

## **Occupy Wall-Street, Two Schools of Liberalism, And The Great Renaissance Dam**

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) is a protest movement which was sparked by a simple call put out last summer by a Canadian group, Adbusters Media Foundation which suggested a peaceful occupation of Wall Street to protest the deep stratification of the society in terms of both income and wealth, and the lack of legal accountability for the global financial crisis. The occupation began on Sept. 17 in Zuccotti Park with about 1,000 and then quickly grew to tenth of thousands. Soon there were Occupy stations in big and small cities around the country and similar Occupy protests and movements began around the world. It must have been an idea whose time had come, for the movement to spread as a wild fire fast and wide.

Since then, the movement undoubtedly achieved one important victory. The protests succeeded in shifting a national conversation to economic injustice and inequality. The national dialog emerging due to Occupy Wall Street in turn has revived a traditional and theoretical debate between two main schools of liberalism which are known as big-L liberalism, (*laissez faire*) and small-l liberalism (welfare state). And the movements do appear to challenge the first and vindicate the latter.

In its annual award for person of the year, Time Magazine this year chose “the protester.” The distinction goes to the man or woman (or sometimes group or idea) the magazine’s editors believe had the greatest impact during the past twelve months. Time editors wrote "All over the world, the protesters share a belief that their countries' political systems and economies have grown dysfunctional and corrupt — sham democracies rigged to favor the rich and powerful and prevent significant change. They are fervent **small-d democrats**. Two decades after the final failure and abandonment of communism, they believe they're experiencing the failure of hell-bent megascaled crony hypercapitalism and pine for some third way, a new social contract."

Though it lacks articulated demands and well defined practical proposals, the gist of Occupy Wall-Street movement is a quest for social and civic virtue. Historical disparity between the affluent riches of the society and the rest 99%, amid unprecedented economic downfall, has become a trigger button for questioning the fairness and sustainability of the existing socio-economic order. The discourse of public discussion on this issue and the unfolding events of the movement on a global scale have reinvigorated the inherited traditional debate between two branches of liberalism of classical sociological theory.

Often the adherents of respective schools are labeled as big-L and small-l liberals (or as Time editors labeled, big-D and small-d democrats). What is the difference between big-L and small-l liberalism? What are the philosophical and sociological ideas behind each line of liberalism? How does the theoretical debate between two branches of liberalisms relate to Occupy Wall Street and other occupy movements around the world? Are all regional and global mass movements (Occupy Wall Street, Occupy earth movement, Arab spring, etc) an integrated part of a one world phenomenon - the new world order formation process? If that is the case, how do we, Ethiopians, as part of the global community, relate ourselves to this process?

First let us brief ourselves on classic theoretical backgrounds of liberalism and the distinction between two schools of thoughts.

### **Precursors of Liberalism**

The historical tradition of two major branches of schools of liberalism grew out from ethical system of the enlightenment and nineteenth-century philosophy called utilitarianism. Classical Sociological theory reflects the evolution of thought from Aristotle; social contract theory to utilitarianism's split into to "big-L" and "small-l" liberalism.

Aristotle brought the first incipient notion of the importance of social order and government, by reasoning that man is the rational social animal lives by rules that promote survival. And John Lock In his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1697), recommended practical learning to prepare people to manage their social, economic, and political affairs efficiently.

The nascent concept of Thomas Hobbes social contract theory presupposes, since life in a state of nature is bound to be miserable, people want to escape or avoid it. In order to do so, they develop and adopt a social contract, and some way of enforcing the social contract. Refining the concept of social contract theory Jean Jacques Rousseau, defines society as outcome of reasoned choices made by individuals. Rousseau wrote in *The social contract* "The Sovereign, having no force other than the legislative power, acts only by means of the laws; and the laws being solely the authentic acts of the general will, the Sovereign cannot act save when the people is assembled."

An important idea of contract theory which later laid the foundation for small-l liberalism is the notion that society and social authority exist before the individual, and influence the individual.

Adam Smith formulated early principles of utilitarianism and established economic equilibrium theory. He emphasized the driving force of people motivations as personal pursuit and status. In his theory he underlines the assertion that unrestricted persuasion of personal wealth and social status as the basis for economic growth and equilibrium which comes through "unseen hand" of the market. Stating the key deliberation of laissez faire or "trickle down" economy theory Smith wrote "They (the riches) are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society." (Smith, 1976) Trickle down theory becomes the maxim for contemporary American conservatism.

Both wings of liberalism are based on the central tenet of utilitarianism, which is a moral and ethical principle. Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, wrote the following in his book *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*: "Nature dictates that mankind is ruled by pleasure and pain, and these determine what we do and also what we ought to do." Bentham, (1789). This fundamental theory implies that the principle which approves or disapproves of all action is that the principle which according to its tendency to further or lessen the happiness of the party involved.

Thus based upon utilitarianism theory and its principle utility is a critical standard by which ought to be judged all action of individual and institution or ought be to addressed all social, political, economical, legal, administrative dilemma.

But if the theory of utility is to serve mankind it must be concerned with the progressive aspect of its nature and this leads to the development of character, not to the mere satisfaction of expressed desires. In practice, the notion of happiness or interest which people strive for is interpreted in a narrow selfish manner, and the motive of conscience or moral obligation is generally dismissed. Bentham stated "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong." Bentham, (1789). This notion set on the theoretical base for l-liberalism (welfare state).

Though both schools of liberalism are founded on the theory of utilitarianism which upholds one single moral absolute, usually pleasure or satisfaction of self-interest, which is intrinsically good and is the basis for morality, their difference emerges in their unit of analysis.

### **Big-L liberalism and Small-l liberalism**

Big-L liberalism emphasizes individual as a unit of study and society as an effect of individual choices. Anne Robert Jacques Turgot wrote the following analysis which becomes the pillar of methodological individualism and big-L liberalism. "Citizens have rights, and rights that are sacred to the very heart of society. The citizens exist independently of society and are its necessary elements. They enter society in order to put themselves, together with all their rights, under the protection of laws that assure their property and their liberty."

Big-L liberals focused on individual and explained society in terms of individual rational actors. Max Weber states that individualism, intentional purposive action and rationality are the key elements in sociological analysis. The individual is characterized as having an autonomous human nature and can practice freedom without interference from society or state. It represents a negative conception of state power. Big-L liberalism became the spring board for laissez faire economics, methodological individualism, exchange theory, rational choice theory, American conservatism and neoliberalism.

Whereas small-l liberalism professes society as a basic unit of analysis for the reason that society precedes the individual and influences individual capacities and choices. Small-l liberals focused on society and its effect upon individual, and held that both could be improved through the use of reason and analysis. It assumes the analytical priority of social structures over individuals.

John Stuart Mill in his book *Utilitarianism* wrote " ... There is this basis of powerful natural sentiment [for utilitarian morality]; and this is which, when once the general happiness is recognized as the ethical standard, will constitute the strength of the utilitarian morality." Mill, (1863). Durkheim strongly rejected methodological individualism by stressing the notion of independent social facts, and disputed the spontaneous order of the market in favor of normative elements which are necessary to make level economic exchanges possible. Marx on *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* emphasized the role of structural variables first of all the necessary relations of production. He wrote "... in the social production of their

existence, men enter into necessary, determined relations independent from their will, which correspond to a given degree of development of productive forces". Marx, (1859). Small-l liberalism has become the foundation for functionalism, conflict theories like Marxism, non-academic analysis and modern liberal or left wing thought and politics.

The general assertion of Small-l liberalism is that the rational economic action is embedded in social context and presumes the binding power of social institutions such as legal contracts, and the free market transactions and self-interested motivations are not enough to make cooperation possible in a utilitarian, individualistic society, and must be superseded and counterbalanced by other institutions and values fostering social cohesion.

To sum up what have been said, Aristotle's initial idea of society and social order; the social contract theory developed by Hobbes Rousseau and others; and Adam Smith's equilibrium theory of laissez faire economics laid the foundation for utilitarianism which became the base for both big-L and small-l liberalisms. Both schools of liberalism are adhered to the principal idea of utilitarianism, but they depart in their unit of analysis in applying those principles.

### **Occupy Wall-Street against big-L liberalism**

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) Movement has invoked the traditional contest and theoretical dispute of these two schools of liberalisms.

The core demand of Occupy Wall Street movement complements the fundamental ideas of small-l liberalism, which is the precedence of societal interest over individual and corporate interest. The movement challenges the existing status quo which is the direct outcome of big-L liberalism and urges the intervention of society or state power in reforming the dominant institutions of the system. As Time editor phrased it "... pine for some third way, a new social contract."

When a domain idea or ideology of a given society upon which it functions and fastens the unity of its member loses its unquestionable status of being collective consciousness, it inevitably would trigger a social unrest and instability endangering the whole social fabric of the society. Similarly, the direct result of a "trickling down" theory which is based on big-L liberalism ideas has resulted in a historic disparity among different sections of the society and became the culprit for mass frustration and social disorder.

People asking whether the capitalist system that has historically created more wealth for more people still work for the middle class, whose income falling or stagnant for decades. The rising income inequality and falling social mobility are creating a groundswell of objections to unregulated market capitalism. Occupy Wall Street movement is the outcome of innate discrepancy in the system value of contemporary capitalism. And OWC will last long till the society delivers more unifying social contract.

On the official web cite of OWC the general goal of the movement outlined as follow; "Occupy Wall Street is leaderless resistance movement with people of many colors, genders and political persuasions. The one thing we all have in common is that We Are The 99% that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%."

By now it seems virtually all of the Occupy encampments have been taken down, but the motivating force behind them remains alive and kicking. The protests gradually pick its impetus and in summer and fall 2012 will reach to its peak. The entrenched power of the status quo and acquired inertia of the society make the movement's fight a long distance run. However the impact of the movement would be by far consequential, forcing American politics to drift to the left as never before. And thus facilitates the change in the existing world system.

Other common feature between small-l liberalism and Occupy Wall-Street is that as small-l liberalism branches itself into different theories and paradigms, OWS does coalescing people with different backgrounds and world views. In the throng, along with moderates there are left wing and radical liberals, Marxists and others who refute the merit of "trickling down" economy and unhinged individualism of big-L liberalism. That is where Times editors' comment comes from. "... They are fervent small-*d* democrats".

The postulates of big-L liberalism characterize today's global market capitalism, advances extended rationalization of world organizations and markets, and orient a significant portion of actual behavior of contemporary societies. In other word the dominant global political system of our time, spearheaded by the world's 1% is undergoing a systematic crack.

No wonder that OWS has created a domino effect around the globe. Indeed, the movement has gone "global" as solidarity demonstrations and protests have sprung up in cities around the world. Prior social uprising on Tahir square in Egypt, in Tunisia, in Libya, and else where are also part and parcel of this one big global tide.

The Arab spring, Occupy Wall Street and the Occupy Global movements are the herald of new era, the omen of the upcoming new world order. Propelled by social media, these leaderless - grass root movements will serve as an engine to spread out people's democracy to every corner of the globe. The change these social movements craving for is the formation of a humane society wherein freedom, justice and prosperity will be neither a privilege of a few segments of a society nor an exclusive blessing of powerful countries.

Upcoming years and decades prelude a paramount challenge for undemocratic and dictatorial regimes across the world. Totalitarian and autocratic governments will be overwhelmed and swept away by century's tide - awakened mass. Only governments of the people, by the people, and for the people will endure this historical wave of social tsunami.

### **The Great Renaissance Dam**

Quick review of our society through the prism of this global trend reaffirms us the correctness of the path which was chosen to salvage the country's unity some twenty years ago. By tackling the country's century old and most explosive issue, a national question, decades earlier, the country is now well positioned itself to seize the opportunities, what these global changes to bring about in terms of redistribution of capital and market. The constitution which laid the foundation for a democratic and effective federal and self governing system has made it possible the continuation of a relative peaceful period which is crucial for rebuilding the economy and fighting the worst enemy of the nation- hunger and poverty. On the light of these

global movements, worth to note that our society did left behind the chaotic and the turbulent stage of social revolution and its uncertainty for good two decades ago.

And worth to note that the awakening process of Ethiopian people began long before and has been progressing continuously through participation in self administration and nation building agendas. The end of century old oppression and marginalization of the majority of Ethiopian people from political process has paved the way for a dynamic and budding people's democracy. Mass awakening of citizens since has been revealing itself through active participation in local and national developmental agendas and in regular election processes.

One of astounding awakening moments of unity of mind and purpose of Ethiopian people has been exhibited over the Renaissance Dam ever since the announcement by the Ethiopian government of plans to build the dam on the Blue Nile River.

The great Renaissance Dam project has drawn the enthusiasm and public support never seen before in recent history. The country has witnessed an exceptional outpouring of enthusiasm from people of all walks of life. The Renaissance Dam becomes a symbol of Ethiopian people's fight against their bitter enemy - the tyranny of abject poverty and backwardness. It becomes a hallmark for this transformational period in their history, a watershed moment which divides the gloomy past of their helplessness and the bright future which promises to bring their might back. The Great Renaissance Dam is a trade mark of one of the newly emerging power of Africa.

The government of Ethiopia has relatively well positioned itself by tapping and binding the resources and aspiration of the people for one single and big historical venture - eradication of poverty. No doubt that the will and determination of the leadership plus unwavering support of the majority of Ethiopian people can bring the dream of generations of Ethiopians - abundance and prosperity on one hand, and the formation of an authentic middle class, the nucleus and the stake-holder of stable and enduring democracy on the other.

Be part of history! Occupy the Great Renaissance dam!

Join the Ethiopian people on their fight against the tyranny of poverty!

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