A Review of the Values of Progressive Liberalism in the Democrats 66 Party in the Netherlands

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I recently came across a collection of articles called *Basic Values of Progressive Liberalism: A European Perspective* [1] describing a political philosophy that has evolved in the Dutch political party called Democrats 66, or D66 for short, One of the chapters in that collection, *Cherish our Fundamental Rights and Shared Values* [2] describes a point of view that has much in common with the paraliberal view of liberalism [3] that I am promoting, but there are also some important differences. The purpose of the present article is to discuss these differences between Progressive Liberalism and Paraliberalism, and to propose some additions to Progressive Liberalism as described there. When venturing to do so I have been encouraged by what the introductory part of [1] says about the contents of that volume:

But – beware! – these are points of departure, not policy positions. They are starting points for the debate, not its final destination.

The present article is an attempt to contribute to this debate.

Background and Context

First a few words about Progressive Liberalism and its organizational affiliation. The collection [1] has been published by the Mr. Hans van Mierlo Foundation. By way of introduction, it describes progressive liberalism as follows:

In the Netherlands this political philosophy mainly took shape in the political party D66. In its fifty-plus years of existence, the party has continued to debate the question of what its exact political compass should be... That is why, in 2006, the party chose to add a number of 'Basic Values' to its manifesto for the national parliamentary election.

Notes:

Each of these basic values is represented by one article in the collection [1] but these articles do not necessarily qualify as an account of the views of the D66 party. In fact, according to the Wikipedia article about Democrats 66, or D66 for short, this party contains two factions, namely, the Radical Democrats and the Progressive Liberals. Although sometimes antagonistic, these two currents currently complement each other as both emphasise the self-realisation of the individual [Wikipedia] . The van Mierlo Foundation that has published the collection is a think-tank that evidently supports the Progressive Liberals faction. The D66 party has had its ups and downs: it did very well in the parliamentary election in 2021 but much less well in the election of 2023 where Geert Wilders advanced.

The chapter that I shall discuss here [2] was actually written in 2014 as an article in its own right that was then included in the collection, but I shall refer to it as a 'chapter' anyway whereas the word 'article' will refer to the present one.

Cherishing our Fundamental Rights and Shared Values

The heading above is also the heading of the chapter that is being discussed here. It consists of three sections that address, respectively, the values of a single individual, the values of an individual in their interactions with some other individual, and the values that occur in the relation between an individual and the state. This means that the occurrence of communities, in one or sense or another, is not discussed very much. They only occur when the chapter says (page 138):

Other political theories, those more focused on the community, often advocate pluralism based on groups. In that view, the emphasis is on group rights, and the individuals within the group are less empowered to make their own choices.

This is a fair characterization of communitarianism. However, a political theory does have good reasons to address the existence of groups for other reasons, and not just for defending their rights to control their members. Those other reasons have become more and more important in recent years, now that liberal democracies are increasingly being threatened by powerful groups that exploit the openness of our societies as a weak point that can be attacked, and for taking control. Both the extremely wealthy and the governments of authoritarian states have learnt how to manipulate public opinion very efficiently, in some cases, and this is certainly a threat against democracy. They may also use high-level corruption as another way of taking control, in the same way as international organized crime does, apparently.

Religious groups that do not respect individual rights, such as freedom of expression, may sometimes resort to violence against persons or institutions that have violated some of their rules. This is not a direct threat against democracy,

but it may well be an indirect one, for example by eroding public trust. Moreover, extremist groups (both Christian and Islamic ones) that cherish an integrist view of society shall also be seen as a challenge to liberal democracy, although in a longer perspective.

Those problems are entirely disregarded by the strictly individual-oriented thinking in the chapter. The following excerpts are examples of its viewpoint:

People who want to restrict the freedom of others should be challenged to offer arguments for this higher truth that should apply to everyone.

Public dialogue, debate, and arguments examine exactly that: which opinion is (temporarily, intersubjectively, but nevertheless) the best one. You can only have a conversation like that if you know your own convictions well.

The previous part described politics as an institutionalised conversation between people among themselves about the possible creation of rules by the state. Democracy is an excellent tool by which to make sure that non-state powers align themselves with the common interest.

The problem is, of course, that the interests of some non-state powers are quite different from the common interests of society, and that those powers are very apt at enforcing *their* interests. My conclusion is that in order to 'cherish' our rights and values, i.e. to protect and care for them lovingly, we need both a political theory and a political system that is able to defend those rights and values against their adversaries, and ours. For these reasons I would like to propose some extensions to the perspective in the chapter at hand, but first I shall identify some important points where I agree entirely with what is said in that chapter.

Points of Agreement

The following are some quotations from [2] together with remarks how similar positions have been expressed in my own writings in [3] .

p. 129: *the pursuit of freedom for every individual leads to freedom in connectedness.*

p. 130: *We cherish the shared values, so that we can disagree on other values.*

p. 131: *Over the course of a person's life, however, they do not just develop a personal morality; they also form a role morality: the mores that go with a certain*

belief or profession, or with a subculture or group of friends.

p. 131: *And then there is also public morality: those values that, on average, society considers to be good or normal—much broader than what we are calling shared values in this essay.*

p. 133: *Individuals' moral convictions are built on the foundation of personal morality, but this morality only acquires meaning when we come into contact with others, when the morality is tested by actions and choices, in other words: by the reality of people interacting with one another. People establish (shared and non-shared) public values among themselves.*

p. 133: *To progressive liberals, fundamental rights and shared values are preconditions for a life of freedom for all individuals. The pluralism that results from cherishing shared values is an expression and guarantee of individuality. In a pluralist society that is open to a diversity of values, it is crucial that everyone is able to deal with dissenting ideals and opinions: so with non-shared values.*

p. 137: *As such, the convictions of the more powerful can have direct freedom-limiting consequences for the less powerful. - - - This creates a grey area in the relationship between people in which, on rare occasion, very carefully and in moderation, the state has a part to play.*

p. 137: *At the same time: values such as freedom of conscience and freedom of belief can only survive as fundamental rights if enough people cherish, defend, and propagate these values.*

p. 138: *Especially in a pluralist society, in which many different value systems hold sway, it is important to be tolerant with regard to non-shared values.*

p. 141: *So, contrary to the widely held belief, liberalism is certainly not by definition an anti-state philosophy.*

p. 148: *Measures to increase the political involvement of citizens cannot and should not emerge only from state structures. Citizens are involved in the shaping of their society to a large degree, which cannot be measured merely by election turnout.*

p. 150: *Cherishing fundamental rights and shared values happens in market squares, at dining tables, and within political parties, but also on television and in the newspaper, or at international negotiation tables. It is vital to have the central*

arguments for fundamental rights at our fingertips.

p. 151: *In order to make sure that fundamental rights and shared values are respected, they have to be cherished at all three levels described in this essay: - - - And in the political sphere, politicians have to be extremely careful about fundamental rights, the rule of law, and democracy.*

Proposed Extensions

My first proposal can be expressed by the following formula:

Shared values < Society-founding values < Public morality

In other words, I propose to introduce the concept of 'society-founding values' for those values that are important for the proper functioning of the liberal and democratic society. The 'public morality' as described in [2] is a broader concept since rules like 'men should take off their hat when they enter a church' qualify as parts of public morality (traditionally, at least), but they can not be considered as society-founding. On the other hand, 'honesty' and 'non-courruptability' must be seen as society-founding, but they are not based on any fundamental rights the way 'shared values' are explained in [2] . Moreover, they can not be held to be 'self-evident truths' since they are culture-dependent: it is a fairly widespread practice that people only apply them within their own community, and not universally.

The introduction of this concept is accompanied by the belief that virtually all human societies are based on a set of society-founding values; that these values may differ between different cultures, and that the advantages of liberal and democratic societies are very much due to their particular set of society-founding values. Chapter 3 in my book 'Values and Liberalism' [3] contains a catalog of around fourty proposed society-founding values which may serve to illustrate what can be included in this concept.

The importance of society-founding values leads at once to my second proposal: *The state must play an enabling role in the common task of cherishing the society-founding values.* This means that these values must express the popular will, but the state must facilitate the public dialog that is needed for the decision. Also, once a consensus has been formed about the choice of society-founding values, the state must play a role for the transmission of these values to the next generation (through the school system, in particular), and to immigrants to the country.

The expression *value culture* is an appropriate one for describing the necessary public debate about the society-founding values. The quotation from page 150,

above, is an observation that such a debate exists, but I propose a stronger position to the effect that the value culture serves several important purposes, and that it should therefore be promoted actively, both by the state and by actors in the civil society. One of its purposes is to scrutinize current beliefs and values so that they will be adjusted or changed if need be. Another purpose is to serve as a training ground where people (especially young people) can learn about currently recognized society-founding values and form their own opinion about them.

Some of the meetings that are mentioned in that quotation may be ad-hoc meetings among people that will not get together again, but it is also very common that the same group of people meet repeatedly, and that their conversations sometimes touch on values: either by applying value judgements to their own experiences, or by discussing the pros and cons of particular value statements. I propose to use the term *value community* for such a group of people. Thriving value communities are an important part of a value culture, therefore.

A value community can be quite small, or quite large, since the discussion there may occur around a dinner table, or in public media, or in a number of other ways. In particular, it is natural to use the word *nation* for a value community that shares a set of society-founding values, that resides in a particular territory, and that has established or wishes to establish a state that is based on those values there.

This definition of 'nation' is in line with the definition of *civic nationalism* where a nation is defined in terms of its views on governance. The major alternative is *ethnic nationalism* where a nation is defined in terms of a common history, a common allegiance, and a common responsibility for the future. It is frequently argued that civic nationalism is too 'thin' and that ethnic nationalism is necessary in order to hold a nation together. On my part I think this is a false dichotomy since there will always be some people in a given country that do not share the society-founding values, and there will also be some people that do not share the common allegiance. Therefore, I propose to use the term 'folk' for the nation in the ethnic sense. In this way, the 'folk' will consist of a large majority (hopefully) of the citizens of a given state; the 'nation' will consist of another large majority of the citizens, and the combination of those two agglomerations will serve well as the glue that keeps the country together.

What I just described is a fortunate situation, of course, and it is easy to think of countries where the nation or the folk are malfunctioning, or even both of them. However, it is common that political theories must be based on idealistic or simplifying assumptions in order to get anywhere, and mine is just one example of this.

Defending our Society-Founding Values

The concepts and the proposals that were described in the previous section are intended to lay the groundwork for necessary measures in the defense of open societies that have adopted liberal democracy. The systematic manipulation of public opinion using social media is one major problem that must be addressed, and the emergence of closed groups or 'bubbles' that cultivate contrary ideologies is also an issue.

The second quotation from page 137, above, describes one necessary condition for successful defense: enough people must cherish, explain, and promote these values. But just doing this is not sufficient for countering the manipulations, as shown by all recent experience. At the same time, counter-manipulation is not an option; the defense of the liberal society must be conducted according to liberal principles. Therefore, the overall strategy must be to *create and preserve a level playing field* for the debate, so that illiberal proposals can be countered in a fair way.

Measures towards a level playing field are sometimes resisted with the argument that they are contrary to the freedom of expression or some other human right. This applies, for example, with proposals to forbid or to strongly restrict the use of anonymity in social media [4, 5] . This is a complicated question since there are certainly some situations where anonymity is well motivated, but generally speaking, it is difficult to combine anonymity with accountability for one's actions, and such accountability is a necessary complement to the freedom of expression.

Fake news and false claims are widely used for the purpose of manipulating public opinion. According to classical liberal theory, such aberrations should be taken care of by the open society and the free press, but the presumed 'invisible hand' of spontaneous correction does not work very well in the present age of social media. One may briefly consider, therefore, whether the level playing field should include a referee function that can decide what is right and what is wrong, as well as take punitive action when this is necessary and appropriate.

It does not take long to see why this is not a viable idea. The following scheme would seem a bit more realistic. Assume, first of all, that there is a mechanism for identifying *controversial issues,* in the sense of issues where there is a need, from society's point of view, to sort out what is right and what to believe. Assume also that there is one or a few *public fora* for discussing these controversial issues. In a simple implementation, each forum would be a website containing one section for each of the controversial issues that have been designated. Every such section should provide a space for *structured debate* on the issue at hand. The structure may distinguish between statements by recognized experts in the field on one hand, and questions and comments by the users, on the other hand. Additional

structure would be provided by a session chair who could, for example, identify specific subissues and arrange for a subordinate forum for each subissue, much like how one group of people in a large meeting may decide to go off in another room in order to sort out their particular issues.

One more way of providing structure for the debate may be to invite one or a few persons to write their conclusions from the debate so far, with their take on what to believe and what to reject in the issue at hand.

The major objective of such a *review facility* would have to be twofold: it should separate truth from falsity when there are solid reasons for such a verdict, and it should also give a fair account of alternative positions as long as it can not yet be decided which of them represents the truth of the matter. In order to achieve these objectives, the review facility would have to be properly funded and properly staffed. One interesting possibility would be to define this as one of the principal tasks of some selected universities, besides their traditional tasks of advanced research and teaching.

A review facility could be of great help for all persons that have a critical mind, so that they are eager to separate reliable facts from fake news and false claims. However, there are also many people that do not have the inclination or the opportunity to operate in this way. One may therefore entertain the idea that automatic systems that screen the contents of social media for abusive behavior and filth might also recognize situations where one of the recognized 'controversial issues' is being discussed. In such situations they could insert a gentle reference and link to the appropriate section in one or more review facilities, in order to encourage readers to check the credibility of what is being said.

Finally, while review facilities of this kind may address issues where the problem is to distinguish what is true and what is false, they could also be used for issues that involve values rather than facts, and where a fair coverage of alternative viewpoints is important. It would be natural to do this for some of the society-founding values, and that would then be an additional aspect of the nation's value culture.

Defending and Restricting Diversity

Diversity of opinions in a society is a natural consequence of the autonomy of its citizens, and it is of great value for them and for the society as a whole. However, the freedoms that lead to that diversity may also be an Achilles' heel for the society since they may allow disruptive antiliberal forces to flourish. At some point one has to consider what measures may be needed and appropriate for the defense against those forces.

As a general rule, there is a need for a balanced approach on those matters. Opinions that are contrary to liberal democracy or to the established society-

founding values should not be suppressed altogether. They should be allowed some space, not only because of liberal principles, but also because they play a role in a healthy society, just like opposition parties play a role in a democratic state. However, there has to be some oversight of them so that they do not take over.

One concrete example of a restrictive measure that may sometimes be needed is to introduce the possibility of a *preaching interdict* for preachers that propagate extreme views in a religious community. This would obviously be an contrary to general liberal principles, but it may sometimes be a necessary exception.

On the other hand, there may also be specific measures that support diversity and that appear as exceptions from those restrictive measures. For example, one may consider a rule of exception so that preachers that have been restricted by a preaching interdict can anyway appear in specific settings, such as in a research seminar in a university, and whereby they are given an opportunity to explain and defend their point of view in an open way.

More generally, the freedom of expression does not come with a right not to be opposed. Instead, anyone who uses that freedom for promoting a controversial point of view has a moral obligation to listen to contrary opinions and to try to understand them. This obligation is a consequence of *open-mindedness* which should be seen as an important society-founding value. It is society-founding since it paves the way for resolving conflicts in a peaceful and constructive way.

The Paraliberal Point of View

The concepts and the proposals that I have advanced here are important components of what I call *the paraliberal point of view,* or just *paraliberalism.* A concise descriptions of this point of view can be found in my forthcoming book *Values and Liberalism* [3] . I have chosen the term 'paraliberal' in order to distinguish it from 'ortholiberal' in the sense of liberal orthodoxy. The paraliberal view deviates from the orthodoxy in several specific ways. In particular, it holds that the state needs to be proactive with respect to the promotion of the recognized society-founding values in a country, whereas the ortholiberal view would dictate that each person decides themselves about their values, and that the state must not intrude on their privacy in that respect.

The paraliberal point of view is therefore my contribution to the debate that the collection of articles about progressive liberalism [1] was meant to initiate.

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