



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**Liberalism and Its Implication for African Thought in the 21st Century:
A Critical Analysis**

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyzes the philosophical foundation of liberalism and its implications for African thought in the 21st century. The authors locate liberalism as an outgrowth of Western individualism which upholds the idea of individual freedom, autonomy, and equality. This in turn has an adverse implication for African thought that emphasizes communalism and interpersonal relationship. The author traces the philosophical foundation of liberalism in the philosophies of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes and outline African thought from the philosophical works of Innocent Asouzu and Chiedozie Okoro. This paper argues that the foundation of African thought on duality, complementarity, and its principle for socialization is located in communalism. Therefore, the paper sees liberalism with its attendant ontology of monism as a challenge in which African thought of communalism and pluralism should rehabilitate and integrate for mutual enrichment. Hence, for this to happen the authors maintain that liberalism and African thought constitute a 'missing link' that are to be opened for mutual complementation. This will foster the advancement of human civilization and the building of a just world order in the 21st century. The philosophical implication therein is that all absolutist thoughts and institutions in which liberalism is championing in politics, economic, education, and social re-engineering should be harmonized within the African thought of complementarity. The authors employ the method of critical analysis.

Keywords liberalism, African thought, communalism, monism, individualism, pluralism.

INTRODUCTION

What is a just social and political order and on what foundation should it be based? The answer to this question has engaged philosophers and other social scientists from antiquity to date.

With some arguing that the just social order should be based on the individual person and his freedom or liberty (which is liberalism), while, some arguing for a strict regulated social arrangement base on the commands of the collective, deities, majority, or the State through the government. The debate is still on, however, in this paper we seek to give a critical analysis of liberalism as a socio-politico-economic philosophy and its implications for African thought in the 21st century. The paper defends the thesis that liberalism and African thought are ‘missing link’ that should be opened to mutual complementation for the advancement of human civilization and the building of a just world order in the 21st century. This entails that all absolutist thoughts and institutions in which liberalism is championing in politics, economic, education, and social reengineering should be harmonized within the African thought system of complementarity or communalism. The question now is to what extent can this be possible? This will be the focus of the paper.

Nonetheless, liberalism as a socio-politico-economic philosophy has as its foundation the protection and promotion of the freedom or liberty of the individual person, as its central tenet for social organization and formation (Liberalism, 2015). In other words, liberalism upholds the ideals of individualism as a principle of social ordering and social living. Although, the objection against this position is that if we build a society on individualism, we will only succeed in raising atomistic, isolated and disjointed individuals pursuing their interests at the expense of civil society. Liberals like Smith (1979) argued against the above position, by submitting that it is not the benevolence of men that we meet our collective needs but through the pursuit of their interests that our collective needs are met. This entails that ontologically liberalism is built on a monistic foundation that is on the individual alone. It is this monistic and fixative ontology that this paper is reacting against within the context of the African thought system.

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to work out a complementary framework within the pluralist tradition that will accommodate the exclusive bifurcated and dichotomizing tendencies of liberal philosophy. These tendencies play out in the elevation of the individual as a being alone but with minimal consideration of the 'other'. The danger of this is playing out when actors in the political or economic scene see their individual wellbeing as being supreme and better than others. This mindset is anti-social and it can be dangerous for building civil society. Though liberals foresaw this weakness in their positions and start preaching tolerance in matters of politics and religion, on the other hand, they are still asserting monism (Okoro, 2009; Akpan 2005; Akpan 2007; Duke 2018). Monism cannot tolerate and accommodate opposites and contraries at the same time; it is either one is or the other is not. This is where the African thought system of duality or complementarity can be of service to liberalism for mutual enrichment. This is because within the African thought system “even nothing is something” (Unah, 2006). This is to say that nothingness is part and parcel of being, and it, not a negation of being as Western ontology has constructed, which liberalism as an ideology is an outgrowth of that Western mindset.

Hence, in this paper, we shall look at liberalism and its fundamental principles for social ordering and living, we will take a cursory look at the philosophies of classical liberals like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Then, we will give a summary of the African Thought system using the writings of Innocent Asouzu and Chiedozie Okoro and work out the implications of liberalism on African thought in the 21st century. The paper will conclude with an evaluation and conclusion.

LIBERALISM AND ITS FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

There is no universal definition of liberalism among liberal thinkers and politicians but the doctrine is associated with Western countries. According to Otto (2015), there are various

interpretations not meanings of liberalism, which are offered by different scholars in the field. However, according to Charvet and Kaczynska-Nay (2014:1), liberalism as a theory and practice is principally concerned with the promotion of social outcomes, which to some extent, is a function of free individual choices, although it is not possible to have individuals pursuing their choices or interests without respecting the equal freedoms and rights of others. In a similar vein, Otto (2015:3) sees liberalism as a philosophical doctrine that emphasizes freedom. This is to say that freedom is the primary value that can govern social and political life. Thus, for liberals, a just social order must recognize the indispensability of individual liberty and freedom because "all men are born equal" (Locke 1834).

Furthermore, Otto (2015), identify two branches of liberal traditions as social liberal (John Rawls); classical liberal tradition (Thomas Hobbes and John Locke). The concern of this paper is to x-ray the positions of the classical liberal tradition and give a brief explanation of the central tenet of their various positions. However, according to Charvet and Kaczynska (2014:2), liberalism has various thought patterns in the sphere of politics, economic and social.

In politics, it is referred to as Political Liberalism which entails that individuals are free to choose their governors through periodic election by casting their votes for the candidates of their choice. This means that the individual has the right to vote and be voted for in a free and fair election. Also political liberalism advocate for limited government (Otto, 2015), that operates within its boundary and must not encroach into the domain of individual liberty and rights. Invariably, this leads to the separation between the private life of the individual and the public life of the individual (Mill, 2011/1859; Otto, 2015:4). Political liberalism put some checks and balances in the activities of government through a parliamentary arrangement and the separation of the various organs of government for mutual accountability to the individual.

Economic Liberalism entails that an individual has the right to owned private properties either tangible or intangible, and the individual is free to use his/her properties for personal pleasure the way he/she desires. For liberals economic activities are matters of private interests and government should not interfere in economic activities. In other words, let individual choices determine economic planning, execution, and development; and the so-called 'invisible hand' of the free market will determine the allocation, ownership, and distribution of economic values or opportunities. The implication of this is that economic liberalism is advocating for a *laissez-faire* kind of capitalism.

In the social sphere, liberalism refers to as Social Liberalism. Social Liberalism entails that the individual is free to hold any belief, idea, or opinion he/she likes, insofar as it does not affect the rights or liberty of others to do the same. Social Liberalism is advocating for social justice and equal freedoms, which implies that everyone has unrestricted freedom to do as he/she pleases, including the right to kill or injure another (Charvet & Kaczynak, 2014: 2). Therefore, it is based on the need of avoiding the tendency of abuse of excess individual freedom that liberals see government or society as a necessary evil. Liberals see the function of government as primarily nothing but mere "night watchman", who moderate not regulates individual freedoms. This indicates that the government is the enforcer of the "mutually accepted equal limits" of individuals. The government uses coercion to punish those who have violated the "mutually accepted equal limits" of individual freedoms. Hence, laws, norms, conventions, and morality are the byproduct of the historical process of negotiations and consultations, not the province of an omnipotent God or Sovereign. Man through his rationality can make laws and determine morality for himself; he is the ultimate lawgiver to himself.

Hence, based on the above we need to outline the basic principles upon which liberalism is built. According to Chau (2009:2), liberalism is built on two foundations which are individualism and liberty, and on that basis he identified four principles of liberalism: individualism, egalitarianism, universalism, and meliorism. While for Otto (2015:1), liberalism is built on three principles; strong private property rights; limited government, and limited welfarism. By way of a synthesis of the above positions, it suffices to say that, the concept of individualism as posits by Chau necessarily implies what Otto was trying to state. Thus the paper adopts Chau typology for further explanations.

Individualism

Individualism as a principle of socialization is based on the assumptions that the individual is superior to the community because the individual is endowed with the freedom to be whatever he/she wants to be in as much as his/her freedom do not infringe on others to actualize themselves (Asuquo, 2016). According to Chau (2015), this assumption of the superiority of the individual over the society hinges on the fact that society exists to make the individual realizes his/her potentials without undermining others to actualize themselves also. This is because “the best way to do this (i.e. make the individual to actualize his/her potentials) is to give the individual as much liberty as possible” (Chau, 2015:2). Therefore, individualism is based on the belief that the individual is reasonable enough to make the right choices in any situation.

According to Chau (2015), individualism also forwards the belief that the individual has fundamental human rights such as the rights for life, happiness, and property, etc. It is therefore, these rights in the negative sense, that government is called to protect and safeguard, and any government that does not guarantee these rights should not exist in the first place. Hence, liberalism advocated for a limited government to maintain individual liberty (Otto, 2015).

Egalitarianism

In a strict sense, within the classical liberal tradition, egalitarianism means that everyone is equal before the law and is entitled to equal opportunity in all matters of resource allocations. In other words, there should be no legal or political impediments on the path of individuals as they pursue their life goals. However, it does not imply that everyone will cross the finish line together and at the same time (Chau, 2015:3).

Universalism

This entails that moral imperatives such as equality of human beings, freedom, fairness, and social justice are universal and applicable to everyone no matter the cultural conditions or place. Furthermore, liberals universalize common human values such as mutual respect, tolerance, non-aggression, cooperation and voluntary exchange between free people and equally maintained that adherence to these universal human values is the foundation of building a just social order (Butler, 2015).

Meliorism

This is the position that holds that human beings are potentially predisposed to become better, just as their social and political institutions can become better (Chau, 2015:3). Therefore, what can make human beings to be better is the presence of the rule of law, which implies that “we should be governed by known laws, not the arbitrary decisions of government officials – i.e. a

government of laws and not of men” (Butler, 2015:8). If human beings are governed by laws, they will do the right things as defined by the law.

OVERVIEW OF THE CLASSICAL LIBERAL THINKERS (THOMAS HOBBS AND JOHN LOCKE)

This section gives a summary of the thoughts of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in the development of liberalism as a political philosophy, that set the tone of political transformation in the modern era of western civilization. This section is only concern with the major contributions they made to liberalism

Hobbesian Liberalism

Although, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is not a strict liberal his philosophy set the tone for liberalism in Western philosophy. Due to the preponderance of political upheavals that characterize Hobbes's time, he articulated his thoughts by positing that man by nature is greedy and sometimes act in ways that promote his interest in self-preservation. It is this nature of man that makes life in the state of nature “solitary, cruel, brutish and short” because it is a state of war of all against all. Therefore, to build a peaceful and secure civil society, men gave up their right for self-government to a single man or assembly of men to act as the commonwealth or *Leviathan*, for mutual coexistence and protection (Hobbes, 1660). Hence, for Hobbes, the individual existed before the advent of society or the state, as such the state or society existed to advance the good of the individual. It is this position that made Hobbes to be christened a liberal.

Lockean Liberalism

John Locke (1632-1704) is regarded as the father of classical liberalism because in his philosophy he argues against the divine right of the king to rule; by maintaining that government must be based on the consent of individuals (the people). This means that any government that does not derive from the consent of the people is illegitimate and it rests on the people to overthrow it. This implies that legitimate government is based on a contract with the people, not ‘force and violence’ (Butler, 2015:98). Just like Hobbes, Locke developed the concept of the State of Nature, where he speculated that people have every right to preserve their lives, health, and property which they acquire by ‘mixing their labour’ with natural resources against violation by others. Hence, to preserve and protect these *natural rights* in a more peaceful way, individuals enter into a social contract to form governments that they empower to preserve and protect them (Locke, 1823; Edet 2014). According to Butler (2015), it is these ideas of Locke that strongly influence the American and French revolutions and constitutional thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson which set the stage for modern liberal democracy that, hinges on popular elections, respect of human rights, and rule of law and independence of social and political institutions. Subsequent liberal thinkers like Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Adman Smith, etc. developed these Lockean ideas further.

African thought in the writing of Innocent Asouzu

Asouzu is a professor of Philosophy at the University of Calabar in Nigeria. He is the promoter of *ibuanyidanda* philosophy, a unique methodological horizon for doing philosophy in and beyond Africa that combined traditionalism and modernism in a uniquely African way. Although he uses the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria, however, the rudiment of his thought encompasses the wide spectrum of the totality of Africa. According to Asouzu (2007:11), the word *Ibuanyidanda* is a combined word made up of three parts: *Ibu* which mean “Load or task”; *Anyi* meaning not

insurmountable for, and *Danda* (a species of ants). He further submits that the concept *Ibuanyidanda* draws its inspiration from the teachings of traditional Igbo philosophers of the complementary system of thought. For the traditional Igbo “*danda*” (ants) can surmount the most difficult challenges if and only if they work in a harmonious complementary unified manner (Asouzu 2004:108). The nearest English equivalent of the concept *Ibuanyidanda* is complementarism which Okpo (2010) sees as a moment of reflection between isolation and teamwork.

The methodological objective of *Ibuanyidanda* is to remedy the bifurcating, dichotomizing, and exclusivist mindset that characterizes western and African philosophy before now. These tendencies are errors of the mind, which, blind actors not to see the comprehensiveness and totalizing nature of reality. Thus, *ibuanyidanda* seeks to rescue ontology from these divisive tendencies. Hence, by way of explaining the methodical principle and the imperative of complementarity, Asouzu (2004) articulates the metaphysical and practical variants of the principle. He calls the metaphysical variant of the principle “*the principle of progressive transformation*”. While *the principle of integration* which is the practical variants indicates the general metaphysical implications of the theory, the principle of progressive transformation addresses specifically the relevance of the theory to human actions.

He went further to point out that the principle of integration holds that “anything that exists serves a missing link in reality”, whereas, the principle of progressive transformation maintains that “all human actions are geared towards the joy of being”. For Asouzu (2004), both principles allow us to formulate the imperative of complementarity which can be stated thus: “allow the limitations of being to be the cause of your joy”

In a nutshell, *ibuanyidanda* gives a comprehensive treatment of being as not being alone but as being in a mutually complementary interpersonal relationship with everything that exists. It exposes the insufficiency of human existence, which a single human cannot carry alone but must necessarily work in a reciprocal relationship with the ‘others’. The ‘other’ which can follow humans, God, or society in general; therefore, *ibuanyidanda* calls for togetherness, cooperation, integration, complementation of efforts, collaboration, and teamwork.

African thought in the writing of Chiedozie Okoro

Okoro is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. He is the promoter of metaphysical duality or pluralist metaphysics, which is rooted in the African world view of holism. This worldview is rooted in the dynamism of the life-force or vital force. According to Okoro (2011:17), “in the universe of the life-forces things are inclusively interconnected and interpenetrating” which entails that in the African mindset there is no exclusivity of entities or the harden division of reality into compartments. In the African cosmology, everything is connected to everything and interfused which makes the universe an extension. This implies that “from family to society, economy to politics, social relations to religion, of which strict rules of empathy, morality, egalitarianism, corporate co-existence, and mutuality, acted as binding forces to ensure that individuals gained a sense of belongingness in the society” (Okoro 2011:18-19). Hence, there is a symbiotic relationship between man and society just like fish and water. Furthermore, it is this relational approach to reality that made Metz (2019), to submit that, African thought places emphasis on relationality and rationality. The rational must submit to the relational for validation and mutual progress and enrichment.

This African philosophical orientation which Okoro sees as metaphysical pluralism is a more universal and comprehensive way of viewing reality, which accommodates both contraries

and opposites harmoniously and intrinsically. It is this multi-dimensional approach to reality that can safeguard the just social order. It is on this note, Okoro (2009:43) opined that “African societies observed the duality (as opposed to dualism) of opposites that ensured a symbiosis between the leader and the led, society and man, family and individual so that the duality did not freeze into dualism or a division between elements that make up society”. This means that the African thought system is not monistic or dualistic in outlook but pluralistic, in that, units or elements when identity are integrated for the mutual service of man and society. The individual is not supreme neither is the society supreme all are 'missing link' in mutual service, and existence will become more joyous if and only if all units work in complementation. This is the basis of African communalism. Therefore, what Asouzu and Okoro are treating to establish is that Africans are communalistic people who share in the mutual complementary framework of the individual and the society in an intrinsic interpersonal relationship or symbiosis.

THE IMPLICATION OF LIBERALISM ON AFRICAN THOUGHT

Fundamentally, liberalism just as we have studied so far is rooted in Western individualism which is grounded on a monistic foundation. Individualism as a principle of social ordering and social living is based on the assumptions that the individual is superior to the community because the individual is endowed with the freedom to be whatever he/she want to be, in as much as, his/her freedom does not infringe on others to actualize themselves. This reductionist or absolutist view of the individual in liberal tradition makes the ideology monistic (Okoro 2009). Hence, this poses a challenge to African thought which is communalistic.

African communalism is based on the intrinsic and mutually complementary relationship between the individual "I" and the society "We". The society is not subjected to individual freedoms or the individual loses his or her identity in the society. Individuality is accommodated but not in the exclusion of the society. This entails that the individual realizes him/herself within the context of society and in turn, society is enriched because of the presence of the individual. The mindset that governed African societies is that “to be is not to be alone but to be in an intrinsic mutual relationship with everything that exists” (Asouzu, 2007:11). Therefore, African communalism rest on this principle: “I am because we are, since we are therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1970: 141). To substantiate the above Menkiti (2014:172), opines that “in the African View - it is the community which defines the person as a person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory”.

Furthermore, if what Menkiti says above holds in Africa, it then means that ideas like capitalism, liberal democracy, and human rights without corresponding human duties which are byproducts of liberalism are un-African and they cannot work in Africa as intended. For example, Okoro (2009:37) submits that capitalism is deliberately killing African communalism by granting some individuals in society the rights and opportunities to exploit and pauperized other members of society. This is why we celebrate one “big man” as the richest in Africa while a lot of Africans are extremely poor. This has also created a wide gap in social, economic, and political inequality in African society. Inequality if not managed properly is a breeding ground for terrorism, criminality, and other social vices.

More so, Liberal Democracy is giving platforms to incompetent leaders who ride on the wing of populism to come into power but lack the intellectual stamina and political experience to govern the state in Africa. The institutions that liberal democracy is championing in Africa, is not only un-African but it is not rooted in the cultural milieu of the African peoples. Governance and social institutions are an organic outgrowth from a people culture, values, and philosophies through

their historical experience. Therefore, the wholesale importation of Liberal Democracy in Africa cannot engender African political development which experience has taught us, however, if Africans can domesticate it and reinterpret it to suit their conditions it will go a long way. The Chinese have done it and it is working for them. Africans have the intellectual raw material to draw from and can do likewise.

Also, the crazy pursuit of human rights without the equivalent emphasis on human duties is not for the good of African society. There is no doubt that human beings possess fundamental human rights that are inalienable but there must be a peaceful order before we can talk about rights. What we are saying is that rights are situational and conditional for the common good as defined by the state. Even the west that is championing human rights in Africa are the worst offenders of human rights in other lands when their interests are at stake. This is what Okoro (2009) refer to as liberal pretense.

Therefore, what the liberals are saying is already accommodated within the context of African thought as such liberalism needs to play down its domineering and absolutist positions at the exclusion of others. This is not the mindset for progress and development and liberalism should look into the African thought system for more enrichment. Furthermore, African thought needs to accept the liberal urge for progress and development but not in the sense of pulling down others in order to develop, which we see in western society but the sympathetic disposition to the plights of others in the face of existential difficulties as they arise.

CONCLUSION

The paper has highlighted the tenets and imperatives of liberalism and it explores the classical liberal traditions of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. The paper discovers that liberalism is based on western individualism which is rooted in the monistic ontology. It is from this that the paper draws out the implication of liberalism on African thought. The paper posits that liberalism needs to borrow from African communalism that is based on togetherness, mutuality, cooperation, and symbiosis that does not polarize or dichotomize to the extent of exclusion of the 'other'.

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