

Parameters of democracy

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Democracy

Charlie Taylor, one of the world's most famous living philosophers, muses on the conditions that make for a healthy democracy. He is a former professor of social and political theory at Oxford University and currently professor of political science and philosophy at McGill University.



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Charles Taylor's academic career together spans over forty years. He has played a crucial role in giving the social sciences a new direction at a time of great crisis and confusion. He has not only examined the conditions that make democracy function but also the sources of its legitimacy.

According to Charles Taylor, all that will ultimately destroy a democratic development may be welcome so long as they are inclusive and so long as they are people stay vigilant.

He emphasises: "A set of rights and a sense of inclusiveness together make for a healthy democracy. When one begins to slip up, we have something cancerous." According to Charles Taylor, there has to be a sense of inclusiveness, which means that a sense of patriotic identity takes on a new meaning in bringing every one together to oppose this to the desire to have a common identity express a particular historical stand and requesting everyone to conform to it."

Charles Taylor argues that healthy democracy requires a sense of patriotism. Democracy or popular sovereignty is legitimised in our minds by the freedom it gives us.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau posed this dilemma in a very clear way: What if I am outvoted by a majority on some issue and it is not my will that is being carried out? Does it make a difference that I was outvoted by a majority or that I was forced into it by a solitary despot? There should be an answer to it. Sometimes, there is none because the majority simply tramples on you. But, if there is a good answer, it should be something

How does one deal with consensus

There is a sense in which democracy is justified only because you are identified and accepted as being part of the democratic process. If you are not identified, then what you are saying is that no majority decision is in fact legitimate, and you are on the road to dissidence.

How does one deal with consensus in a pluralistic society, where conflicting interpretations are inevitable? There are two big ideas on this issue that are locked in mortal combat with each other. Both assume that democratic societies need consensus. That is, they need a common understanding of what the issues are about, otherwise, the possibility of a real exchange between all concerned is compromised. Now, some people say that only way to do this is to find some absolutely fundamental points of agreement — most often by abstracting from the cultural and religious differences to uncover certain basic political principles of rights and democratic processes — which are, so to say, neutral and are taken as beyond question.

The problem with this approach is that it is very difficult to bracket off certain cultural traits and claim that some are more fundamental to democratic functioning than others.

The second problem is that it is very hard to make a distinction between general political principles that are supposedly neutral on the one hand and the practical beliefs on the other,

varying, depending on one's identity and background. A good example of this is what happened sometime ago in France where a Muslim girl wanted to wear a headscarf in a government school. People reacted against this claiming that France was a secular society with separation of church and state and that one could not have religious symbols in state schools. When the Muslim girl pointed out that a lot of her school-mates wore crosses, she was told that they were merely decorative. Now, this made sense within a post-Christian society that has been Christian for almost 2000 years, but it showed the extent to which French secularism was coloured by a certain historic past and identity, and one can understand why this secularism was hard for the Muslim girl to accept.

Let us take the case of Indian secularism. It seems that the greatest challenge to Indian secularism is from Sangh Parivar (The Sangh Family consisting of RSS; Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal) and Bharatiya Janata Party whose ideological and organisational base is Sangh Parivar. BJP talks about secularism of its own kind. Secularism which is supposed to define what unites the Indians, irrespective of religious and ethnic divisions, is itself differently coloured and interpreted depending on any Indian identity.

In Pakistan, the word "secularism" is an anathema, and it is wrongly translated as *la-deeniyyat* (atheism) whereas, in fact, it means simply the separation of religion and state and it really means that religion must not be

because the very manner in which one projects those general political principles will

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exploited to further political ends. Islam, which should have been a unifying force, has been politicised, leading to different interpretations, creating fissions and disruptions often ending in violence and terrorism.

According to Charles Taylor, "We have to go the other way to resolve the question of consensus which is to constantly re-negotiate the common ground between different identities. "The aim is not to establish some neutral principles but to reach overlapping consensus by continuously talking one's differences.

According to Charles Taylor, every science only proceeds within what Thomas Kuhn calls a paradigm. By this, he really means a global understanding with certain basic categories, and, when these change, the paradigm shifts. It is true that in regard to conceptual framework, both the natural and social sciences rely on interpretation. But this does not obviate the real difference that within this interpretative scheme, the social science are trying to pass judgement on the motivations and understandings of what they study, which is not the case when we study stones, stars and particles (ie natural sciences).

The most important thing for a philosopher is to understand one's time. This is not because philosophy has some kind of insight or wisdom. Philosophy is nothing more than a kind of thinking that digs down to the deepest assumptions and tries to question them. It is an attempt to carry on the work of other disciplines such as history, sociology, political science and so on, at a certain level of self-questioning: the questioning of categories and the way people think. Philosophy comes to our aid to answer the question: what makes a healthy democracy? The answer is: a set of rights and a sense of inclusiveness, meaning thereby developing a consensus embracing all members of society.