

In Pursuit of Liberty, Equality, and Solidarity in Public Administration

Reflections on Pluralism and Anarchism

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Are liberty, equality, and solidarity compatible with one another? This essay, drawing on the idea of value pluralism, argues that they are not, and that seeking to combine all three of these values into a single end or value, for purposes of governing, ignores the conflicts between them and, as a result, is not only incoherent with our moral experience but also potentially harmful to the plurality of values that seems to constitute that experience. However, as I shall also argue, drawing on anarchist writings, liberty, equality, and solidarity, notwithstanding the conflicts among them, have in common the idea of resistance to governance and the coercive power that it entails. The implications of this commonality for public administration are explored. I argue that administrative decentralization, as well as our constitutional practices, can play an important role in helping to protect liberty, equality, and solidarity.

VALUE PLURALISM AND CONFLICT

Value pluralism entails the idea that many of the values that we hold to be important conflict with one another and, furthermore, that there exists neither any overarching value nor any common measuring rod that might be used to resolve these conflicts (Spicer, 2010). It is the idea, as Isaiah Berlin argues, that the “ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with one another” (1969, p. 169). As such, value pluralism entails a recognition that “the world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others” (p. 168).

If the reality of value pluralism is accepted, then this casts into doubt any notion that we might be able to find a means by which liberty, equality, and solidarity might, to borrow the words of the call for papers for this forum, “be politically and philosophically synthesized into a common theoretical system,” one that “enhances each without diminishing the saliency of any of the other aspirations.” Indeed, as Berlin himself recognizes with respect to liberty and equality, for example, “you cannot combine full liberty with full equality” because “full liberty for the wolves cannot be combined with full

liberty for the sheep” (Berlin & Jahanbegloo, 1991, p. 142). Furthermore, as communitarians argue, the solidarity of communities can be undermined by excessive and irresponsible exercise of individual freedom or liberty, whereas, as their critics are quick to retort, individual freedom within a community can be undermined by an excessive and stifling emphasis on solidarity. Even equality and solidarity, while often thought of nowadays as almost coterminous with one another, can sometimes come into conflict, as, for example, when newly arrived immigrants to a state find themselves denied certain welfare benefits (Spicker, 1992).

Matters become further complicated when we consider how the meanings of each of these values—liberty, equality, and solidarity—are themselves often subject to different and conflicting interpretations. They are examples of what W.B. Gallie (1956) has termed “essentially contested” concepts. They are concepts or terms such that, as Gallie puts it, “when we examine the different uses of these terms and the characteristic arguments in which they figure we soon see that there is no one clearly definable general use of any of them which can be set up as the correct or standard use” (p. 168). Rather, we see that they are “concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of users” (p. 169). Berlin recognized this with respect to the concept of liberty when he famously argued that “negative and positive liberty are not the same thing,” that “both are ends in themselves,” but that “these ends may clash irreconcilably” (1969, p. xlix). With respect to the concept of equality, similarly, equality of opportunity may conflict with equality of outcomes. Likewise, with respect to the concept of solidarity, as Max Pensky has noted, we have multiple notions of solidarity that “jostle for primacy” in modern societies (2008, p. 2). National solidarity may conflict with international solidarity, class solidarity may conflict with ethnic solidarity, or gender solidarity with religious solidarity, and so on.

In light of these conflicts between the values of liberty, equality, and solidarity, as well as among different interpretations of these values, any sort of philosophical or political synthesis of them would appear, therefore, to be beyond our grasp. To attempt such a synthesis would be to ignore our lived moral experience and to fall prey to the age-old and seductive but false monist idea, described by Berlin, that “all truly good things are linked to one another in a single, perfect whole” (1969, p. x). It would be to presume the existence of a world “altogether beyond our ken,” a world whose moral principles are “not the principles with which, in our daily lives, we are acquainted” (Berlin, 1992, p. 13).

To accept monism, however, is not simply incoherent with our moral experience. When coupled with the coercive power of government, it is also potentially harmful to the plurality of values that human beings find important. This is because monism diverts attention away from the conflicts that exist between such values as liberty, equality, and solidarity, as well as

other values, and, as a result, can encourage a narrow and extreme form of instrumental rationalism in governing, in which monist ends can be used to justify almost any means. As Berlin warns, the belief that “it is in principle possible to discover a harmonious pattern in which all values are reconciled, and that it is towards this unique goal that we must make” can lead not only to “absurdities in theory,” but also to “barbarous consequences in practice” (1969, pp. lv–lvi).

FREEDOM, EQUALITY, AND SOLIDARITY AS RESISTANCE

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the conflicts that exist between liberty, equality, and solidarity and the risks of ignoring them, the foregoing argument should not be taken to mean that liberty, equality, and solidarity have nothing at all in common with each other. To the contrary, as Charles Johnson, a contemporary left-leaning anarchist theorist, has argued, all three of these values reflect an opposition or resistance to coercive power. As Johnson puts it, the “three demands made by the original revolutionary Left in France: *Liberty, Equality, and Solidarity*” each contribute “an essential element to a radical challenge to any form of coercive authority” (2008, pp. 156–157).

From Johnson’s radical anarchist perspective, “liberty cannot coexist with government sovereignty, however ‘limited,’ because the claim of sovereignty must be backed up by coercion at some point, given up or reduced to a vacuous arrangement of words. . . . Any way you slice it, government sovereignty means an invasion of individual freedom, and individual freedom means, ultimately, freedom from the State” (2008, p. 169). Furthermore, as Johnson sees it, “political coercion is the material expression of a claim of unequal authority: one person is entitled to dictate terms over another’s person and property, and the other can be forced to obey. Declaring universal equality thus means denying all such claims of lordship, and, thus, asserting that everyone has authority over *herself*, and over herself *alone*” (p. 170). Moreover, turning to the demand of solidarity, Johnson is critical of “not only political structures of coercion, but also the whole *system* of status and unequal authority,” a system that “includes not only exercises of coercive power, but also a knot of ideas, practices, and institutions based on deference to traditionally constituted authorities” (p. 176). Discussing, for example the subjection of women to male supremacy, he notes how “although often in league with the male-dominated State, male violence is older, more invasive, closer to home, and harder to escape than most forms of statism” (p. 178).

Johnson concludes, “Liberty, understood in the context of Equality and Solidarity, calls for political revolution against all forms of government,” by which he means “dissolving the legal authority of a government” and recognizing that “you have no obligation to obey any government longer than you choose to remain under it; once you have declared your intent to withdraw from the State,

no government on earth has the authority to force you to recognise its authority over you” (2008, p. 184). While many readers may well reject Johnson’s anarchist views here as too extreme, what his argument does illustrate, importantly in my view, is that demands for freedom, equality, and solidarity emerge not from any unified discourse about the practice of governance as such, but rather from multiple discourses about resistance to governance and coercive power in various forms. They are values articulated, at least originally, in opposition to, rather than in support of, governance. As such, these values need not necessarily be consistent with one another, but rather they reflect differing and sometimes conflicting practices of resistance to power.

IMPLICATIONS

If the foregoing argument is correct, then—whereas the conscious collective pursuit by government officials of freedom, equality, and solidarity, simultaneously, in a unified and instrumental fashion, is not possible and, indeed, if attempted in governance, may well be dangerous—these conflicting values may, nonetheless, be advanced through practices of opposition or resistance to the actions of these officials. In other words, liberty, equality, and solidarity may be best promoted not in the exercise of power, but rather in the checking of power. It follows therefore that if, contrary to the wishes of anarchists, we are to have some sort of government, then we in public administration ought to pay more attention than we often do to our constitutional practices as a means of checking power. Notwithstanding their abuses, these practices, by providing multiple veto points within our process of governance and administration, can check the monistic inclinations of political leaders, as well as administrators, and induce them to take account of a broader range of values, including our different notions of liberty, equality, and solidarity, than might otherwise be the case.

Moreover, we should also think about how we might encourage the practices of what David Farmer has termed “anti-administration,” in other words, “administration which is directed at negating administrative bureaucratic power” (1998, p. 5). While a full exploration of the implications of the latter idea is beyond the scope of this short essay, a reasonable argument can be made here that decentralization of administration can play an important role in checking power. This chimes well with Johnson’s anarchist argument that we should consider “devolving power from centralized seats of power down to the local level, with arbitration and enforcement handled face-to-face through diffuse networks of local associations, rather than mediated through powerful, bureaucratized hegemons” (2008, p. 183). Of course, as Johnson concedes, “local powers are often more subject to parochial prejudices, and can often enforce them with force that is less diffuse, closer to home, and therefore more intense than anything a mighty but remote central

government could muster” (pp. 183–184). However, as he argues, “what is needed here,” in such cases, is not more centralization but rather “a *more radical decentralism*” (p. 184).

The idea that we might use administrative decentralization to check or resist power is consistent with long-held Anglo-American traditions of public administration that date back at least to the Stuart monarchs (Spicer, 2001). It is reflected, for example, in Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation, in the American context, that administrative decentralization can “serve like so many hidden reefs retarding or dividing the flood of the popular will” so that “if the law were oppressive, liberty would still find some shelter from the way the law is carried into execution” (Tocqueville, 1835/1969, p. 263). Certainly, as value pluralists would rightly remind us, the single-minded, monistic pursuit of any value, even that of administrative decentralization, is not without its own problems and perils. Nonetheless, if the foregoing argument is correct, we should seriously consider the role that greater administrative decentralization might play, along with other checks on coercive power, in helping to foster the conflicting values of liberty, equality, and solidarity.

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