

**PRIVATE CHOICE AND PUBLIC INTEREST –
A LITERATURE REVIEW**

CHAU, Pak-kwan
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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I shall analyze the works we have read during this semester by focusing on the issue of private choice and public interest. How are different individual preferences to be summated into a public interest that is shared by all members of a society? It is one of the major problems in democratic theory, and the books we have read, to a certain extent, are trying to provide answers to this problem.

The issue of private choice and public interest is a modern political problem and basically occurs in an individualist-democratic context. It is not a problem for people who live in a community with extensive shared values. Traditions, religious beliefs and customs basically provide sufficient justifications for public actions. However, people who live in a large complex society tend to exhibit conflicts in their preferences, and political justifications are needed for any cooperative and collective action. Also, in a totalitarian society, there is no need for a government to provide reasonable justification for public actions. In a democratic society, it is assumed that any public action should be justified in the sense that it serves the common interest. Therefore, the questioning of a relationship between private choice and public interest presupposes a certain conception of the individual and society.

The central questions of democratic politics have always been concerned with the relationship between the citizen and the state. The issue of private choice and public interest reveals the nature of this relationship. Also, the search for justifications between individual choice and public interest can be seen as attempts to maintain a democratic and balanced political system.

More importantly, the understanding of relationships between private choice and public interest can help us to realize the complex nature of democracy. We need to be careful about the ideological dominance of majority rule. A procedure is undemocratic if it allows social policies to be formed without regard to the choices of the individuals in a society. Are democratic states' power beyond control? How do democratic states manipulate citizen's preferences and value orientations?

Throughout the paper, the issue of private choice and public interest will be analyzed along the individualist-collectivist axis. The conflict/tension between individualism and collectivism will be used to illustrate the private and communal aspects of democracy.

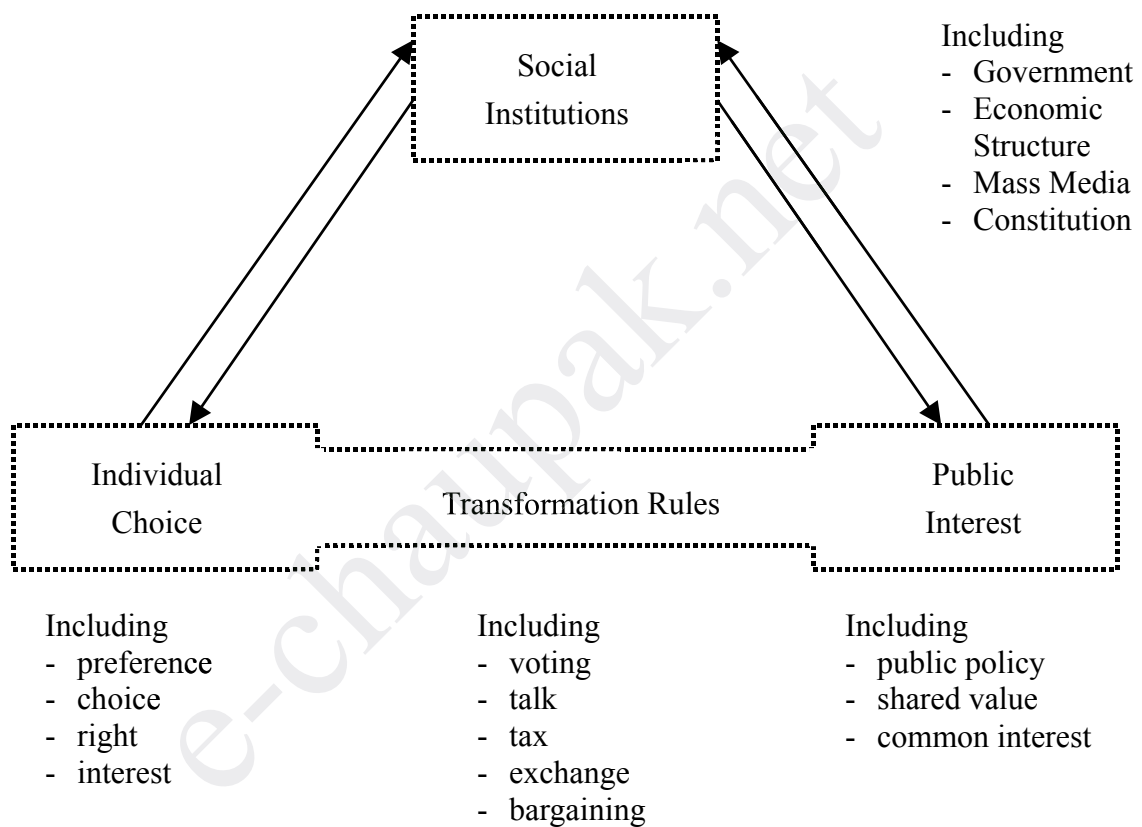
The first part of the paper will argue that a substantial portion of the controversy in democratic theories has to do with the conflict/tension between individualism and collectivism. Then, I shall use the readings to illustrate the implications of individualism and collectivism for democratic theories. Finally, I shall evaluate some of the ways to reconcile the differences between these two positions.

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LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Basically, there are four major elements involved in the relationships between private choice and public interest, which are (1) individual choice, (2) public interest, (3) the transformation rule between individual choice and public interest, and (4) social institutions. Their relationships are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 The Relationships Between Private Choice and Public Interest



The literature we have read tries to describe and explain the interrelationships among these four variables. Some authors focus on the transformation rules. Riker, taking individual preference as given, describes the voting system in democratic politics as incapable of simultaneously satisfying the conditions of fairness and of logically. Barber argues that individual preferences can be changed and the perfect transformation rule is through 'talking'. Pateman advocates extensive participation in areas other than national politics so that citizens can exercise the maximum amount of control over their own lives and environment.

There are two writers who focus on the evaluative criteria for the transformation rules. It is clear that we are not seeking anything like scientific truth. Evaluative criteria of the transformation rules are inevitably based on judgements of fairness, stability, cohesion, and efficiency. Nielsen and Nozick try to provide evaluative criteria that are based on the notion of equality.

Finally, there is another group of writers that concentrates on how social institutions affect individual choice and public interest. Ginsberg demonstrates how mass opinion has been used to manipulate individual and public interests. Nordlinger argues that the state (one of the major social institutions) acts autonomously and frequently to enforce its own preferences rather than those of society. Lowi describes how governmental agencies become captives of powerful interest groups and lose their control over public policy. Socialist writers such as Cunningham, Bowles and Gintis, and Green argue that not only does capitalism govern individual and public interests, but it also creates a pseudo-democratic political system.

PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

There are two questions regarding the relationship between individual choice and public interest. The positive question is : How are individual choices being channelled towards the public interest under the existing political institutions? And, the normative question is : How should individual choice be channelled towards the public interest?

Most of the authors in our readings do not use empirical evidence to support their arguments, except Mansbridge, Pateman, and Riker. Most of the time, these authors are not arguing facts; instead, they are debating world views, ideologies, and ways of life. Of course, the major problem here is how to reconcile these value differences. Paradoxically, this is the same question they try to answer (how to reconcile different individual choices?).

It is important to notice that these authors use different concepts when they say similar things. Authors that are based on different frameworks focus on different aspects of a same issue. The concept of 'choice' is an example. Riker, like other social choice theorists, treats 'preference' and 'choice' as essentially synonymous concepts. A preference is tied to the meaning of subjective emotions and usually used in describing behaviours in the market system. However, when Barber talks about 'choice', it is not the same as preference. Barber considers choice as an actualized preference and usually involves goals, plan and will. Who is right? Who is wrong? It is difficult to tell because they are talking about two different things.

The concept of democracy is another example. Riker equates democracy to voting. Pateman defines democracy as full participation. Cunningham considers democracy as channels to maximize individual control over social environment and should be thought about in terms of 'more or less'. Theorists use many languages to classify things. Each language is selected because it serves certain purposes. Concepts reflect theorists' purposes and determine what is to count as a fact. A useful way to understand the problem of definition in democratic theories is to look at them along the individualist and collectivist axis.

INDIVIDUALISM AND COLECTIVISM

A substantial portion of the controversy in our readings has to do with what is the appropriate starting point for analysis. The two extreme starting points are individualism and collectivism. These two different frameworks provide a quite different conception of human nature, social life and collective action.

The writers that subscribe to individualism are Riker, Nozick and Nordlinger (see Table 2). Although there are various forms of individualism, basically, individualists believe the individual should be the fundamental unit of analysis. The building block of a society is individuals, not communities, not states. The building blocks are living, choosing, economizing persons. A state (government) should only keep a minimal role in the political system. The rights of the individual are being used against the state's claims.

Table 2 Individualists vs. Collectivists

<u>Individualists</u>	<u>Collectivists</u>	
	Communitarian	Socialist
Riker	Barber	Nielsen
Nozick	Pateman	Bowles &
Nordlinger		Gintis
		Green

Individualists believe a society is simply a collection of individual beings. They tend to reduce complex social situations, institutions or events into individual beliefs and preferences. Individual's preferences are extremely different and are difficult to comprise.

The writers that prescribe to collectivism are Barber, Pateman, Bowles and Gintis, Cunningham, Nielsen and Green. These writers can be subdivided into two groups: the communitarian and the socialists (see Table 2).

Generally, communitarians criticize individualists' devaluation, neglect and undermining the concept of community. Community is a fundamental good for human beings. Communitarians believe that the dichotomies between individual/society and public/private are only myths. Individuals are social beings. Common consensus, communal commitment and full participation are fundamental human values.

Socialists regard social systems as having their own laws or tendencies. Individuals are not autonomous; each person is governed by social roles and social institutions. Socialists argue that the economic system (capitalism) should be treated as a major independent variable which continuously exerts influences on individuals and society.

Both communitarians and socialists believe that social phenomena cannot be described purely in terms of the individuals who compose them. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. However, they differ on whether socialism is a prerequisite for democracy.

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL CHOICE AND PUBLIC INTEREST

In this section and next, I shall use the readings to illustrate the implications of individualism and collectivism for democratic theory. Social choice theorists tend to equate democracy with voting. Riker argues that participation is "organized voting into genuine choice," liberty is "an instrument to organizing voting," and equality also is merely instrumental to voting (p. 5-8). In other words, traditional ideals of liberty, equality, and participation are only means to facilitate and sustain voting.

The major problem in the issue of individual choice and public interest is how to aggregate individual preferences to a collective decision. Kenneth Arrow proved that such aggregation is impossible, if certain conditions are to be maintained. Based on Arrow's results, Riker reinterprets democracy: "A democratic system should simply provide the citizens with the opportunity to dispose of unacceptable leaders rather than offering decision-making procedures which prioritize and select public policy options according to voter's preference" (p.241-246).

Obviously, the basic assumption here is that individuals are isolated human beings with different preferences. Individual choice and public interest are two separate entities; therefore, we need some kind of transformation rules to connect them. Voting serves as the major transformation rule in democratic societies. However, it is likely that individuals will have conflicting preferences, and politicians can easily manipulate the voting process to suit their own interests. Voting should not be considered as a reliable way to make public policies.

How do communitarians respond to the issue of aggregating individual preference to public interest? First, Barber and Pateman believe human beings are social individuals. The public and private are inseparable. Barber considers "politics as a way of living" and it is an inherent characteristic of human beings. Society is made up of individuals who share a common citizenship. Second, because of the political nature of human beings, politics (democracy) should be carried out in all aspects of life - not only in the political system, but also in education and the work place. A representative type of democracy proposed by Riker is unacceptable. Pateman says "the existence of representative institutions at national level is not sufficient for democracy; for maximum participation by all the people at that level socialisation, or 'social training,' for democracy must take place in

other spheres in order that the necessary individual attitudes and psychological qualities can be developed" (p.42).

Third, Barber and Pateman do not think democracy should merely be reduced to voting. Voting is only one of the ways individuals can express their political preferences. Barber argues that the paradox between individual preference and public interest exists because individualists "pose them in the vacuum of abstract rationality, where they are stripped of historical and political context and removed from areas of will and political judgement" (p. 203). Strong democracy, in Barber's words, requires citizens to make decisions that are based on political judgement and common will. Public interest evolves through continuous discussions among citizens. Individual conflicts and differences can be reconciled and comprised through political discussions. Barber's solution to the paradox of individual preference and public interest is simply "talk", the affective power of communal talk.

Here, one can see how differences in the starting point of analysis can affect judgements on political systems. Individualists' assumption of human nature may be too extreme, their reductionist view about society may be too naïve. Human beings all live in societies with certain amounts of shared values. Also, one of the major functions of political institutions is to shape people's preferences in order to obtain some common goals. However, communitarians may also be too optimistic about the communal nature of human beings. History has shown us that conflicts of interests and ideas are not easily reconciled, especially in a large and complex society.

There are some major questions that need to be addressed by both sides: What are the functions of a democratic political system or what do we expect from it? What are the justifications of democracy? What is the meaning of community in a capitalist society? To communitarians, what kind of structure is required to facilitate communal talk? How far should a state act positively to promote communal values? What is the actual process on how value conflicts can be resolved through communal talk?

A similar situation also happens between Nozick and Nielsen. Different starting points end up with different conclusions. Nozick's and Nielsen's works are trying to provide evaluative criteria for the transformation rules that are based on the notion of equality.

Nozick, an extreme individualist, claims that "the species is an abstraction; only the individual is real." Starting from the idea of absolute individual rights, Nozick proposes that a theory of justice should be concerned with justice in the initial acquisition and in transfer of what is initially just acquired (justice as entitlement), rather than distributive justice. Nozick's solution to the paradox of individual choice and public interest is to insist that the transformation rule should be based on morally authoritative rules-entitlement principles. The moral rules are impersonal and authoritative because they are not to embody the values of some person or group in preference to the values of others.

Nielsen also proposes his moral rules; however, his basic assumption and starting point of analysis is different from that of Nozick. Based on socialist ideals, he advocates a position of radical equalitarianism. In his socialist world, individual "would not be accumulators or possessive individualists, and the aim of their economic organization would not be profit maximization but the satisfaction of the human needs of everyone." "People would be their own masters with a psychology that thinks in terms of "we" and not just, and most fundamentally in terms of "I,"....." (p. 66).

Again, one can see the tensions between individualism and collectivism. Although Nielsen tries to draw socialist conclusions from liberal premises (which will be discussed later), his basic conception of human nature and society is still based on collectivism. One thing to be considered here is the relationship between these moral rules and democracy. These moral rules may lead us to believe that there exist laws of social justice outside our mind, which could be followed to make good policy. However, they would justify a significant trend to a planned, rationalized social system and deny the importance of citizen participation. Who needs citizens, when the policy makers can construct the just world by thought-experiment, without bothering to consult their views?

I shall discuss some of the ways to reconcile the differences between individualism and collectivism in the final section of this paper. Now, I shall analyse the institutional impacts on the relationship between individual choice and public interest along the individualist-collectivist axis.

INSTITUTIONAL IMPACTS

Nordlinger, a structuralist based on individualism (a strange label), defines a state "is made up and limited to those individuals who are endowed with society-wide decision-making authority" (p.11), as "only individuals have preferences and engage in actions that make for their realization" (p.9). He challenges the basic assumption of the 'societal constraint' model-public officials are constrained by societal forces and their policies. Instead, the state (public officials) is autonomous and translates its preferences into authoritative actions. He argues that the democratic state has far greater autonomy than we expect.

Clearly, Nordlinger's conception of state is based on a reductionist view of society. He reduces the problem of autonomy to the capacity of public officials to resist political pressures and to a listing of strategies they have for manipulating public opinion. Like social choice theorists, he regards the preferences of public officials as self-generated, and independent of social and political influences.

On the other hand, socialists argue that the economic structure is a major determining factor affecting individuals and public interest. In order to achieve real democracy, socialism, rather than capitalism, should be adopted in a society.

Bowles and Gintis stress the contradiction between democracy (defined as personal rights) and capitalism (defined as property rights). Democratic capitalism has been driven by the clash of property rights and personal rights. Also, liberal capitalism has disempowered and depoliticized the intervening community between the individual and the state. As a result, the "state come to monopolize politics" (p.140). Finally, they propose a post-liberal democracy, a synthesis of the Jeffersonian and Marxian visions. It is not based on the exchange of property claims, rather, "it is a vision of society based on learning governed by the exercise of personal rights" (p.178).

Cunningham also argues that capitalism is a major barrier to achieving more democracy in an industrial society. Capitalism creates too much inequality, inhibits public control over economic decisions and creates "a situation where very few people have sufficient wealth to make effective use of democratic mechanisms" (p.107). The goal of socialism is to advance democracy. He suggests that future development of socialism should be based on direct and representative democratic institutions and movement-

based politics.

Green argues that capitalism creates a pseudo-democratic political system in the United States. He believes political equality cannot be achieved without social equality. A genuine democratic political system can be achieved by attaining a classless society and equalizing the social divisions based on sex and race.

Nordlinger argues that the state may not be constrained by societal factors, while socialists insist that the state is mainly constrained by economic structure. It seems that they may both be right. In a complex society, there are some decisions and policies that are constrained by societal and economic factors, while others may not have direct or strong relationships with these factors.

First, more empirical work needs to be done to find out what are these two type of decisions. Second, normative arguments should be developed to lead us to react to the autonomy of the democratic state? The normative arguments should be based on a fully developed theory of democracy.

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BEYOND INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM

In our readings, several authors have been trying to reconcile the differences between individualism and collectivism. In this section, I shall evaluate their efforts and suggest some of the remaining questions that need to be addressed. There are four ways that have been suggested to reconcile the differences (1) Institutionalism, (2) A Participatory Approach, (3) Reflective Equilibrium, and (4) A Contingency Approach.

Institutionalism

Institutionalists do not presuppose a 'strong' theory of human nature and society. They consider social institutions, not only the economic system, as major determinants of individual behaviours. Institutionalists believe that political values are meaningless if they cannot be institutionalized. Their main purpose is to understand how institutional norms guide our behaviours. Ginsberg's and Lowi's works are two examples of institutionalism.

Ginsberg's basic point is that the development of modern mass opinion enhances democratic states' domination over individual and cultural beliefs. Not only can public opinion be a way to achieve citizen control over government, but it also can be used to exercise political control by the state. In Ginsberg's words, "citizens become overwhelmingly receptive to governmental intervention in economy and society because their rules seemed so responsive to opinion" (p.230). His work shows how democratic institutions shape our social and political behaviours.

Lowi's book poses three major problems of the political system in the United States: (1) government agencies and the legislative process are dominated by powerful special interest groups; (2) legislative branches lose their control over social policies by delegating excessive authority public philosophy to guide policy-making. Lowi proposes a new public philosophy-"Juridical democracy" to solve these problems. According to Lowi, juridical democracy "is rule of law operating in institutions,..... is a public philosophy of which rejects informality as a criterion, accepting it only as a measure of the distance between reality and the ideal situation" (p.298). The juridical approach "produces increments of justice as surely as the interest-group liberal approach produces increments of equilibrium" (p.311).

However, Lowi's solution only focuses on the problem of delegation of excessive legislative authority, it is difficult to see how juridical democracy can achieve justice by only making the rules more explicit. Lowi is very optimistic about the juridical approach: "the approach does not dictate a particular definition of justice, of virtue, or of good life..... The juridical principle can convert a consumer into a just society without altering in any way the virtue of consumption or the freedom to consume" (p.311). Making the rule more explicit may imply that we have a clear idea of what is right and what is wrong-which presupposes a strong theory of goodness. It is an inherent difficulty for institutionalist because they try not to have a strong theory about human nature and society.

Institutionalism can be a useful perspective to help us to understand the dynamics of political institutions. The information obtained by Ginsberg and Lowi can serve the purposes of education and enlightenment. However, because of the descriptive nature of institutionalism, it fails to provide a theoretical basis for change in a positive direction.

A Participatory Approach

Another way to reconcile the tensions between the individualism and collectivism is to adopt a radical scepticism and relativism. The paradox between private interest and public interest cannot be resolved theoretically. The only resolution is to encourage the establishment of participatory structures throughout a society. On the one hand, this position regards each individual has his own criterion of truth (individualism). On the other hand, because each individual's truth is equal, public interest and collective action can only be legitimated by a participatory consensus (collectivism).

The position of a participatory approach may be useful to justify the existence of various ideologies in a society-'let a hundred flowers bloom.' However, a theorist still has to make his/her judgement and determine his/her own conception of society and individual.

Green's arguments contain some elements of this position (although his starting point is collectivism). He believes that a theorist's job is to lay some general direction, the details of how to run a government should be left to the public. In discussing to what extent we should socialize the means of production, Green says "what appropriately within the public sphere will become evidence to peoples as they try democratically to control their own lives" (pp.136-7). In discussing participation, he says "the end of democracy is to make effective public choice possible, such questions can

only be answered by the same people who create a democratic social order in the first place. My purpose here is only to point to some of the tools that may be of use in that task of invention.... " (p.199).

There are two things that we need to consider here: first, trying to go beyond the dichotomy of individualism and collectivism does not prevent us from making value judgements. The only thing we could do is to be fair to both sides and to consider the arguments of both sides seriously. Second, we may get involved in an infinite regress, because we would have to decide what are the criteria to determine the degree of fairness to both sides. For example, individualists can argue that Green's conclusion is derived from his belief on collectivism because he still believes that we should socialize a certain amount of means of production.

Reflective Equilibrium

The third way to reconcile the tensions between individualism and collectivism is to use the method of reflective equilibrium. A theorist reaches his final judgment after he/she has weighted and considered various proposed values. According to Rawls, a moral judgment "cannot be deduced from self-evident premises or conditions on principles; instead, its justification is a matter of the mutual support of many considerations, of every thing fitting together into one coherent view" (p.21). Both Nielsen and Cunningham (in Cunningham terms: non-foundationalism) adopt the method of reflective equilibrium to support their arguments. Cunningham argues that "an advantage to pursuing political philosophy non-foundationally is that this helps keep foundational options open. Tying political analyses to fundamental philosophical positions forces choices that may be unnecessary" (p.21). Both authors construct their arguments in dialogue with a large variety of intellectual traditions and systematically respond to opposing views.

However, it is not certain whether this method can reconcile the conflicts between individualism and collectivism. The final conclusion may still depend on the judgements from which one begins. Both John Rawls and Kai Nielsen use the method of reflective equilibrium, but they end up with two different conclusions. Nielsen argues that the major element that separates his and Rawls' conclusion is Rawls pays little attention to socialist ideas!

Also, non-socialists may see Nielsen's and Cunningham's works (even Bowles and Gintis' book) as attempts to save socialist ideals, they both draw socialist conclusions from liberal premises. The major problem here is whether socialists can, without sacrificing ideological integrity, incorporate liberal notions of equality and democracy within socialism. Socialists' real problem is to convince non-socialists to believe that a system which integrates socialism, equality and democracy is better than capitalism, in spite of the fact that most socialist countries in this world have been an enemy of equal liberty and democracy. Socialists have to show how democratic-socialism would not obliterate individual freedom, or if some sacrifice of individual freedom is inevitable, then, such conditions would need to be carefully spelled out. These theorists try to maintain a balanced view, but to do so would be much more difficult than stay at the two extremes.

A Contingency Approach

A contingency approach means that our conception of human behaviour and political judgements will vary depending upon the characteristic of a social context. Mansbridge's book can be used to illustrate the contingency approach.

Mansbridge argues that "both unitary and the adversary forms of democracy embody worthy democratic ideals, although each is appropriate in a different context" (p.4). Her solution to the problem of individual choice and public interest is a contingency one. When individual or group interests conflict, a democratic polity needs adversary institution. When individual interests do not conflict, a democratic polity needs unitary institution. A society must develop institutions which do justice to both common and conflicting interests. Her conclusion seems to suggest that the communal conception of human behaviour is more applicable in a small local community, while the individualist conception of human behaviour is applicable to democracies of a broader scope.

It is difficult to translate Mansbridge's dichotomy to state and national level democracies. Because of the size and complexity of the modern nation-state, the unitary form of democracy can only be found in local small communities. Mansbridge acknowledges this problem; her suggestion is to develop some types of national ideals and less competitive economy so as to de-emphasize self-interested behaviour and obtain unitary experiences through co-operative economy. If this is the case, what is the difference between Mansbridge's and collectivists' position?

There is a need to clarify how and when to apply these different democratic theories. Who is going to decide what type of democracy should be used in different contexts? Also, can we get similar unitary experiences from other social institutions such as family and church, instead of political institution? Is there any difference in the nature of unitary experience obtained from political institution and other institutions? If the answer is that there is no difference, Mansbridge may overemphasize human beings' need of unitary experiences in political institution. Other kinds of institutions can be used to satisfy people's need for community.

The contingency approach could sharpen our judgements that there are no single best type of democracy other than that the type of democracy must have a good 'fit' with the context. However, the contingency approach can have conservative implications. One could use the contingency approach to justify that adversary democracy is the best type of political arrangement for a national government, even though it is only a pseudo-democratic political system.

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SOME FINAL COMMENTS

Theorists may overemphasize the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism. The controversy over starting points has led both sides to moderate its extreme claims, especially the socialist writers. The individualist has emphasized liberty, private space and competition, at the expense of social equality, co-operation and community, while collectivist commits the opposite errors. Freedom and competition provide opportunities for human beings to be creative, while co-operation and community create a sense of belonging and security in a society. Both privacy and community are essential for human development.

Both individualists and collectivists have provided a great deal of insights about individual, society and their relationships. Recently, socialist countries have come to realize the importance of democracy and liberty in modern society. Theoreticians have been trying to provide linkages between the two extremes. It is hoped that future democratic theory would include a genuine dialogue between individualists and collectivists. However, this does not mean that both sides will give up their positions; it may only indicate that they will develop richer theories that can admit not only autonomy but also community is of fundamental importance.

In light of all these developments, there are some questions that need to be further clarified:

Normative Questions

- (1) What are the normative justifications of democracy?
- (2) What kind of activities should be regulated by market exchange, government structure or collective reciprocal relationships?
- (3) Under what conditions should individual freedom be constrained and by what means?
- (4) Under what conditions should government shape individual and societal preferences and by what means?
- (5) How far should a state act positively to promote communal values?
- (6) Should we allow different types of democracy in different situations?

Conceptual Questions

- (1) What is the meaning of community in a modern capitalist society?
- (2) How to justify political authority in a democratic society?
- (3) How does individualism fail to recognize the good of community? Can we achieve the good of community in non-political context?

Empirical Questions

- (1) What are people's expectations on democracy?
- (2) How do various modern bureaucratic institutions respond to democratic politics?
- (3) How do different kinds of decision rules affect policy outcomes?
- (4) What kinds of decisions or policies are constrained by societal and economic factors? What kinds of decisions and policies have no direct or strong relationship with these factors?

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