**A Socio-political Analysis of Paul Hirst’s Theory of Associative Democracy as Representing the English Pluralist Theory of the State.**

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**Abstract**

This theoretical study lies at the intersection of sociology, political science, and democratic theory. Basically, the study attempts to assess the validity of the resurgence of interest in the pluralist theories of the state, especially the contemporary English pluralist theory. In doing so, the study will be focusing on the critical account and assessing the main theoretical debates of the British sociologist and political scientist Paul Hirst (1946-2003). Moreover, the study will be exploring the main themes and debates of his associative democracy. The study consists of six sections. Section one is devoted for the introduction. The second section deals with a short biography on Paul Hirst. Section three is exploring Pluralism, the English pluralist theory and the state from Paul Hirst’s point of view. Section four, however, deals with Paul Hirst’s argument on democracy, welfare state and the “Third Way”. Section five presents a critical assessment of representative democracy by exploration of Paul Hirst’s associative democracy, governance and the free market economy. The last section is devoted for the conclusion of the study.

**Key Words**

Pluralist Theory, Associative Democracy, Pluralism, Government.

**Introduction**

In modern and contemporary political and social theory there exist many debates over the ways in which the role of the state can be explained. Indeed, the traditional thinking on this topic maintains that the 'Pluralist theory' is the most efficacious in explaining both the role of the state and the power struggle which has an impact upon policy (Hirst, P, 1989: 2-4). Historically, Pluralism can be characterised in terms of three phases: (1) The early twentieth century works of the three major exponent British Scholars; (G.D.H.Cole,1889-1959),(J.N.Figgis,1866-1919) and (Harold Laski,1893-1950), which explore the criticism of the idea of the state as the centre of political life and concerned with rethinking representation.(2) The post-World War Two, American political science Robert Dahl’s (1915-2014) argument that there are plural centres of power within the political system. (3) 1980 to the present isconcernedwith associational practices of governance which represent Paul Hirst’s argument with the way in which political identities are formed in the process of political discourse (Hirst, P, 1989: 4-22). It is clear that in the first two decades of twentieth century, English political pluralism criticized the state sovereignty and in the same time offered a federated and decentralized form of authority-pluralism- in which the affairs of society would be conducted by self-governing and independent associations. English political pluralism theory addresses contemporary debates on the nature and future of democratic government and Paul Hirst however is the leading scholar of it.

**Who is Paul Hirst?**

Professor Paul Hirst (1946-2003), was one of the most pioneering British political and social thinkers and academics of his generation. He began his carrier as a revolutionary Marxist, and his ideas were very significant in providing the intellectual path for New Labour party in the United Kingdom. He was awarded his Bachelor degree in Sociology from Leicester University, and then later moved to Sussex University in 1968, studied for a Master degree under the supervision of the well-known British sociologist Tom Bottomore, (1920-1992). Not surprisingly, at the unusually early age of 23, he became a lecturer in sociology at Birkbeck College, London University. At Birkbeck, Hirst joined his former Leicester teacher, the Middle East expert professor Sami Zubaida. They, in turn, were joined by the political scientist Bernard Crick (1929-2008), who was the first head of department of politics and sociology (Pilmot, B, 2003). Hirst’s optimistic personality found “expression in the rediscovery of one of the strands of early British socialism-associationism. Associationism, with which the names of both Harold Laski and G.D.H. Cole are linked, grounds decision-making at the lowest possible level and develops an egalitarian society by producing a host of pluralistic and decentralised associations which will balance and challenge the power of local government”.(Cousins, M and MacCabe, C, 2003:ii). During his short life as he died in age of 57, Hirst has published 12 books in sociology and politics and the one in which published two years after his death was “Space and Power: Politics”, War and Architecture. Cambridge: Polity, 2005(ibid). During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hirst developed a theory of associationalism which attempted to revive social democracy by providing an alternative to state socialism and free-market liberalism. He also made important contributions to critical legal theory.

**Pluralism, the English Pluralist theory and the State**

The English Pluralists challenged the theory of unlimited state sovereignty and of unitary centralized state embodying such sovereign power in hierarchy of authority. According to Hirst the “English political pluralism shared with the classicalpolitical theory of the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century a primary concern with political institutions, but it offered a critique of the institutions founded on and justified by classical political theory ( Hirst, P, 1989: 2-3).The pluralist theory arose in the context of a somewhat negative appraisal of the monistic theory of the state. The pluralists engaged in extensive criticism of a certain notion of sovereignty, the State and Law. However, they did not all reject the state, but they were trying to theorise an idea of the state incorporating maximal diversity of group life and some kind of central authority. Political Pluralism, then, emerged at a time when the state was becoming increasingly active and powerful. The Pluralist emphasis upon the importance of groups within the state, and particularly upon the crucial role of small groups, was a protest on the one hand against individualism and on the other against idealism (ibid: 4-8).

Pluralism has functioned as very effective ideology. It reigned supreme as a theory of social structure and politics from the 1930s to the 1960s. In essence Pluralism is a modern liberal theory, which applies not to the individual of nineteenth century liberal theory, but rather to the group, characteristic of twentieth century’s Western capitalism and democracy. The Italian political theorist Norberto Bobbio pointed out that, “democracies in our modern world have to come to terms with pluralism. Pluralism is not primarily a theory, but first and foremost an objective situation which is part and parcel of our lives, and has the advantage of making us aware of a basic trait of modern democracy” (Bobbio, N, 1987: 58-60).

Therefore, it is important to ask whether pluralist systems of government are necessarily democratic and, conversely, whether democratic systems of government are necessarily pluralist. The answer to the first question has to be negative. Pluralism is clearly compatible with democracy but incompatible with totalitarianism, for the government cannot exercise total control over society if autonomous organizations are permitted to exercise any substantial degree of social and political influence.

More to the point, most systems of government are neither democratic nor totalitarian. Precisely, it is not difficult to imagine a system of government that is characterized by competition between organised groups for influence and power, but is nevertheless undemocratic, either because only a minority of citizens are permitted to participate in political life or because the dominant groups use the power of the state to exclude other relevant groups from the competition. The answer to the question of whether democratic systems are necessarily pluralist depends upon how pluralism is defined. (Bobbio, N, 1987; Hirst, P, 1994). In its simplest form Pluralism refers to the competitive process where-by a plurality of organised interests strive to control government through taking part in electro contests and /or to influence the policies of the respective government (Hirst, 1989: 3). The late twentieth century as Hirst pointed out, offers new conditions in which ideas marginalised for many decades can be redefined and developed to serve as an alternative, radical means of reforming and reorganizing economic and social governance in Western societies. Social democracy was always a pragmatic halfway house that lacked ideological appeal (Hirst, P, 1994: 2-3). Pluralists therefore call for a complex network of interest organisations throughout society, each of which possesses its own power base and hence can function relatively independently of the government. Essentially, these associations rest on voluntary membership from those members of society that have a shared interest or concern regarding a particular issue (ibid: 7-8). For example such organisations include labour unions, business and professional associations, civic organisations, ethnic groups and cultural associations. Thus under Pluralism any resulting policy is seen as a direct result of bargaining and compromise between these groups and the government (Hirst, 1994). Hirst argued that the British society had become centralised, unaccountable and incapable of understanding and meeting needs or engaging with diverse citizens.

**Paul Hirst’s View on Democracy, Welfare State and the Third Way**

The vital and very fundamental question Hirst raises in his book; ***Associative* *Democracy***, is how and in which way “associational” forms of democracy should be developed, and how to re-balance the centralisation of the state and the dominance of big business.

In fact, Hirst devotes special attention to the organisation of welfare (encompassing health, education and social insurance) and how it might be detached from the welfare state. He pointed out that the welfare state and democracy are intimately linked. Therefore, it is impossible to build new forms of democracy without ensuring a measure of social security. The decentralisation of sovereign power has to be coupled with a welfare system and set of public services that is itself decentralised, but which ensures common minimum standards of provision. This can be achieved by maintaining public funding and common minimum entitlements (Hirst, P, 1994). In the introduction to ***From Statism to Pluralism,*** Hirst states that “associative democracy as a definite political doctrine is a practical “third way” between collectivist state socialism and *laissez-fairs* capitalism” (Hirst, P, 1997: 3). The conflict between liberal democratic capitalism and state socialism dominated political life for most of the twentieth century. State socialism is finished as a credible political idea. But liberal democracy is almost moribund, too, something most celebrants the collapse of communism failed to notice (ibid: 27-28).

According to Anthony Giddens, Paul Hirst’s work did not generate a political consensus in his lifetime. It inspired an academic and research interest but was ultimately eclipsed as a work of social democratic revisionism by the “Third Way” in terms of historical narrative, policy development and political potency” (Giddens, A, 1998). In criticising Anthony Giddens' Third Way, Hirst pointed out that there has only been one practical Third Way between authoritarian state socialism and *Laissez faire* capitalism, and that is some form of social democracy (Hirst, 1998). Democracy itself, as Hirst argues, needs to be democratised. More specifically, associative democracy for Hirst as definite political doctrine is a practical third way between Collectivist state socialism and Laissez faire capitalism (Hirst, P, 1997: 2).

Norberto Bobbio unlike Hirst denies that a 'third way' exists between Western liberal democracy and Eastern socialism. According to Norberto Bobbio, the competitive model of democracy is better suited to the pluralist nature of modern society, and the important issue for the democrats today is "Where can you vote"? Not "Who can vote"? (Bobbio, N. 1987: 56). Democracy, as he requires, is not only equal civil and political rights but social rights as well. Therefore, the difficulty with modern democracy stems from the diversification and specification of contemporary life, which has produced the growth of many different agencies outside our control - bureaucracies, technocracies, and international corporations. Multi-party system (as participatory democratic system) operating within a strong legal framework guaranteeing citizen's rights provides the most practicable avenue for reform.

Moreover, as Bobbio argues, Democracy creates new bonds between the individuals and their fellow human beings, because their artificial union allows society to be reconstituted not as an organic whole, but as association of free individuals. The guiding principle of democratic thought has always been Liberty. However, while direct democracy is the ideal form of political theory, representative democracy is the only form, which actually exists, in modern societies. (ibid: 43-49) For Bobbio however, both forms of democracies are not alternative systems, but necessary for the modern industrial societies (ibid: 53). As Bobbio seems to suggest, the way of modern western society developing is not to be understood as the emergence of a new type of democracy, but rather as a process in which quite traditional forms of democracy, such as representative democracy, are infiltrating new spaces, occupied continuously by hierarchic or bureaucratic organisations. He characterised modern societies as once which have been “polycratic”, soothing that easily strand the unsuspecting on the quick sands of pluralism. Thus the problem of democracy encounters the problem of pluralism and subsumes it (ibid: .55-57).

**Associative Democracy, Governance and the Free Market Economy: A Critical Assessment of Representative Democracy.**

Hirst's interpretations suggest that associative democracy provides new and clear models of governance that are applicable in the political system, in economic life and in welfare services. Associative democracy responds directly to the problems of how to democratise a post-liberal organisational society, since it aims to promote governance through democratically legitimated voluntary associations. Hirst points out that today we are facing a post-liberal organisational society in which the traditional relationship on either side of the public-private divide is that between a service provider and its clients, and in which the old liberal relationships of citizens and representative government, sovereign consumer and neutral market mean less and less (Hirst, P, 1997: 12-17).

In relation to the economic life in Western democracy, social democrats, for example, have stressed the need for equality and social welfare as the core of government's economic policies. Market will be the primary form of social governance and non-market institutions have a distinctly secondary role in social governance. The notion of governance which has been introduced by Hirst in a very general sense can be defined as the means and become very problematic in recent decades as its prevailing forms have become more difficult to apply to changing conditions and activities and less certain in their outcomes (Hirst, P, 1997: 3).

In relation to the British society, Hirst argues that in the past, this has entailed government ownership of the major components of the nation's economy, such as telecommunications, transportation, and some heavy industry. They also call upon government to provide medical, unemployment, and other welfare benefits to those in need. By contrast, centrist and conservative political parties usually place much greater stress on the free market economy, unimpeded by government control or interventions as the most effective means of achieving economic growth, technological progress, and widespread prosperity. In recent years, the collapse of centrally planned economies in many parts of the world has reinforced the emphasis on the critical role of free market. In economic as well as in political affairs, it seems, that the indispensable element remains freedom (Hirst, P, 1994 & 1997). As mentioned above, in clarifying the principles of associative democracy, Hirst argues that “Associationalism” as a doctrine enjoyed some popularity because it appeared to offer a third way between capitalism and socialism. According to him, both capitalism and socialism are utopias and our modern organisational society has grown tired of these utopias. The radical alternative in the relation between state and civil society will only accepted it if it makes sense locally, in relation to particular strategies of institutional reform. (Hirst, P, 1997: 133).

In his radical criticism of the weaknesses and limits of modern representative democracy, Hirst explains that liberal democracy is inadequate precisely because changing political circumstances are making its institutions less and less able to cope with the new challenges. However, he referred to three main reasons behind this failure; Firstly, the representative democracy in the beginning of the twentieth century created a big government and an interventionist bureaucracy in order to secure their societies against external threats and internal conflicts. Secondly, representative democracy has atrophied, because it has become more a means of legitimizing of centralised and bureaucratic government than a check upon it. Western societies become more and more heterogeneous, and therefore it is difficult to govern. Thirdly, the distinctive feature of liberal democracy is its stagnancy in a way closely tied to the idea that the nation state is the primarily political community (Hirst, P, 1997: 28-29 & Hirst, P, 1994: 2-3). As Hirst pointed out perhaps by the early twenty-first century politics will have no "centre". The classic institutions of representative government will be even less effective means of accountability than they are now. Liberal democratic theory is stagnant and it lacks the resources, without supplementation, to perform many tasks. The institutions that it has become identified with-national parliament, political parties and the majority choices of the citizens of a homogenous political community - seem less than effective means of organising the new politics (Hirst, P, 1997: 29-30). The changing international conjuncture and the collapse of the Cold War have weakened the military imperatives that sustained the nation state. Liberal democratic politics centred on the nation state are entering a period of growing problematicity, in which their democratic effectiveness and legitimacy are questioned (Hirst, 1994: 7).

Considering Norberto Bobbio’s view on this is very important especially as he explain that “the democracy of modern state has no alternative but to be a pluralistic democracy”. According to him what democratic and pluralistic theory has in common is that they are two different critiques of abuse of power, not incompatible but in fact complementary and convergent. They represent two different but not necessarily alternative, remedies against the excessive concentration of power. The Democratic theory is directed against autocratic power, and pluralist theory is directed against monocratic power. (Bobbio, N, 1987: 59). However, Laclau and Mouffe rightly pointed out that “the logic of democracy is not a logic of the positivity of the social, and it is therefore incapable of founding a nodal point of any kind around which the social fabric can be reconstituted” (Laclau, E, & Mouffe, C, 1985: 188).

Thus, democracy in modern states is characterised by the struggle against the abuse of power on two parallel fronts; against power from above in the name of power from below, and against the concentration of power in the name of the distribution of power (Bobbio, N, 1987: 60). Bobbio gives three reasons for preferring democratic government to other forms. The first derives from Rousseau's formula that liberty consists in obeying laws we have prescribed to ourselves. The second, political justification, regards it as the best available protection against the abuse of power, since it shares sovereignty among the people as a whole. Finally, from a utilitarian standpoint, democracy is preferable to autocracy on the grounds that the people are the best interpreters of their own collective interest (ibid). Hirst, however, argues that at present 'pluralism' has become a policy of the state, promoting 'multi-cultural' programmes within uniform structures of provision that satisfy no community and at worst degenerate into a decluttered pap. Associative democracy as he pointed out is not tied to any given part of the left-right political spectrum. It can appeal to and be used as a guiding political doctrine by a wide variety of political and social groups subscribing to very different beliefs (Hirst, P. 1994: 11-12). Associative democracy has two fundamental distinctive features: that it bridges and transforms the division between “state and civil society”, pluralising the former and 'publicising' the latter; second, that it promotes the democratic governance of corporate bodies in both public and private spheres, aiming to restrict the scope of hierarchical management and offering a new model of organisational efficiency (ibid: 74). Modern associative democracy can only be a more or less extensive supplement to liberal representative democracy, it cannot seek to abolish the individual right to vote on a territorial basis, nor to abolish the state as a public power that attempts to protect the rights of individual citizens and associations (ibid: 19). As Laclau and Mouffe pointed out that “A democratic struggle can autonomize a certain space within which it develops, and produce effects of equivalence with other struggles in a different political space. It is to this plurality of the social that the project for a radical democracy is linked, and the possibility of it emanates directly from the decentred character of the social agents, from the discursive plurality which constitutes them as subjects, and from the displacements which take place within that plurality”(Laclau, E, & Mouffe, C, 1985: 181).

Paul Hirst’s theory of associative democracy has been criticized by the British Scholar Mark Wenman. Wenman argues that on a preliminary analysis, Hirst's project appears to have been predicated on a normative defence of voluntarism, individualism and pluralism. However, Wenman argues that Hirst’s theory is undermined and contradicted in his work – and in the work of the earlier English pluralists – by an implicit assumption of social unity. This “assumption is manifest in the functionalism and corporatism that Hirst presented as necessary components of pluralism, which in turn reflect his unwarranted presumption that industrial productivity, efficient economic governance and welfare provision represent impartial and incontestable axioms of social organisation” (Wenman, M, 2007: 801). Wenman believes that Hirst inherited from (G.D.H.Cole,1889-1959) an essential “tension” or contradiction between a commitment to voluntarism and pluralism on the one hand a unified social purpose on the other (ibid: 812 & 816). But this critique of Wenman has been challenged by Jason Edwards and Kelvin Knight as they respond to him by arguing that Wenman overstates the importance of G.D.H. Cole in the formation of Hirst’s theory says that, he therefore misrepresents important aspects of Hirst argument, and that, as it stands his own theory of ‘agnostic pluralism’ is less the alternative he claims that an observation about the ineradicability of social conflict that Hirst would have regarded as true ( Edward, J & Knight, K, 2008: 717).

**Conclusion**

To sum up, one can conclude that Paul Hirst has contributed to rethinking democracy from an aggregative perspective, and again the power balance perspective is central. His associative model of democracy suggests that representative democracy at the state level is supplemented with being publicly funded, but autonomously governed service providing associations. The purpose of this is not to ensure a horizontal power balance between different elites but to establish a vertical power balance between democracy from above (representative democracy at the state level) and democracy from below (self-governing voluntary associations).

In this vertical balancing of powers, the role of the state is to define the overall political goals and financial frames for the operation of the associations while the task of the associations is to produce public services in competition with each other. Paul Hirst argues that the principle of affectedness must play a central role in considerations about how to ensure equal access to channels of political influence. The equal right to vote for parliament must also play a central role in the future. However, this territorially defined representative democracy must be supplemented with a functionally defined democracy for the affected stakeholders. In this associative democracy, the access to channels of influence is distributed equally, not among all citizens, but among those who are affected by the decisions.

More clearly, the pluralist theory challenged the theory of unlimited state sovereignty and the conception of unitary centralised state embodying such sovereign power hierarchy of exclusively controlled authority. Hirst gave a central role to voluntary formed associations of citizens in civil society. The central problem for Hirst is how to renew the post liberal society from bottom up through free association. In fact Hirst ask us to imagine a system that combined citizen choice with public welfare (Hirst, 1994: 6). As Maurice Glasman argues the very clear weakness in Paul Hirst’s work, is that it does not encompass the full penetration of democracy into the economy (beyond a functional use of democracy to improve performance and growth); and that it does not consider the need for a democratic renewal of vocational governance, and a further development of the relationship of association and democracy to capitalism, innovation and growth. (Glasman, 2011: 64). Finally, one may ask the pluralist, can post-liberal society live by associational one?

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ملخص الدراسة

 تتناول هذه الدراسة في مضمونها تحليلاّ سياسياّ لنظرية عالم الأجتماع والسياسة البريطاني ( بول هيرست: 1946-2003) والتي تتشكل فرضياتها من "الديمقراطية الترابطية" والتي تمثل في محتواها نظرية التعددية الانكليزية ، وتتمحور الدراسة على التداخل والأندماج بين علمي السياسة والاجتماع في نظرية الديمقراطية، وتحاول ان تقدم تقييمأ لنظرية " بول هيرست " في التعددية الديمقراطية والتي بدء الاهتمام بها في الثمانينات والتسعينات من القرن الماضي، اذ يعَد "هيرست" واحداّ من أهم من تطرقوا الى مضامين علم الاجتماع والسياسة وخصوصأ في مجال نظرية التعددية الأنكليزية ، ولقد أسّس العديد من الركائز النظرية فيها. تنقسم هذه الدراسة الى ستة محاور ، عرض المحور الاول مقدمة حول الدراسة، وجاء المحور الثاني مقدمأ نبذة تاريخية مختصرة عن حياة " بول هيرست " الاكاديمية وتطرق المبحث لأهم أعماله، فيما جاء المحور الثالث موضحا تفاصيل النظرية الانكليزية في التعددية وعلاقتها بالدولة من وجهة نظر " هيرست " ، فيما ركز المحور الرابع على نقد " بول هيرست " للديمقراطية ودولة الرفاه المزعومة والطريق الثالث ، وشمل المحور الخامس تقيما نقديا أدلى به الباحث للديمقراطية التمثيلية ، وذلك من خلال شرحه لنظرية " هيرست " في هيكلة الديمقراطية الترابطية وحكمها للاقتصاديات ودورها في السوق الحرة . وأختتمت الدراسة في المبحث السادس الذي ُقدًم أهم ماتوصلت اليه الدراسة مع خاتمة توجز الفكرة.

**پوختەی توێژینەوە**

ئه م توێژینەوەیە شیکردنەوە و هەڵسەنگاندێکە بۆ تیۆری کؤمەڵناس و زانای سیاسەتی بریتانی (پۆڵ هێرست ١٩٤٦-\_-٢٠٠٣) سەبارەت بە دیمۆکراسی پێکەوەیی (الديمقراطية الترابطية) کە لە ناواخندا ڕەنگدانەوەی تیۆری فرەیی سیاسی ئينگلیزیە. تیۆری فرە دیمؤکراسی پؤڵ هێرست کە لەهەشتاکان و نەوەدەکانی سەدەی ڕابردو دووبارە هاتەوە مەیدانی بیرو وهزری کؤمەڵایەتی و سیاسی لەبریتانیا. ئه م توێژینەوەیە شەش تەوەر لەخۆ دەگرێت. تەوەری یەکەم دەروازەێکە بؤ تؤێژینەوەکە. تەوەری دووەم بەکورتی باس لە ژیانی ئه كاديمى پۆڵ هێرست دەکات. تەوەری سێیەم لێکؤڵینەوەێکە لە بؤچوون و ڕوانگەی هێرست بۆ تیۆری ئينگلیزی فرە سیاسی و پەیوەندی بە دەوڵەتەوە. تەوەری چوارەم هەڵسەنگاندنێکە بؤ ڕەخنەی پۆڵ هێرست بۆ دیمۆکراسی و دەوڵەتی خؤشگوزەرانی وڕێگای سێیەم (الطريق الثالث) بەتایبەتی لە کؤمەڵگای بریتانی. تەوەری پێنجەم هەڵسەنگاندنێکی ڕەخنەیی توێژەرە بؤ دیمۆکراسی نوێنەرایەتی و چۆنیەتی پابەندبوونی بە فرەیی سیاسی و بونیادنانی دیمۆکراسی پێکەوەیی و ئابوورى بازاری ئازاد. تەوەری شەشەم باس لە دەرئه نجامى تۆێژینەوەکە دەکات