Evaluation of Karl Popper’s Democratic Theory: an Imperative for Nigerian Democracy

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Abstract:
Karl Popper’s achievement in defence of democracy was as the result of his philosophy of science (critical philosophy or critical rationalism) which subjects every truth to criticism. This is one of the contemporary philosophies that centres on the claim or assertion of being system of thought. This quality particularly lies in the feature cognizable to Popper’s readers that ideas originally worked out in the natural sciences are extended and applied coherently to the social and political society. He opted for open society contrary to close society characterized by utopian social engineering. The paper properly evaluates Karl Popper’s democratic theory and pinpoints the relevant ideas for national development.

CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

The concept of democracy seems complex and full of controversies. African democracy is consensus democracy, different from Western democracy and Eastern democracy which people consider to be majoritarian democracies. This is why I advocate for the pure use and sense of the concept as originated by the Athenians in 450 B.C which mean “The government of the people and it comes form the Greek words demos (People) and Kratos (government or power) Pericles defined it in clear terms or pattern that:

Our constitution is named democracy because it is in the hands not of the few but of the many. But our laws secure equal justice for all in their private disputes and our public opinion welcome and honours talent in every branch of achievement on grounds of excellence alone…our citizens attend both to public and private duties and do not allow absorption in their various affairs to interfere with their knowledge of the city’s --- We decide or debate, carefully and in person all matters of policy holding… that acts are foredoomed to failure when undertaken undiscussed.1

The following points are obtainable in the definition of democracy by Pericles; government involves full participation of individuals which offers opportunity for equality before the law and respect to all. This tripartite point remains the corner stone for democracy. From this one will understanding the etymological meaning of democracy, which is derived from two Greek words ‘demos’ meaning the people and ‘Krattia’ meaning ‘to rule’ which means rule by the people. How can people rule? According to Karl Popper people can rule through genuine criticism and proper election.

KARL POPPER’S CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY-FALSIFICATIONISM

Karl Popper’s critical philosophy centred on the way of expanding knowledge through unending process of criticism. For him criticism involves observations and experiments not limited to verbal critical arguments in the sense that both observations and experiments are used to test theories challenge theories and refute theories. He did not claim that he propagated the source of philosophy of criticism but attributed that to pre-Socratics who he understood and claimed inaugurated the tradition of critical discussion as an avenue for expanding knowledge2.

It was believed that before the pre-Socratic the society’s core body of knowledge and doctrine remain static and not dynamic. So, as against this historical background the pre-Socratic philosophers of ancient Greece introduced something that is revolutionary that is the idea of criticism.3 One basic quality of Karl Popper’s critical philosophy is the idea of freedom, mainly of high level. It contains the most powerful theoretical justification of the case for freedom. Falsificationism is the process of acquiring knowledge that does not recognize dogmatism, it gives room for improvement. This is evidently the intellectual counterpart of what is, the pragmatic sphere, in the strict sense of the term, the outlook of liberalism or democracy. Basically, Popper was so much concerned in espousing a method of free inquiry and freedom that was why Helmut Kohl, the Hamer German chancellor emphasized:

The age of totalitarian ideologies in Europe is drawing to a close. The belief in the historic mission of one race or class has proved to be the most devastating fallacy of this century. Millions of innocent people fell victim to its sway. Karl Popper ceaselessly fought this fallacy. He is amongst the most significant champions of the open society. The triumph of freedom and democracy in Europe demonstrates that Karl popper was right. His message from the future is that we must remain alert critical rationality is the precondition for the coexistence of people and nations in dignity and peace4.

Most importantly, Karl Popper was interested in paradigmatic logic and method of investigation and discovery. The formative roots, the tap root and its mainstay goes deeper into the realm of modern science where it derives its vitality. Knowledge for Karl Popper grows through constant criticism (critical test) and revision. This accounts for his core faith in fallibilism.5 This idea reminds us vividly of his democratic theory which centred on proper election and critical rationalism. He emphasized that democracy was not the governing of the majority of people over all people rather democracy was a system which prevents damage from the bad rulers in politics through peaceful changes to prevent absolute governing.

ANALYSIS OF POPPER’S FALSIFICATIONISM

Although Popper had an impressive work The Open Society and Its Enemies but what actually gave rise to such
work? What he achieved in defence of democracy is the
offshoot or as a result of his philosophy of science (critical
philosophy) which subjects every truth to criticism
(falsificationism). The critical rationalism of Karl Popper
starts by rejecting induction as a scientific method. Popper
maintained that the actual method of science is a continuous
process of conjecture and refutation. Our knowledge
especially scientific knowledge progresses by unjustified
(and unjustifiable) anticipations by guesses, by tentative
solutions to our problems refutations which include many
critical tests. They may survive these tests but they can
never be positively justified, they can be established neither
as certainly true nor even as probable. Popper put it
succinctly:

All knowledge is hypothetical or all knowledge remains
... conjectural and it is in the form all knowledge is
conjectural that the essence of his philosophy has been
captured ... and has influenced others.6

Critical Rationalism was developed by Popper to
demarcate science from non-science. According to him,
scientific knowledge can be considered knowledge if it is
refutable. In so far as scientific statements refer to the world
of experience they must be refutable, in so far as they are
irrefutable, they do not refer to the world of experience.

Falsification can be sudden and definitive. A familiar
example of falsification concerns the assertion that all crows
are white. Finding of another white crow obviously confirms
it, the greater becomes its "corroboration" although
corroboration is also uncertain and can never be quantified
by degree of probability. Corroboration is a form of
induction and Popper has sneaked induction in through the
unknown door by giving it a new name. For Popper, there is
no such thing as induction. In objection to this claim,
falsifications are much rarer in science than searches for
confirming instances. Astronomers look for signs of water
on Mars. They do not think they are making efforts to falsify
the conjecture that Mars never had water.

Likely falsification may be based on faulty observation.
A man who claims he saw a black crow could be mistaken
or even lying. As far as the observation of white crows
continues such can be taken in two ways; as confirmations
of all crows are not white or disconfirmations of some crows
are not white. Popper recognized but dismissed as
unimportant that every falsification of a conjecture is
simultaneously a confirmation of an opposite conjecture and
every conforming instance of a conjecture is a falsification
of an opposite conjecture.

Consider the current hypothesis that there is a quantum
field known to be Higgs field made up of quantized particle.
Then if a giant atom smasher one day detects a Higgs, it will
confirm the conjecture that the field exists. At the same time
it will falsify the opinion or views of some higher physicists,
Oxford's Roger Penrose for one, that there is no Higgs field.
For the scientists and philosophers who are not Popperian
fold, science operates basically by induction (confirmation)
and precisely less often by disconfirmation (falsification).

Its language is almost always one of induction. If Popper bet
on somebody to win a race and the person won, you would
not expect Popper to shout, "Great the person I bet with
failed to lose".7

Precisely and great to know that astronomers are now
noticing serious and compelling evidence that smaller and
smaller planets orbit distant to the suns. It is inductive
evidence that there may be Earth-sized planets out there.
Why bothered or disturbed to say, as each new and smaller
planet is discovered, that it tends to falsify the conjecture
that there are no small planets beyond our solar system?
Astronomers are looking for small planets. They are not
trying to refute a theory anymore than physicists are trying
to refute the conjecture that there is no Higgs field. Scientists
seldom attempt to falsify. They are indutivity
who seek positive confirmations.

LANGUAGE PROBLEM

Popper referred conjecture and refutation a new way of
knowing. This can be objected in common sense point of
view that we do not normally claim to 'know' something
which is unjustifiable, tentative or hypothetical. Knowledge
for many people including scientists is something which it is
possible to be sure of, to justify, to validate, to prove, in
other words to know. For one to propose that "all knowledge
remains conjectural" is a pure contradiction in terms. Firstly,
conjecture on the other hand is by definition not knowledge.
According to Chambers English Dictionary, a conjecture is
"an opinion formed on slight or defective evidence or none:
an opinion without proof: a guess" for the fact that one
cannot define an idea by means of other ideas which are
contrary to it. It is clearly illegitimate to place knowledge in
the same category as conjecture.

Popper's proposition is itself not conjectural. Universal
and affirmative, it states that "All knowledge remains
conjectural" which is a claim to knowledge. The proposition
asserts actually what it denies and is self-contradictory on a
second count. Another problem to consider is that the notion
of conjecture depends for its intelligibility upon the prior
concept of knowledge. The idea of a conjecture arose to
designate a form of mental activity which was unlike
knowledge, and to distinguish clearly from knowledge an
idea put forward as opinion without proof. All knowledge is
conjectural and may sound intriguing but throughout his
career Popper worked within a framework of knowledge,
not of conjecture.

A further problem comes when one views the concept of "growth" in Popper's claim that knowledge grows via
conjectures and refutations. The legitimate response to this
idea is: What exactly is it that grows? The concept of growth
implies the existence of a thing, a body, an entity of some
sort that which grows. It may be true that conjectures and
refutations play a role in the growth of knowledge but they
could hardly do this without some knowledge to work on.
Therefore, the growth of knowledge through conjecture and
refutation presupposes pre-existing knowledge, not pre-
existing conjectures. It seems that all knowledge is
conjectural is simply not true.
Critical Rationalism in practice is another problem. This urges us to conjecture and to subject the resultant theory to severely critical tests. Based on its survival on those tests then we are permitted to grant the theory a degree of severismilitude, the more stringent the tests, the higher the degree. The problem is the method's apparent arbitrariness.

Karl Popper draws a division between his view and early classical doctrine but he does little more than state his idea as a way or avenue to differentiate democracy from dictatorship. Karl Popper's theory has much more potential than this. His theory has a normative aspect that is desirable, considering a number of arguments. The argument is based on this great premise that a single conception of the idea which is required by exacting theories of democracy is unattainable since a given democracy's goals at any time are temporary, not to mention that they vary significantly across democracies. Therefore his conceptions really further the quality of a democracy by making it more effective at measuring and implementing the different and varying objectives of given societies through valid elections that are made possible through people.

Karl Popper's view could be based on two main premises; it is something that is desirable and his theory brings desirable outcomes achieved through an effective expression of a society's ideals at a given time through elections. Karl Popper's view concerning democracy centres on the two premises above. A capacious rule of democracy is very paramount and necessary too to accommodate democracy's spread. The democracy continues to gain wider influence in various political traditions, so increased acceptance of democracy is put to many interpretations. In discussing the difference between “formal” (minimalist and) "substantive" (thick) conceptions, Noberto Bobbio states "Every regime is democratic according to the meaning of democracy presumed by its defenders, and undemocratic in the sense upheld by its detractors". One could argue that subjectivity is in the position to operate in democracy's favour. Democracy should be a system that is open to interpretation. In accommodating traditions and subjectivity, we should consider great values that are democratic not the undemocratic ones. It is best at first for democracy to simply be installed with a number of qualifications before it could advance and truly thrive.

Although the undemocratic aspects of these nascent democracies may be distasteful, they are a short-term sacrifice within a long-term process and this process cannot begin if the country in question is rejected as a democratic state at the outset. Bobbio accepts this claim on the logical grounds, stating "it is known that the greater the number of connotations attached to a concept, the narrower is the range which it denotes". Democracy is an approach to government, which should be advocated or encouraged. It is not a selective club that has a set of criteria and taking Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famed or popular assertions or view that a true democracy has never existed, stating that it would require a small state, simplicity in public business, equality among citizens and an absence of luxury. Rousseau remarks, if there was a nation of gods it would be governed democratically. Such a government is not suitable for men.

The desires of a given democratic society are best reflected in outcomes when elections go a long way to define the government and the reason being that elections are a direct ways or means of influence on government. As against or opposite to thicker theories that rely on a set of outcomes or standardized values that are superimposed on society before rule is exercised. Basic issue that we have to know is that Karl Popper's view for democracy provides for the constantly changing needs and desires of society to find a place in government through elections. Democracy has a quality of cohesiveness attained particularly through the closeness of the voters and the government. Democratic theory starts from the vantage ground of democracy as preferable, as taken as effort to discover and refine its benefits. One could say out rightly that the purpose of democratic theory is to emphasize widely its favourable traits and illustrate what it can accomplish. Therefore, Karl Popper's theory can meet the demands of being both realistic and aimed towards advancing many goals.

The great benefit is the issue of fairness in elections which Karl Popper advocated. Fairness is advocated by most of the minimalist theorists as the basis in elections. When people of a democratic nation like Nigeria realize that elections are the sole guiding force of their democracy, the greatest effort would be made for the elections to be fair for functional democracy. If Nigerians should assign a high level of value to elections there would be better democracy.

Karl Popper's focus on elections assigns them value from the perspective of the electorate, so it would be unreasonable to suggest that those who support fair elections would possibly be anything other than an overwhelming majority. Fair elections or electoral proceedings are suggested by Przeworski's evaluation of rational choice compliance and he argued that in all but the most extreme cases of continued deprivation, groups would prefer to fairly lose elections in a democracy than to undermine democracy itself, since a debasement of its democratic institutions can lead to repression and arbitrary violence.

Keeping with fairness is the provision of rights. Considering the premises given here, this is explicitly mentioned by Przeworski and Karl Popper who stated that the focus on institutions leads to provision of rights. Worthy of note is that rights are not forms of policy but rather aspects of political institutions. Karl Popper advocated for strong political institutions that could guarantee people's rights. As Przeworski commented "while the distinction is not unambiguous, constitutions protect at most rights, not interests". Constitution provides for processes that effectively translates popular sentiments into policy. The reason being that political rights are essential and paramount to holding credible and effective elections.

Popper in his book, Conjectures and Refutations argued that revolutions destroy the institutional and traditional framework of society. Popper was speaking of anti-freedom Marxist revolutions. Karl Popper's view provides for strong political institutions. The tyranny of the majority is no larger a problem for Karl Popper's democracy than it is for any other and though it remains a valid concern, his democracy may prevent it without betraying its definitional
Karl Popper's concrete voice against authoritarianism and totalitarianism is a welcome idea in the sense that it would pave ways for better democracy which would lead to development. His defence of democracy is an unbiased idea because such is the offshoot of his critical philosophy (critical rationalism) which opens everything to revision for better truth which would lead to better understanding. This idea is very important for Nigerian democracy because most of the policies would be subjected to critical analysis which in turn would lead to better democracy. This would confront the problem that Nigerian democracy is facing. Nigerian experiences in democracy indicate many emerging cultural trends characteristic of authoritarian states known for strategic individual and state interests that are in conflict with democratic values and good governance. The Electoral Commission has a radiation of such scenario in Nigeria. The only thing I believe that could solve this problem is when we adopt Karl Popper's idea of democracy. This would solve the problem of insecurity in Nigeria. Nigerian democracy is prone to insecurity. According to Maduabuchi Dukor:

Nigeria is currently operating an insecurity based democracy which we can literally call a 'Bunker democracy', allegorically describing a Nigeria condition where the masses and the electorate, in constant fear, scamper for safety and the politicians, armed with mortars, bombs, and rifles, in the pursuit of naked and inordinate power, junket from the trenches. The political landscape is unfree filled with values, gutters, gullies and booby-traps. In Nigeria's Bunker democracy is a harvest of freedom without human value, milk of liberty and equity. The idea of social and political freedom in Nigeria is that of the pre-civil society. This freedom constantly sets the political landscape and the civil society aflame.16

According to Popper knowledge proceeds from the provisional and then the permanent thought and grows through constant criticism (critical tests) and revision. He articulates his intellectual account of scientific rationality that:

Knowledge can grow and science can progress- Just because we can learn from our mistakes. The way in which knowledge progresses and especially our scientific knowledge is by unjustified (and unjustifiabe) anticipations, by guesses, by tentative solutions to our problems, by conjectures are controlled by criticism that is by attempted refutations which include several critical tests. They may survive these tests; but they can never be positively justified: they can. neither be established as certainly true nor even as probability (in the sense of probability calculus).17

Karl Popper advocated critical philosophy to fight against antidemocratic and illiberal ideas of Plato, Hegel and Marx's ideas. It would be of great advantage to Nigerians especially our leaders to adopt the issue of critical method to fight against the antidemocratic system operating in Nigeria. The issue of authoritarian regimes that are ravaging this world today is due to poor control of thought and some obvious internal contradictions and inability to take education seriously amongst the citizens. Nigeria can only be better if we adopt Karl Popper's democratic tenets. Buttressing the importance of Karl Popper's view and ideas Helmut Kohl said:

The age of totalitarian ideologies in Europe is drawing to a close. The belief in historic mission of more race or class has proved to be the most devastating fallacy of this. Millions of innocent people fell victim to its sway. Karl Popper ceaselessly fought this fallacy. He is amongst the most significant champions of the open society... the triumph of freedom and democracy in Europe demonstrates that Karl Popper was right.18

Popper sent a message for the future that we should mostly remain alert; critical rationality is the precondition for the coexistence of individuals, people and nations in dignity and peace. Nigerian democracy needs to embrace 98% of what critical rationality is all about to practise better system of government. Critical rationalism would open channels for better development in Nigeria. The deep nature of Karl Popper's view made Bertrand Russell to say:

His (Popper's) attack on Plato, while unorthodox is in my opinion thoroughly justified. His Analysis of Hegel is deadly. Marx is dissected with equal acumen and given his due share of responsibility for modern misfortune. The book is a vigorous and profound defence of democracy timely, very interesting.19

For Bertrand Russell, Karl Popper's view would help to eliminate the enemies of democracy. We have a lot of enemies of democracy in Nigeria, a lot of problems but all these would be terminated and eliminated only and only if we embrace the totality of Karl Popper's democracy channeling his critical philosophy for better democratic system. In further illustration of the importance of Karl Popper's view, Sam Ghandchi said:

The open society had become, in the seven years of its gestation, a major treatise on the intellectual and socialills of the time, offering an explanation of how totalitarianism had gained intellectual respectability and how post war society of it would involve rethinking politics, education and social morality -An open society marks that difference and confronts its members with personal decisions and the opportunity to reflect rationally on them.20

Worthy of note is that Karl Popper's democracy rates personal decisions high and creates opportunity to reflect rationally on them and due to the fact that our system of government lacks this that the general atmosphere of violence terrorism and insecurity have been engulfing our democracy since independence. The issue of critical rationalism gives ground for better adoption of the principles of democracy like the rule of law. With Karl Popper's idea, the seed of good governance, accountability and probity would be planted and nurtured for better development. Incessant bombing proves that Nigerians still need much orientation- to embrace democratic system of government. Our learning process in Nigeria which I believe is not engulfed by critical rationalism is being tortuous and redundant and that is why we keep on living in darkness. The elites are the political class, the professional class and the religious class whose actions trigger off series of problems in Nigeria, like armed robbery, assassinations, kidnappings, religious conflicts and terrorism. The elites manipulate the state craft for their selfish interests.

Popper was interested in political equality which means
equality before the law. Everybody no matter one's class should be equal before the law. The issue of the rule of law can only be at its best when our democratic system embraces the idea of critical rationalism and better electoral system. The issue of proper voting system paves the avenue for better democratic system. This solidifies the essence of democracy. Nigerian democracy can only be at its best when Nigerians value election because it is one of the institutions that propagate and solidify the real nature of democracy.

CONCLUSION

Democracy that embraces mass participation in decision making cannot record 40% of ethnic and religious conflicts. Karl Popper advocated mass participation in decision making and if Nigerian democracy should embrace that there would be better development. Another important issue is that Karl Popper's democracy guides against the misuse of power. The elected officials and leaders are being monitored by the electorates and they are not allowed to misuse power. If Nigerians should adopt that, we would have better democracy. Karl Popper advocated that and for him such would help to reduce the tyrants or people who misuse power. Another issue that is associated with Karl Popper's democracy is the idea of regular review of policies. Regular review of policies helps to create opportunity for further development and growth of the society. It would pave avenues for new ideas for better development. If Nigerian democracy should adopt such, it would be of great benefit to Nigerians.

ENDNOTES

[3]. Ibid.
[5]. Ibid, p. 36.
[9]. Ibid., p. 61