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## **Corporatism and Benevolent Authoritarianism: Viable Antidotes to Populism**

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**Abstract:** *The instability of liberal democracies both in Europe and in the Americas partly brought about by the COVID-19 Pandemic has shown the limits of this construct in terms of protecting the core values of liberalism itself, such as freedom of speech and the protection of private property. Riots in the United States, vandalism in several European countries, and the attempts by the media and big technology corporations to suppress free speech can be contrasted to the relative stability and calm of Asian countries with corporatist systems and with different varieties of benevolent authoritarianism. The present paper argues that an emerging Asian model combining aspects of corporatism, increasing professional engagement throughout society, and benevolent authoritarianism has shown greater resilience and greater success in protecting the core values that liberal democracies are supposed to be based on, than the open systems favored by the West.*

**Keywords:** *Corporatism, governance, liberal democracy, benevolent authoritarianism*

## **1. Introduction**

Western democracies are under attack from within. Riots in America target monuments representing the core values of the country, such as the statues of the founding fathers and federal courthouses (Attacks and unrest continues outside Federal Courthouse, 2020; Rove, 2020). Looting is common during these riots and many protestors call for the abolition or defunding of police departments (Rove, 2020) due to their harsh responses, especially towards minority groups. Further complicating the picture, certain local government officials in America allow rioters a free hand to occupy parts of their cities in open defiance of the federal government. Protests in cities such as Portland include flag and bible burnings (Rove, 2020). Politicized prosecutors attack law abiding citizens who protect their property from destruction even though the law clearly allows the defense of their homes and businesses.

The situation in European democracies is equally complicated. Vandals attack the statues of Winston Churchill in London and thousands march in Berlin against COVID-19 restrictions ("Black Lives Matter protest: Why was Churchill's statue defaced?," 2020; Morris & Berger, 2020). While there are many complex ideological reasons for the protests, the level of discord has put unprecedented strains on the institutions upholding the basic values of a liberal democracy and increased the level of confusion in our communities (Rouault et al, 2021). The following sections provide some historical explanation regarding the development of liberal democracy and its original tenets. This discussion is followed by an explanation of alternative models such as corporatism and several types of benevolent authoritarianism. The final section of the study compares the strengths and weaknesses of the different systems.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The present study applies functionalism in that it adopts the assumption that all societies have goals and that the social structure, norms, and mores are meant to support the achievement of those goals (Faubion, 2007; Macdonald, 2007). Thus, when certain behaviors deviate from the desired norms and thus put a strain on the social structure itself, those behaviors are considered deviant and make it difficult or impossible to achieve desired social goals (Macmillan, 2001). Societies have corrective mechanisms called social sanctions that serve to protect the stability of the overall system and to help socialize new members of the community into the norms and goals of the group (Von Feigenblatt, 2011c). Societies have both formal and informal sanctions ranging from the death penalty to ostracism (Von Feigenblatt, 2010c, 2011d, 2012b, 2014; Johnston & Swanson, 2004).

## **3. Methodology**

The present study follows the case study tradition (Stake, 1995). Several case studies of attacks on liberal democracies were chosen because of their prominence in terms of visibility and socio-political impact (Alexander, 2020; Attacks and unrest continues outside Federal Courthouse, 2020; "Black Lives Matter protest: Why was Churchill's statue defaced?," 2020; Morris & Berger, 2020; Rove, 2020). Discursive analysis was applied to the official statements made by the main stakeholders of the groups studied in each case study. Concept mapping was conducted so as to trace the connection between different socio-political movements and their relationship to society at large.

## **4. Analysis**

“Few men think, yet all will have opinions. Hence men’s opinions are superficial and confused.”

— John Locke, *The Empiricists.*: (Locke: *Concerning Human Understanding*; Berkeley: *Principles of Human Knowledge & 3 Dialogues*; Hume: *Concerning Human Understanding & Concerning Natural Religion*).

Liberal democracies are based on the ideals of the enlightenment (Sorkin, 1983; Walker, 2008). It is beyond the scope of this study to explain the development of liberalism but it will suffice to note a few important points as to how it influenced the development of the United States, considered by many to be the paramount ideal of a liberal democracy (Collins, 2003; Cox, 2008). The founding fathers, in particular James Madison and Thomas Jefferson enshrined basic tenets of liberalism in the declaration of independence and in the constitution (Eakin, 2007). Some of those tenets include but are not limited to: the right to private property, freedom of movement, freedom of speech, right to bear arms, *inter alia* (Walker, 2008).

The early years of the American Republic reflect those ideals in that there was not income tax until the 20th century and there was considerable freedom of the press. Thus, in comparison to other parts of the world, during the early years of the Republic, Americans enjoyed more freedom and a higher quality of life. Nevertheless many contemporary pundits and critics are evaluating life in eighteenth century America by applying contemporary standards (Alexander, 2020). Moreover, the current attacks on Federal property and the looting by protesters are signs of how some members of society are rejecting some of the core tenets of this liberalism (Rove, 2020).

Liberalism is usually connected to democracy but this link is frayed with tension and contradictions (Callahan, 2005). There are many types of democracy however the version of democracy that is prevalent in Europe and the United States in the 21st century is very

different from the one envisioned by 18th century liberalism (Gleditsch, 2008). Universal suffrage is a relatively new addition and there is still an intense debate over whether direct democracy is better than representative democracy (John, 2005). Remnants of a more nuanced version of democracy which includes group representation rather than just the aggregation of the popular vote can still be seen in the Electoral College of the United States and in the corporatism of some Western European democracies (Kim, Fidler, & Ganguly, 2009). Corporatism in this study refers to the representation of different sectors or social groups as discreet entities in public policy making.

The fickleness of public opinion and the short term vision of the average voter in industrialized countries has been documented and widely studied (Albritton & Bureekul, 2004; Dalpino, 2011). Nevertheless the prevalent theories in political science and public policy rely on the aggregation of interests into pressure groups in an eerily similar way to Adam Smith's invisible hand of the market (Anderson, 2006; Sharman, 2008; Thakur & Weiss, 2009). Under most conditions this system of interest groups competing and cooperating with each other does result in the protection of the overall values of liberalism and in a healthy combination of short term and long term goals (Anderson, 2006).

Democracies are systems and as like most systems they tend to have enough flexibility to survive a certain level of conflict and stress (Chambliss, 1973; Cloke, 1991; Constantino & Merchant, 1996). Nevertheless systems can collapse when the majority starts to attack the core values of the state with the support of a complacent section of the elite (Von Feigenblatt, 2011a, 2011b; Goldberg & Brett, 1991; Hall, 1982). Signs of decay and strain in the system include: open defiance to the rule of law, attacks on shared history, and attacks on private property (Kessler, 2009; Lal, 2004). History is cyclical and crises usually coincide with such strains on the system, however those are the times when the elites and a patriotic

minority rise to the challenge of defending the system against internal and external challenges (Lin, 2009; Luoma-Aho, 2009; Mandel, 1980). Examples of this include the United Kingdom during World War II facing internal economic recession and a very serious external security threat and Singapore during the independence process from the Malaysian Federation (Von Feigenblatt, 2012a; Heidhues, 2000; Roberts, 1997).

For most of the 20th century Western democracies criticized the socio-political development of newly industrializing Asian states as “authoritarian” (Chang, Chu, & Park, 2007; Cock, 2010; Von Feigenblatt, 2009c, 2010b; Haklai, 2009; Katanyuu, 2006; Ku, 2010; McCargo, 2005; Montesano, 2009; Thayer, 2010). Criticism is mostly worded in the language of universalistic “human rights” (Eriksen, 2005; Hertel, 2009; Hsin-Huang, Hsiao, & Wan, 2007; Kershaw, 2003; MacFarlane & Khong, 2006; McCargo, 2005; Mines, 2002). Inherent contradictions in terms of the criticism leveled against these countries include that while the international community, and in particular Western democracies, voiced their concerns for greater respect for minority rights, the very claims of universal human rights deny the unique cultural differences and particular socio-cultural conditions of those very countries (Kim et al., 2009; Merry, 2006; Mines, 2002; Rüländ, 2011; Scott Cooper, 2008; Tow, Thakur, & Hyun, 2000).

There is a wealth of research dealing with democratic development and in particular dealing with the factors leading to its success or failure (Brown, 2014; Von Feigenblatt, 2007, 2009b, 2010a). A certain level of development is usually mentioned in the literature as an important factor determining the success of the process of democratization (Albritton & Bureekul, 2004; Omelicheva, 2009; Togo, 2005). The level of education of the general population (literacy) is also mentioned by many scholars as important (Von Feigenblatt, 2016b; Von Feigenblatt, Domíngue, &

Vallé, 2015; Von Feigenblatt, Suttichujit, Shuib, Keling, & Ajis, 2010; Suttichujit, 2013; Wang, 2008). Many scholars who focus on the developing world, and in particular in Asia, emphasize the need to separate economic liberalization from political democratization (Santander & Martínez, 2010; Saul, 2013). The reason for this is that many countries in the developing world gained their independence before having reached a high level of socio-economic development (John, 2005; Keling, Saludin, von Feigenblatt, Ajis, & Shuib, 2010; Kershaw, 2003; Shuib, Saludin, Feigenblatt, Keling, & Ajis, 2010; Thayer, 2010). Thus, jumping straight to direct democracy ignores the hundreds of years of experience enjoyed by Europe and the United States (Nayak & Malone, 2009; Roberts, 1997).

Assessing the relationship between different factors at the international level is very difficult. The very nature of the phenomenon makes it impossible to conduct controlled experiments. Nevertheless a cursory overview of the experiences of Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, Japan, and South Korea versus Brazil, Chile, and most Sub-Saharan countries clearly points towards better results for the former (Albaugh, 2009; Brant, 2013; von Feigenblatt, 2008; Komori, 2009; McCargo, 2009; Means, 2009; Yang, 2010). Therefore it is necessary to examine the different paths followed by the previously mentioned countries in relation to democratization and the protection of the traditional values of liberalism.

The economic success of Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan can be partly linked to their very gradual and controlled movement towards popular participation and democracy (Bix, 2000; Dore, 1997; Von Feigenblatt, 2007). Taiwan was a mostly agricultural society by the end of World War II and it was basically a military dictatorship until the 1980s when the ruling party, the Kuomintang decided that the economy was developed enough to start opening the political system (Callahan, 2008; Ge, 2013). Singapore is an island with no natural resources which has been under the rule of the same political party since independence and

Japan is known for its “iron triangle” of bureaucracy, big business, and traditional politicians (Mulgan, 2008).

One important common characteristic of the most successful Asian countries is the presence of corporatism and benevolent authoritarianism. Corporatism refers to the practice of including distinct social groups, guilds, and classes in the policy making process (Kingston, 2011; Sakamoto, 2008). Rather than direct participation by the individual, corporatism favors indirect representation of the group to which the individual belongs. Thus, if the individual is a factory worker he or she would be represented through his or her union and through his industry. The advantage of this system is that it leads to better long term solutions because it focuses on the aggregate sustainable goals of the sector of the population and also this system usually avoids wasteful overt conflict in the public sphere (Myers, 2008; Pieterse, 2009). Representatives from the different sectors, guilds, and classes have a seat at the policy making table. Having direct access to policy makers gives them a different perspective on what is feasible and what is not. It also makes representatives aware of the needs of other groups and of the nation as a whole and this helps moderate their demands. Corporatism originated in Europe but it is a great fit for the collectivist orientation found in East Asia and parts of Southeast Asia. Thus, cultural factors play an important factor in making democracy function properly (Chang et al., 2007; John, 2005). The Greeks and the Romans emphasized the need to aim for higher ideals of behavior but the individualism of the enlightenment with the reinforcement of capitalism slowly eroded those ideals in the Western elites.

One of the most controversial aspects of democracy is the idea of one person one vote. Greek and Roman democracy was not based on absolute equality and even more recent versions such as the American Republic did not originally grant the right to vote to the

entire population (Eakin, 2007; Fernandez-Armesto, 2003; Jelavich, 1969; Roberts, 1997). Contemporary values of equality have stressed the importance of universal franchise and participation but it should be noted that even in the 21st century minors are still not allowed to vote. This point is important because there is no doubt that there are 17 and 16 year olds with outstanding aptitudes and who are in some cases even more educated than people who are much older than them. Thus the decision to disenfranchise people younger than 18 is a remnant of the enlightenment idea that what makes us human is our ability to reason and that true equality can only be achieved by those who develop this skill (Eriksen, 2005). The logical conclusion of this statement is that if our ability to reason, from an enlightenment perspective, makes us human thus our right to participate is contingent on that ability, then minors who are supposedly not capable of reasoning, because of their alleged immaturity, should not be allowed to vote. It is highly debatable that a biological switch is turned on at 18 that brings about wisdom and the ability to reason. Nevertheless age is used as a general marker to determine maturity which somehow correlates with an ability to reason. This example is important to understand the original purpose of property requirements and literacy tests in order to vote. There is no doubt that those requirements were imperfect and in many cases unfairly applied but the logic was similar to the current age requirement for voting. Thus, rather than focus on the historical imperfection of the different benchmarks used to determine who gets to vote it is more fruitful to understand the original and even current, as in the case of the age requirement, purpose of those limitations.

To participate in decision making a minimum aptitude and knowledge is necessary (Hook, Worthington, & Utsey, 2008; Folger, 2005; Perrow, 1972; Poole, DeSanctis, Kirsch, & Jackson, 1995). This applies to all types of decision making and is widely accepted in professional organizations, with several categories of membership, full members with voting rights and usually junior

members who can participate but cannot vote. The reason for this difference between members is that full members are usually more involved in the organization; by contributing fees and service, and that they are usually more experienced and in some cases have received more advanced training. The literature on decision making supports the relationship between higher level of training and better decision making (Gallis, 2009; Rohrbaugh, 2005). It is also recommended that the decision makers understand the rules and norms of negotiation and that they share the same technical language (Broome, 1997; Von Feigenblatt, 2009d; Goldberg & Brett, 1991; Kriesberg, 1997). This leads to the currently controversial conclusion that at the national level decision-making would function better if participation is limited.

The literature also supports greater participation based on the concept of empowerment (Bayulgen, 2008; Bush & Folger, 2005; Von Feigenblatt, 2009a; Von Feigenblatt, Paliwal, Rivero, Orta, & Lemus, 2015; Gilson, 2007; Haritaworn, 2007; Lederach, 1996; Norsworthy & Khuankaew, 2008). In the field of development studies, participative development encourages local leadership and participation (Bayulgen, 2008; Bhaskaran, 2010; Bhattacharyay, 2010; Brant, 2013; Brown, 2014). A sense of ownership in decision making results in better implementation, higher satisfaction, and lower confusion. This observation has been made in a vast variety of settings and disciplines (Benedek, 1999; G. Hook, Gilson, Hughes, & Dobson, 2005; Rouault et al., 2021). Employees who are allowed to make some choices (professional engagement) about how to achieve a goal show greater satisfaction than those who are micromanaged (Broome, DeTurk, Kristjansdottir, Kanata, & Ganesan, 2002; Perrow, 1972; Stewart & Knowles, 2003). Is there a contradiction between the need for limited participation in the political process and empowerment? This is one of the greatest challenges in terms of making democracy in communities successful.

Can decision making be limited to those most capable while at the same time increasing empowerment among the rank and file of the population? The answer is yes. The Asian model of benevolent authoritarianism coupled with corporatism satisfies both requirements. Rank and file members actively participate in their unions, guilds, and other sector based organizations while their direct participation in the policy making process is highly restricted. A hypothetical example helps illustrate the case. Saito is a salary man in a large Japanese industrial corporation. As an employee he automatically belongs to a union and his industry is in turn represented in a vast array of national industrial associations. Saito participates weekly in union activities which focus on providing training and information to its members. The relationship between the union and management is amicable and well managed because the union has a seat at the corporate decision making table. In the political realm, Japan is a parliamentary democracy where the Prime Minister is indirectly elected by parliament chosen by the leading factions in the legislature, a negotiation that happens behind the scenes (Von Feigenblatt, 2007, 2016a; Hook et al., 2005). Members of parliament are elected with the support of local interest groups and industries with most districts going by consensus to one party or another. Saito is included in the organization of community festivals, wellness retreats for the company, upkeep of the local Shrine or Temple, and feels included and appreciated by the local community. Nevertheless Saito understands that the needs of the community, industry, and nation come before his own. Thus, Saito delegates his representation to the many well trained delegates of his union, industry, and local Member of Parliament. Thus, Saito's interests are represented but not through his direct participation but rather through an organic system of corporatism. The resulting policy will be the result of a complex negotiation and consensus making process between the different representatives of interests groups at the local, prefectural, and national levels.

The previously described scenario deviates from the contemporary Western ideal of direct participation in that Saito does not have a direct say in terms of policy making (Pearce, 1995; Tuecke, 2005). Moreover, his individual needs may be sacrificed for long term goals. Consensual decision making does not happen in the public sphere which is also very different from the Western taste for overt conflict and involvement of the media. Nevertheless, this type of Asian benevolent authoritarianism protects the interests of Saito without his own need to directly participate because of the understanding of the elites of the interdependence of the system. For the community to thrive the interests of everyone should be protected by the elites. Thus it is a modern case of rule by the best for the benefit of the majority.

Another great example is the Thai political system. Thailand's society is based on three pillars, namely the monarchy, religion, and the nation (Von Feigenblatt, 2016b; Means, 2009; Poocharoen, 2010; Wyatt, 2003). By religion, they mean Theravada Buddhism, by the monarchy they mean the Chakri dynasty, and by the nation they mean all the ethnicities living in the territory of Thailand and the national culture and traditions (Mulder, 2000). Thailand's constitution has changed many times but the principle of the three pillars is so strong that it survives every new iteration of charter changes. Thus, the unwritten constitution is even more important than the written one. Thailand is also unique in that it explicitly requires at least a bachelor's degree to serve in the senate and parliament and more than half the seats in the senate are directly appointed to represent particular guilds and social groups. The direct appointment of senators is not unique to Thailand but it is one of the few cases in which half of the seats are allotted in this way. Colombia also reserves a number of seats to certain groups, such as the former FARC leaders, to guarantee the representation of particular sectors of society (Cheng, 2006).

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

The present exploratory study has focused on the idea that corporatism coupled with benevolent authoritarianism can lead to the protection of classical liberal values in business and community. Case studies from Taiwan, Japan, Singapore and other Asian countries point to long term stability and development. One of the challenges of studying a macro level phenomenon such as democracy is that it is virtually impossible to isolate the variables leading to success or failure (Stake, 1995; Willis, 2007). Corporatism and benevolent authoritarianism has worked well in the previously mentioned countries, however there are many confounding variables that need to be taken into consideration. According to Hofstede, most Asian societies, and in particular East Asians, rank high on several cultural traits such as power distance and collectivism (Hook et al., 2008; Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 2001). Thus, culturally Asian countries are inclined to work well under conditions of corporatism and benevolent authoritarianism. Nevertheless rather than dismissing the success and stability of the previously mentioned Asian countries it is important to consider important socio-cultural changes in Western liberal societies and how they came about.

Education is at the core of democracy, and as discussed in early sections of this study, the enlightenment was intricately connected to reason (Marchetti, 2009; Walker, 2008). Thus a focus on education and socialization in general can have a greater impact in terms of the success or failure of democracy than structural changes to the political system itself. Rampant individualism and a generalized sense of entitlement have replaced the original values of the founding fathers in the United States. A sense of national patriotism and duty has degenerated into a complete disdain for the sacrifices of those who built our nations. An education focused on followership and duty can slowly reverse those trends and

eventually lead to a national culture based on respect and self-reliance.

With populism rising on both the left and the right of the political spectrum it is more important than ever to look at alternative models of democracy so as to avoid the instability and unbridled passions of populism and increase professional engagement in all parts of society (Rouault, Pardo & Drugmand, 2020). All sectors of society deserve protection and respect in a liberal democracy. Protecting liberal democracy may require restricting it and modifying it to fit the realities of the 21st century.

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