Empowering Liberty and Debates about Redistributive Policies

Introduction

The chapter advances a further step the model of empowering liberty encapsulated in the two interrelated spheres of liberty found in the political thought of Locke and Mill. It demonstrates how comprehending the conception of liberty advocated by Locke and Mill through the suggested model undercuts contemporary debates about redistributive policies. The chapter shows that their presumed philosophical ancestors did not support the contemporary dichotomous division between proponents of “negative” and “positive” liberty, culminating in their adoption of opposite stances regarding welfare and redistributive policies. It is explained why the empowering liberty model allows the fostering of a “positive” freedom, embracing the necessity of supporting redistributive policy even from a Lockean-right-libertarian viewpoint, at least to a certain extent. By doing so, the chapter also enhances and furthers the scope of the empowering nature attributed to the suggested model of liberty. Hence, it is shown that this model, particularly in its Lockean version, entails a larger societal empowerment than originally explicated in the second chapter. In such an expanded version of empowerment, the door is open for governments, even from a classical-liberalism perspective, to pursue a more active role in facilitating their citizens’ empowerment. This is certainly true with respect to political participation, but as we shall see, it is not necessarily limited to this topic alone.
Redistributive policies: A main contemporary cleavage within liberal thought

In his seminal article about the roots of liberalism, published more than three decades ago (1987), Jeremy Waldron had stressed the bitter discourse between proponents of “negative” liberty and those who supported “less negative conceptions” of liberty. While not directly explicating the term “positive” liberty, then, Waldron was clearly referring to the debate between supporters of “negative” freedom and advocates of “positive” liberty among contemporary liberal philosophers.

The debate over the proper conception of liberty has been bitter and sometimes deadly. Many who call themselves liberals (but who might be labeled “conservatives” or “libertarians” by their opponents) take their stand on what is termed a “negative” conception of liberty: a person’s liberty is simply the extent to which he can act unconstrained by literal obstruction or interference from others. This view is referred to by its opponents as an “impoverished,” “infantile” or “philistine” theory of freedom, while libertarians themselves describe less negative conceptions as “fraudulent” and potentially “despotic.”

Waldron 1987: 127–50

More recently (2002), George Crowder, reflecting on the same and still vibrant debate within contemporary liberal theory and praxis, has pinpointed its main theme quite eloquently as revolving around governments’ authority over private property.

The liberal commitment to individual autonomy [i.e., liberty] and toleration suggests the ideal of limited government. [...] Exactly where the boundary should lie between state authority and individual rights is a principal issue that separates different streams of liberalism. More precisely, the principal issue is over attitudes to private property.

Crowder 2002: 23–4

Indeed, one of the well-acknowledged and long-perpetuated divisions within contemporary liberal discourse (and praxis) is between