

The Purpose of the State: Ancient, Liberal, Marxist and Feminist Standpoints

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Abstract

Every political ideology has a distinct conception of various aspects of human life such as reason, purpose of life, free-will, liberty, freedom, autonomy, democracy, sovereignty and moral rights and obligations of the citizen. But the fundamental purpose of a political ideology is to define the purpose of the state and its role in providing a political system to its citizen in which individuals can live their social and political life according to the moral values and ethical principles of that political ideology. This paper only elucidates the purpose of the state according to ancient, Liberal, Marxist and Feminist standpoints. To understand the viewpoint of each political ideology, it is necessary to understand the political thought of its founders. It is pertinent to mention that all political thinkers have one ultimate aim in describing the purpose of the state which is the “ultimate good” of the citizen though they may differ with each other. The viewpoint of one ideology about the purpose of the state may be at odds with another ideology. For example, liberals demand freedom and equality while accepting the capitalist state but Marxist reject the capitalist state in totality, however they also demand freedom and equality of man. Hence, all these political ideologies of these great political thinkers have developed into political movements and later into the formation of political parties which resulted in the modern day civic political system.

Key Words: State, Plato, Modern State, Freedom, Political Ideology, Feminist.

Introduction

Every political ideology has a distinct conception of various aspects of human life such as reason, purpose of life, free-will, liberty, freedom, autonomy, democracy, sovereignty and the moral rights and obligations of the citizen. But the fundamental purpose of a political ideology is to define the purpose of the state and its role in providing a political system to its citizen in which individuals can live their social and political life according to the moral values and ethical principles of that political ideology. This is the ultimate purpose of all political thinkers. There are various political ideologies ranging from the ideologies of ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato to the modern political

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ideologies of Feminism and Ecologism. This paper only elucidates the purpose of the state according to ancient, Liberal, Marxist and Feminist standpoints. To understand the viewpoint of each political ideology, it is necessary to understand the political thought of its founders. Therefore, the ideas of various political thinkers of a specific ideology are discussed in this essay. Although all political ideologues such as ancient, Liberal, Marxist and Feminist differ in their conceptions of the purpose of the state but all of them agree on one idea which is that whatever the purpose of the state is, it should be for the welfare and well-being of the citizens.

The Greek Standpoints

The Greek was the first civilization that regarded the state as an instrument through which the good can be achieved and regarded it as a moral institution. Plato, the founder of political philosophy, was the first philosopher to explain the purpose of the state. *According to Plato, the purpose of the state is to provide justice* (Plato, 1992). Justice is when each and every individual given a task in society according to his (her abilities). According to Plato, some people are born with superior qualities and others with inferior qualities. On this basis he classifies the citizens as the Guardians (Philosopher Kings), the auxiliaries (warriors) and the producers (traders and workers). It is the purpose of the state and the law-makers to identify people with the most superior qualities and educate them. This is because Plato believed that only men of high abilities (the Guardian Class), who are gifted with natural abilities of wisdom and intelligence and they should be given the responsibility of ruling the state. He says that the state should give the “Philosopher Kings” a rigorous physical, military, academic, intellectual and philosophical training of 50 years so they can rule in the interest of all people for their ultimate “good”. Amongst them one is chosen as the Philosopher King who rules the state (Plato, 1992). Plato believed in deductive reasoning as the epistemological foundation of all knowledge. This is why Plato stresses on the quality of dialectic (the extended discussion and debate on an object with a view to removing all ambiguities and reaching an elegant first principle or essence to know the truth of “Forms” of things) as the greatest ability of a philosopher King because it is through dialectics that he is able to know true nature of the “Form of the Good”. Once he knows the true nature of the “Form of Good”, he will be able to work for the ultimate “goodness” of his people through his philosophical wisdom and knowledge. Plato’s view about Philosopher Kings can be understood from the following quote of Plato, “There will be no end to the troubles of states, or of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands” (Thune, 2012). Hence, Plato’s state is based on political idealism.

Aristotle, the founder of political science and a student of Plato, was the first to carry out a system scientific study of the state because he believed in inductive reasoning as the epistemological foundation of all knowledge. According to Aristotle, the purpose of the state is the creation of a just and principled society for the common good of all in which the law is supreme so that everyone can reach their teleological completion of life in the polis (city-state). Aristotle views the state as a body of citizens sufficing for all the purposes of life (Thune, 2012). This is why Aristotle regards constitutional government (A form of government in which many rule in the interest of law) as the best form of government. In such a government constitutionalism is supported by a large middle class as well an aristocracy of talent. According to Aristotle, it is the task of the state and legislator to carve out a society which shall make good life possible. Aristotle does not separate politics and ethics or the statesman and the moralist but regards ethics as necessary for a good political system. He arrived at this conclusion by carrying out an empirical study of the state and types of governments. He classified governments as pure and perversions. Amongst the pure are Kingship (A ruler ruling in the interest of all), Aristocracy (Few ruling in the interest of all) and Constitutional Governments (All ruling in the interest of law). Amongst the perversions are Tyranny (One despot ruling for his own interest), Oligarchy (The Few rich ruling in their own interest) and Democracy (All rule in order to oppress the few and use its power for revenge and extremism) (Aristotle, 1999). He supported constitutional government as the best form of government because it ensures the supremacy of the constitution and rule of law where all will act according to the law. Hence, morals and ethics will be upheld to ensure not only a living to the citizens but also a life that is good (Aristotle, 1999). Lastly, according to Plato, the state should divert all attentions to the education of the youth and they should be educated in a way to mold them to suit the form of government under which they live. As the purpose and end of the state is one, it means that the education should also be one and same for the all and it should be public so that all can be trained in things of the common interest (Aristotle, 1999). In Conclusion, Aristotle's holds an empirical view of the state and his state is based on ethics and moralities.

Liberal Standpoints

Liberalism is a political ideology whose core idea is the protection and enhancement of the freedom and liberty of the individual. Liberals hold the view that the role of the government is necessary to preserve freedom of man by protecting individuals from being harmed by others but they also hold the view that the same government can be a threat to individual liberty. Hence, liberals demand state intervention where liberty of man is enhanced and reject state intervention where liberty of man is diminished (Khan, 2016). According to

liberals, the purpose of the state is to provide freedom, liberty and equality by creating a political system that gives government the power required for the protection of individual liberty but also prevents those who govern from abusing that power. Liberals hold the view that governments should remove all obstacles which prevents an individual from living freely and according to his wishes unless he harms someone else. Liberalism is a culmination of the trend of individualist thought and preoccupation in Western society with individualism into a political doctrine aimed at emancipating man from the group and collectivist culture. Some of the greatest liberal philosophers are Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant. All social contractors (Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau) have regarded the protection of the liberty and freedom of man as the basis for the establishment of the social contract. According to Hobbes, the life, property and freedom of man is at danger in the state of nature. He advocated the establishment of a social contract in which all will give up absolute freedom and liberty to kill others in return for liberty and rights for all citizens to be enjoyed under civil laws. Hobbes believes in the creation of a sovereign (monarch) who will enforce the social contract and protect the life and property of the citizens. Hobbes argued that the absolute power of the sovereign was eventually justified by the agreement of the governed, who agreed, in the social contract, to totally obey the sovereign in return for the safety of their life and property by the sovereign. Hence, according to Hobbes, man enjoys that amount of liberty, which the sovereign has determined for him and the subject is not at will to do as his free will determines once he by free will gives the right to make civil laws. Hence, there is no right to rebellion to a citizen (Khan & Ullah, 2015).

John Locke, considered as the father of Anglo-Saxon liberal philosophy, also believed in a social contract but he was against the absolute domination of the Sovereign because he believed that absolutism is at odds with liberalism as it curtails individual freedom by imposing restrictions on thought, speech and actions. Liberalism also demands limiting the powers of the government while holding it accountable to the people. This is the reason for Locke's support of a democratic parliamentary government based on majority rule. He believed that human beings were peaceful and the right to life, liberty and property existed in the state of nature but there was a threat to such rights from individuals who would violate the freedom and rights of citizens. Hence, the social contract is required to preserve the already available rights in the state of nature (Khan H. U., 2015). Locke believed that citizens should obey the government as long as it does not invade the right to life, liberty and property. James Mill defined liberty as protection against the tyranny of the political rulers. According to Mill, the state should ensure three broad categories of liberties. Firstly, freedom of conscience, thought, feelings and opinions on any subject should be ensured. Secondly, the liberty of tastes and pursuits of things which one wishes until he

harms someone else should be ensured. Thirdly, freedom of association should be ensured by the state. Mill regarded religion as a personal matter and considers the absence of regulation as a guarantee of liberty. He also believed that the state can only intervene through legal penalties if someone misuses his liberty by harming others. Hence, liberals view the state an instrument for their protection and the basis of the liberal state is provision of liberty, freedom and equality to man.

Marxist Standpoint

Marxism is a political ideology founded by the two great intellectuals, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. According to Marxists, the history of all society existing until now is the history of class struggle (Marx F. E., 1848). Marxist holds the view that the state is an instrument of class struggle in which the bourgeoisie class (the capital owning class) exploits the proletariat class. Marxists also believe in Dialectic Materialism, according to which it is not ideas which drive society forward but material conditions which give birth to ideas (Marx K.). It is the economic base on which the superstructure consisting of arts, philosophy, politics, culture and so on is raised. The two, economic base and superstructure interact dialectically. However, it is the economic base which in the last analysis determines the shape of society and the direction of change. Marxists believe that the mode of production changes from one stage to another as society moves forward due to internal contradictions. Hence, all history is classified into stages of primitive communism, Slave Society, Feudalism, Capitalism, Socialism and Communism (Marx F. E., 1848). The final shape of human society will be based on communism which serves the true purpose of the state. *This true purpose of the state, according to Marxists, is the end of all class exploitation.* Marxism is in essence, a critique of capitalism because capitalism is regarded as an instrument of exploitation. Marx explained the exploitation of the worker through his two famous theories. The first, called the labor theory of value states that a laborer does not get paid for his labor but only for his labor power (Marx K. , 1844). According to this theory, a product is formed by capital and labor. Hence both, the capitalist and the worker has equal share in the final price of the sold product. The worker adds value to a product through his labor but he does not receive his share of value added in the product and the profits are kept by the capitalists. The Second theory, called the Marx's Theory of Alienation, states that the creativity of human beings is lost when humans are estranged from their product and the activity of labor itself because industrial production reduces works to a mechanical single task (Khan, 2014). Marxists even call for the abolition of the state once the class exploitation ends because Marxist demand firstly, a class-less society and ultimately a state-less society. This is because Marxists believe that the state serves the ruling class and is not neutral. According to Marx, the

administration of the modern state is but a group for managing the common concerns of the bourgeoisie (Marx F. E., 1848). In conclusion, Marxists hold an economic view of history and the state and their state is based on the creation of a classless society.

Feminist Standpoints

Feminism is a political ideology which aims at championing the rights of women and abolishing the gender differences in power. Feminism began as a political thought after Olympe De Gouges wrote the “Declaration of the rights of women and the Female Citizen”, in 1791, demanding equal rights for women based on “The rights of man and citizen” published during the French Revolution. One of the most famous contemporary feminists is Mary Wollstonecraft. Feminists hold the view that the state and society are based on a patriarchal structure of society that favors men. Feminists (especially Mary Wollstonecraft) have criticized Rousseau and other social contract theorists for not giving them a role in the state while not considering women as thinking or rational human beings. *According to the feminists, the purpose of the state is the establishment of a gender-neutral state and the end of all gender exploitation.* Feminist ideological positions fall into three broad categories i.e. the liberal, socialist and radical feminists (Hobson, 2005). Each hold a different view of patriarchal dominance of the state and provide their approach as to the purpose of the state in response to ending gender discrimination. Liberal feminists argue that the state is a neutral arbitrator and lack any ideology of its own but men have captured the state. This is because the state is a site in which groups compete with each other and men as a pressure group have dominated women. Given their perspective, liberal feminists stress on strategies which argue for more access and influence for women. This entails a belief in gradual erosion of the patriarchal state through step-wise empowerment of women through providing a greater role in society and the state to the women. Social Feminists, believe that the state supports the patriarchal structure (division of labor on the basis of gender) that exists in the family. The state supports this patriarchal structure by its bifurcation of private and public sphere. The affairs of the family are regarded as private and the affairs of the state as public. Hence, the division of labor and the allocation of housework to women entail that women cannot be a part of the public life and consequently have no role in the affairs of the state. Social Feminists demand that the state should end its support of patriarchy by abolishing public/private divide. Radical Feminists, on the other hand, believe that the state is a system of structures and institutions created by men in order to sustain and recreate male power and female subordination. Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism (Hobson, 2005). They regard sexuality as the core factor in creating unequal power relations between men and women and hold the view that women have been exploited as an object of

sexuality. Radical Feminism can be compared with Marxism by describing it as a historical gender struggle (as opposed to class struggle) between men and women. Radical Feminists, in a resemblance with Marxists, believe in bringing a radical change in power relations and overthrowing the patriarchal state by opposing standard gender roles and oppression of women. In conclusion, feminists hold a gender-based view of the state and their state is based on the creation of a gender-neutral society.

Conclusion

In the end, it is pertinent to mention that all political thinkers have one ultimate aim in describing the purpose of the state which is the “ultimate good” of the citizen though they may differ with each other. The viewpoint of one ideology about the purpose of the state may be at odds with another ideology. For example, liberals demand freedom and equality while accepting the capitalist state but Marxist reject the capitalist state in totality, however they also demand freedom and equality of man. Hence, all these political ideologies of these great political thinkers have developed into political movements and later into the formation of political parties which resulted in the modern day civic political system. It is through these political ideologies that man has campaigned for a better life in society. In conclusion, the purpose of the state according to Ancient, Liberal, Marxist and Feminist standpoint is the creation of a just society; the protection of freedom and liberty; the creation of a class-less society and the creation of a gender-neutral society respectively.

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