Pluralism and Liberalism: Could there be a common relationship of support and connection between them?

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Abstract— **One of the most debatable issues in political theory has been the debate on the relation between pluralism and liberalism. Based on definitions or various meanings that different authors give to these two concepts, they have often theorized a tension and incompatibility in the relation between pluralism and liberalism. In contrast with these authors' views, the objective of this paper is to argue that there are common relationships of support between the concepts of pluralism and liberalism in theory and in practice. That is, to argue that the main principles defended by pluralism such as value pluralism, incommensurability, the numerous perceptions of good or faiths, different lifestyles etc., apply within the context of a liberal society.**

Keywords: pluralism, liberalism, incommensurability, incomparability, freedom, negative liberty, group autonomy.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most debatable issues in political theory has been and remains the debate on pluralism and its potential relation with liberalism. These two concepts certainly constitute two individual central theoretical debates in the field of political theory, if we are to keep in mind the evolution of debate within each of them, and their acceptance or rejection (which is still ongoing) in the political arena; or the various definitions given to pluralism and liberalism by different authors. Although since from the-beginning (which started mainly with the writings and influences of the pluralist view by William James) to this day many of the pluralism principles or its core assumptions such as: value pluralism, reality and value of diversity, their origin from the group they belong to, etc., are widely accepted mainly in liberal democratic societies, still various authors theorize the existence of a tension or incompatibility in the relation between pluralism and liberalism. In contrast with these authors' views (see George Crowder, 1994; John Gray, 1996; Richard Rorty, 1989)[1], and by focusing mainly on the views and arguments presented by Isaiah Berlin, on this paper I will defend the idea that there are common relationships of support and compatibility between the concepts of pluralism and liberalism.

II. PLURALISM APPLIED IN CONTEXT OF LIBERALISM

The tenets of value pluralism and incommensurability were central to Isaiah Berlin's examination of the relationship between liberalism and pluralism [2]. To Isaiah Berlin, value pluralism and various beliefs exist naturally in people, and they conflict each other just as naturally, and they cannot be reduced to each-other. He considers this a conceptual truth, and when he states that among the several components which pluralism contains, the most fundamental is to argue that values are plural which means that they are not forms of nor are they derived from a single source [3]. And, based on this, on the idea that there is no single source or origin where values stem from, we could also claim the justification of the existence and objectivity of such values, and the various beliefs adopted by

everyone as ultimate purposes of their lives. As a matter of fact, this is clearly indicated in the definition that Isaiah Berlin gives to pluralism in his book *"The Crooked Timber of Humanity"*, as "the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other" [4].

Another important topic defended by pluralism which in its core is also related to the justification of existence and the claim on various values objectivity, is linked to the incomparability and incommensurability of such values. Given that to Berlin pluralism is first of all and essentially a theory of incommensurability of various values, we should stop and explain these two terms. *Incommensurability* is taken to mean that there is no single scale of units of value in terms of which different values or, perhaps, more accurately, different bearers of value could be measured. The term is often used to mean *incomparability* - the idea, simply, that things, in this case values, cannot be compared[1]. In Berlin's view of pluralism he sees incommensurability as implying incomparability. These two terms are important on the analysis of pluralism, because they also suggest that: first, no given list of goods or values can exist a priori and itemized hierarchically, and based on which one could commensurate, evaluate or show the validity of each one of them; on the other hand, given that perceptions of good and ultimate life purposes by people are different, they could be also incompatible, and as such incomparable, and should be *freely* followed by their "believers".

For many authors who oppose the link between pluralism and liberalism, it would be difficult to logically connect the cohabitation between them, because we could easily end up in liberal positions which could destroy the plurality of values. As George Crowder has shown, to make such a claim is to commit the "naturalistic fallacy", which is to say, it is to derive a normative commitment from an empirical proposition. As

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[1] See [3] Lassman, Peter. (1999) "Pluralism and Liberalism in the Political Thought of Isaiah Berlin". In Political Studies Association Conference, p. 5.

Crowder puts it: "The mere fact of the ultimate plurality of values, supposing it to be a fact, has no tendency to advance the normative claims of liberalism or… of any other political doctrine"[2]. All values, regardless of their multitude, are equally important to pluralism, they have the same validity, despite the fact that they could conflict with each-other. This means that there is no problem even if there is a conflict between values different from each-other, because every one of them has its own domain of applicability. Liberalism on the other hand, promotes a value different from all other values, *freedom*, which becomes *supervalue* or *metavalue*, and subordinates other values, under ranks them or can treat them as secondary. Thus, in this sense, it is argued that in a liberal society other values could be sacrificed or even destroyed for the sake of the primary value (metavalue), which is *freedom.*

However, we could argue here that exclusive domains for particular values are an illusion. No issues can be resolved by applying one single value, for example, the justice, utility, equality, or solidarity value. Choosing among incommensurables is always hard in two senses: first, such choices always involve regrettable loss, because gains in terms of one value can never wholly compensate for sacrifices in terms of an incommensurable value; secondly, because choices among incommensurables cannot be guided or justified by any simply monist standard… Moreover, *some* cases many present genuine dilemmas in which there is no decisive reason to favour one option over another [5]. In this sense, it is impossible for pluralism to create consensus at all times by applying one single value in the respective domain in order to resolve a particular issue. This could result in a sort of dictate by the value chosen by someone as a primary value. So, in brief, on one hand stand the value pluralism and incommensurability and on the other stands singularity.

In the conditions when pluralism stands on one side and singularity on the other, the question which arises is: which singular value *should* regulate the plurality of values that can exist in a given society, or in a given context? We could say that this is the end of our logical analysis regarding what can best guarantee the plurality of different values and faiths, and it would mark the beginning of normative-political analysis.

This brings to the political point where we argue that the plurality of values and faiths can best be applied in the context of liberalism. This is because the primary value of *freedom* offers the widest range of opportunities for the realization of other values (crucial for pluralism) to be applied in practice. It is *freedom*, the primary value of liberalism, that guarantees applicability for the opportunity that various individuals and groups live their lives in compliance with their concepts of what is better or more valuable for their lives. It is exactly the liberal doctrine which supports and gives particular importance to goods such as toleration, personal autonomy, freedom to choose for people and to live their lives as they see fit (as opposed to externally interventions, or imposed constraints from outside). This is basically the essence of what Berlin said when he noted that "if pluralism is a valid view and respect between system of values.. is possible then toleration and

liberal consequences follow…"[6]; and when he said that pluralism does indeed imply liberalism, when he assert that "pluralism, with the measure of "negative" liberty that it entails…"[7]. The biggest opportunities for the applicability and implementation on practice of the plurality of values could only exist in the context of liberalism. If pluralism is true, then "the necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition. This gives its value to freedom..."[3]. Which means that, the diversity of values, faiths or different lifestyles implied by pluralism, can be best organized through the primary value of *freedom* in a liberal order.

III. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLURALISM AND LIBERALISM

Now we should explain how pluralism and the principles it contains, is related to liberalism. To the defenders of the idea that there is a rational link between them, at the heart of the argument that liberalism and pluralism are compatible is the claim that value pluralism—multiple and incommensurable conceptions of the good—is the starting point of liberalism[4]. It is known that for liberalism, despite various interpretations that might lead to different directions; its main principle, its fundamental main value is freedom: perceived as freedom to act, to choose, to pursue ultimate life purposes, etc. This is exactly the point where value pluralism is given its specific importance, because it implies that individuals must be free to recognize and pursue all true and genuine values they believe in. Thus, we see that there is compatibility between the idea of value pluralism and the idea of individual freedom (mostly understood in its negative perception[5]). As William A. Galston notes, *liberal principles serve the empirical reality of value pluralism. Ideally, a liberal pluralist society "will organize itself around the principle of maximum feasible accommodation of diverse legitimate ways of life"*[8]. That is, if it would tolerate such different lifestyles and if it would guarantee their maximal potential adaption within the context of a given society.

With regards to this, it is worth mentioning another liberalism value as well, the autonomy, which also finds compatibility and support in the context of a pluralist society. Autonomy can be understood as having a small space within which the individual or groups are free to develop their beliefs and act in the best way they deem possible, without being forced by external factors or influences. William A. Galston also reiterates that the liberal value of autonomy finds itself rationally within a pluralist society: "The liberal value of autonomy, then, can only be realized in a pluralistic society, and so valuing autonomy leads to the endorsement of moral

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[2]   See [1] Crowder, G. (2004) "Pluralism and Liberalism". Political Studies 42, p. 293.

[3]   See [7] p. 278.

[4]   See [2] Schlosberg, David. "The Pluralist Imagination". In (2006). "The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory". Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 153.

[5]   Berlin defines the negative liberty as freedom from, which implies the absence of externally imposed constraints, or by a group of people. Thus, it is implied that the existence of a liberty space within which every individuals acts in, without being hampered by anyone externally. In general, it is agreed that the human being is as free as long as no one else interferes with his activity. For more details, see Isaiah Berlin (1969). "Four Essays on Liberty". Oxford, Oxford University Press.

pluralism... Moral pluralism, he argues, "supports the importance of expressive liberty in a way monist theories do not"[6]. Thus the author tells us that an evaluation of personal autonomy and/or of the group naturally results in the evaluation of, or at least in the acceptance of, the different perception of views compared to others', different ways of action, judgement, etc. And such a thing can best take place in the context of a liberal pluralist society.

Another argument which is given to show the relationship between pluralism and liberalism is also linked to the importance that they both give to choices made by individuals. As it was highlighted above, there is a natural conflict between various values and lifestyles, a topic on which pluralism focuses, and on which individuals are required to make a choice. And it is exactly the making of such choices which define the way we are and what we do, that different authors say are best made in the context of a plural and free society. This is what Isaiah Berlin had in mind when he says that *"Pluralism is the best context for this choice-making because it recognizes both incommensurability and rivalry across values"[7]*. This is because, in this rivalry or conflict between various values, pluralism sticks to the idea that there could exist no accurate and single choice / answer which served to all values and interests of people at the same time, so they should be left to choose or pursue those values they believe are best for them freely. Then Berlin continues: "It may be that the ideal of freedom to choose ends without claiming eternal validity for them, and the pluralism of values connected with this, is only the late fruit of our declining capitalist civilization"[8].

Yet another argument presented in the relationship between pluralism and liberalism, albeit it raises lots of objections, is the one concerning the group (groups) in which individuals belong to, and the recognition of differences between these groups. While it is accepted that the pluralist school of thought is generally focused on the group, it also recognizes the importance it has in the shaping of identity and behavior of individuals which compose such group. It also evaluates and legitimates the diversity of values, beliefs, different lifestyles which characterize different groups. The criticism which is addressed to liberalism on this topic and which claims a disruption of the relationship with pluralism, is related to the individualist nature of liberalism, the absence of social in liberal meanings, or the lack of a middle ground between individuals and the state, which is in essence a lack of recognition of the difference and autonomy of group life[9]. However, such assumptions are seemingly not accepted by liberal pluralist authors, who claim that liberalism does not serve to the individuals only or to the individualism in society, but it generally serves to groups as such too. This is understood by William A. Galston, when he states that: "Liberalism

requires a robust though rebuttable presumption in favor of individuals and groups leading their lives as they see fit, within a broad range of legitimate variation, in accordance with their own understanding of what gives life meaning and value. I call this presumption the principle of expressive liberty. This principle implies a corresponding presumption (also rebuttable) against external interference with individual and group endeavors[10]. For Berlin, this freedom and recognition for self-definition in a plural society is not solely for individuals, but for groups as well[11]. Thus, from these lines, we explicitly understand the defense given to liberalism at this point by claiming that it serves other groups that compose society as well; it recognizes their diversity and their self-definition based on what they see giving value and meaning to their lives, without the complications of interference from outside (group).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I tried to defend the idea of a common relationship of support between what make two central individual theoretical debates in political theory: pluralism and liberalism. Although, such a 'marriage' between them is not agreed upon by all authors, we saw that the main principles defended by pluralism – value pluralism, incommensurability and the numerous perceptions of good – apply and are compatible with in the context of liberalism. It is exactly this freedom context which is defended by liberalism that gives pluralism its specific importance, because it presupposes that individuals must be free to recognize and follow all genuine values which they believe in. as carefully noted by Peter Lassman when he says that "it is difficult to see how anyone would accept pluralism if they were not already receptive to liberal ideas"[12]. If all values are equally important to pluralism, they have the same validity (even if they are incompatible, and as such incomparable with each other) and should be *freely* followed by their believers. It is exactly the liberalism context (based on negative concept of liberty according to Berlin) which enables the applicability in practice of these multiple values. Liberalism offers the best context to guaranteeing the diversity of values, faiths or different lifestyles implied by pluralism. Also, other links, argued in this paper, which explain the connections which exists between pluralism and liberalism, or principles which they commonly support are also: the appreciation of personal autonomy by individuals, as well as groups; the importance that liberalism and pluralism place on the individual choice; and the recognition of group freedom and not individuals freedom only, the recognition of differences and diversity between groups, and their self-definition based on what they believe gives value and meaning to their lives. Although liberalism and pluralism are different concepts which should not be confused with each other or overlapped, we can see that there is a connection, a common

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6   See [8] p. 37-38.

7   See [7] Berlin, Isaiah. (2003) "Idetë Filozofike të shekullit XX dhe Katër Ese mbi Lirinë". (Philosophical Ideas of XX Century and Four Essays on Liberty). Tiranë: Botimet Toena, p. 280.

8   See [7] p. 281.

9   See [2] Schlosberg, David. "The Pluralist Imagination". In (2006). "The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory". Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 155.

10   See [8] Galston, William A. (2002) "The Implication of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice". Cambridge: Cambrige University Press, p. 3.

11   See [7] Berlin, Isaiah. (2003) "Idetë Filozofike të shekullit XX dhe Katër Ese mbi Lirinë". (Philosophical Ideas of XX Century and Four Essays on Liberty). Tiranë: Botimet Toena, p. 265-266.

12   See [3] Lassman, Peter. (1999) "Pluralism and Liberalism in the Political Thought of Isaiah Berlin". In Political Studies Association Conference, p. 19.

relationship of support between them, which applies (or can apply) in practical terms.

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