

Liberalism: Dialectic and/or Rhetoric: Its impact on transforming Islamic Society**By****Dr. Arifa Farid,
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“Liberalism” and “Neo Liberalism” are used as almost synonymous terms in contemporary political and philosophical discourse. Liberalism is a legacy of Enlightenment in which both individual and collective freedom became the ultimate goal of human endeavor. Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau and Voltaire envisaged a world in which rationality will transform Western society into a liberal society. The first fruit of the struggle was the French Revolution, which overthrew monarchy and established democracy. John Locke in England laid the foundation of government by democratic representative legislation as a means for replacing monarchy gradually. “Right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness” was to be the cherished goal according to Locke. Kant in his essay “What is Enlightenment” developed the project of Enlightenment as an initiative for transforming society in such a way that the authoritarian approach to life lost legitimacy. Kant saw rationality as the most important tool for replacing authority and forming independent judgment. “Dare to differ” or courage to differ from established norms, practices, rules on rational ground was the only way to transform society according to Kant. Kant thus initiated a critical spirit which by the end of the nineteenth century became the hallmark of liberalism. In the nineteenth century the industrial revolution gave birth to industrial culture in which two rival ideologies, that is, liberalism and Socialism secured popular support. Both promised to fulfill the project of Enlightenment on rational grounds, the former through the free market economy and the latter through establishment of a socialist order. For liberalism freedom meant democracy, free trade and a liberal society. For socialism (Karl Marx) freedom meant freedom of the economically oppressed class, the proletariat, from the bourgeoisie class (the oppressor). It meant end of class struggle and the establishment of the socialist rule.

Twentieth century saw the rise of liberalism in the full blown form. After the cold war period and dissolution of the USSR in the last two decades of the twentieth century liberalism became the sole ideological power in the West. Post cold war liberalism assumed the name “neo liberalism” in political discourse on account of capitalism’s heightened agenda of creating a global culture with advance capitalism salvaging humanity. The uni-polar power of the US assumed the role of liberating humanity from dictatorial regimes. The philosophy of human rights became the new emancipating human science of the age, and human rights organizations assumed the role of surveillance, and basic human rights became the touchstone for evaluating state policies of the third world countries.

From the seventeenth century up to the beginning of the twenty first century liberalism has come a long way. It is no more a single ideology or perspective. It has now many facets and forms, and has ardent followers among different groups of intellectuals, philosophers, political ideologists, resistance groups, intelligent laymen, and masses. I have identified in this essay at least six brands of liberalism. These are:

1. Early Philosophical / Classical liberalism which had an altruistic character and was a challenge to authority, especially that of the monarchy of the church. (Descartes Kant, Rousseau, Locke, Mill).
2. Political or Ideological Liberalism which envisages freedom, especially individual freedom as the basic human right attainable only through a rational political order and the social dominance of the free markets. The present US agenda belongs to this category.
3. Cultural Neo Liberalism, which may be the same as neo liberalism without political order. It questions the authority of reason in salvaging humanity. It focuses on human emotions and sentiments, feelings etc. for the flourishing of the freedom in society. It condemns “the tyranny of reason” or what they call the “paranoia of reason” in shaping Western civilization.

4. Critical Neo Liberalism. It includes the point of view of philosophers such as Francoise Lyotard who is highly critical of advanced capitalism, as well as of Foucault who questions the autonomy of reason, or essentiality of reason. It also includes the point of view of Karl Popper who points out the limitation of knowledge as a means for the pursuit of freedom. It emphasizes the limitations of scientific discoveries, and questions the coherence of Utopian political schemes, and thus rejects them.

5. Neo Liberalism Without Metaphysical Foundation. Neo liberalism of John Rawls and Karl Popper, (the two most ardent spokesmen of neo liberalism) are, for example without any metaphysical foundation. Habermas criticizes Rawls for this lack of foundation from his idea of the “good...”. Without a moral theory, Habermas argues, Rawls “free standing” liberalism and his theory of Justice as fairness remains on infirm grounds.

6. Neo Liberalism As A Phenomenon of International Relations. The global perspective is kept in sight in this kind of liberalism. From an international point of view nation state phenomenon is fast making space for a global world. The emphasis here is not so much on security issues of the cold war period of the modern West. A corporate world is fast emerging replacing the nation state phenomenon. Education, poverty gender equality, environment, basic human rights terrorism are the critical issues that need immediate solution at the international level, and have thus occupied international attention.

Liberalism: Dialectic and /or Rhetoric.

Having seen the various forms, facets and models of liberalism and neo liberalism one has to see now the logic of liberalism/neo liberalism. Socrates was the originator of a form of philosophical argument, which came to be termed later on as “dialectic”. This consisted in deciphering the true meaning of a notion, for example, justice, in a discourse, gradually, step by step, after arguments and counter arguments finally leading to a position that could no more

be argued. Socrates contrasted this form of the argument with rhetoric (*Tekhne*) in Plato’s famous Dialogue **Gorgias**. As against dialectic rhetoric was the art of persuasion practiced by the Sophists who did not believe in any universal truth but used arguments

to meet their personal political goals and objectives. Socrates made their sophistry and inconsistency of the argument apparent to the audience by engaging them in the dialogue. Rhetoric was not even a *tekhne* (expertise), it was more a ‘knack’ of drawing conviction rather than true knowledge through persuasion. Dialectic was for Socrates the true philosophical method of eliciting knowledge.

The meaning of dialectic has changed and evolved in Western philosophical thought. Kant used the term to show the contradictory or what he calls antinomous character of Pure Reason in its employment to know the transcendental reality or the Noumena. Hegel used the term to explain the historical process of the revelation of the Absolute Idea/Spirit. Reason he thought, reveals itself in History in the three fold process of thesis-anti-thesis- synthesis. He envisaged this dialectical process as evolutionary. Karl Marx had drawn on Hegel in his use of the term “dialectic”. But Marx envisaged History in materialistic terms; hence the nomenclatures “Historical Materialism” and “Dialectical Materialism” for the Marxist paradigm. Dialectic was conceived as the struggle of the oppressed class against the oppressor class, finally resolving in the triumphs of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie.

In my evaluation of Liberalism I will use the term dialectic in the original Socratic sense, that is, the form of the rational argument step by step leading to truth after evolution of contradictory hypotheses.

The Western discourse on ‘freedom’ may be said to have begun in the sixteenth century in the Socratic spirit. The French philosopher Rene Descartes suspected all knowledge as prejudicial and attempted to erect the edifice of knowledge on firm rational grounds. His *Discourse on Method* sought clear and distinct ideas, notions and arguments about Reality. His French descendent Rousseau took a leap from “reality” to “man” as the more appropriate philosophical concern and focused on ‘freedom’ as the most urgent concern of man. ‘Man is born free but is everywhere in chains’, so he thought. In his *Social Contract Theory*, and *Discourse on Inequality* he envisaged the realization of freedom and equality as the main project of rationality. His French contemporary Voltaire along

with him became the forerunners of French Revolution. Monarchy and Feudalism made space for Democracy. Capitalism emerged as the new champion of liberalism (freedom) through Industrial Revolution, and free society/open society appeared as the new social /individual life style.

The Enlightenment project has been described as having failed by the Critical Theorists of the New York School of Social Sciences in the twentieth century. These early twentieth Century New Marxists have drawn elaborate arguments to underline the failure of Enlightenment project. Adorno and Hockheimer wrote the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and brought to focus the dubious character of rationality which according to them manipulated against “freedom”. In mid sixties and seventies Erich Fromm wrote many books including *The Sane Society* in which he brought to light the manipulative and conspiring character of reason employed in the pursuit of the capitalist’s goals. Marcuse wrote *One Dimensional Man* to argue that modern man is disillusioned by the results of the Enlightenment project of rationality. Capitalism hijacked freedom. It seemed very obvious that according to these writers the dialectic of liberalism lost its way and the rhetoric of liberalism was what survived in the capitalist order.

Rhetoric as pointed out earlier is the art of persuasion in which consistency of argument is the first casualty. Honest desire to discover the truth is, again, not a part of rhetoric. Self-interest is dominant in rhetorical persuasion and conviction. This art was practiced by the Sophists who did not believe in any universal truth. The Frankfurt School Critical Theorists question the argument for freedom though they do not question freedom as the genuine goal.

The discourse on freedom in the Western context, I believe began with the assumption that freedom was the ultimate goal of human pursuits. This assumption was not well founded and well grounded in the Leibnitzian sense. It was Rousseau who announced in the seventeenth century that “man is born free but is every where in chains”. Rousseau obviously was talking of man’s moral freedom, i.e., his right to choose. Since then freedom is considered the cherished goal of Enlightenment thinkers and their followers

forever to be. Freedom is man's basic right with the proviso that it is attained through reason.

Granting that freedom was man's basic right, the next question was whose freedom? Of individual man or of men forming a community? The prompt answer in the liberalist context was freedom of every individual and possibly of collective men also. The socialist had their emphasis on the collective freedom with recognition of individual freedom also as long as individual freedom does not infringe upon collective freedom. Both camps came forth with strong rhetorical arguments in support of liberalism or socialism.

Fortunately for the US socialism failed to make any significant positive economic and social impact even in the USSR. This resulted in the triumph of liberalism which today claims to be the sole global political ideology except for Islamic ideology which has had comparatively much less impact. But one must keep an eye on the original argument of liberalism and watch whether it has survived in the course of history; whether the logic of the discourse has remained intact; whether the dialectical reasoning has been employed consistently; whether argument moves from theses to antitheses to synthesis; whether the discourse has been followed in an honest spirit for arriving at the truth and knowledge.

I do not need to advance any special argument to prove that the dialectical method of reasoning has been abandoned, twisted and manipulated in western history all through and the freedom and liberation emancipation discourse has turned into rhetoric at the hands of Western political and social ideologues, and social engineers. As pointed out earlier, this is well documented by the Critical Theorists of the New York School of Social Sciences who had been inviting attention to the failure of Enlightenment ideal since 1930 or earlier. I only need to remind that the dialectical argument of freedom was from the very beginning not well founded as freedom was never demonstrated as being the legitimate single goal of human pursuit. In the Western philosophical discourse it was always an assumption which was never challenged by any eminent thinker. The contemporary postmodern Western man is however, challenging the legitimacy of

attaining this goal via rationality. But he does not question the legitimacies of freedom as a necessary end in itself.

LIBERALISM: TRANSFORMATION OF ISLAMIC SOCIETIES

Politically speaking liberalism has had enormous impact on the globe. Originally a European project enthusiastically pursued by the US, liberalism has penetrated deep in the cultures of what they call the Second and the Third worlds. Islamic societies are no exception to its pervasive influence. However the mode and the force of its influence is different in different Islamic societies. The dialectic / rhetoric of liberalism is based on a few key concepts. Democracy is its political ideology, free society or what Karl Popper calls “open society” is its social model. And free market or free trade is its economic goal being realized through WTO. Through these key instruments of change liberal ideology is being forcefully pursued and implemented by the US government and its allies at what they call the “Third World” with little realization that the element of force contradicts liberalism itself.

Muslim countries and Muslim societies these days are the main targets of liberalism’s political ideology. George Bush is pursuing this ideology with great missionary zeal. He proclaimed himself and the US as Crusaders of “freedom”. Thus he rushed to “liberate” Iraq from the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussain, and bombarded Afghanistan to rid it of the mullas – the Taliban in order to provide them an experience of freedom. These countries according to him were run undemocratically by a dictator in Iraq and a few mullas in Afghanistan. Yet, he denies the legitimacy of Ahmed Najidi’s government in Iran. Ahmed Najidi has been elected by popular vote by religious minded and ordinary people. Syria is another contemplated target or project of “freedom” ideology of the US..

All Muslim countries / societies need to be forcibly liberated through pre-emptive wars or other means according to the Bush / US agenda. Fundamentalism by free choice is also prohibited by the Neo-con ideology (the Iran case). Hundreds of thousands of human rights organizations and NGOs are working in the Muslim World to liberate women,

children and other oppressed classes, and are making room for free permissive liberal societies. The WTO is fast engulfing the entire globe in its free trade economy agenda. One cannot deny the reality of liberalism as a transforming force in the Muslim societies in the contemporary Muslim world. What is strange is that liberal agenda is being pursued with or without the “will” of the people. One wonders how much liberalism dialectic has given way to rhetoric. The US approach has become very tactical, the argument is persuasive and the end result is the achievement of the hegemony of the west (superiority of the white race, priority of the first world security concerns). “Open Society”, “free world”, “civilized world” are the catch phrases of western media today. “Terrorism”, “fundamentalism” “religious extremism”, “rogue states”, “bad boys”, “Islamic bomb”, “suicide bombers” are the antithetical catch phrases that counter balance the symbols of liberal “good”. Civil liberties are at risk at the hands of civil liberators, Patriot Act of the US, and Guantanamo Prison, Abu Ghuraib prison openly defy liberal ideology. Shooting the suspect at sight is another addition to these anti liberal laws.

One wonders if US pre-emptive wars, forceful subjugation of weaker nations, collateral damage, resulting from bombing the “other” are really part of the freedom dialectic or of the freedom rhetoric. How would one differentiate this so called dialectic of liberalism from the rhetoric of liberalism in the face of US denial to be a signatory anti-racism charter of UNO, or its refusal to seek permission from the Security Council to impose pre-emptive war on Iraq? Do we see the Socratic spirit surviving underneath West’s dialogue with the Islamic world? Are the arguments moving in the honest spirit to rationally arrive at the truth and the cherished goal of freedom for all humanity? Is coherence and consistency maintained in today’s argument for freedom? Is coercion a part of freedom? Is tolerance a responsibility of the weaker nation only? These are some of the open questions related to the dialogue of freedom.

Socially and culturally, liberalism has made great impact on Islamic societies. Modernization, which is a fruit of Enlightenment can indeed be perceived in all urban cities of the Muslim world. Post-modern culture is pervading most Muslim homes in urban setup. Liberal values are being introduced and propagated through media and are

being followed by the elite and upper middle classes in many Muslim homes. The only thing that has survived is Islamic identity. It is this Islamic identity, which is the target of liberalism's rhetoric today.

This Islamic identity embedded deeply in Muslim religious consciousness will survive, I believe, in the dialogue of freedom. Islamic consciousness is the consciousness that proclaims the sovereignty of God and submission of human will to the Will of God. Freedom of man is not the antinomy to sovereignty of God. It is antithetical to liberal ideology. Islam seeks a deeper synthesis forming a new Islamic civilization capable of addressing and resolving the new pressing issues of the post modern world. Freedom in the Islamic context is the privilege of man and not his basic right as defined by liberalism. Rights and duties are complementary according to Islam. Man is given freedom to choose with the responsibility to respect and not to violate basic norms of justice, equality and brotherhood deeply rooted in human consciousness. Freedom itself is not a norm or a value it is a means of actualization of universal norms and values.

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