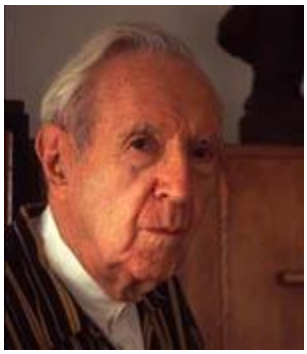
THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

May 2018 *Philosophy is Everybody's Business* Nº 941



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Is Democratic Theory for Export?

Jacques Barzun

Sixth Morgenthau Memorial Lecture on Ethics & Foreign Policy

A last feature of modern democracy which should baffle would-be imitators is the contempt in which politicians are held. Here is a system that requires their existence, endows them with power, and throws a searchlight on all their acts, and yet the same people who choose them perpetually deride and denounce them. The educated no less than the populace resent the politician's prominence but would not trade places with him. Writers multiply more or less witty epigrams about the breed and defamatory little essays against them.[1] The title "honorable," used to address them, is obviously a bitter irony. How to explain all this to a visitor from Mars? For politicians not only represent us, they represent the scheme by which our changeable will is expressed. They are, as a group, the hardest working professionals; they must continually learn new masses of facts, make judgments, give help, and contin-

[1] See, for example: two sections in *A Casual Commentary* by Rose Macaulay (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1925)—"Problems for the Citizen" and "General Elections." In the second, the author suggests *a* nationwide refusal to vote, which would result in "a ridiculous little parliament that could be ignored," to everybody's advantage.

ue to please. It is this obligation, of course, that makes them look unprincipled. To please and do another's will is prostitution, but it remains the nub of the representative system.

With these many complex deeds and chaotic demands, American democracy would have little to show the world with pride if it were not for another aspect of our life that Tocqueville observed and admired, that is, our habit of setting up free, spontaneous associations for every conceivable purpose.[2] To this day, anybody with a typewriter and a copying machine can start a league, a club, a think tank, a library, a museum, a hospital, a college, or a center for this or that, and can proceed to raise money, publish a newsletter, and carry on propaganda—all tax exempt, without government permission or interference, and free of the slightest ridicule from the surrounding society. Here is where the habits of American democracy survive in full force. Robert's Rules of Order are sacred scripture and the treasurer's report is scanned like a love letter. Committees work with high seriousness, volunteers abound, and the democratic process reaches new heights of refinement.[3]

This admirable tradition enables us to accomplish by and for ourselves many things that in other democracies require government action. But this very habit of self help, contrasting with the huge helpless bulk of government, has lately bred the conviction that popular sovereignty, like equality, should be unlimited. More and more often it is taken for granted that every organization, from businesses and churches to magazines and universities, should become a little democracy, with everyone voting, regardless of his position or knowledge. The former governing bodies—board of directors or elected vestry—should no longer act for their constituency because their decisions "affect everybody." In some instances, indeed, the geographical neighbors of an institution have claimed a voice, on the irrefutable ground that they too are affected by what it does.

It is plausible to regard this tendency as a result of the feeling that government at the top is unresponsive and in some ways unrepresentative, even though it is busy enacting privileges and protections. The bureaucracy then tries to homogenize the fates of citizens; they, in turn, appeal to the courts, which establish and often widen the rule; and thus a hopefully contentious atmosphere keeps everyone's attention on his or her rights. These are the occasion of a continual free-for-all.[4] There is undoubted freedom of a

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[2] *Democracy in America,* vol. II, pt. II, ch. 5.

[3] It is not uncommon, for example, that after a strenuous debate in committee, a vote of seven to five will prompt a chairman to say, "This business needs further thought; we shouldn't go ahead divided as we are."

[4] The latest of these to arouse angry debate is "language rights," aimed at making the United States officially multilingual. It is not said how many languages

kind in a free-for-all. In how many countries, for example, would it be possible for a visiting head of state to make half a dozen speeches in New York attacking the President for his foreign policy? Where else would avowed partisans of subversion be allowed to teach in state universities? Such things are commonplace with us, but, again, they betoken group rights. Dissenters nowadays are tolerated only when their views are already group views. On our campuses, where academic freedom is claimed by the faculty, it is not extended to unpopular lecturers from outside. Their invitations are cancelled under pressure and their talks disrupted. The notion of a "free market for ideas," the belief that truth comes out of unrestricted debate, are vindicated only when a vocal group favors the freedom.[5]

That, unfortunately, is an old story in this country. Tocqueville observed in 1835 that "he knew of no nation in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion."[6] He attributed this lack to the weight of majority sentiment. Now the majority is that of the group to which one belongs by profession, status, or region. But if in those early days of democracy free discussion thrived better elsewhere, it was not solely because free speech was a legal right, it was also because of property rights. Their sanctity was something all the early proponents of constitutional government insisted on. They knew that liberties must have a material base—independence of mind is wonderfully spurred by an independent income. And this underpinning has been progressively weakened, by industrial civilization as much as by public law. Even in public opinion, property has become an unsavory word.

These various developments of democratic life help to account for the generalized feeling of oppression that pervades the free world. It manifests itself in common talk, in novels and plays, in the medical concern with stress, in the rise of cults, and in the recourse to drugs.[7] Such feelings of oppression are now so perva-

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other than English would be included under these rights; at the moment Spanish is the one contender. See the arguments on each side in Gerola Bikales's "Comment," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 60 (1986), 77-85.

[5] The disruption of others' speech, coupled with the claim to free expression for oneself, seems to be triggered by something besides unpopular views, namely holding office. Members of the cabinet or of the diplomatic corps have been assailed at colleges (and at a writers' conference) even before they spoke, and university officials have apologized for issuing the invitations. Faculty members doing "government research" or aiding intelligence agencies are suspect. These symptoms of disaffection may not be grave, but they indicate something less than support for the American form of government.

[6] . *Democracy in America vol.* I, pt. II, ch. 7.

[7] Tocqueville again has something to say on the subject: "If social conditions, circumstances, and laws did not confine the American mind so closely to the

sive that optimism and the love of life are felt to be almost indecent. Consider in this light the universal demand for liberation, or emancipation, which has come not from the former colonies, but from long-united parts of great nations. The Scots, the Welsh, the Basques, the Bretons want to be free, just like the smallest islands of the Pacific or Caribbean, and indeed of our own waters. Only a couple of years ago, Martha's Vineyard was clamoring to be free of Massachusetts. It sounded like a joke, but it expressed the widespread illusion that if only we could be "by ourselves" all our frustrations would end. It is an individual desire before it becomes a group demand, a demand generally called nationalism. But that is the wrong word. It is separatism, the very reverse of wanting to form or belong to a larger group. Hence the call for decentralization and what has been termed in this country the New Federalism, each a type of separation from the great machine built on the plan of popular sovereignty and absolute equality.[8]

Being at the end of this rapid survey, I must repeat the caution I urged before: do not take description as disparagement. We do live under a free government, and it has enormous advantages over any that is not free or only part free. We could all name these advantages and show their rational and emotional value, but that would not help our present inquiry, which is to find out what foreign nations could use to model themselves on our polity, could adopt from our complicated practices. The answer, I think, is: Nothing. The parts of the machine are not detachable; the organism is in fact indescribable, and what keeps it going, the "habits of the heart," as Tocqueville called them, are unique and undefinable. In short, we cannot by any conceivable means "show them how to do it."

This must be our third and last conclusion. What is more, if Rousseau were approached today by some liberal-minded South African and asked for advice of the kind he gave to Poland and Corsica, he would be at a loss where to begin, for he would not be facing one nation trying to modify its institutions, but several peoples, with diverse traditions, each trying to keep or gain its freedom by power. In the democratic theorem, the sovereignty of the

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search for comfort, it might be that when the Americans came to deal with immaterial things, they would act with more maturity and prudence and would keep themselves more readily in hand. But they feel themselves to be imprisoned within bounds that they are seemingly not allowed to escape, so that once they have broken through these barriers their minds do not know where to settle down and they often rush heedlessly far beyond the limits of common sense." (vol. II, pt. II, chap. 12)

[8] Students of government in the United States report that it is in the counties that flexible adaptation to modern circumstances is most visible and innovative. See Howard L. Griffin, "Stasis and American County Governments—Myth or Reality?" (Address to the American Studies Association of Texas, Huntsville, TX, November 15-17, 1984).

people implies the practical unity of that people. How to create it when it does not exist is a different task from that of developing free institutions and is probably incompatible with it.

In answer to the question posed in the title of this discussion, I have attempted to make three points:

First, democracy has no theory to export, because it is not an ideology but a wayward historical development.

Second, the historical development of democracy has taken many forms and used many devices to reach the elusive goal called human freedom.

Third, the forms of democracy in existence are today in a state of flux. The strong current toward greater equality and the strong desire for greater freedom are more than ever in conflict. Freedom calls for a government that governs least; equality for a government that governs most. No wonder the institutions of the free world are under strain and its citizens under stress. The theorem of democracy still holds, but all of its terms have changed in nature, especially the phrase "the people," which has been changed beyond recognition by the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and the social revolution of the twentieth.

Discussion

QUESTION: You have been talking about whether we have the ability to export democracy. Have you any thoughts on whether we as Americans have a responsibility to defend democracy overseas?

PROFESSOR BARZUN: That is a question that cannot be answered in absolute terms. The presumption is that we would want to defend any democracy that is attacked, provided we can do so without damaging any other democracy, which would include our own. In other words, foreign policy has a component of national interest which I do not think can be eliminated.

QUESTION: To follow up on that question, do you feel it is in the interest of the United States—both its real political interest and its moral interest—to further the growth of democracy when it emerges around the world? Is it just for the United States to support what appears to be a bona fide democracy?

PROFESSOR BARZUN: Yes, provided that we are sure—as far as anyone can be sure—that we are supporting a genuine democracy, that it has sustained itself for a long enough time not to be an

easy prey to anti-democratic forces within that same country. We have seen that happen again and again: an attempt is made to establish a representative assembly or parliament; elections are held; a large group of ideological dissenters are elected to the parliament. Once they are inside the government (since there must be a couple of ministers to represent the party's strength), subversion takes over. So we may have aided, prematurely, a movement that is not likely to remain democratic.

QUESTION: You are then applying some sort of ethical standard, are you not, because one could then say, for example, that the Weimar democracy should have been nurtured, but Adolf Hitler should have been cut off?

PROFESSOR BARZUN: Certainly the Weimar democracy should have been nurtured—and it could have been, because Hitler's great appeal was the promised destruction of the Versailles treaty. We didn't help destroy the Versailles treaty, we tried to bolster it up, with the result that Hitler was left with a wonderful hold on national support.

QUESTION: Apropos of what you said earlier, would not one of the reasons that the Weimar Republic did not survive be because there was no tradition of democracy prior to that period?

PROFESSOR BARZUN: It seems to me that the Weimar Republic would have had a good chance of survival if the economic conditions of the people, if the political leadership, and if the Versailles treaty had been dealt with differently from the way they were dealt with. The Germans did not have a tradition of perfect and complete democracy, but from before the establishment of the German empire in 1871, they had assemblies, elections, and prime ministers in each of their provinces. They had the practical sense of democracy—not to mention the fact that the large Socialist party was a reformist, nonrevolutionary, thoroughly parliamentary party. The Socialists had a large following ready to play according to the rules of the game. So it would have been possible to save the Weimar Republic. But to write out the description of what should have been done, that's impossible. In the end, historical forces prevented it: the Western powers wanted reparations and a disarmed Germany, and the American efforts to modify those demands were ineffectual. The West kept reproaching the Germans with the guilt of having started the war, which was a highly questionable reproach. The Western powers did everything wrong if they wanted to sustain democracy there.

QUESTION: I understood you to say that it is necessary for us to

defend other democracies insofar as we can do so without hurting those democracies, neighboring democracies, or our own democracy. My question has to do with deterrence. Sticks are expensive these days, big sticks are even more expensive. At what point does the expense of the technology necessary to defend democracy outweigh the need to defend either our own country or neighboring or friendly nation-states?

PROFESSOR BARZUN: That question would be taken care of under my general caveat that, first, we do not underwrite the kind of promissory note that says we will defend all democracies everywhere; second, that we should be sure those we do defend are living, actual, genuine, free democracies before we undertake that expense. We are now giving money as aid to any number of nations, or peoples, without knowing what we are going to get back on the moral or material plane of promoting democracy. As I said before, foreign policy implies a large component of national interest; just as much care must go into defining the moral component of the policy; and finally, action must be adroit and economical about the means. For example, in Vietnam we were presumably trying to support and sustain a government that was *moving toward* democracy, and we spent a great deal of money and many lives but didn't manage things well. That lesson should be in the back of everybody's mind when advocating the defense of democracy in any part of the globe.

QUESTION: You have traced the rise of a mentality of anti-capitalism in the Western countries after the First World War—what is sometimes called middle class self-hatred, although you didn't use that term. Back in 1941, when you reviewed Peter Viereck's *Metapolltics,* you were very confident that this could not be laid at the door of romanticism. Are you as confident today, given the rise of the Green party in West Germany and the triumph of a bohemian mentality in high culture?

PROFESSOR BARZUN: If possible, I am now *more* confident that romanticism as an intellectual and artistic movement had little or nothing to do with what occurred in Italy and Germany or anywhere else where proletarian enthusiasm was aroused by the glorification of heroes. After all, heroes have existed in all times and places, long before fascism was thought of. In the West today, literature is anti-heroic and anti-romanticist; nevertheless, the human enthusiasm and response to political genius and power continue—remember Winston Churchill. To be sure, the forms, the vocabulary, the coloring of the romanticist outlook vary, and they can also be exploited variously. But absolutism in government can use classicism just as well—remember Louis XIV.

QUESTION: Professor Barzun, you began and ended your lecture with mention of South Africa. Quite clearly, a very strong point you made was the difficulty of exporting democracy to South Africa. You also pointed out the possible conflict between many theoretically based and ethically based, broad, rather utopian policies and the national interest. Well, from any point of view—that of national interest, of what is possible, or of what is ethical—what would you advocate for United States policy toward South Africa?

PROFESSOR BARZUN: I don't know whether I shouldn't ask to be named secretary of state before answering that question, because I believe that foreign policy is, in addition to all else, a highly technical art. One must be on the inside and able to know a great deal more than the public can be told, even by a very expert press, before one can say what can and should be done. I will answer your question so far as to say that it seems to me that sanctions and a hasty economic exit from South Africa are not in any way going to help. Such action will only exacerbate the situation there and give the anti-democratic forces tremendous leverage. I think, for example, that IBM in South Africa, with the programs it now has in force, can do more for the black population that is oppressed than any political party advocating abstract "liberation" in the name of that black population. Historically, industry has always been liberating. The great emancipation of the masses throughout the nineteenth century came from their going into cities and factories, getting away from the poverty and ignorance of life on the land. Industry gave them new hope, and it gave them the means, of course, to develop the new ideas and habits that make a democracy work. So the more American and other Western concerns are down in South Africa opposing apartheid quietly through their own operations, their own attitudes, and through allowing workers and employees of all races and tribes to mingle in the factory and the office—all these new, decent ways bring on democracy much faster than speeches from soap boxes or pulpits or lecterns.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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