

The investigation that attempts to answer the questions about how pluralism responded to the pessimism of the competitive elitists and whether the response is a convincing one in the following essay consists of identification and evaluation of the two significant approaches – competitive elitism and pluralism, as well as their critiques and alternatives. Firstly, the competitive elitist theory, and its ‘pessimistic views’ in relation to its representatives’ arguments are examined. Secondly, the departure from this approach is suggested by classical pluralist view of liberal democracy, and therefore, their theory is explored to some depth. Finally, the last part of the essay concentrates on the evaluation of the competitive elitist approach and of the pluralist response, in order to examine the validity of the two, as well as perhaps to suggest alternative views, such as neo-pluralist, or neo-Marxist arguments.

Most of the theorists who belong to competitive elitist approach, to some extent at least, tend to emphasise the existence of a high price that needs to be paid for living in a modern world. One of their essential arguments is that because of the rapid development in economic, political and social sphere, in order to live in a modern, industrial society, a technically developed civilisation must suffer the restriction of its freedom of choice and action.

‘Pessimism’ of competitive elitist approach appeared as a contrast to rather optimistic view in the thought of the XIX century liberals and radicals. For those all shared a hope and a belief that whatever is wrong with a society today, can, or should be corrected in future, their stands make a quite strong opposition to competitive elitists’ respect of the world. In particular, the theorists of competitive elitism, like Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter saw little, or no scope for democratic participation of citizens, or even for individual development in a modern world. Their argument was based on the significant issues of democratic system, which include freedom of choice and action, being undermined by the political, economic, and social growth and development. Therefore, the only achievement, which would bring the most of democracy possible under the domination of highly developed capitalism, is to be able to choose the leaders. Furthermore, pessimism is reflected in their view of citizens as passive in respect to political issues and isolated from the competitiveness of elites, as will be discussed below.

Following this, competitive elitists tried to think of the best way in which democracy, as a means of choosing representatives, or decision makers, can take place, given the severe circumstances of restricted liberty and equality, that complex relations of developed society impose. Max Weber (1864-1920) argued that the world dominated by competition and conflicts between capitalism and socialism, together with the ever growing power of large enterprises in economic sphere, is a world in which ideas of individuality and

social difference are undermined, a world far from democratic or liberal, in any of the senses given by the previous theorists.

The progressive intellectualisation, what Weber called 'rationalisation', and the view that one can 'master life by calculation' instead of relying on the forces outside of one's control (*Science as a vocation*, p.139), was an outcome of economic and social development. This view frees people of burden of theological illusions, and some part of it represents perhaps one of the very few, if not the only advantage of modernisation that Weber emphasises when speaking about democracy. But the negative, the pessimistic side of such world that Weber tends to be concerned with, is far more broadly analysed.

Societies with a rapid development need administrative functions to be taken care of by experts. This inevitably creates a gap between those with skills, training and experience, and those who do not possess such abilities, favouring the first. This is why Weber sees direct democracy as extremely inappropriate for the modern societies (characterised by complexity and sheer diversity), and emphasises the ineffectiveness in administration and political instability that this system would bring about.

The alternative he proposed was the establishment of the strong parliament that would create increasing competitiveness in political affairs. The complex administration, the effectiveness of organisations and economic stability (which is crucial for the expansion of industry), in Weber's view, could only be handled by a strong bureaucracy.

Weber did recognise the importance of the existence of systems of checks of bureaucratic power, since in the absence of checks, ineffectiveness, and pursue of private, rather than national interests, would be of a more central concern, but he believed that the private and the public bureaucracies, antagonising with one another are at the same time under mutual checks. This is why Weber emphasised the need for existence of the private capitalism, for if it would be eliminated, state bureaucracy would rule alone. (*Economy and Society* vol I, p.143.)

Following these beliefs, Weber suggested an organisation consisting of capitalist economy (to ensure the competition and checks), parliamentary government (to secure the opportunity for the expression of peoples' different ideas and interests, to ensure that political leaders are capable of persuading the citizens and of creating a suitable political programme, as well as to contrast, or give alternatives to bureaucratic processes), and competitive party system (to make sure that only the most competent ones in a struggle for votes and power will achieve their goals, given the weak interest and general passiveness of the electorate, as well as its inability to discriminate among policies). This last argument, that people are generally ignorant when it comes to political affairs, and that they cannot easily make sound judgements, was also supported by Schumpeter, who argued that, due to the lack of education or involvement, as well as due to understanding

political issues as too remote from their lives to trigger any interest whatsoever, people refuse to even try to make a change.

Just as Weber saw democracy as means for achieving liberty, Schumpeter agreed that democracy is neither a goal itself, not a form of life characterised by equality, or best grounds for human development. Rather, it is a political method in which people choose among possible leaders, and in which a clear division between those who choose, and those who are chosen is most desirable. Unlike Weber, however, Schumpeter suggested that bureaucracy is absolutely compatible with democracy, and that democracy is consistent with socialist organisation. (1976. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*)

In spite the differences between the arguments of the two theorists, they tend more or less to agree on the main issues of a system that would be the most appropriate for the modern world to allow individual development, relative political stability, and economic growth. But their work carries a number of weaknesses. To mention just a few, it seems that the system they propose would bring prosperity, equality and freedom, only to those who manage to rise to the top. Moreover, their argument highlights one great contradiction. On the one hand they argue that citizens are passive, lacking knowledge, commitment and involvement in politics. On the other hand, those same people are said to be capable of making the right judgements when choosing the leaders, therefore capable of making estimations about political matters and their representatives.

In an attempt to assess critically the pessimistic conclusions of competitive elitism described above, pluralist theorists provided a rather different description of the world, and different propositions about the appropriate system within such a world. In contrast to the view that individuals are vulnerable, weak, and isolated from the competitiveness of elites, as well as that they are not willing to engage in politics, pluralists argued that individuals' activeness makes them engage into various interest groups, such as business organisations, religious bodies, community associations, and so on. In this way, although not overestimating the influence people can exercise on political procedures or outcomes, classical pluralists do suggest that citizens are neither indifferent, nor passive, since it is precisely these groups whose competitive demands are taken under consideration when the government is about to choose the policy. The existence of various active groups is of crucial importance in democratic process, if all individuals are to achieve their goals.

Furthermore, whereas competitive elitism suggests that in a modern world there is little scope for reduction of domination, or for achieving liberty through democratic process of politics, classical pluralists, in particular David Truman, and Robert Dahl argue that it is precisely the modernisation of the world that allows competitive relations and the diversity of interests to appear, which in turn ensure democratic organisation, keeping all the groups too weak, too small and too divided to acquire more power than their

size allows. The competition based on the existence of diverse interests is vital and essential element of the development of public policy in classical pluralist view. The competition they tend to emphasise in politics is seen as similar to the one in economic sphere, because they occur due to the tendency to maximise common and personal interests respectively. This is by no means to say that all the people engage into interest groups. Many people are neither active nor very interested in politics. But classical pluralists tend to recognise the positive side of this phenomenon, arguing that extensive participation may lead to fanatic commitment to particular ethnic, or racial cleansing groups like Nazi or fascist organisations have proved in the past.

Classical pluralist model tends to emphasise the need for investigating whether the policy is controlled by interests of a small minority and whether these are coerced by the democratic majority. In other words, there are two major dangers in this model that threaten the people: first, the danger of a government acting in a self-interest of a minority, and second, the impact of a majority. This is why they claimed that the essential condition of democracy achieving relative stability is the existence of a 'protean complex' of relationships. (Truman, 1951). The diversity of interests and an ever-going antagonism in society can protect the democracy from the tyranny of majority.

The critique of classical pluralists on Schumpeter's view is based on understanding politics as much more competitive than it appears in his writings. They agree with Schumpeter's claim that democracy is all about the way in which political leaders are selected, as well as that individuals do not have significant influence on politics, and that representatives usually create opinions in people, rather than representing them. But they decisively reject the argument that competing political elites are inevitably to hold the concentration of power. This is so, they argue, because the diversity of interests causes an absence of a single, powerful decision-making centre, and makes a plurality of pressure points arise. (Truman, 1951, p.508) They accuse competitive elitist theory for ignoring these pressure points, and for overemphasising the capacity of politicians to shape contemporary life.

The emphasis on the influence those different groups may have on the system as a whole is to some considerable extent justified by the facts and events of the post-Second World War, in 1960s and 1970s, when the large groups engaged in protests, demanding democratisation in the West, the East and the South. In United States, as well as all over Europe, demands for peace, embedded in Anti-Vietnam war movement, the women's liberation protests, the movement for civil rights and resistance to racism, the direct action of students calling for democratisation of education, and many other that took place, represent the capacity of plain citizens to engage spontaneously into mass organised groups, and express their views and opinions, in order to bring innovations and changes. All those struggles, whether successful, or limited and eventually rapidly destroyed, represent efforts of individuals to change what seemed in those times not right, illiberal, or non democratic.

These show that people were far from indifferent or ignorant, as in competitive elitist theory, rather struggling to reform the existent system, which favours the classical pluralist theory. It is quite clear that the response of classical pluralists to the competitive elitism is a convincing one, its significance lying in emphasising the many ways in which patterns of interaction, conflict and antagonism are embedded into policies of the contemporary state, and outlining the constraints to ability of politicians to act independently of interest-groups' demands and pressures.

However, the same revolutionary events put light on the shortcomings and weaknesses of pluralist theory, for they could have not been predicted or even expected by pluralists approach, since they characterised the system as immoral, rigid, and authoritarian, instead of open and trusted. Although rightly emphasising the possibility of the existence of power may appear in many different centres, they fail to acknowledge the absence of a guarantee that government will listen to them all equally, or even take their views under consideration. Another failure of pluralist theory when calling for the possibility of all to engage in politics is to recognise the inability of many people to gain access to resources necessary to compete in national political arena.

Furthermore, the classical pluralist model, since concentrated on the existent idea of democracy in Western polities, failed to examine or compare the competing democratic models. But even within such limited investigation, pluralists failed to characterise Western politics adequately. The reason for this lies in their underestimation, or even ignorance of asymmetries of power between classes, races, men and women, politicians and ordinary citizens, as well as of the constraints in the capacity of governments and state institutions to act in a way the interest groups desire.

Investigation of these ideas, based on understanding the limitations of classical pluralist theory, was further developed by neo-pluralists like Dahl (who, as shown above, existed as a classical pluralist first) and Charles Lindblom, as well as by many Marxist theorists. Lindblom recognised the necessary action of governments to secure the prosperity and profitability of the private sector, in order to maintain their own power and position. (Lindblom, 1977, p.122-3). Considering the pluralist emphasis on the existence of different interest groups, neo-pluralists add that these cannot be treated as necessarily equal, and that the state cannot act neutrally among all interests, since pursuing political strategies which place on central agenda the interests of one group, will possibly not favour, or even be at the expense, of another. (Dahl, 1989, chs 22-3).

Whereas neo-pluralists suggest interrelated, yet quite independent dynamics of class relations and political processes, one of the neo-Marxist theorists, Ralph Miliband, argued that the state is not only never neutral among social interests, but also that those who form the dominant or ruling class, and hold the means of

production, make the governments and state institutions their own instruments for preserving the capital. in other words, they practically force the state to act in their own interest, that is in a way that will help the keep the accumulated wealth. (Miliband, 1969, p.128-9)

None of the theories analysed above, however important in the history of political science, is free of significant limits imposed by the time and space in which created. This is by no means to say that they are not worth being repeatedly over analysed, rearranged and restructured in the present time (and perhaps also in future), since they carry extremely valuable analysis and estimations throughout the whole development of political and social thought. It is quite clear however, that neither theory should be taken for granted without considering the alternative views, that each put great effort in proceeding always at least one step further from the point that the previous one had managed to reach. In the world of ever changing social, economic and political conditions as well as technology, upon which conditions one can base their views about what can, or should be done to make the world a 'better place', the continuous struggle for understanding such broad issues like democracy, equality, or liberty in so many different ways, most certainly remains active.

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