Understanding particularism

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Abstract

Particularism refers to the idea that different moral standards apply to different people. This view is inherently discriminatory. The universal application of moral principles has been challenged in 'communitarian' critiques, which argue that moral rules have to be placed in a specific social context. People are tied to families, communities and localities; these kinds of relationships define the scope of their moral responsibilities. There are strong particularist traditions in Europe, including arguments for 'sphere sovereignty' and 'solidarity'. Some ideals in social policy, including the 'welfare society' and the concept of 'welfare pluralism', appeal to similar social constructs, and are likely to be particularist in their effects.

Particularism can be qualified by the acceptance of some basic universal principles, but this still implies a presumption in favour of certain discriminatory structures. The arguments for particularism are framed in very similar terms to those which socialists use, referring to social networks, mutual aid and collective action. Ideas like empowerment, or participation in social networks, are generally applied within a particularist framework. For universalists, the main danger in advocating 'community' and 'solidarity' as values in their own right is that they are liable to be discriminatory in practice. Communitarianism is an attractive approach; it is also dangerous.

Universalism and particularism

The kinds of moral beliefs and principles which are usually referred to in social policy are universal: they apply to everyone, or at least to everyone who falls within relevant criteria. In social policy, 'universalism' is often taken in a narrow but 'thick' sense - that is, a highly specific but elaborate use of the term - referring to a way of distributing benefits and services. 'Universality' is commonly distinguished from 'selectivity': if universal benefits are available to everyone, selective benefits are available only to those in need. The distinction of universality and selectivity is mainly about method; where it touches on principles, it is usually another way of referring to models of 'institutional and 'residual' welfare (Spicker, 1988, pp 162-4). But there is also a 'thinner', broader use of the idea of universality, found in expressions like 'universal human rights'; that is the sense in which I shall be using the term here. If universalism means that the same rules are applied to everyone, residual and institutional models might both be called 'universal' in the 'thin' sense of the word.

Universalist premises of this kind pervade much of the discussion of welfare: concepts like altruism, freedom, or the 'right to welfare' are applied in general terms, and it is usually taken for granted that they should be - I have to confess to doing it myself (Spicker, 1988). Fiona Williams' critique of universalism offers an interesting example, because on the face of it she is concerned with issues of diversity and difference. She argues as follows:

> The distrust of uniformity and universalism and the recognition of diversity and difference has emerged in two ways within social policy. The first has been a 'top

down' approach to diversity in the form of welfare pluralism. The second has been a 'bottom up' development of work around gender in particular, but also race, disability, age and sexuality. One consequence of this latter work has been to expose the 'false universalism' of the post war welfare state ... Whilst welfare pluralism stresses the diversity of sources ... for welfare provision, the second places emphasis on the diversity of identity, experience, interest and need in welfare provision. (Williams, 1992, pp 206-7)

This is not an argument against the universal application of principles; rather, it implies that the traditional interpretation of 'universalism' has not been universal enough.

Critical theory, as outlined by Habermas, has to take a view from outside the society which is being criticised. It depends on a communicative discourse referring to consistent criteria; as such, it is built on universalist premises. Habermas proposes a 'fundamental principle of universalisation', that 'every valid norm must be able to be accepted by all those affected.' (cited Kelly, 1990, p.147.) The universal application of moral norms - applying them to everyone - is based in an argument from consistency: if one accepts a rule in one case, it cannot reasonably be denied in other circumstances which satisfy the same criteria (Habermas, 1990, pp 68-70). The same principle establishes a presumptive case for equality and social justice: people should be treated equally when other things are equal, and unequally only if they are not (Spicker, 1985). This kind of argument has been taken to be so obvious in the discussion of social policy that the issue of universal application has hardly been discussed. In other areas of academic discourse, however, universalist premises have been seriously challenged. The counter argument to Habermas is represented, in different ways, by a range of 'communitarian' arguments. Communitarians argue that the values and norms on which a social critique can be founded must be drawn from specific social contexts. An asocial critique has no meaning (see Rasmussen, 1990). Communitarianism can be taken to stand for a highly socialised view of people in which their moral position can be understood only in terms of their social relationships. Communitarian critiques challenge the basis on which judgments about society can be made, and they imply that different standards will be applied in different places.

The debate between universalism and communitarianism cuts across the conventional division of 'left' and 'right' wing; there are left- and right-wing communitarians, as there are left- and right-wing universalists. On the left, communitarian critiques have mainly been directed at the kind of abstract moral theory associated with writers like Rawls or Nozick, and in particular at liberalism (Kymlicka, 1989). Part of the critique of the welfare state with which Williams is concerned has been communitarian rather than universalist: welfare, to be effective, must both recognize the limitations and build on the strengths of existing social relationships. On the right, communitarian premises have been used to challenge some of the general principles, like equality and social justice (see, e.g. Charvet, 1983), which have been basic to socialism in the past. The conservative critique has been a powerful one, because it uses the same kind of language and premises as collectivism - a concern with mutual support, diversity, social networks and social context - to argue for social differentiation. It is an argument that communitarian socialists need to come to terms with. This paper has two main aims. One is to explain the arguments for particularism and communitarianism; the second is to try to reconcile them with the universal values on which socialism depends.

At the simplest level, communitarian ideas imply that there are differences between people, and that these differences must lead to diverse responses. MacIntyre, for example, writes that

> 'we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles.' (MacIntyre, 1981, pp 204-205).

MacIntyre has also argued that norms have to be understood in the context of particular traditions (1988) - and so that they have to be different. Some communitarian thinkers take this much further. Walzer, in 'Spheres of justice', argues that social principles like justice, equality and need can only be understood and implemented in specific social contexts: his case is

> 'that the principles of justice are themselves pluralistic in form; that different social goods ought to be distributed for different reasons, in accordance with different procedures, by different agents; and that all these differences derive from different understandings of the actual goods themselves - the inevitable product of historical and cultural particularism.' (Walzer, 1983, p.6)

'Particularism', rather than communitarianism, is the true opposite of universalism; it refers to the idea that different standards should be applied to different people (Jones, 1990).   The kinds of standards which this argues for are discriminatory. Walzer, for example, is ready to argue for the restriction of immigration, and within that for priority to the relatives of existing citizens. Discrimination is often morally objectionable, and much of it is better explained in terms like 'prejudice' (Allport, 1954) rather than in any moral sense. But discrimination is not necessarily random, irrational or indefensible; it is based on criteria like kinship, friendship, community and nationality. The kinds of responsibilities which people recognise to each other are not universal; they depend on existing ties. The corollary is that people who do not share those ties are left out, and are liable as a result to receive less. The effect of giving priority to family, community or occupational group is to exclude outsiders - people without roots, people from different communities, and those with marginal status - people who are often poor and disadvantaged. So, for example, an appeal for extra resources for Scotland is generally made at the expense of other areas; and where the sons and daughters of council tenants are given priority for rehousing (Kensington and Chelsea has a formal scheme), the people who get left out include incomers, and racial minorities.

It is tempting to dismiss this kind of discrimination as immoral, because much of it is. But it hardly seems reasonable to treat all forms of discrimination in the same way: if there is a moral defect in giving preferential treatment to one's family, arguing for resources for one's home town or region, or special pleading for one disadvantaged group out of many, it hardly seems to fall in the same category as, say, refusing health care to people on racial grounds. That is not to say that there is no connection between this kind of discrimination and disadvantage. If everyone gives preference to their family, then richer families will thrive, and the disadvantage of poor families will be reinforced; if too much is made of community affiliations, ethnic minorities will be excluded; and special treatment for one disadvantaged group is all too often gained at the expense of others. But the position is not simply a moral aberration, which we might choose to tolerate because it is 'understandable'. Particularism represents a set of moral imperatives in its own right.

Universalists have acknowledged the arguments half-heartedly. Titmuss was concerned to establish the importance of social integration, as well as universal social provision (though he couched the arguments for a 'gift relationship' in universalist terms) (Titmuss, 1970). The recognition of duties at the personal level, duties which usually far exceed those required from universal principles like human rights or altruism, is fundamental to much moral conduct. The moral obligations experienced within the family are the archetypal example. Conversely, I suspect we would feel that there was something morally wrong with someone whose commitment for the third world was so great that he or she subordinated all responsibility to family, friends and community. Where there is a tension between the two principles, it is not necessarily the case that universalism should be preferred.

Particularist beliefs

The universalist ethos has been so much accepted in the academic literature in Britain that it is difficult to find explicit arguments for a particularist approach.   Particularism, however, derives from long-standing traditions; it is possible to see, in the growth of communitarianism, references to ancient arguments. Walzer's arguments are influenced both by American pluralism and traditional Judaism. The pluralist tradition in the United States has emphasised community solidarity and diversity. The Jewish tradition is strongly communitarian: according to Jewish law, charity is to be distributed to one's poor relatives before strangers; to Jewish poor before non-Jewish poor (there are also reservations against taking charity from non-Jews); and to the poor of one's own town before the poor of any other town (Encyclopaedica Judaica, 1971). The role of 'communitarianism' might be seen as a justification of the kinds of particularist arguments which have long been prevalent in many different societies.

Perhaps the nearest thing to a defence of discriminatory approaches in English writing is found in traditional conservatism. Conservatism has often represented society as a complex, organic structure in which people develop a range of responsibilities of different kinds and at different levels. People are born into families, communities, and nations (Clarke, 1975). But there are more fully developed arguments. In European thought, the most important arguments of this kind have been the development, associated respectively with Calvinist and Catholic social thought, of 'sphere sovereignty' and 'solidarity'.

Sphere sovereignty

The idea of sphere sovereignty comes from the Netherlands. It was developed by Groen van Prinsterer, on a prescriptive basis, as a defence of the kinds of social networks which had developed in practice (Dooyeweerd, 1979, pp 53-54). Kuyper, the leader of the Christian Anti-Revolutionary Party, was to justify the principle in theological terms. He claimed that social diversity reflected the kinds of differences intended by God as part of the creation, and that the duty of the state was to safeguard such boundaries. Kuyper argued that the development of social relationships "is spontaneous, just as that of the stem and branches of a plant" (1899, p.117). The spheres had developed naturally: "all together they form the life of creation, in accord with the ordinances of creation, and therefore are organically developed." (p.118)

The concept of sphere sovereignty was liberal in its origins. The idea was used to deny state authority in important areas of people's lives, like the family, education and religion. "In a Calvinistic sense", Kuyper wrote,

> "we understand hereby, that the family, the business, science, art and so forth are all social spheres, which do not owe their existence to the state, and which do not derive the law of their life from the superiority of the state, but obey a high authority within their own bosom; an authority which rules, by the grace of God, just as the sovereignty of the State does." (1899, p.116)

Each major sphere of society was independent, and authority within that sphere derived from the natural order that existed within it.

One offshoot of Kuyper's arguments was the development of South African apartheid. Kuyper's lectures on Calvinism were published simultaneously in Amsterdam and Pretoria, and the concepts were adopted by those who argued for racial segregation. Skillen and McCarthy argue that this misrepresents Kuyper, who did not 'identify races or nations as social spheres' (1991, p.411); but the connection between apartheid and his emphasis on creational differences seems fairly close. Social services under apartheid were segregated very distinctly: there were different medical services, for example, for whites, asians, coloureds and blacks.

The moral repugnance which apartheid provokes tends to obscure the force of 'sphere sovereignty' in other respects. In the Netherlands, the main application of the principle has been in the form of pillarisation (Bryant, 1981). The basic structure of society was that people lived in certain cohesive, independent networks. The responsibilities they had, and the responsibilities of others towards them, were determined by the kinds of responsibility which these frameworks established. Dutch social services were developed on the principle of *particulier initiatief*: different social organisations (especially the churches) work in distinct spheres of influence, with their own constituencies, finance and modes of operation (Brenton, 1982). (The word 'particulier' here has the same effect as that of 'particularism'.)   Lijphart distinguishes separate development in the Netherlands from apartheid on two grounds: first, that Dutch particularism is not racist, and second, that apartheid was imposed, whereas separation in the Netherlands was 'self-imposed' (Lijphart, 1975, p.186). This is not to deny the common ancestry of the ideas.

'Sphere sovereignty' is vulnerable to the kind of objections which might be made from a universalist perspective. The central texts, by Kuyper and Dooyeweerd, are explicitly conservative in tone; there is an underlying assumption that moral action requires abstinence from intervention; and the concept has a disturbing association with racist ideology. However, the principle has other more attractive features. The idea of community is often valued, especially when it is associated with the recognition of a network of responsibilities (Nisbet, 1953). The strengths of pillarisation in practice include the development of organisations adapted to the characteristics of different communities, the devolution of power from the state, and the fostering and tolerance of diverse arrangements to meet needs. In other words, there is within the idea of sphere sovereignty the kernel of ideas which are now commonly associated with welfare pluralism.

Solidarity

The Catholic model of solidarity defines responsibilities in terms which have to be related to the social circumstances of each person (see Coote, 1989). The concept of solidarity has been of particular importance in France, where the term is widely used to justify provision, and it has been formally enshrined in social welfare law (Dupeyroux, 1989, p.290). The idea has become a cliché, used, like 'the welfare state' in the UK, to refer a broad set of ideals governing the ways in which people support each other. However, where the 'welfare state' emphasises issues like citizenship and the right to welfare (Marshall, 1982), solidarity depends on the place of people within social networks. If a person is part of such networks, there are strong mutual obligations to offer social protection; if not, the emphasis falls on social integration, to ensure that such relationships can be developed.

Solidarity can be understood in two main senses (Spicker, 1991). The first describes a network of mutual support. People come to share, either through affiliation or through reciprocal obligations, both duties to help others and expectations of support. This applies to many different kinds of network, including families, occupational groups, and communities. Solidaristic welfare structures are characterised, not so much by common rights and responsibilities as by a complex network of such responsibilities. People have relationships with families, communities, and occupational groups; they share rights and responsibilities mutually with others. Much of French social policy has been concerned with the gradual expansion of this kind of mutual network, to incorporate (or 'insert') those left out of society - the 'marginals' (Lejeune, 1988; Alfarandi, 1989).

The second main sense of solidarity is as a form of collective social action - 'fraternity' rather than 'mutualism'. If people act together, it is not just because they have individual interests in common, but because they accept a common social identity as a collective group. There are social preferences, and social forms of welfare - a 'common good' - distinct from the preferences and interests of individuals. Solidaristic measures, by this account, are those which support and reinforce the interests of the group.

Much of the political debate in France has focused on the question of which people should be included within solidaristic networks. The concept of solidarity was taken up by a political movement, 'solidarism'. Solidarism favoured a general extension of the principle to the population as a whole (see Bourgeois, 1897). It tended to assume that solidarities would link together into a widespread, inclusive network. However, not every appeal to 'solidarity' would meet these criteria; there are circumstances in which solidarities are narrowly conceived and defined. The idea, like other forms of particularism, has the potential to be exclusive as well as inclusive.

Solidaristic social networks can be represented in terms similar to the 'spheres' of sphere sovereignty, but the idea also has the potential to be interpreted within a rather more complex framework. Solidaristic arrangements depend on an interaction between individuals and groups, which can overlap and be interrelated. A person might be at the same time a member of a family, a friendly society, and a community, and have solidaristic relationships with each. Social responsibility is defined in terms of relationships like these. The primary responsibilities are felt to those with whom one is most intimately connected, and the strength of rights and responsibilities diminishes with social distance. 'One can imagine', Alfarandi suggests, 'a system of concentric circles of solidarity, wider and wider, which goes from the nuclear family to the international community.' (1989, p.73)

The patterns of particularism associated with these doctrines are complex, and it may be misleading to generalise too strongly between arguments which are themselves rooted in different traditions and ideologies. What the doctrines have in common is a belief that rights and responsibilities are not general, but dependent on specific links between people in different social contexts. They negate universalism.

Assessing particularism

Particularist doctrines define the boundaries of responsibility. The moral weakness of these beliefs is that they are, in their nature, liable to be exclusive and discriminatory. Particularism has encouraged separatism and racism. However, there is a danger, in identifying the particularist approach too closely with these kinds of problem, of losing sight of its moral force. Particularism can also be held to represent a process which, as long as it is kept within appropriate bounds, is necessary and desirable. There is not just a distinction between in-groups and out-groups. Social relationships form complex networks, and responsibilities have to be defined in a specific context. This is powerful as a description of the way that people live in society. It is also compelling as a moral argument, because the obligations it emphasises are those which we are likely, in practice, to recognise. Values like mutual support, community, personal relationships and loyalty are more usually prized than they are condemned. The principal strength of particularist doctrines is their use of such principles and relationships to reinforce their argument.

The existence of this kind of relationship does help to explain why certain rules are treated as 'moral'. Hume argued that the nature of social morality depends crucially on its utility, and the development over time of moral codes which reflect and support social practices (Hume, 1789, book III). Burke, similarly, argued that the gradual process of testing such practices led progressively to moral 'prescription', the selection of beneficial (or functional) rules, and the rejection of undesirable ones (1790). Morality is not, by this account, universal; rather, it depends on the social context in which it develops. The central defence of the existing structure of rights and responsibilities is that without it, there would be no real 'society' at all. However, although this helps to explain many moral rules, it is not enough to justify them morally: the way things are is not necessarily the way that they should be.

The case for universalism has to be set against these arguments. The argument for consistency seems fairly weak in the face of communitarian objections; it is not that the argument is wrong, but that its scope for application is restricted. There are still some elements of universalism, in particular those associated with human rights, which might be considered important as a precondition of social contact. The provision of welfare is often concerned with 'welfare interests', items which everyone needs, and which are in some sense 'essential' (Feinberg, 1973; Doyal and Gough, 1991). Without food or water, one cannot be a person; without basic material goods, and some (like Townsend, 1979) would argue a great deal else besides, one cannot exist in society with others.

This does not undermine the case for particularism; it only limits it. When particularism is qualified by some universal standards, Jones refers to it as 'moderate' rather than 'radical' (1990, p.39). The kind of universalism which this permits is still limited and defined by the context of social relationships in which it is applied. Social duties are still hierarchically ordered, and defined in terms both of existing networks and of social distance. If we pay more attention to a pensioner in Bognor than an orphan in Bogota, it

is because we recognise the importance of such networks in shaping the patterns of social responsibility and solidarity which define our actions. We may draw the limits at different stages, but virtually everyone is particularist to some extent. Particularist doctrines suggest that, in the way in which people relate to us, they are not equivalent; we have special responsibilities to some people which we do not have towards others. The effect of the universalist argument might be to impose duties to everybody, but these duties will not be as strong or as demanding as those which are specific to other people.

The welfare society

The development and strengthening of this kind of moral relationship have an important potential for improving welfare provision. Arguments for welfare based in reciprocity are often stronger (as Titmuss realised) than others based in a non-specific altruism. The French system has developed on the basis of 'solidarity' or mutual aid (Dupeyroux, 1989). The kinds of networks developed in France have deficiencies, but for those who are covered they are often notably superior to the kinds of provisions offered under the universalist welfare state in Britain.

However, a system of solidaristic networks does not look very much like a universal welfare state. Universal principles, like 'social justice' or the 'right to welfare', offer basic standards; they can also be used, in the application of rules like 'territorial justice' within the NHS, to justify an attempt to equalise provision and resources. By contrast, solidaristic arrangements, in so far as they are based in relatively small, overlapping groups, are diverse; the kinds and levels of protection which they offer depend greatly on the context of both the person who is being helped and the group to which the need is referred. The main aim of mutualism is social protection: people should not have to suffer destructive changes in their lives because of needs like sickness, unemployment or old age. This often implies unequal treatment - because a person in a better position has further to fall than a poor person.

The 'institutional model' of welfare has similar concerns - the development of systems to protect people against socially defined needs. If this is what the 'welfare state' is like, it does not have to be seen as monolithic (Titmuss, 1974) or even egalitarian (Spicker, 1988, pp 159-161). However, the model associated with this argument is not so much the traditional 'welfare state' as what Titmuss and Robson called a 'welfare society' (Titmuss, 1968, ch 11; Robson, 1976). For many, this is now associated with a concept of welfare pluralism. An important element within the discussion, though, has been a critique of the universalist pretensions of the welfare state; the welfare state cannot do everything. The welfare society is one in which people recognise responsibilities towards each other, through a system of 'gift-reciprocity' which binds together the various actors in society.

The development of the concept of a welfare society has depended on a picture of a diverse, multifaceted set of social relationships - including the kinds of relationships considered in sphere sovereignty. The arguments for independent provision include the belief that diversity complements existing provision, fosters innovation, increases flexibility and choice, and offers alternative perspectives from state welfare. For those (on both right and left) who think that state welfare can be restrictive and repressive, the devolution and decentralisation of welfare can be seen as a means of empowering people.

This argument is not necessarily particularist, but it is very likely to be. The emphasis on diversity is difficult to reconcile with the norms usually associated with universal principles of distribution, like minimum guarantees or optimal provision. It can be argued that there are different routes to achieving basic standards; and if there are different routes, one has to ask on what basis they can be judged. There are some answers which might be compatible with universalism: that the standard to be achieved must depend on the choices of the people being served; or that the best location for decisions is at the level where they will apply (a principle also, incidentally, compatible with sphere sovereignty). But there are also answers that are particularist: that the standards cannot be seen in the abstract, but have to be translated into a form which is compatible with the social context in which they are applied; that although basic standards are desirable, it is for every moral community to decide how, and whether, to pursue them; and, of course, that different standards should apply to different people.

The limits of particularism

Particularism and communitarianism present an important challenge for socialists. The arguments are framed in terms very similar to those which socialists themselves use, referring to social networks, mutual aid and collective action. These are ideas which socialists are likely to approve of. At the same time, some aspects of particularism are repellent; the idea can be used to justify racism, inequality, patronage and injustice. My own position is ambivalent, as might by now be clear; I am both attracted and appalled by the concepts. The problem is to find some way of taking on board what is valuable in the particularist approach without conceding its disagreeable points.

Jones takes the view that it is at least possible to reconcile particularism with some universal values:

> "strictly, there is no reason why moderate particularism should not also accommodate an idea of universal rights of citizenship - if by that we mean only that there are certain rights which every political community must accord to its members." (1990, p.40)

This is probably right, though there are some reservations to make about it. Universal rights have to be interpreted and realised within a social context, which means that they are subject to particular applications. Particularism is necessary, and perhaps even desirable, to the extent that it provides the means through which people are able to exercise rights and duties, and by which they participate in society. It ceases to be defensible in cases where it contradicts other kinds of moral principle, like the right to welfare. This is an important limitation, but it still implies a significant qualification to universalism - that some degree of particularism, and so of discrimination between groups, is desirable. The main issue is to decide where the boundaries lie.

The weakness of moderate particularism is that it assumes the status quo to be desirable unless some argument can be made to the contrary. This is the basis for many of the arguments which are actually made. For example, people commonly use the rules of inheritance and succession to offer property, some protection and where possible some advantages to others. This is largely defensible in terms of the social framework which I have been describing. The main reservation to make is that the result of such rules may not be socially just; the position after succession has to be reviewed and if necessary altered to prevent unacceptable inequalities from arising. However, there are also cases in which the assumption seems unwarranted. Particularism is an argument for discrimination, and there are wholly unacceptable grounds for discrimination. In cases

where a landlord will not accept a tenant on the grounds of race, or where politicians appoint unqualified members of their families to public office, it is not generally the practice to say that 'this would be reasonable were it not for some other values which it contradicts'. On the contrary, they are unreasonable, and there is something wrong with a principle which states otherwise.

It is not enough, then, to try to reconcile contradictory values. What needs to be done is to find a different way of appealing to values like 'community' and 'solidarity' which does not leave room for exclusion and injustice. There have been a number of attempts to do so. The idea of community is ambiguous; it can refer, amongst many other definitions, to a network of social relationships, a geographical area, or a group of people with common interests. To make the emphasis on community as inclusive as possible, the idea has to be taken in a fairly comprehensive sense. It might, for example, be taken to mean a geographical area - so that everyone within that area makes up part of the 'community' - or to a widely spread group of people, defined in terms of their common rights or citizenship. David Miller argues that the idea of community can effectively be identified with the nation state (1990, ch 9); others, like Ruth Lister, try to define 'citizenship' as widely as possible (1990). The solidaristic approach equally depends on establishing the broadest possible terms for the inclusion of people at the margins. The issue is implicit within Titmuss's understanding of 'gift-reciprocity' (1970); a more fully elaborated example is Bill Jordan's 'socialist model' of welfare (1987, p.42). It is possible to represent all these arguments in terms of 'moderate particularism', which would suggest that there is some inconsistency in the positions they hold. I think, though, that the case which communitarian socialists wish to make can be argued without any theoretical inconsistency.

People's lives develop within a particular social context, and that they are structured in terms of that context. This is the central case for the development of 'particular' rights and responsibilities. Social relationships, and social networks, are the means through which people are able to make a reality of their hopes or aspirations. The view which this represents is a form of freedom, in a 'positive' sense - the freedom to do things. More importantly, it is freedom in a collective sense. People can only be said to be 'free' or 'unfree', not when they act in isolation from others, but when their actions are seen in relation to others (Spicker, 1985). In order to be free, people must be able to choose; they must have the power to choose; and they must not be prevented from choosing. In principle, freedom can be increased without diminishing the freedom of others; people collaborating, for example, can all increase their range of actions. In a social context, however, people's freedom tends to be limited by the structure of power: in these circumstances, the power to act can be increased only through a relative increase in their power, and a reduction in the power of others.

Another way of saying this is that there must be a redistribution of power. The idea of 'empowerment' means that people who are relatively powerless are able to gain more power. The term has only recently come into widespread use, and it tends to reflect its origins in social work practice. Solomon, in the earliest use I have been able to identify, defines empowerment as

> "a process whereby the social worker or other helping professional engages in a set of activities with the client aimed at reducing the powerlessness stemming from the experience of discrimination because the client belongs to a stigmatised collective" (Solomon, 1976 p.29);

this has subsequently been extended to refer to

> "the mechanism by which people, organisations and communities gain mastery over their lives" (Rappaport 1984, cited Holdsworth 1991 p.3).

A protest against the closure of a local school or hospital is almost invariably made in competition with the allocation of resources elsewhere. Positive action for racial groups, such as black housing associations, always runs the risk that in compensating for the disadvantages for one group it may work to the detriment of others. Empowerment has to be taken, then, as a relative concept. The test which has to be applied is a relative one: what is the balance of power, and to what extent does it produce disadvantage?

Increasing people's freedom, and reducing their disadvantage, are general principles, even if they can only be understood in a social context; they apply to everyone. If principles like 'community' and 'solidarity' are advocated as a means to empowerment and the removal of disadvantage, there does not have to be any inconsistency. But this means that they must be treated as secondary rather than primary values; universal claims like freedom and equality have priority. It is only when socialists advocate 'community' and 'solidarity' as values in their own right that they come close to a particularism which can undermine universal claims for equality and social justice. There are dangers, but the theoretical problems can be resolved.

There are still important practical problems. Communitarian values have to be applied within a particular social framework. It is often assumed that if people who are most vulnerable and most often excluded are given power, they will ensure that others like them who have been excluded will be given greater opportunities. The reverse may well be the case. Tenants in poor estates do their utmost to keep out 'problem families'; parents of children in schools where many children do not speak English (notably in the Dewsbury case) have tried to take their children out. This may be distasteful, but there is nothing surprising in it. Empowerment means that people are gaining power in a competition for scarce resources. It means that they will have the opportunity, as others have, to protect their own situation, and those they care about. They are being given the opportunity to participate - to take part in social relationships and networks. People are being empowered to do the kinds of thing which other people do; and the kinds of thing which other people do are often discriminatory. The real dilemma for communitarian socialism rests not, then, in the need to reconcile universalism with particularism in theory, but in the problem of respecting universal values in practice.

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