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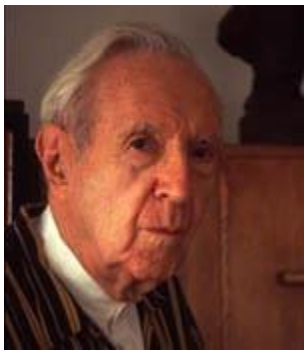

Part 1 of 3

Is Democratic Theory for Export?

Jacques Barzun

Sixth Morgenthau Memorial Lecture on Ethics & Foreign Policy

Introduction

The Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs presents the annual Morgenthau Memorial Lecture as a tribute to the memory of Professor Hans J. Morgenthau, author of *Politics Among Nations* and other books on the subject of international affairs. Professor Morgenthau was a trustee of the Carnegie Council for more than twenty years until his death in 1980. The Carnegie Council, formerly the Council on Religion and International Affairs, initiated an annual lecture series in 1979, and Professor Morgenthau delivered this first Distinguished Lecture on Ethics and Foreign Policy. In 1981 the lecture series was renamed to commemorate the contribution Professor Morgenthau made not only to the Carnegie Council but also to the study of ethical problems of international affairs.

Professor Morgenthau's first book, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics,* appeared in 1946. There were two main points: first, politics cannot be reduced to scientific calculations, and sec-

ond, man not being perfectible, political progress will remain problematic. This was not in keeping with the dominant trends of the day in political science nor with the heady expectations of the postwar world for the realization of Immanuel Kant's perpetual peace through the mechanism of the United Nations.

Professor Morgenthau eventually reduced his philosophy to six principles in order to distinguish what he called "practical realism" from competing formulas of international relations. The first principle is that "politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature." Two, the "main signpost" is the "concept of interest defined in terms of power." Three, "interest defined as power" is "an objective category which is universally valid although the meaning is not fixed once and for all." Four, political action has great moral significance. Five, the moral aspirations of a particular nation are not identical with the moral laws that govern the universe. Sixth and finally, these principles together make a unique theory, however much political realism may have been misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Certainly the criticism of the "practical realist" vision of international politics continues unabated. It is a growth industry in academe. Competing ideas or additions are said to be of growing significance in guiding international relations. At the moment, one such competing vision is that of international regimes, or principles, structures, and mechanisms for dealing with special categories of international activities such as international trade (which is dealt with through, for example, the GATT), fishing, wheat, monetary affairs, and so on. Whatever the criticism, however, it begins with Morgenthau. Everyone else is now a "neo-realist." I believe Professor Morgenthau would have enjoyed that. However, we can consider his six principles on another occasion.

Last year, the Fifth Annual Morgenthau Memorial Lecture was presented by Professor Kenneth W. Thompson, who edited the sixth edition of *Politics Among Nations.* Among others who have been with us are Abba Eban, Donald McHenry, and Admiral Hyman Rickover. The sixth Morgenthau Memorial Lecturer adds luster to this event. Professor Jacques Barzun has had a most distinguished career at Columbia University as professor of history, dean of faculties and provost, University Professor, and special adviser on the arts to the president. His writings and lectures are models in the fields of history, cultural history, and criticism. One of his most recent books is *A Stroll with William James*, published in 1983, eight years after his retirement from Columbia. It is a graceful, witty, and profound book, and I recommend it to all as a companion. I'll mention only one quote:

> In society, to be sure, an unchecked pluralism can be disastrous. When everybody has to be lectured to, or has a veto, or usurps one through solitary or group obstruction, the quasi chaos returns. Time passes, anger mounts, nothing gets done, and with each bout of paralysis the necessary faith in private and public institutions is breached. That is how, by a progressive failure of nerve, civilizations come to an end. Once again, the refusal to limit and qualify truths, because so doing would tarnish "principle," incurs its own punishment.[1]

From some of his thoughts expressed in that volume, as well as from his life's work and reflections, comes this Morgenthau Memorial Lecture, "Is Democratic Theory for Export?" In addition to thanking Professor Barzun, I would like to take this occasion to thank all those who made contributions to the Morgenthau Memorial Endowment Fund to assure that this annual lecture will remain a permanent part of the Carnegie Council's institutional program.

Robert J. Myers
President
Carnegie Council

Is Democratic Theory for Export?

by Jacques Barzun

A permanent feature of American opinion and action in foreign policy is the wish, the hope, that other nations might turn from the error of their ways and become democracies: "They are a great people,[2] why can't they manage their affairs like us?" A corollary has been, let us help those governments that are democratic, make them our allies, and let us oppose the others—indeed, if necessary, take action to coerce them. A current example is the agitation about South Africa, which rages from the campus to

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[1] Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 123.

[2] Or, "a great little people."

Capitol Hill and from the board room to the living room. In these rooms, anyone not in favor of "doing something" against South Africa is deemed a traitor to the very spirit of this country, these democratic United States.

But, there remains a question on this subject that has long bothered the thoughtful. What is it exactly that we want others to copy? What is the theory of democracy that we mean to export? Not all democracies are alike. Whose constitution is the best? On what theory is it based? The demand for a theory has been especially urgent during the last 40 years because of the striking success of the opposite theory, Marxist-Leninist communism. In one region after another it has conquered what often looked like rising democracies. The rival theory was apparently more attractive, more convincing. We attribute these results to eloquent agents who had an easy time because "we" weren't there with a theory of our own. Who such missionaries for our side might be, given the democratic idea of the self-determination of peoples, is something of a puzzle, but it is secondary to yet another, greater one: What are these missionaries to preach? Where do we find the parallel to the writings of Marx and Lenin, and what do those writings tell?

Different persons would give different answers, which is a weakness to begin with. Some would point to the Declaration of Independence and the federal Constitution; others to Rousseau, Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine. Then there is Tocqueville's Democracy in America in two volumes and a wonderful little book by Walter Bagehot on the English Constitution, not to mention The Federalist papers and many eloquent pages from John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. Taken loosely together, those writings would be regarded by many as making up the theory of democracy.

Of course, they don't all agree; they don't form a system. *The Federalist* writers are afraid of democracy;[3] John Adams disputes Tom Paine and goes only part way with Jefferson.[4] Burke and Rousseau sound like direct contraries. Tocqueville calls for so many of the special conditions he found here that his conclusions are not transferable. And Bagehot does the same thing for Great Britain: you have to be Englishmen to make the English Constitution work.

All these ifs and ands make a poor prospect for unified

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[3] Madison repeats in *The Federalist* (nos. 10, 14, 48, 58, and 63) that full or pure democracy is a menace to freedom, and he praises the constitution being proposed to the American people for its "total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity" (no. 63).

[4] See *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2 volumes, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1959), pp. 199, 236, 248, 279, 351-52, 456, 519, 550, 598, and passim.

theory, but there is worse. When we actually read these documents we find that each theorized about a few subjects among many which very properly go by different names. We have: democracy, republic, free government, representative government, constitutional monarchy. These are beside: natural rights, civil rights, equality before the law, equal opportunity. Then there are also: universal suffrage, majority rule, separation of powers, and the two-party system. Nor should we forget another half dozen other topics that are found associated in modern times with the so-called democratic process—primary elections, the referendum, proportional representation, and so on.

That array of ideas and devices cannot but be daunting to the propagandist for democracy. Which are essential? How should they combine? The very need to explain what the terms mean bars the way to easy acceptance and enthusiasm. In addition, the key words do not mean the same thing to all the theorists. To cap these troubles, nowhere in the West has there been a central authority to define an orthodoxy, even a shifting one, such as there has been on the communist side.

On that side, there is the advantage not only of unity but of broad abstraction: the class struggle, history as dialectical materialism, surplus value, society shaped by the forms of economic production, the contradictions in capitalism preparing its decline and fall, the aim and training of the revolutionist, and the dictatorship of the proletariat leading to the withering away of the state. These eight "big ideas," energized by resentment and utopian hope, make up a scheme that has the ring of high intellectuality. The scheme is readily teachable as a series of catchwords which, as experience shows, can appeal to every level of intelligence. It offers not only a promise of material advantage, but also a drama—a struggle toward a glorious end, unfolding according to necessity.

Compared with a scripture and prophecy, which amount not to theory but to ideology, the concrete plans and the varied means of the writers on democracy present a spectacle of pettifogging and confusion. Common opinion reinforces this lack of order and unity. The democratic peoples suppose that free governments did not exist before the population at large got the vote, which is not true, or that democracy is incompatible with a king and an aristocracy, though England is there to show that a monarchy with a House of Lords can be democratic. Was the United States a democracy when senators were not elected directly by the people? Were we a free government when we held millions in slavery or segregation? Finally, it takes no research to find out that the democracies of France, Italy, and Sweden, those of Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines, and of Thailand, India, and the Unit-

ed States are far from giving people the same freedoms by the same means.

Take two recent illustrations. In France, the last elections brought to power in the National Assembly, and hence in the office of the prime minister, a party opposed to that of the president, whose term was to continue for another two years. This vote caused immediate and prolonged consternation. Would there be a violent clash or would government stop dead in a stalemate between the president and his prime minister backed by the Assembly? A few daring souls said that "cohabitation" (which in French has no sexual overtones) might be possible. But debate raged on. It so happened that a young musicologist from Smith College was in Paris when the dismay was at its height. Being fluent in French, he wrote a letter to *Le Monde*, which published it as remarkable. It said in effect: "Good people, don't be upset. What bothers you has happened in the United States quite often. Democracy won't come to an end because two branches of government are in the hands of different parties."5

He was right. Cohabitation has begun, but it is working in ways that surprise American friends of democracy—for instance, by the use of ministerial decrees that become law or of the closure called guillotine by which debate is cut off in the Assembly. The point of the example is clear: one Western democracy is nearly stymied by a lawful result of its own system, and gets over the trouble by means that would be unthinkable—anti-democratic—in another democracy where that same trouble of divided authority seems no trouble at all. What unified theory could cover both versions of the democratic process?

The second example comes from the Philippines, where a national election was held in circumstances of violence and coercion and yielded an outcome that could therefore be questioned. A delegation from the United States Congress had to go and inquire into the events surrounding the vote before this country could assume that the democratic process had in fact been carried out, for as we saw, common opinion holds that the vote of the people is the diagnostic test of democracy.6 But what if the voting itself is not free, as in parts of the Philippines and in many other countries where the doubt and confusion are never settled by inquiry? Are those democracies? Or must they be considered half-way cases in order to fit under the grand theory?

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[5] * Peter Anthony Bloom, "La Lecon des Etats-Unis," Le Monde (Paris), February 28, 1986.

[6] " ... the right to vote is surely the linchpin of peaceful change . ," says Lloyd N. Cutler, former counsel to President Carter, and he recommends it for South Africa ("Using Morals, Not Money, on Pretoria," New York Times, August 3, 1986, sec. 4, p. 23). But change to peace is far from assured. Hitler's example has been imitated again and again by well-led groups aiming at one-party

The truth is, the real subject for discussion is not "Is democratic rule theory for export?" but "Is there a theory of democracy?" We expect to find one not solely because a large part of the world boasts a rival theory, but also because in our admiration for science, we like to have a theory for every human activity. My conviction is that democracy has no theory. It has only a theorem, that is, a proposition which is generally accepted and which can be stated in a single sentence. Here is the theorem of democracy: For a free mankind, it is best that the people should be sovereign, and this popular sovereignty implies political and social equality.

When I say the theorem of democracy has been accepted, I am not overlooking the anti-democratic opposition. For in one sense there is none. Look over the world of the twentieth century and you find at every turn the claim that the government of this nation and that nation is a popular government—the People's Republic of China, the German Democratic Republic, the Democratic Republic of Yemen and that of Kampuchea all say so in their titles. Other nations profess the same creed and point to their constitutions. The Soviet Union has one that provides for elections and delegates at various levels. Parties and voting and assemblies are found all up and down the five continents. The split comes over who "the people" are, what is meant by "party," and how the agents of government act for (or against) the people. Historically, the people has always been recognized in some fashion. Athens was a democracy—with slaves; the Roman emperor spoke in the name of "the Senate and the Roman people"; the Germanic tribes and the American Indians had chiefs and also general councils; kings were the "fathers" of their people—and their servants too. And the old adage *Vox populi, vox Dei*—the voice of the people is the voice of God—has always meant that rulers cannot and should not withstand the people's will.

The theorem, then, is not disputed even when tyranny flourishes under it, for it has two parts and the tyrant can boast that the blessings of the second part, equality, are due to him. We are thus brought to the great question of the machinery of government, because it is how the wheels turn, and not a theory, that makes a government free or not free. The dictatorship of the proletariat may be the theory of communism, but in fact neither the proletariat nor its single party rules. Voting and debating is make-believe set over a tight oligarchy led by one man. There is no machinery to carry out the promise that in time the proletariat will disappear and the state will wither away, and most often, there is not even a device for ensuring the public succession from one top leader to the next.

The conclusion established so far would seem to be this: Democracy has no theory to cover the working of its many brands

of machinery, whereas its antagonists use a single, well-publicized theory to cover in another sense, namely to conceal, the workings of one rather uniform machine, the police state.

A further conclusion is that the demand for a theory of democracy shows the regrettable tendency to think entirely in abstractions, never bringing general statements side by side with the facts of experience, or even noticing important differences between abstractions if they happen to be linked together by custom or usage. Democracy, for example, is thought of as synonymous with free government; "the sovereign people" is thought of as meaning all or most or some of the residents within the boundaries of a state. What kinds of freedom a government guarantees, how they are secured, and which groups and individuals actually obtain them and which do not are complicated questions that theorists and journalists alike prefer to ignore. They know that such details are of no use in stirring up either protests at home or virtuous indignation about others abroad. The public at large takes government itself abstractly, as a kind of single-minded entity, an engine that works only in one direction and always expresses the same attitude toward human desires. The democratic, modern style of government is the good kind, and the rest, past and present, are the bad.

For this childlike view, there is only one remedy and that is a little history. I include under this term contemporary history, for after having excluded the possibility of a theory of democracy I am concerned to offer instead a survey, or rather a sketchy panorama, of its manifestations. I do this with a practical purpose in view: I think it is important to know how the so-called free world came into being, what ideas and conditions would be required for its extension, and most immediate and important, what changes are occurring in our own democracy that threaten its peculiar advantages and make its export impossible.

Let us return to our theorem. It calls for three difficult things: expressing the popular will, ensuring equality, and by means of both, distributing a variety of freedoms. These purposes imply machinery. How, for example, is the popular will ascertained? The devices we are familiar with in the Anglo-American tradition have come from two sources. One is the long, slow, haphazard growth of the English Constitution from the Parliament of Simon de Montfort in 1265 through innumerable struggles for rights won (and listed) a few at a time—Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, and so on.[7] From this history, Montesquieu, Locke, and

[7] Simon de Montfort anticipated "the English Constitution" by 600 years. The Parliament of 1265 included two delegates from every shire and two burgesses from every town. The aim was that acting as Great Council to the king, they should advise him, supervise the several divisions of government, afford redress,

others variously derived the precepts and precedents that influenced the making of the United States Constitution.

The other source is antiquity—Greece and Rome—whose practices and writings on government inspired thinkers to design plans or issue warnings appropriate to their own time. The most famous scheme is that of Rousseau. His is also the most instructive, for although he is crystal clear, his interpreters divide on the tendency of his great book, *The Social Contract*. Some say it promotes freedom, others say it leads to totalitarianism. This shows how double-edged propositions can be. But let us see what Rousseau himself says. He takes democracy literally: all the people, equal in rank, come together and decide policy and choose leaders. This is the old Athenian democracy, except that there are no slaves. Rousseau goes on to point out that only a small city-state can manage that sort of government. Knowing his ancient history, he adds that such pure democracy is too good for men as they are. He agrees with the great minds of ancient Greece—Aristotle, Plato, Xenophon, Thucydides—all were against democracy; they saw dozens of democratic cities perish from inefficiency, stupidity, and corruption.8

Rousseau therefore falls back on representative government, which he calls, correctly, "elective aristocracy": the people elect those they think the best *(aristoi)* to run their affairs for them. He also requires a lawgiver to describe the structure of the government. For "lawgiver" substitute "constitution," a set of rules for day-to- day operations.

Why should anybody think that such a system must end in tyranny? One answer can be given through a quick reminder: Hitler did not seize power, he was voted in as head of a plurality party by a people living under a democratic government and with a constitution that combined the best features of all constitutions on record. If you add to the strength of Hitler's party that of the German Communists, you have a large democratic majority voting for totalitarian rule. To generalize from this example, if the people is sovereign, it can do anything it wants, including turn its constitution upside down. It can lose its freedom by choosing leaders who promise more equality, more prosperity, more national power

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and approve taxes. The Icing's ministers should be responsible to it. In short, Montfort wanted in 1265 what slowly and painfully became general in Western Europe by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1265 the barons quarreled, resented middle-class participation in government, and resumed a war in which Montfort was conveniently stabbed in the back. But the people of England continued to worship him as a martyr, patriot, and saint.

[8] Aristotle's treatise on ancient governments influenced such eighteenth-century proponents of free government as Madison in their fear of "democracy," for Aristotle says it is the corruption of free government, just as tyranny is the corruption of monarchy (Politics, bk. TV, chap. 2).

through dictatorship. The theorem of popular sovereignty is honored in the breach. The dictator says, “I represent the will of the people. I know what it wants.”

On the other hand, a new nation can ask: “Popular sovereignty, the vote for everybody, then what?” That question was precisely the one put to Rousseau by envoys from two nations, Poland and Corsica. He wrote for each of them a small book that shows how he would go about being a lawgiver, a constitution-maker. These notable supplements to the abstract outline of *The Social Contract* are conveniently forgotten by Rousseau’s critics. For in prescribing for Poland and for Corsica, Rousseau makes the all-important point that the history, character, habits, religion, economic base, and education of each people must be taken into account before setting up any machinery. No rules or means apply universally. What works in England will fail in Poland; what the French prefer, the Corsicans will reject.

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