 1983). The permeation of governmental agenda with the Keynesian prescriptions had the potential to engender an illusion for reformist social democrats to believe that the equilibrium of class forces had been achieved and the dominant class had lost its pivotal position inside the state (Panitch 1999). The proliferation of universal social programs after the Second World War provoked some intellectuals such as T.H. Marshall to promulgate the enthronement of socialism without the destruction of capitalism (Marshall 1964: 77). T.H. Marshall's enunciation echoed Anthony Crosland's attempt to remind social democrats of their excursion in the periphery of the socialist land. In his response to M. Raymond Aron's remark that socialism had ceased to be a myth in the west because it was a part of reality, Crosland forcefully proclaimed that "not, of course, a complete reality, but sufficiently so to be no longer a myth" (Crosland 1963: 63).

The assumption that social democrats had entered the heartland of socialism was demystified by the economic convulsion of the 1970s which culminated in the disintegration of the Keynesian paradigm and its supersession by the neo-liberal doctrine that has functioned as an ideological spearhead of economic restructuring. The eclipse of the Keynesian paradigm and subsequent ascendancy of neo-liberalism triggered a seismic alteration in the structure of social citizenship discourse which has manifested itself in a shift to externalization of market failures and reprsonalization of social responsibility for economic outcomes.

Neo-liberalism and the Eclipse of Social Rights

The emerging political discourse on social citizenship is premised on the apotheosis of radical individualism that traces the sources of social problems to individuals' failure in maximizing their utility (Williams 1989: 22). By imputing the inherent malaise of the capitalist mode of production to individual failures and misbehaviours, the ubiquitous neo-liberal discourse is not only conducive to depoliticize economic policy but is also geared to externalize the exogenous perversity of the capitalist social order. Within the scope of neoliberal discourse on social citizenship, the new good citizen is the one who discerns the limitations and liabilities of state provision of social services and undertakes his or her obligations to work harder and longer in order to become self-reliant (Drache 1992: 221).

As a set of political and institutional strategies to reshape labour market policy, workfare schemes have become a prominent component of social welfare policy in advanced industrialized countries (Peck 2001). Tightening the eligibility criteria for social security benefits and the pervasiveness of workfare schemes intended to compel the poor to undertake work-related activities in order to receive social benefits constitutes a decisive departure with the post-war development of the social right to state benefits (Dahrendrof 1994). Compulsory engagement in certain work related activities has become a requirement to access social benefits. In contrast to the post war nexus between social right to state benefits and citizenship, widening labor force participation has become a neo-liberal route to the realization of citizenship. As Ralf Dahrendrof has pointed out, under the aegis of neo-liberal welfare restructuring "...rights are dissolved into marketable commodities" (Dahrendrof 1994: 13).

The threat to the social right component of citizenship has manifested itself in the shift from the principle of universality to the mechanism of selectivity, which is the most significant change in the framework of social welfare income security that has marked the process of welfare state restructuring across western nations (Gilbert 2002; Shaver 1997). The drift towards selectivity is a clear indication to a gradual retreat from universalism, which has generally been conceptualized as the defining character of the welfare state ideal that came to be intimately associated with the social right component of citizenship during the post-war welfare state expansion. The replacement of universal provision of social services with means/income tested social benefits constitutes an overt endeavour to break the umbilical cord between universalism and social right ingredient of citizenship. During the post-war expansion of welfare state, the linkage between universalism and social right came to be envisaged as a mechanical tool to enhance inclusion and solidarity within community (Marshall 1964). Within the emerging neo-liberal reconstruction of the socio-political order under which social welfare policy is adjusted to the imperatives of market forces, the fragile nature of social right component of citizenship associated with the universal provision of services has become nakedly visible.

While the post-war discourse on the axis of universality/selectivity was shaped by the portrayal of the latter as a relic of the past embodied in the poor law relief, the ongoing discourse on welfare state restructuring has come to be dominated by the necessity of adopting selectivity as the most effective approach to tackle the constrained circumstances of the future (Shaver 1997). The ascendancy of selectivity in the discourse of welfare state restructuring is predicated on an assumption that the deployment of national resources to those of need is in line with a low level of social expenditure and a minimal disturbance of the operation of market economy (Friedman 1962; Hayek 1944). The shift from universalism to the mechanism of selectivity, which is tenaciously associated with the revival of liberal stigma, entails a drift from the availability of social benefits to sizable groups such as elderly people and children irrespective of their incomes to directing benefits to those of the greatest need. The revitalization of the mechanism of targeting is further buttressed by an assumption that the redistributive impact of a given volume of social expenditure is greater when social benefits are effectively targeted at those of low-income groups.

The replacement of universalism by the principle of selectivity in social welfare programs has been achieved through restricting the criteria of eligibility, targeting benefits to low income groups, flattening benefits rate and clawing back benefits via taxation measures (Shaver 1997). Based on the data provided by Neil Gilbert, between 1980 to mid 1990s, income and means tested expenditures as a percentage of total social security expenditure experienced an alarming increase in most of OECD countries (Gilbert 2002: 138). An increase in income and asset tested benefits, as a proportion of the overall social security expenditures in most of the OECD countries, is an empirical manifestation of the gradual eclipse of universalism and the triumph of selectivity. This shift has acquired a growing momentum in social policy agenda of the advanced industrialized countries.

The imperatives of welfare state restructuring justified as an appropriate response to tackle the fiscal crisis of the state have been used by governments of all ideological stripes to adopt the language of restraint as “tough but necessary medicine” (Shields and Evans 2002). However, welfare state restructuring has acquired multifarious characters, none of which can be construed as the demise or the obliteration of the welfare state (Shields and Evans 2002). The ascendancy of the discourse of restraint in the vocabulary of social welfare policy has come to reflect itself in social policy practice of restriction (controlling budgetary growth), retrenchment (re-organizing the budgetary priority of government and cutting some of resources of the base budgets of a particular programs, privatization (ceding public involvement to the private sector) and vertical downloading of social responsibility to lower level of governments or the third sector (Shields and Evans 2002). Even though these social policy practices of fiscal restraints do not signal the obliteration of the welfare state, welfare state restructuring has been accompanied by an increase in the levels of both income inequality and poverty in most of advanced industrial countries (OECD 2005).

The shift from Keynesianism to neo-liberalism, which has been accompanied by a sustained assault on the edifice of the welfare state, has not only displayed the fragile nature of welfare programs as the basis for social rights but it has also unraveled the structural subordination of the state to the exigencies of capital accumulation which had been overlooked by reformist social democrats (Panitch 1999; Panitch 1986; Offe 1984). Social democrats failed to take into consideration a fact that in the absence of a complete socialization of the means of production, the apparent separation of the economic sphere from the political arena allows capturing governmental power by a social democratic party to be compatible with the rule of capital (Therborn 1977: 27-28). The neo-liberal reconstruction of socio-political order and the systematic onslaught on social programs has substantiated that the social truce under the reign of the bourgeoisie is a chimera. The breakdown of the post-war social settlement and ensuing pressures by capital for social retrenchment has provided an excruciating opportunity for social democrats to realize the limit of reforms within capitalist democracies (Panitch 1986).

The paradigmatic shift from Keynesianism to neo-liberalism has not only unveiled the vulnerability of social democracy to rely on redistributive policies as means to deepen egalitarian principles but it has also shed light on the variable nature of social rights. In contrast to the relative stability of civil and political rights, the preservation of welfare programs such as health care, education and social assistance which cumulatively constitute the basis for social rights is contingent upon the health of economic production. In other words, alteration in the economic sphere will trigger changes in the magnitude of social rights. Conversely, beyond a certain threshold, excessive expansion of social programs is bound to squeeze the rate of capital accumulation (which cannot be tolerated by the capitalist mode of production) (Offe 1986). The provision of social services, codetermination, collective bargaining and worker participation in the decision making process on the production site which Thomas Janoski has construed as the potential of social rights to propel liberal democratic societies towards economic democracy, are also subject to the unpredictable rhythms of market forces (Janoski 1998: 49-51). This conspicuous contradiction in the nature of social rights is a part and parcel of the immanent contradiction of capitalism, which has also been manifested in a simultaneous commitment of liberal democracy to hold the contradictory flag of liberty and equality (Manley 1983).

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in this paper, the gradual development of citizenship may have operated as a gravitational force to retain the working class within the parameters of capitalist social relations but it has not defused the basis for social conflict. In contrast to the relative stability of civil and political rights, which have functioned as the bulwark of liberal democracy,

social rights have acquired a variable character. The vulnerability of social rights to the gales of market forces has thwarted the stability of a permanent equilibrium between the elements of citizenship, which is imperative to the legitimacy of liberal democracy. Due to the ingrained societal attitude to internalize social welfare benefits as rights not charities, constantly restructuring and retrenching of social programs in accordance with the exigencies of market forces is bound to trigger popular discontent. As long as within the lexicon of liberal democracy liberty is construed as unrestricted latitude to appropriate and as long as social rights remain captive to the volatility of economic forces, citizenship will remain a terrain of social struggle.

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