

Liberty and Prosperity towards a People-Centered Approach

Changing places has been one way to see hidden things in the world.¹

Liberty and prosperity are universal concepts. Both are grand narratives in their own right encompassing philosophical borders. But universalities are not ends themselves. In a social context, the concepts of liberty and prosperity evolve depending on the platform one stands in, on the lens one sees through, on the position one stands for. We live in a society with deep-rooted injustices interwoven in different dimensions of our identity not only in the economic structures but also in the political dynamics, cultural facets and social relations. Liberty and prosperity are universalities that should be merged with a people-centered orientation. To put oneself in the situation of the poor, marginalized, deprived and disenfranchised and aspire to make society better for the people.

I believe that the rule of law holds the unwavering position in times of unrest. When all are unsettled, institutions shaken and liberties threatened, it is the strengthening of the rule of law that provides for an unshakeable ground to move forward. But the law must also have the people at its heart. It should not be studied in an ivory tower void of action. Rather, it must touch the ground to see everyday realities.

In the perspective of the poor is liberty felt in the gut? How does prosperity trickle to those surviving by the day? How do we sharpen the law to safeguard our hard fought liberties and the scales of justice to tilt on the side of the marginalized? These are questions and realities confronting us. Truthfully I believe there is no easy way to answer these questions. The concepts overlap because of their close interrelation; and the complexity brings in the impossibility to discuss the ideas in isolation with one another. The law must bridge the spaces between the clouds and the grassroots. Sometimes when the poor has been so used to being poor, neglected and deprived it is so hard for them to see a world beyond their battle for survival. For them, aspirations for liberty and prosperity would seem a foreign endeavor when their day-to-day life is focused on putting a meal on the table. It is in this context that the law must also be a source of empowerment. It must uphold one's entitlement to basic freedoms as a common unit to our shared humanity. By embracing the concept of human dignity that we find the strength to hold on to our rights, to protect its sanctity and assert it with utmost vigor.

¹ Sen, A. (2009). *The Idea of Justice*. The Belknap Press: Massachusetts.

The idea of prosperity encompasses both institutional and individual efforts. It is a common goal that requires unity of action from different sectors of the society. Development must not only be confined to statistics but must adopt a human face and embody the actual lives of people. Poverty is not just an idea. It cuts the deepest in many portions of our people's lives. Our humble nation has been plagued with aggravated poverty that has claimed the lives of the best of its sons and daughters. The law must have a perspective to improve the quality of life of the disadvantaged. The freedoms and liberties people enjoy are positive reinforcements for them to take a hold of their lives, for indeed, 'the real wealth of the nation is its people and the purpose of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives.'²

As an aspiring member of the legal profession, it is my dream to serve the most basic sectors of our society as a human rights lawyer. I will use the principles of liberty and prosperity to widen the arena for legal discourse and movement towards an increased awareness on the plight of the poor, marginalized, neglected and deprived. It has been my life's pursuit to contribute my profession to a greater purpose. That is why I truly advocate for people empowerment and a developmental approach in interpreting the role of law, justice and liberty in the lives of the people.

When I was in college because of our curriculum's development and integration program, I was exposed to political realities outside the classroom setting. We were integrated to poor communities to study the lives of the poor, own their lives as ours and live their struggles. We were required to go on exposure trips to poor and vulnerable sectors both in the urban areas and the outskirts in the countryside. Ultimately on my final year, I was required to spend two whole semesters in the field in a rural community. These experiences gave me a different perspective on poverty, inequality and injustice and how the poor perceive the law. One of my vivid memories was conversing with a farm worker while he teaches me to plant root crops. I told them that I plan on studying law and maybe one day I could help them in any way. He said that he has been farming all his life, his parents before him, and still not know what the law does for him. What he knows is that his everyday life revolves on tilling the land. Up to this day, his answer echoes in my mind especially now that I am a student of the law. This was also my motivation in joining the legal aid office in our law school. The institutionalization of legal aid service is the embodiment of the concrete contribution in providing access to justice of poor and indigent clients. It is also an opportunity for students like me to envision a career in legal aid and in service. I learned in our barangay extension programs that it takes a lot of difference knowing that there are legal aid clinics available in communities, which could not afford the services of a lawyer. Seminars and legal consultations provided to the poor empower them to know their rights and basic legal remedies

² UNDP (1990). *Human Development Report 1990*. New York: Oxford University Press.

to their predicament. It is my advocacy to bring the access to the law a little closer to the poor, make them more visible in our legal system and amplify their voices that has long been unheard.

I am very passionate to the cause of human rights as a field because of the fundamental role it plays to individual lives, collective relationships and institutional guarantees. It is unfortunate that ideas against human rights still found its way in the middle of academic discussions. Disintegrating the concept of rights to humanity is a dangerous precedent especially for those people in the lower social strata. It is always the poor who suffer the most when rights are endangered. It is always the poor who do not have enough mechanisms to protect themselves on injustices perpetuated. In the advent of social justice, the principles of liberty and prosperity are facing greater heights. The law is neither a messiah nor a universal panacea for all social ills of society. Rather it has evolved into a collective consciousness for social order. That is why the law must be used with a sense of duty to uplift the lives of our people, to secure their dignity and ensure equal opportunity in their access to justice.

Now more than ever that the rule of law must stand firm to safeguard well-defined rights of our people. The twin concepts of liberty and prosperity are not merely found in the realm of ideas but are already actualized truths. Such are not only positioned as theoretical foundations, but mechanisms in the very practical domains of every day life. Liberty and prosperity must be foundations of just institutions and at the same time guiding principles of an idea of justice that is realizable.

I believe that liberty and prosperity are living concepts constantly evolving in practice. And as a student of the law and aspiring member of the legal profession, I want to espouse a kind of practice with the people at the center. The struggle of the poor is not theirs alone. A certain collectivity binds us to be one with them in their struggle. And that is where I want to position the law, not in an ivory tower, but in our linked hands, in our shared dream, in a united vision.

In safeguarding liberty and nurturing prosperity, the rule of law must step up in the protection of our democratic institutions. The centerpiece of our democracy is the people and ensuring that the balance of power serves the stability of the nation. In times of political confusion, it is the law that provides clarity and delineates arbitrariness from legitimate sources of power. Justice is not just a question of distribution but also an idea of social change. The rule of law is a beacon of hope that amidst societal turbulence, its existence is a shield protecting the interest of the people.