

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Jan '02

Center for the Study of The Great Ideas

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One of the most important advancements taking place in our society today is the penetration of learning and intellectual values into the work-a-day world of business and industry. This is as significant in its own way as the tremendous scientific, technological and product consumer developments we have seen taking place all around us. These traditions of learning and the benefits of liberal education have had notable impact on the business world and the industrial society in which we live

and work. Today we are relearning what we never should have forgotten—the pertinence and immediacy with which the past speaks to the present.

Dr. Mortimer Adler, our lecturer for this “Major Issues” series, is one of the main exponents of this revival of learning. An eminent philosopher, educator and speaker, Dr. Adler is one of the founders and chief practitioners of the “Great Books” concept of learning through group discussions.

The Democratic Revolution is the first of three lectures that were delivered by Dr. Adler to the people of Industrial Indemnity and their guests in San Francisco and Los Angeles. The other two lectures in the series are The Capitalist Revolution and Liberal Education In An Industrial Democracy.

THE DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION *

Part 1 of 3

by Mortimer Adler

This century has witnessed, is still witnessing, and I hope will continue to witness, the two greatest revolutions that have taken place since the emergence of civilization itself. Using Arnold Toynbee as my guide, I would date the beginning of civilization six thousand years ago. The only revolutions in the past which are as important as the two in our century, are the one which saw the rise of cities, and the one when cities first became republics. Since the one that started six thousand years ago and the one that occurred about twenty-five hundred years ago, the revolutions that I want to talk about in this lecture and the next are the only great revolutions that have taken place in human affairs.

Let me mention one other thing that Arnold Toynbee says in the light of his study of the twenty-five or twenty-six civilizations which once existed, most of which have now disappeared. He tells us that two evils destroyed most of them. These are the twin evils of *class* and *war*.

The revolutions that I want to talk about tonight and in the next lecture are the *democratic* revolution and the *capitalist* revolution. These revolutions may remove from human life one of these evils—the evil of class. We will then still have the evil of war to deal with. It may take a third, and greatest revolution of them all, to cure that evil.

Revolution as a Term of Praise

I have used the word “revolution” as a term of praise. Many people use the word “revolution” for something to be feared, and use the word “revolutionist” as a term of derogation. The word has many meanings. It means a radical change, *with* violence or *without* violence; and a change which can be *progressive* or *retrogressive*. All of these possibilities fall within the meaning of the term. But I would not be using it as a term of praise except to connote a progressive change that is accomplished, for the most part, without violence.

The two revolutions that I am talking about are non-violent revolutions and progressive.

It is important to recognize this because it helps us to understand that the United States is, in the best sense, the most revolutionary of countries. I share this opinion, by the way, with the editors of *Fortune*. The editors of *Fortune*, some years ago, devoted an entire issue to one article, which they later published as a book, entitled *U.S.A.—A Permanent Revolution*. What they tried to express in that title was simply that the traditions of our country are revolutionary throughout.

The History and Theory of These Revolutions

Since we are concerned with the democratic and capitalist revolutions as *progressive* changes, we have to be concerned with the *theory* of the matter as well as the *history* of it. History, by itself, will not support a judgment of progress. You can report, historically, that such changes have taken place. You can also narrate what changes are taking place. But in order to say that the changes are in the line of progress, it is necessary to say that the change is from worse to better. In order to say that things are getting better, you must have some principles or standards of measurement. Hence I must begin with the basic theory of democracy and tell you, as quickly and simply as I can, *what democracy is* and *why it is the political ideal*. When I say “the political ideal,” I mean the *only* just, or the *most perfectly and completely* just, form of government, or political organization.

If you ask most Americans what democracy is, they are not able to give you a clear or precise definition of it. If you ask them why they are for democracy, they are not able to give you the reasons which demonstrate its goodness. They are for it without knowing very much about what it is, or why it is good. This seems to be a very bad state of affairs. If we are dedicated to democracy, we had better understand what it is and why it is good.

After I have stated the theory of democracy, I would like to have you look at the sweep of the last three thousand years on a large canvas, because I want you to see what stages of progress have brought us to the point at which the democratic revolution starts. Many changes have prepared the way for it. But the revolution itself began only toward the end of the last century. It is as recent as that and is by no means completed.

The fact that the democratic revolution began only yesterday is very important for everyone to understand. I was taught in school—and I am sure most children are still taught in school—that this country was founded as a democracy. That is completely false. No one in the eighteenth century understood democracy very clearly, and what they understood they did not like. No eighteenth century government was a democracy.

Finally, I want to ask how far we have progressed in the democratic revolution and what remains to be done, what obstacles must be overcome. I shall leave to you the question of our prospects of overcoming these obstacles.

THEORY OF DEMOCRACY: DEFINITION AND DEMONSTRATION

Let me start with an analysis of the forms of government. This will enable you to see what democracy is, and why it is the only just, or the only completely just, form of government. Let me ask you to think of the following relationships.

Three Possible Relations Between Men as Rulers and Ruled

Government is a relation that involves ruler and ruled. It happens in the family: parents rule children. It happens in the factory when men manage machines. All these words—”manage,” “control,” “direct,” “rule”—connote government.

Man as ruler is related to three different types of objects—that which he rules. The object he rules is either a thing or a person.

And when persons are ruled, they are either mature or immature. They are either children or adults.

Let us look at these three for a moment. How

should a man rule things: for their own good, or for man's good? The answer is, *for the human good*. We manage machines, we direct and control animals, for our good. We do not do it for the good of the machine, or for the good of the animal. This is quite proper, because of the radical inequality that exists between men and things, or persons and things. How should parents rule children? For the parent's good or for the child's good? You know the answer to that. A proper parent, understanding his duties and his vocation, rules the child for the child's good, so long as the child remains a child.

When you are ruling a thing, you do not consult the thing. You do not consult the machine about how it wants to be governed; you do not seek its consent to government, nor grant it participation in government. When a child is very young, you rule it in the same way. You do not ask the child's consent to being ruled. You do not ask the child's opinion in reaching decisions on family matters. The child is ruled *absolutely* in the sense of *without participation*, yet *for the child's good*.

Finally, we come to the case in which man rules man, both being adult. As in the case of the child, the rule should be for the good of the ruled. But now, because of the equality among all mature persons, the rule should not be absolute, but with consent on the part of the ruled and with his participation in government.

From these three relationships, you can see at once two ways in which men can be misruled. When men are ruled as if they were things, i.e., *ruled or governed for the good of the ruler, with no voice in their own government*, ruler and ruled are related as tyrant and slave. Men ruled as slaves are men being used as instruments and so being misused, because they are persons being treated as if they were things. And when one man rules another paternalistically as if that other were a child, the rule is despotic. In fact, the Greek word "despotic" actually means the rule of *paterfamilias*,

the rule of the householder over the immature persons in the family. When such rule is over children, it is not a bad rule; but when this kind of rule is exercised over mature persons, they are subjected to despotism, even if they are benevolently ruled.

The only just or proper rule of one mature person over another is one in which they are related as equals, and both have a voice in their common affairs, though they may have different functions. Let me illustrate this.

The first distinction among the forms of government is the distinction between tyranny and all the other forms. Tyranny, we can say, is absolutely unjust. What we mean by tyranny is that kind of government in which men are treated as things and so are enslaved.

The second basic distinction is more important, but a little harder to understand. It is the distinction between *absolute* and *limited* government; or, if you will, between a *government of men* and a *government of laws*. Limited government, republican government, constitutional government, government of laws, are all ways of saying the same thing. On the other hand, there is absolute government, despotic government, government of men.

The most interesting way of expressing the distinction is in terms of *government of laws* and *government of men*. You may think it is absurd to contrast government of laws and government of men. Every government involves laws or regulations, and men are always also involved. Of course, but that is not the meaning of the distinction. What then is meant when we say: "Ours is a government of laws, not men." We mean that the rulers do not rule by any power or authority vested in their own persons. We mean that the rulers rule only as office-holders, by virtue of such power or authority as is vested in the office they hold; and this office is limited by the fundamental law of the land—the

constitution. That is why we say it is limited government. The power office-holders can exercise is limited by the office they hold. They wield it only as long as they hold the office. Moreover, they can be thrown out of office for misuse of it. Above all, in this form of government, the most important office is that of citizenship.

* Number one in a series of lectures entitled "Major Issues of Our Times", for the Industrial Indemnity Company, San Francisco (1956).

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max,

My son just returned home for Christmas and he is more excited than ever about learning and living well. When I visited the school [Magdalen College in NH] with him last year, it was one of the happiest bunch of kids I ever met. And I do mean happy in the sense that both Aristotle and Dr. Adler talked about.

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Max,

I don't get to read as much from the Center as I would like to, but I consider the reading I do get to do among the most profitable self-development experiences available to me.

All the best,

George Dudley

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
is published weekly for its members, by the
Center for the Study of The Great Ideas

Founded by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann (1990)

E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com

Homepage: TheGreatIdeas.org

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.