DOES RAWLS ESTABLISH A CREDIBLE DEFENCE OF LIBERALISM?

The understanding of what is meant by liberalism is very varied. One interpretation is provided by John Rawls. (1) He contends that it is possible to establish agreement within society based on constitutional democracy and the principles of justice and fairness. He is not suggesting that this would mean the expression of some monolithic agreement about the values of society, but instead that people would express minimal support for the aim of justice despite having different views. This situation would mean that a consensus of values could be established in terms of the principle of reasonable pluralism: “A modern democratic society is characterised not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical and moral doctrines, but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonably comprehensive doctrines. No one of these doctrines is affirmed by citizens generally. Nor should one expect that in the foreseeable future one of them, or some other reasonable doctrine, will ever be affirmed by all, or nearly all citizens. Political liberalism assumes that for political purposes, a plurality of reasonable yet incomprehensible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime. Political liberalism also supposes that a reasonable comprehensive doctrine does not reject the essentials of a democratic regime.”(2) The major task of Rawls is to establish that despite the plurality, and often opposition of different doctrines, they can establish sufficient common ground to uphold a constitutional democratic regime. This perspective implies that this type of society must have a solid basis for agreement about its values despite important differences between the different standpoints. The criteria on which this possibility is established is defined by the principle of justice. So, Rawls is assuming that the various differences within society can ultimately be reconciled in terms of agreement about its basic values, which implies that the very character of liberal society can provide the possibility for this ultimate reconciliation of contending views.

Marxism would oppose this perspective because it would contend that the different class interests cannot be reconciled in terms of the principle of reasonable pluralism. In other words the working class has credible reasons why it should not be satisfied with a liberal society because its conception of justice does not overcome the problems of exploitation and oppression within capitalism. It is true that liberalism can establish a formal application of justice in political terms, but this possibility is not sufficient to resolve outstanding economic problems. This point is not addressed adequately by Rawls because he assumes that his standpoint is correct, and so does not require modification or the possibility of rejection. In this dogmatic manner he assumes that society is united in the terms that he has outlined. This means that he considers it feasible and practical that he will be successful in resolving the following problem which is to work out a political conception of political justice for a (liberal) constitutional democratic regime that a 'plurality of reasonable doctrines, both religious and nonreligious, liberal and non-liberal may endorse for the right reasons'.(3) But in making these assumptions that he can achieve his aim of establishing consensus about the liberal values of society, he must also maintain that people have more in common than divides them concerning the values of society. For example, he has to maintain that conservatives and socialists are both united in favour of liberalism, and that liberalism is the expression of the major principles of capitalist society. Hence the application of the principle of democracy will promote liberalism regardless of which party is actually in power. But can it be seriously accepted that Rawls conception of a well ordered society based on fairness and justice has been consistently realised within the history of capitalism? It is true that pluralism may explain the relationship of different views, but what is the outcome of this situation is not necessarily the realisation of justice. Instead we can argues that what society is at any given moment in time is the outcome of the balance of class forces. If the working class has a low level of class consciousness and combativity, then the result is the formation of reactionary governments with the aim of promoting the profits of capitalism. In these circumstances the issue of justice becomes merely formal and contested. Thus Rawl's conception of people as free and equal citizens represents a naïve view of the actual power structure in contemporary capitalism. His primarily political analysis is also problematical because of its lack of a connection with the role of the economic, which is the dynamic basis for promoting actual inequality within society. Hence Rawls’ definition of the character of politics is both over-optimistic and naïve: “In order to fulfil their political role, citizens are viewed as having the intellectual and moral powers appropriate to that role, such as a capacity for a sense of political justice given by a liberal conception and a capacity to form, follow and revise their individual doctrines of the good, and capable also of the political virtues necessary for them to cooperate in maintaining a just political society.”(4) This understanding is more a definition of what should be the situation rather than a description of actual political reality. Instead of connecting an understanding of empirical reality to the importance of the principles of a liberal society what is actually being elaborated is a view that reality itself should correspond to these principles. Hence the assumption that is being made is the justification of the view that the only form of just society is one that corresponds to the principles of liberalism. Thus the outcome of the role of reasonable pluralism can only be the expression of a just or liberal society. In other words the only conclusion that people can make about what is reasonable will correspond to the aspirations of what is meant by liberalism. This assumption would seem to be dogmatic because it could be argued that many expressions of the views of the dominant political parties within a constitutional democracy have not corresponded with Rawls definition of liberalism. Most notably in terms of the influence of the ideology of conservatism which is primarily motivated by individualism and the importance of private property rather than the aim of justice. In contrast Rawls considers that the only suitable political process corresponds to a situation in which: “This ideal is that citizens are to conduct their public political discussions of constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice within the framework of what each sincerely regards as a reasonable political conception of justice, a conception that expresses political values that others as free and equal also might reasonably be expected reasonably to endorse.”(5) But the actual conduct of politics is not based around an agreed collection of values, and is instead based on ideological differences that cannot easily be reconciled in terms of establishing agreement about values. For example, much of the politics of the 20th century was based on the issue of free enterprise versus the rival merits of the welfare state. This meant there was no agreed collection of reciprocal values and instead the issue of which approach would be dominant was decided by means of the results of the ballot box. In this context the issue of justice was not important, and instead what was crucial was the level of influence of rival views about how the economy should be administered. But this is not important to Rawls because he is concerned with the outcome of the interaction of the political views of the citizens of a democratic society. The voters, regardless of their different views, are considered to be united around the principles of justice. This means they are disunited by matters of conscience, but the importance of what are the consequences of tensions caused by distinct social and economic programmes is not discussed. Instead he assumes that a liberal society will ensure that there is a decent distribution of wealth among its citizens; that the state will be the employer of last resort in order to overcome the problem of unemployment; and that basic health care will be realised in a liberal society. But these aspects have not been realised in the conditions of increasing crisis and austerity policies. Instead what he is defining as the economic features of liberalism is another expression of an ideal that has often been difficult to realise in practice. He makes the assumption that social and economic inequalities should not be excessive, but this is a moral claim that has often lacked practical expression. The major difficulty in his approach is that he cannot reconcile the principles of what he considers to be the liberal society with the actual reality.

In other words his approach is more plausible when he contends that in a liberal society people should have equal basic rights and liberties in political terms, but his standpoint is more problematical when he associates this condition with the aim of limiting the economic inequality in society. This view does not recognise that the rights within what is a constitutional democracy has often been connected with the generation of disparities in the economic power available to each person. His approach is on stronger grounds when he argues that it is possible to establish a consensus within society about what is political justice. He contends: “Thus political liberalism looks for a political conception of justice that we hope can gain the support of an overlapping consensus of reasonable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines in a society regulated by it. Gaining this support of reasonable doctrines lays the basis....as to how citizens, who remain deeply divided on religious, philosophical and moral doctrines, can still maintain a just and stable democratic society.”(6) Such a point would have to be valid within any society that was aiming to establish political stability in a democratic manner. The principle being established is that it is possible to establish consensus about the political arrangements that should be established without the imposition of any given viewpoint, and instead compromise between the various standpoints can be established in terms of common goals, such as the promotion of justice. This point is important because it has been the lack of this type of consensus within societies aiming to realise socialism which has led to a form of monolithic repression. Rawls is making the point that in order for a society to be tolerant, and based on an acceptance of diverse views, it has to be pluralistic. This possibility cannot be realised if a one party state is formed. In these circumstances there must be the official repression of unorthodox views. However, the important question which Rawls does not adequately address is whether the principle of justice is sufficient to establish a situation of consensus. Certainly this principle would seem to be vital if a constitutional democracy is to have accepted and agreed principles for its functioning, but the problem is that this formulation does not establish what are the social and economic premises for a similar type of consensus. For example will Conservative parties ever accept the creation of socialism? Indeed it could be argued that the formation of political democracy can only express, but not resolve, the issue of divergent social and economic interests. Hence the most that political democracy can realise is that different economic aims can be expressed reasonably in this situation. Rawls implies that the role of the economic will effectively be subsumed within the political in terms of the principle of social cooperation and a well ordered society. The assumption is that the aspect of justice that is expressed by constitutional arrangements will be projected onto the realm of the economic. This point seems to be presumed by the following comment: “Thus justice as fairness starts from within a certain political tradition and task as its fundamental idea that of society as a fair system of cooperation over time, from one generation to the next. This central organizing idea is developed together with two companion fundamental ideas: one is the idea of citizens (those engaged in co-operation) as free and equal persons and the other is the idea of a well ordered society as a society effectively regulated by a political conception of justice.”(7) Whilst he does not mention the role of economics in this comment, it would seem inconceivable that he is not implying certain economic conclusions. How else can social cooperation be realised? What would we mean by justice without projecting it onto the question of how society produces and distributes its goods?

Rawls outlines how social cooperation represents the principles by which to understand justice, and that this means society is to the rational advantage of each of the members of society. The aspiration is to establish relations of reciprocity within society. This means: “The basic idea is that in virtue of their two moral powers (a capacity for a sense of justice and for a conception of the good) and the powers of reason (of judgment, thought and inference connected with these powers) persons are free. Their having these powers to the requisite minimum degree to be fully cooperating members of society makes persons equal.”(8) However if we accept that these are the premises of an effective and functioning constitutional democracy how are these aspects to be consolidated and consistently realised? The only answer to this question is to extend these aspects to the sphere of economic activity. Social cooperation can only be consistently realised if it is applied to the task of production and distribution. What it is to be equal in economic terms implies that a few powerful individuals do not dominate ownership of the means of production and exchange. Indeed Rawls implies this point when he considers that large property owners should not benefit in the type of society he is advocating. (9) Thus he would address this issue in terms of implying that he supports the policies associated with the welfare state. The problem is that this perspective is not outlined in any detail because his concern is to address strictly the issues of what constitutes political liberalism. But continually the economic implications of his standpoint arise on a regular basis. Hence his approach would have been more convincing if his economic premises had been made explicit.

Rawls outlines how a liberal society is based on the principles of justice, social cooperation and the aim of upholding the good. It is being suggested that the various reasonable doctrines within society can be united in these terms in order to sustain a type of pluralism. The result is that: “Finally, a....general fact is that an enduring and secure democratic regime, one not divided into contending doctrinal confessions and hostile social classes, must be willingly and freely supported by at least a substantial majority of its politically active citizens.....this means that to serve as a public basis of justification for a constitutional regime a political conception of justice must be one that can be endorsed by a widely different and opposing though reasonable comprehensive doctrines.”(10) This view seems to be valid in that it is considered possible to establish consensus about values in terms of the ability of democracy to function in an effective and fair manner. However, we would dispute that this prospect is empirically durable under capitalism because of the importance of social inequalities. However despite this criticism the approach of Rawls represents a model of how agreement can be made between often opposed and contending parties concerning the values of democracy. In this manner it is important that socialists learn from the methodology of Rawls, and apply it to any emerging socialist society, as opposed to the intolerance of the Bolsheviks under Stalin. Rawls outlines how political stability can be created despite the fact of contrasting doctrines around the concept of justice. It is possible to establish a consensus of views in these terms, but this would also mean that a type of society is created in which justice is materially realised in terms of providing the basic goods that society requires in order to meet its needs of subsistence. Or, as Rawls maintains, the members of society are able to have the possibility to have justice in society in relation to the ability to access basic democratic rights. But socialists would insist that in order for this principle to be truly credible it means that working people have the possibility to be able to define the role of the economy in an effective manner. However, Rawls is right to insist that this possibility would begin with the generation of a credible democratic regime.

Rawls defines his standpoint in the following manner: “First, the basic structure of society is regulated by a political conception of justice; second, this political conception is the focus of an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines; and third, public discussion, when constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice are at stake, is conducted in terms of the political conception of justice.”(11) It is being suggested that despite the many differences of the contrasting doctrines within society they can establish agreement about the aim of justice. This would mean that there is no political discrimination practiced against any viewpoint in favour of another. Hence no preferences would be made. This is a noble aim to outline, but in practice it is difficult to sustain. For example, the trade unions are consistently being undermined in a capitalist society, and this means that there can be no political parity between themselves and the employers. However, despite these difficulties, Rawls has surely outlined what should be an approach to at least aspire to in relation to understanding the principles of political arrangements. Thus he is arguing that in order to create justice within society no one should be coerced to believe something they disagree with if their own standpoint is reasonable and credible. This means we should be able to support the aim of justice in terms of developing our own independent reasons for this standpoint. Therefore we should not be influenced by a dominant ideology in order to support the aim of justice, indeed in such a situation it would not be possible to establish justice which requires the development of a genuine consensus among diverse views.

In order to uphold his standpoint, Rawls has to specify what he means by a reasonable doctrine. He contends that it means the willingness to engage in the process of upholding the principle of social cooperation, and so does not accept the dilution of this standpoint in terms of a willingness to project self-interest above this principle. This approach is credible as a principle, but in reality it could be argued that it is possible to utilise rational decision making in order to promote a given interest above those of others. Indeed, Rawls does not seem to outline what should be done in this situation, apart from outlining moral criticism of such selfish behaviour. He contends that what is moral and reasonable is to act according to the principle of social cooperation, but he does not establish why this should be in the particular self-interest of a given social group to act in this manner. Instead he assumes that it would be reasonable for any particular standpoint and its representatives to reconcile their self-interests with the general aim of social cooperation. He comments: “Finally, as we have seen, the reasonable (with its idea of reciprocity) is not the altruistic (the impartial acting solely for the interests of others) nor is it concern for self (and moved by its affections alone). In a reasonable society, most simply illustrated in a society of equals in basic matters, all have their rational ends they hope to advance, and all stand ready to propose fair terms that others may reasonably be expected to accept, so that all may benefit and improve on what every one can do on their own. This reasonable society is neither a society of saints nor a society of the self-centred...Yet the moral power that underlies the capacity to propose, or to endorse, and then to be moved from fair terms of cooperation for their own sake is an essential social virtue all the same.”(12) This viewpoint would be more convincing if it could be established why it was possible to reconcile the importance of self-interest with that of social cooperation. It could be argued that people still can gain more from the expression of self-interest than from uniting in terms of social cooperation. Instead it is assumed by Rawls that there is no contradiction between the importance of self-interest and the aim of social cooperation. However, this view is problematical given that we know from empirical history that self-interest has been an important aspect of human activity, and which undermines the possibility of social cooperation. The problem with the methodology of Rawls is that his outline of what is a principle is then connected with what is feasible and practical. This perspective means that he cannot accept that his approach represents a principle that is often not realised in reality because of the prevailing influence of self-interest.

In order to attempt to resolve the above issues, Rawls insists that it would be unreasonable for the proponents of one doctrine to try to impose it on others who disagree with it: “”To conclude: reasonable persons....set limits on what can be reasonably justified to others, and so they endorse some form of liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. It is unreasonable for us to use political power, should we possess it, or share it with others, to repress comprehensive views that are not unreasonable.”(13) So in terms of the issue of political freedom, the diversity of thought is upheld despite the problem of self-interest because it is not reasonable for the proponents of one view to repress another. This means pluralism has to be an enduring aspect of what is meant by a just political society. In this context it could be suggested that a multiplicity of views is in the interests of society because the repression of any of these views would mean the effective demise of political freedom. Thus the implementation of extreme self interest in the form of the repression of any reasonable view is irrational because it means that coercion rather than genuine pluralism is the basis of the political character of society. But the assumption being made is that the influence of reasonable doctrines will be more than that of unreasonable standpoints that may act to repress political freedom. This assumption is logical to the extent that a regime of constitutional democracy will encourage the role of reasonable doctrines. However, what is not addressed is that a reasonable doctrine, which adheres to the rules of constitutional democracy, could also act in terms of the standpoint of self-interest. It could be both reasonable in terms of upholding the rule of constitutional democracy, and yet still manipulate this political system to its own advantage. This point is not addressed by Rawls because he assumes that a reasonable doctrine can only express the altruistic standpoint of social cooperation.

In summary, Rawls is arguing the following: “Thus very briefly: (I) besides a capacity for the conception of the good, citizens have a capacity to acquire conceptions of justice and fairness and a desire to act as these conceptions require (ii) when they believe these institutions or social practices are just, or fair....they are ready and willing to do their part in these arrangements provided they have reasonable assurance that others will do their part; (iii) if other persons with evident intention strive to do their part in just or fair arrangements, citizens tend to develop trust and confidence in them; (iv) this trust and confidence becomes stronger and more complete as the success of cooperative arrangements is sustained over a longer time; and (v) the same is true as the basic institutions framed to secure our fundamental interests (the basic rights and liberties) are more firmly and willingly recognized.”(14) This approach makes many assumptions. It assumes that the inherent tendency is for humans to cooperate together, but this understanding ignores that it may be to the benefit of individuals or social groups that they may benefit from the expression of the principles of self-interest. However, this point is glossed over because Rawls assumes that a viable constitutional democracy can only be based on the principles of justice and social cooperation. But in fact this understanding can represent an idealised view of the virtues of democracy. What Rawls is assuming is that the reasonable nature of individuals and groups can result in the pluralistic standpoint that there is inherently within society a motive to sustain the possibility of a just and fair society. It is vital for his standpoint that the importance of what is reasonable in terms of the relationship of doctrines or the character of society is paramount. Thus what he is unable to explain is that a reasonable doctrine may be able to promote the interests of a particular group, and so the issue of genuine pluralism becomes a formality. In this context the issue of actual political power still resides with the proponents of what is a dominant ideology, and so the aspect of pluralism is not realised. Rawls would reply and suggest that it is unreasonable for any given doctrine to impose its view in terms of the application of political power, but this very development is surely the logical result of a particular party winning an election. In these circumstances the majority party does not defer to the principles of pluralism and instead insists that it has a mandate to impose its views onto society. Indeed it would be considered to be a weak party of government if this development did not occur. Hence Rawls seems to be implying that the practice of reasonable pluralism means that there is a process of political compromise, but in actuality such a possibility only occurs when a coalition form of government occurs. In actuality pluralism implies a biased situation in which some views are primary and others are secondary in terms of their importance and influence.

Rawls insists that: “Quite the contrary: it is vital to the idea of political liberalism that we may with perfect consistency hold that it would be unreasonable to use political power to enforce our own comprehensive view, which we must, of course affirm as either reasonable or true.”(15) He glosses over explaining this standpoint in an explicit manner by implying that it is possible that people can accept the implementation of a given viewpoint by government if it is realised in a reasonable manner. Hence he is suggesting that it is possible to differentiate between the overall principles of the comprehensive doctrine from how it is expressed in practice as a political policy. Thus it would only be unreasonable if the comprehensive doctrine was being imposed without genuine consent. But what is the criteria by which we establish the process of differentiation? On this issue, Rawls is vague. Indeed it could be argued that in implementing its policies a government will inherently be expressing some aspect of its comprehensive doctrine. If it has an electoral mandate for this standpoint, it will claim that it is not acting unreasonably. Thus in order to resolve the issue of what is reasonable or unreasonable we would suggest that the issue of class interests is relevant. In order to uphold the principles of justice and social cooperation requires the standpoint of socialism. Whilst in contrast the implementation of the comprehensive doctrine of conservatism requires the expression of a policy based on self-interest. So what is reasonable from the standpoint of Rawls would imply the rejection of a right wing approach. But Rawls ignores the tensions in his approach and instead insists that what is reasonable expresses the principles of justice. This glosses over the fact that we will have a different concept of the character of justice depending on where we are in the political spectrum. Hence his aim of establishing a consensus may not be possible. Indeed in empirical terms, the majority party in governments often implements its policy despite the vigorous opposition of the minority party. In this context there is no consensus around common values like justice. Instead what determines the ability to implement policy is the balance of power within Parliament. Therefore what is reasonable is an ideal that is often not realised.

In contrast, Rawls ignores the importance of tension and conflict within the process of political activity within a democratic society and instead contends: “If justice as fairness were not expressly designed to gain the reasoned support of citizens who affirm reasonable although conflicting comprehensive doctrines – the existence of such conflicting doctrines being a feature of the kind of public culture that liberal conception itself encourages – it would not be liberal.”(16) The problem is that the character of the relations between opposing doctrines is more antagonistic and oppositional than supposed by Rawls's approach. This means that each doctrine defines what is reasonable in terms that are at variance with the approach of the rival doctrine, such as those of capitalism and socialism. In this context the issue is about establishing ideological hegemony rather than a process of conciliation of doctrines, and so the very sense of what is reasonable is contested. This means that Rawls view that there is a common sense of what is public reason must be questioned in relation to the many instances in which the issue of what view is influential within society is not defined by the standpoint of reasonableness or consensus, and is instead about what view is about to dominate the other conceptions about what should be the prevailing belief system. But Rawls would object to this criticism of his view because he contends that the only alternative to the prospect of a reasonable pluralism would be the imposition of a coercive form of state power. However, it is the very importance of ideological uniformity and domination by one given doctrine which actually means that the necessity to apply state coercion is not necessary. Instead what is apparent is that the majority of people accept what is considered to be the most persuasive doctrine, which may or may not be defined as being reasonable in the terms defined by Rawls. But he also contends that what is understood to be reasonable will not be altered by any change in the balance of political power. His point is that consensus will not be changed by the formation of a new dominant doctrine. But this view cannot be made in a dogmatic manner. Instead it will require utilising empirical criteria in order to establish the continued viability of pluralism in the situation of a change of political power. For example, it could be argued that the formation of right wing conservative governments, which have been very intransigent over the last forty years, has undermine the validity of the application of consensus. Instead their very aim has been to undermine what has been considered to be reasonable because they do not agree with Rawl's conception of consensus. Instead of pluralism they assert the domination of their doctrine. Hence only the most precise analysis of the various political viewpoints can establish whether the principle of being reasonable is actually expressed by the practice of a given doctrine. Hence instead of explaining the significance of political tensions, which may not be limited by an agreed conception of what is reasonable, Rawls presumes that a situation in which there is a just constitution means that tensions will not arise on issues that could undermine a consensus on issues like liberty of conscience, or basic political rights. But in fact these aspects can be upheld, and yet differences do develop on issues like equality and fairness that do bring into question the common principles of reasonable pluralism.

Rawls would reply to the above criticism and contend that: “Here we are bound to ask: how can a political conception of justice express values that, under the reasonably favourable conditions that make democracy possible, normally outweigh whatever other values are likely to conflict with them? One reason is this.....the most reasonable political conception of justice for a democratic regime will be, broadly speaking liberal. This means that it protects the familiar basic rights and assigns them a special priority; it also includes measures to insure that all citizens have sufficient material means to make effective use of those basic rights. Faced with the fact of reasonable pluralism, a liberal view removes from the political agenda the most divisive issues, serious contention about which must undermine the bases of social cooperation.”(17) In this context a situation of a constitutional regime enables tolerance and compromise to be more important than contrasting values of intransigence. But empirical history has indicated that politics has had many examples of situations in which a ruling party has considered that its democratic mandate means that it can act in the most uncompromising manner, and in order to effectively diminish the very validity and importance of the opposing viewpoint. Only in situations of comparative economic prosperity has it been possible to establish political relations based on genuine expressions of pluralism and consensus. The point is that democracy has not been undermined by the inability to promote what is considered to be reasonable and acceptable to all doctrines. What is dogmatic about the view of Rawls is that he considers that it is inherently reasonable and a matter of consensus that proponents of different political doctrines can agree about basis democratic rights and liberties. But the paradox is that whilst there may be agreement on these issues, it has still been frequently possible for the various rival parties to treat each other in an intransigent and unreasonable manner in terms of considering each other to be adversaries. In this context actual political compromise is not possible despite agreement about the importance of democracy. But because Rawls is vehemently in favour of the view that the establishment of a just constitutional consensus in order to promote compromise, this means he considers that the following situation is unlikely: “Thus if the liberal conceptions correctly framed from fundamental ideas of a democratic political culture are supported by and encourage deeply conflicting political and economic interests, and if there was no way of designing a constitutional regime so as to overcome that, a full overlapping consensus cannot, it seems be achieved.”(18) But it is not a question of either or: of the possibility of a just constitutional regime, or the alternative of social tensions, instead it has been possible to reconcile these two aspects. Hence it could be said that a given political regime was just and democratic but that it was still possible for economic tensions to occur. Indeed this has been the actual history of many constitutional regimes.

The major problem with the approach of Rawls is that he assumes that it is possible to reconcile the realisation of political rights with adequate levels of income. In fact it has been perfectly possible for constitutional regimes to be established which have justified poverty and inequality. The point is that it has been easier to realise political rights without a corresponding achievement of economic equality. Instead of recognising this contradiction, Rawls assumes that the possibility and feasibility to attain political rights goes together with economic equality. He resolves this apparent contradiction between the economic and political in terms of the vague concept of equality of opportunity, which is to be promoted by the role of the constitutional state. In actuality the only meaningful prospects for effective equality have been advanced by the importance of class struggle, but this is ruled out by Rawls because he assumes that what is a united people can agree on the basic values of society. This is a naïve view which ignores the importance of the disparities in economic power within society. In other words we can establish as Rawls does that people can be equal in terms of having political rights in a democratic society, and he can establish that this represents the ability to realise justice or the good. But the problem is that the character of these rights still does not address the issue of whether this situation enables genuine economic equality to be realised.

However, despite this criticism we can still suggest that what Rawls has outlined in relation to the role of the political is valid. We should be aiming to develop a society based on consensus, or which has the ability to resolve differences in terms of a reasonable conception of justice. Thus: “Democracy involves....a political relationship between citizens within the basis structure of society....it implies further an equal share in the coercive political power that citizens exercise over one another by voting and in other ways. As reasonable and rational, and knowing that they affirm a diversity of reasonable religious and philosophical doctrines, they should be ready to explain the basis of their actions to one another in terms each could reasonably expect that others might endorse as consistent with their freedom and equality. Trying to meet this condition is one of the tasks that the ideal of democratic politics asks of us.”(19) This seems to outline one of the most credible arguments in favour of the possibility to establish agreement about shared political values despite different opinions. The problem is that this possibility of consensus will continually be undermined by the contrasting and polarising issue of distinct economic interests. The result of this situation will be to promote the justification of considering the views of others as being unreasonable or unrealistic. Indeed the aim of the party of government because of these diverse economic circumstances will be to argue that the opposition because of its contrasting economic programme is not suitable for the task of government. Hence the principles of Rawls concerning consensus cannot be sustained because of the influence of the economic situation. Instead of genuine pluralism the result is a process of struggle between incompatible ideologies. All that they are united on is the importance of the democratic constitutional regime. Thus Rawls can only sustain his approach by ignoring the divisive character of the role of the economic.

Much more could be said about the virtues and problems of Rawls’ approach, we will limit ourselves to one issue. In the opinion of Rawls it is argued that equal political rights and liberties provide the basis to realise the possibility of economic justice. (20) Certainly it can be maintained that the possibilities of democracy provide the potential for political rights to be translated into economic equality. But in practice the ability of parties of privilege to be elected into office because of the utilisation of the appeal of nationalism, or deference, means that it becomes difficult for parties of reform to be elected which are aiming to establish more equal forms of distribution and upholding the welfare state. In this context the institutions of democracy are not necessarily receptive to the realisation of economic equality. The point is that whilst Rawls has outlined the principles of what expresses political liberalism in the form of constitutional democracy and the principles of justice as fairness, he does not allow for the role of political parties, such as conservative ones, which are primarily motivated by maintaining the importance of privilege and the interests of capital. These types of parties have been very successful in being elected. Hence the issue as to whether the type of justice that Rawls is advocating can be expressed by the democratic political system depends on the character of the parties that are elected. In this manner what is the level of support for the reformist liberalism that Rawls is advocating? Instead of answering this question he makes the assumption that a democratic society based on justice is the 'natural' or typical state of affairs in a situation in which everyone can agree about the values of liberalism. But this type of consensus is rare, and has become less typical in relation to the decline of the influence of liberal and reformist parties. Instead the type of parties that have been elected in the recent period have tended to be conservative, and not in any manner dedicated to the aims of justice as defined by Rawls. Instead it can be argued that democracy has been utilised in order to uphold the values of conservatism as opposed to liberalism. The question of what is meant by liberalism is an ideal which is often not realised in practice. Rawls could reply and suggest that he is outlining only the principles of what is meant by liberalism. But the problem with this standpoint is that he does assume that the typical democratic regime does correspond with his conception of liberalism. If this is what he is arguing then his standpoint would seem to be problematical. Instead there is a divergence between theory and practice. The actual practice of democracy is able to reject most of the liberal values such as fairness, with the exception of the continued rights of liberty of conscience and freedom of speech. But in this situation of the election of right wing regimes the possibility of equality of opportunity becomes restricted, and distribution according to the principle of fairness is increasingly difficult to maintain. Hence the role of pluralism, in terms of a consensus in favour of the values of democracy, can work to the benefit of the domination of the rich and powerful. However these practical problems should not result in us rejecting the liberal values elaborated by Rawls. Instead we should relate them to what we consider to be an alternative type of society, or socialism. One of the major problems with societies claiming to be socialist, has been there lack of the promotion of the values of reasonable pluralism and consensus. It is necessary that if socialism is developed in the future that this type of society should attempt to uphold these political values in order to establish a situation of tolerance and pluralism. Hence the democratic values of liberalism outlined by Rawls should become part of any society that is aiming to connect its economic aims with a political approach based on consensus.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)John Rawls Political Liberalism Columbia University Press, New York 1996

(2) ibid pxviii

(3) ibid pxli

(4) ibid pxlvi-xlvii

(5) ibid pl

(6) ibid p10

(7) ibid p14

(8) ibid p19

(9) ibid p17

(10Ibid p38

(11) ibid p44

(12) ibid p54

(13) ibid p61

(14) ibid p86

(15) ibid p138

(16) ibid p143

(17) ibid p156-157

(18) ibid p168

(19) ibid p217-218

(20ibid p327