

Ideology

Ideology is the name given to any comprehensive and mutually consistent set of ideas by which a social group makes sense of the world. ¹When ideology is employed in the use of government it effects not only those who already conform to the ideology but those citizens who do not. In my view as long as ideology exists there can never be a consensus among all as to how people should live and view the world. Liberalism, Conservatism and Socialism are notable examples of the major ideologies in this world that are employed by those who possess power. Due to the way the political process works ideology can effect many areas of life, social equality is one such area, which falls victim to the changing perspectives and ideologies of those who possess power. Each ideology would provide a differing perspective on social inequality and each would employ a separate way of dealing with the problem. I will attempt to outline the differing views and compare and contrast them against each other.

Liberalism is in general, the belief that it is the aim of politics to preserve individual rights and to maximise freedom of choice². Liberalism has come to be the dominant ideology of the industrialised West, its main themes are: The individual, Freedom, Reason, Justice and Toleration. For liberals the belief of the primacy of the individual is the characteristic theme and has had important implications for liberal thought. Conservatism aspires for the preservation of the best in established society, and opposes radical change, a central and recurrent theme of conservatism is its defence of tradition, its desire to maintain established customs and institutions. Its other central beliefs are: Human imperfection, Organic society, Authority and Property. ³Socialism is a political and economic theory or system of social organisation based on collective or state ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange- although like capitalism, it takes many and diverse forms, and is a continually developing concept.⁴ Socialism draws on the power of the community rather than the individual effort and this is its central theme, other themes are Co-operation, Equality, The satisfaction of need and Common ownership.

¹ Iain McLean, Concise Dictionary of Politics, Oxford, p 233.

² Ibid. p286

³ Andrew Heywood, Political Ideologies An Introduction, 2nd Ed, Macmillan press Ltd., pp27 + 69.

⁴ Iain McLean, Concise Dictionary of Politics, Oxford, p459

Social inequality objectively speaking refers to the imbalance of economic assets within society, each of the three ideologies provide a different perspective on Equality. Liberals believe that people are 'borne' equal and they believe in equality of opportunity, but social equality is subject to freedom and through the penalising of talent. Conservatives have traditionally viewed society as naturally hierarchical and have thus dismissed equality as an unachievable goal, however the new right has looked to a more individualist belief in equality of opportunity but they still emphasis the economic benefits of material inequality. Socialists on the other hand regard equality as a fundamental value; it is the political value that most clearly distinguishes socialism from its rivals. Socialists believe that social equality is necessary to ensure social cohesion and fraternity, establish justice or equity and enlarge freedom in a positive sense.⁵

Liberalism can be separated in to traditional liberalism and modern liberalism, with in each there are internal perspectives on social equality. Traditional liberalism under Social Darwinism outlines its attitude to poverty and social equality, the traditional belief is that individuals make what they want and what they can of their own lives, those with the ability and willingness to work will prosper while the incompetent and lazy will not. This idea is well illustrated by the maxim 'Heaven helps those who helps themselves'. H. Spencer employed Darwin's theory on constructing social theory he argued that a process of natural selection also exists with in human society, which is characterised by the principle of 'the survival of the fittest'. Those who are best suited by nature to survive rise to the top, while the less fit fall to the bottom. Thus inequalities of wealth, social position and political power are natural and cannot be helped they are inevitable and government should not intervene. This perspective of Social Darwinian liberalism is in effect a complete contrast to the idea of a welfare state and any attempt by the state to provide pensions, benefits free education and healthcare results in the individual becoming lazy and is deprived of self-respect. Alternatively if the individual is encouraged to 'stand on his own two feet' then he enjoys dignity and becomes a productive member of society. The Thatcher and Major governments subscribed to this view and they attacked the dependency culture which was developed through the welfare state thus they advocated to 'Roll back the state'.⁶

Modern liberalism on the other hand outlines its attitudes to social equality under 'Social Liberalism'. Within liberalism modern liberals on the basis of equality of opportunity

⁵ Andrew Heywood, Political Ideologies An Introduction, 2nd Ed, Macmillan Press Ltd. P111.

defend the case for welfarism, if particular individuals are socially disadvantaged, then the state possesses a social responsibility to reduce or remove these disadvantages. This is reflected in the development of the welfare state. Thus citizens have acquired a range of welfare or social rights, such as the right to work and the right to decent housing. So the distinction between the traditional and modern is that Traditional liberals believe that the only rights to which the citizen is entitled is 'Negative' rights whereas the Modern liberals believe that the citizens are entitled to 'Positive' rights.⁷

Conservatism can also be broken down into two traditions each of whom address the issue of social inequality namely: Paternalistic Conservatism and Libertarian Conservatism. The Paternalistic conservative tradition can be related to the UK Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli who emphasised the traditional conservative belief that society is held together by an acceptance of duty and obligations. He believes that society is socially unequal and society is naturally hierarchic, therefore the wealthy and the powerful should shoulder the burden of social responsibility. These ideas came to be known as 'one nation conservatism' and when the welfare state was introduced in Britain it was accepted in the name of paternalism, because the welfare state did not attempt to abolish hierarchy and authority but to establish the role of social obligation and duty.

Libertarian Conservatives have adopted liberal ideas, and those from this perspective are commonly referred to as the 'New Right', the ideas in this perspective seem to correspond with those of traditional liberalism. Theorists of the New Right such as C. Murray have argued that the welfare state creates a 'culture of dependency' barring independence and self-help. Murray went further to add that the welfare state is a major cause of family breakdown as it stops women from being dependant on men to earn their living, thus leading to the creation of an underclass of single women and fatherless children.⁸ Therefore it can be seen that the New Right believe that social inequalities should be treated by ones self and the state should limit its help or as Thatcher put it 'roll back the state'. Again we can notice that there is a complete contrast in the belief of the Paternalistic Conservative tradition which believes in social duty and obligation and the New Right which on the other hand stresses self-help and minimalist state.

⁶ Ibid. PP 54-55

⁷ Andrew Heywood, Political Ideologies and introduction, 2nd Ed, Macmillan press td, PP 58-59

⁸ Ibid. P96

Equality plays a very important role in the ideology of socialist thinkers, socialists demand social equality as an essential guarantee that all individuals not just those who are privileged are able to develop themselves to the fullest potential. Socialists believe that equality enables humans to work together co-operatively and harmoniously. This pursuance of equality is referred to as Egalitarianism. With in socialism there are differing perspectives as to how social equality should be brought about. Marxists believe that the only way that social equality is possible is through the establishment of a classless society and this can only be done through the abolition of private property and when productive wealth is owned by all. Social democrats on the other hand believe that capitalism should be reformed or tamed rather than actually abolished they believe that ownership of wealth does not reflect inequality instead it is in fact the unequal distribution of wealth in terms of salaries and wages that reflects social inequality. Therefore private property should be distributed more equally in society rather than being abolished. The difference in opinion between the Marxist and social democrats is that the Marxists believe in absolute equality whereas the social democrats believe in greater distributive equality.⁹

Overall if we look at each perspectives responses to the inequality we can see that traditional liberalism, libertarian conservatism and Marxists all believe in the restricted role of the state, whereas Modern liberalism, paternalistic conservatism and social democrats all seek the expansion of the welfare state. It is interesting that in all three perspectives the divided view on the restriction or the expansion of the welfare state exists, even though they all claim to be from different ideologies and claim to have a separate rationale for their beliefs.

⁹ Andrew Heywood, Political Ideologies an introduction, 2nd Ed, Macmillan press ltd. PP109-111