



Part 2 of 3

Is Democratic Theory for Export?

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Political equality can be decreed, but freedom cannot—it is a most elusive good. Rousseau warns the Poles that they should go slowly in freeing their serfs, for fear that in their economic ignorance the serfs will fall into worse misery than before. This was Burke's great point about the solidity of English freedom, which is freedom under a monarchy and what we would surely call a non-representative Parliament: based as it was on gradual change through history, freedom had taken root inside every Englishman. Burke criticized the French revolutionists because they did not revive the old assemblies and thereby give the French some training in the use of freedom. Instead, they wrote principles on a piece of paper and expected them to produce the right behavior overnight. On this central issue, Burke and Rousseau are at one, as a fine scholar long ago demonstrated to a non-listening world in her book *Rousseau and Burke*.¹

This element of Time, of the slow training of individuals by

¹ A.M. Osborne, *Rousseau and Burke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940).

history, carries with it a predicament and a paradox. The predicament is: How can the peoples that want to spread freedom to the world propose their institutions as models if those institutions depend on habits long ingrained? It is easy enough to copy a piece of actual machinery, such as a computer or even a nuclear weapon. It takes only a few bright, well-trained people with the model in front of them. But to copy a government is not something that a whole population can achieve by merely deciding to do it.

One may note in passing the double error of the former colonial powers: They did not teach the ways of freedom soon enough to their colonial subjects, and they let go of their colonies too quickly when the urge to independence swept the globe. The bloodshed was immediate and extensive, and it is not over. Some of the nations that emerged tried what they thought was democracy, only to succumb to military or one-party rule—always in the name of popular sovereignty, indeed of liberation. The word is not always a mere pretense, for it is liberation to be rid of a government that cannot govern. The ancient maxim is true, *mundus vult gubernari*—the world insists on being governed.

As for the paradox, it is this: How can a people learn the ways of free government until it is free? And how can it stay free if it cannot run the type of machinery associated with self-government? On this score, the spectacle of Latin America is baffling. The several states gained their independence from Spain not long after the thirteen North American colonies gained theirs from England, during the period 1783-1823. Yet repeated efforts by able, selfless leaders have left South and Central America prey to repeated dictatorships with the usual accompaniment of wars, massacres, oppression, assassinations, and that great diagnostic fact, uncertainty about the succession of legitimate governors.

To contrast the history of the North American colonies with the history of those of the South is not to disparage Latin America, but to remind ourselves of the bases of free government. We make a great mistake in calling the American War of Independence “the American Revolution” and in bragging about the fact that it did not wind up in dictatorship like the English Revolution under Cromwell or the French under Robespierre. In 1776 the Americans rebelled against very recent rules and impositions. What they wanted was not a new type of government, but the old type they had always enjoyed. They were used to many freedoms which they claimed as the immemorial rights of Englishmen. Once they had defeated the English armies and expelled the Loyalists, they went back to their former ways, which they modestly enlarged and codified in the Bill of Rights. Needless to say, when the people of South America threw off Spanish and Portuguese rule they had no such tradition or experience to help them.

The evidence is overwhelming that it is not enough to be left alone by a royal or imperial power in order to establish some degree of freedom and to keep it safe, to say nothing of achieving egalitarian democracy. One should remember the travails of Spain itself throughout the nineteenth century and down to a few years ago. One should think of France, eager for freedom in 1789 but hardly settled in it during its five republics, two empires, one partial dictatorship, and twelve constitutions. For 200 years in Central Europe, various peoples, unhappily intermingled by centuries of war and oppression, have been longing to form nations and nations to form free states. Even under the iron heel of local communism and Russian hegemony, a working system seems beyond reach. A recent headline read: “Ethnic Mini-states Paralyze Yugoslavia.”² The lesson here is that *the people* must first define itself through a common language and common traditions before it can hope to be the *sovereign people*.

Nor are grass-roots aspirations alone enough to ensure either nationhood or liberal rule. We should recall the forgotten example of Russia. At the turn of the nineteenth century there had developed there a widespread, home-grown movement toward constitutional government. In 1905 several well-organized parties ranging from conservative and liberal to socialist and revolutionary had obtained from the tsar a representative two-chamber assembly based on nearly universal suffrage. Important civil rights and religious toleration were granted and able leaders arose from the middle class and professional groups, but the parties and leaders were unable to keep united behind their gains and the whole house of cards soon collapsed. Politics were, so to speak, immature and the popular will confused. A symbol of that confusion was the crowd’s cheering for the Archduke Constantine to replace the tsar: “Constantine and Constitution” was the shout, and it turned out that many thought that Constitution was Constantine’s wife.

That first experience was not forgotten. Ten years later, in March 1917, a second democratic revolution occurred, backed at first by everybody—not just do-or-die liberals and revolutionaries, but business and professional men, trade unionists and conservative landholders, urban workers and army officers. The force behind the call for reform was the desire to win the war, and the institutions set up to carry out the one and carry on the other were perfectly adequate. Again, those in charge were unable to make the new institutions work, and in eight months they perished under the onslaught of a new autocracy led by Lenin and Trotsky. In less than ten years, then, two intelligent attempts to modernize government in Russia had failed—and Russia was a country where Western ideas had long since penetrated, a country whose educated

² Washington Post, June 28, 1986

class was at home in all the democratic capitals of Europe.

Our second large conclusion must therefore be that a democracy cannot be fashioned out of whatever people happen to be around in a given region; it cannot be promoted from outside by strangers; and it may still be impossible when attempted from inside by determined natives. Just as life on the earth depended on a particular coming together of unrelated factors, so a cluster of disparate elements and conditions is needed for a democracy to be born viable. Among these conditions one can name tradition, literacy, and a certain kind of training in give-and-take, as well as the sobering effect of national disaster—France in 1870 and Germany in 1945. The most adaptable of peoples, the Japanese, took a century to approximate Western democracy, aided no doubt by the harsh tutelage which followed a grievous defeat. And another people might have taken these same experiences the other way, as spurs to resist change.

The absence of theory and the rare occurrence at one time and place of the right pieces to assemble might seem enough to rule out the export of democracy from nation to nation, but there is today a third and last obstacle: the present character of free governments in the West. This difficulty may be made clear by comparing our times with the heyday of enthusiasm for democratic freedom, 1918-20. The First World War had been fought against monarchies and empires, and this country joined in to “make the world safe for democracy.” There is nothing foolish in that motto of Woodrow Wilson’s. Victory seemed to give the Allied powers a chance to replace two conglomerate empires with a galaxy of new, true, and free nations.³ Russia itself seemed to have jumped the gun in March 1917.

What was not foreseen was the backlash of the war. Emotionally, it was a revulsion against four years of carnage. In practical effect, it was nothing less than a social revolution. The war itself was revolutionary, having moved the masses out of their routines—the men into the trenches, the women into the factories. What happened under Lenin in Russia, and for a time among her neighbors, advertised this social upheaval. The masses were now sovereign in their outlook and behavior. Henceforth, whatever was done must be done for their good and in their name. Their needs and wants, their habits and tastes, marked the high tide of democracy as Tocqueville had foreseen it in this country. The message was clear to all, because it had been preached with growing intensity for 100 years. Universal suffrage; the end of poverty; identical

³ It is worth noting that tsarist Russia and the Communist Soviet Union joined the Western powers in the last two world wars without preventing those powers from proclaiming that they were fighting to put down autocracy and advance the cause of freedom. Theories, theories!

rights for everybody; social, economic, even sexual emancipation; popular culture, not elite esthetics—these demands went with a distrust and hatred of all the old orders, old leaders, and old modes of life that had brought on the four years of homicidal horror and destruction. The new modes were to be anti-capitalist (obviously); anti-Victorian in morals, and anti-parliamentarian as well, for many thought representative government a corrupt and contemptible fraud. Democracy needed better machinery. In that mood it is no wonder that fascism and the corporate state triumphed so rapidly.⁴ If England and France hung on to their constitutional freedoms amid this turmoil, it was due largely to historical momentum, the same force that threw Russia back into its old groove.

After all this, it would be a mistake to think that what is now called the free world is just the continuation of the liberal regimes which existed before 1914. The social revolution has changed them all into welfare states, and this transformation, which is one expression of the socialist ideal, has so altered the machinery of free government that it no longer resembles the model one could previously define by a few plain devices, such as voting, the party system, and majority rule.

Although the changes of the last 60 years in democratic nations have been similar, they have been uneven. In different countries the notions of freedom and equality have taken varying and sometimes contradictory meanings. Does a national health service increase freedom or reduce it? Does workers' compensation give equal treatment to workers and employers when it disregards contributory negligence in causing accidents? Are the rules for zoning and landmark preservation a protection of property rights or an infringement of them? More generally, can the enormous increase in the bureaucracy needed to enforce endless regulations and the high taxes levied for all the new services be called an extension of freedom or a limitation? Where it is clearly a limitation, the argument advanced is that it is imposed for the sake of equality, thus fulfilling the prediction of the earliest critics of democracy—that it begins by talking the language of liberty but ends in promoting an equality that destroys one freedom after another.

One can readily understand how the modern constraints to ensure rights came into being. The old inequalities were so flagrant, so irrational, and so undeserved, the exclusions and prejudices were so heartless and often so contrary to the laws even then on the books, that only concerted action by the government could

⁴ The theory of the corporate state, or socialism in the guise of state capitalism, was expounded in France and Germany and promulgated in Italy. It had intellectual adherents for a time; Winston Churchill praised Mussolini, and David Lloyd George, Hitler. The defeat of the Axis powers silenced such advocates, which shows again how dependent on current events theorists are.

bring the conditions of life for the masses into conformity with the democratic theorem—the popular will absolute implies equality also absolute.

But the steady drive toward social and economic parity for all has brought about a great shift in the source of day-to-day authority over individuals. The guarantor of rights and freedoms is no longer political; the government we live under is administrative and judiciary. Hence the diminished interest in political life and political rights: the poor turnout at most elections, the increase in single-issue partisanship, the rare occurrence of clear majorities, and the widespread feeling that individual action is futile. To exercise his or her freedom, the free citizen must work through channels long and intricate and rarely political.

To see this situation in perspective, open your Tocqueville and see what he saw as the essence of the American democracy. For him, the federal government is of small importance compared to the government of each state—and so it was in 1835 for every American citizen. “The government” meant the legislature at the state capitol. What is more, in all the small things that affect individual life, from roads and police to schools and taxes, Tocqueville tells us that it is the township or county that is paramount. He gives New England as proof: the town meeting determines the will of the people and the selectmen carry it out. That is democracy at work. Everybody has a voice in decisions, everybody has a chance to serve in office, everybody understands the common needs, as well as the degree to which anybody’s opinion or proposal is worth following.⁵ The democracy is that of Athens in its best days, the one Rousseau said was too perfect for human use.

Today, the government machine is more like the circuitry of a mainframe computer, too complex for anybody but students of the science. And this elaboration of devices for equality can only be endless. The lure of further rights is ever-present, because among men and women in society “equal” is a figurative term, not a mathematical one. For example, the justice of rewarding talent with higher pay has been gravely debated; the word meritocracy has been invented to suggest that merit violates democratic equality, because merit is not earned, it is as it were unmerited. Other attempts are being made, under the name of comparable worth, to legislate the equality of very diverse occupations. Equality of opportunity has come to seem too indefinite and uncertain.

Please note that I am describing, not judging. The point here is not the contents or wisdom of these new rights conferred in batches on the minorities—ethnic and sexual, on the employed and the unemployed, the disabled, the pregnant, the nonsmokers, the criminal, the moribund, and the insane, to say nothing of the fanci-

⁵ Alexis de Toqueville. *Democracy in America*, vol 1, pt I, ch. 5

ers of old buildings, the champions of certain animals and plants, and that great silent minority, the consumers. What is in question is the effect of ever-extended rights on the conception or definition of free government. One such effect is a conflict of claims, a division in the body politic. Many complain that others have become not equal but superequal, that reverse discrimination has set in. The rights of women and those of the unborn are clearly opposite. Perhaps the smoker and the nonsmoker form the emblematic pair whose freedoms are incompatible.

The upshot is that the idea of the citizen, a person with the same few clear rights as everybody else, no longer holds. In his place is a person with a set of special characteristics matched by a set of privileges. These group privileges must be kept in balance by continual addition if overall equality is to survive.⁶ This progression has a visible side effect: it tends to nullify majority rule, for in seeing to it that nobody loses through any decision, it makes majority and minority equal. Finally, progressive equality and bureaucratic delay encourage the thing known as “participatory democracy,” which is in fact direct minority rule, a kind of reverse democracy for coercing authority by protests, demonstrations, sit-ins, and job actions in order to obtain the rapid satisfaction of new demands.⁷ Regardless of one’s like or dislike for the great complication that the original ideal of government by the people and for the people has undergone, one must admit once more that devising a theory for its actual working is impossible. To say, “Here it is, come and observe, and then copy it” would be a cruel joke. For one thing, the Western world still believes, rightly, that it is free. But though at one in the resolve to establish equality, its institutions remain wide apart in their allotment of freedoms. For example, an American citizen would find the extent of regulation in Switzerland or Sweden oppressive. He would call Switzerland’s indirect elections at every level a backward, undemocratic system of representation. A Swiss (or an Australian) would retort, “You haven’t advanced as far as the initiative and referendum for im-

⁶ State constitutions are continually being amended. In 1984-85, the last year for which figures are available, 158 of the 338 proposed changes in state constitutions were approved. Many of these proposals dealt with rights and of these, 77.7 percent were approved (Council of State Governments, *The Book of the States: 1986-87*, Lexington, KY, 1986), p. 4.

⁷ For example, when budget cuts forced the Library of Congress to reduce its hours of service, readers staged protests by various forms of obstruction. Arrests were made, and so were concessions. Again, acting in behalf of eleven monkeys, a group of simophiles camped outside the National Institutes of Health and commanded attention. Such sequences have come to be called civil disobedience, but they are not always civil and they bypass the traditional procedures guaranteed by the Bill of Rights—peaceful assembly and petition. It is felt, no doubt justly, that the old devices presuppose a different society, less hurried, better integrated, and used to articulate communication.

portant national issues. You don't know what freedom is.”⁸

In France, that same American would be shocked at the practices by which the police regularly gather and use information about every citizen and would not be pacified by the reply that it is an old custom quite harmless to freedom. Elsewhere, the drag on democracy would seem to be the inability to act within a reasonable time, the result of government by coalition. In Holland, for example, because of the system of “pillarization”—the forming of groups according to religious, occupational, and ideological preference—there are over twenty parties competing at the polls and there is no majority. It is precluded by proportional representation, which many regard as essential to democracy. As for Germany and Italy, the same need for coalition works in the usual way to give extremists leverage against the wishes of the actual but disunified majority.

Which of these complexities would one recommend to a new nation eager for free government? If a detached observer turned to the American scene, he would note still other obstacles to the straightforward democratic process: gerrymandering, the filibuster, the distorting effect of opinion polls, the lobbying system, the maze of regulations governing registration for voting and nominating, the perversities of the primaries, and worst of all, the enormous expense of getting elected, which entails a scramble for money and the desperate shifts for abating its influence, including financial disclosure, codes of ethics, and the like. Nobody wants to play according to the rules.⁹

“Pillarization” was made official in 1917 to satisfy the demands of the Catholic, Protestant, and “Humanist” factions that divided the Dutch professions, trade unions, sexes, and ideological groups. Each permutation of these combining allegiances was recognized as a pillar of the state and given a place on the ballot. In the last ten years, a demand has grown for more comprehensive parties, but it has not yet made headway. Add the use of television to make quick bids for popularity through inane, fictional dialogue, and the employment of public relations gurus to guide

⁸ The latest “initiative” in Switzerland proposes to abolish the Swiss army. So radical a change will doubtless elicit a large turnout at the polls, but usually no more than a quarter of the electorate votes on the initiatives, of which there is usually a large backlog.

⁹ In addition to the deliberate evasion or twisting of the rules, their administration is inevitably slow and poor. This evil is only partly the fault of the bureaucrats who are so readily blamed. The art of administration has not been brought up to date; no one has thought about it since Frederick the Great and Napoleon, or, it often seems, since Charlemagne. Although courses and certificates are offered on every conceivable activity of the modern world, administration is ignored. There are courses in management, but they take it for granted that psychologizing and manipulating people is the sole avenue to efficiency.

the choice of ideas to propose to the electorate, and you can gauge the decay of political campaigning. A symbol of the loss is the four-yearly spectacle called a debate between presidential candidates—no debate but an amateurish quiz program.¹⁰



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¹⁰ As one listens to any current campaign or “debate,” one cannot help comparing its quality and methods with those of Lincoln and Douglas in 1858, or even of later presidential aspirants, such as Woodrow Wilson, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, or John F. Kennedy. One difference is in the span of attention required. Its dwindling is suitably met by the use of “30-second spots” on the air.