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THE DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION *

Part 2 of 3

by Mortimer Adler

Citizenship

If you were to ask “What is the basic office that anyone can hold in a republican or constitutional form of government?” I would not say “the presidency” or “the chief magistracy.” I would say “citizenship.” For that is the only permanent office and the one that is prerequisite to holding any other.

This is of the utmost importance to understand. If you understand that a constitutional government is rule by office-holders’ and that they rule citizens who are their equals, citizens who have a voice in electing them and a voice in the government which they administer, you see that constitutional government is government of, by, and for citizens. Such government is a government of free men and equals who rule and are ruled in turn. It is quite different from despotic government, in which those who are ruled have no voice in their own affairs. They are not ruled as equals, but by a “superior” man who rules them as “inferiors” even if he rules them benevolently and takes care of them.

Once you set up constitutional government, and with it the office of citizenship, the question arises: *Who shall be citizens?* Some men, or all? If some, which? This is the great question that any constitutional government must face as soon as it exists.

Grounds for Exclusion from Citizenship

There are only three just grounds for excluding anyone from citizenship. They are: *infancy*, *mental deficiency* (any of the insanities or feeble-minded conditions) and *criminal turpitude*. No other attribute of man justly disqualifies him from citizenship. If I am right about this, then a just constitution is built upon the principle of *universal suffrage*; and an unjust constitution is a constitution that has *restricted franchise*.

“Suffrage” and “Franchise”

Within the large genus of republics, or constitutional governments, there is now a third and final distinction among the forms of government. Any republic or constitutional government with a restricted franchise, with restrictions—other than the three disqualifications I have just mentioned, is an *oligarchy*. A constitution in which you have universal suffrage, with no more than the three disqualifications mentioned, is a *democracy*.

The democratic principle of suffrage is *universal and equal* manhood suffrage—one man, one vote. This defines democracy. *Democracy is republican or constitutional government, in the constitution of which is embodied the principle of universal, equal manhood suffrage. It is, therefore, a politically classless society with equal rights and liberties for all.* There are no unjustly disfranchised persons. Or, in the language of John Stuart Mill, there are no “political pariahs.” No one is disqualified except by his own default.

Equality and Liberty

I would like to call your attention to this last point. The two words “equality” and “liberty” are great words to conjure up all kinds of fundamental notions; and we are often torn between what they imply. The institution of republican government is, in the first instance, a great step forward toward *liberty*. Until you have republican government, no one is free. Under tyrannies or despotisms, the ruled are always subjected or enslaved. The transition from absolute, despotic, and tyrannical governments to republics is the transition from no freedom to *some* freedom. The other transition’, from oligarchical republics to democratic republics, is not a transition from no freedom to some freedom. It is a transition from *freedom for some men* to *freedom for all men*. In other words, the democratic revolution, the

democratic change, is governed by the principle of equality, as the republican change is governed by the principle of *liberty*.

The great thing that came into the world with the establishment of republics is freedom. The great thing that came into the world with the establishment of democracy is equality. That is why I do not refer to democracy as *the free society*. That it is free goes without saying. But freedom is only part of the picture. Freedom exists in republics that are not democratic. The essence of democracy is *equal freedom, for all*. And that is why a democracy is most accurately described as a politically classless society.

Three Principles of Democracy

Having defined democracy, let me now try to demonstrate that it is the ideal, the most just or the only perfectly just form of government. This truth rests on three principles. If these three principles are true, the conclusion about democracy is sound. The three principles are as follows.

(1) *Man is by nature a political animal*. All men are by nature *constitutional* animals. Let me explain. We are gregarious; we need to associate with our fellowmen. Many other animals are gregarious also: the social insects (wasps, ants, termites) and the herding mammals (elephants, wolves, and bison). But we differ from all the other herding or gregarious animals by the fact that they associate by instinct. The forms of their association are fixed by their very nature. We do not associate by instinct. We associate by need; and when we associate, we do so by reason and free will. That is why, if you look at human associations—the family or tribe, the city or state—you see the wide variety of forms that human association takes. We *constitute* them ourselves. That is what I mean by saying “man is by nature a political or constitutional animal.”

(2) My second proposition is one that I take from the Declaration of independence:—*All men are by nature equal*. I do not mean that they are all equally strong, equally bright, equally charming, equally anything else *except one thing*. They are all equally persons, and the most important thing I can say about a person is that *all persons are of equal worth*. One person is not worth more than another. The intrinsic dignity and worth of all persons is the same.

(3) The third principle of this demonstration is the principle of justice, which is, simply, that *we should treat equals equally and unequals unequally*. Since all men are equal as persons, you can see the absolute injustice of tyranny, in which men are treated as things; the slight justice of benevolent despotism, in which men are treated as persons, but treated as unequals, as children rather than as men; the relatively greater justice of oligarchical government, in which *some men*, at least, are treated as full equals; and finally, the absolute and perfect justice of democracy, in which all men are treated as they should be treated, namely, as persons, as political animals, and as full equals.

I said that justice requires us to treat equals equally and unequals unequally. You may ask, therefore: What about human inequalities? In view of the fact that men are both equal and unequal, should not the inequality of men be recognized politically?

Egalitarian Democracy and Aristocracy

The answer is “Yes.” We must avoid two false extremes. One is egalitarian democracy, which considers only the equality of men and pays no attention to their inequality. In some of the Greek city-states, for example, the magistrates were chosen by lot from the citizenry on the ground that all were equally capable of holding any public office. They made no effort to select superior

men for superior offices in the state. This is wrong. A democracy should recognize that there is a hierarchy of functions to be performed and a hierarchy of men to perform them. Such recognition of a hierarchy of functions and of capacities acknowledges human inequality in a way that is not inconsistent with the fundamental principle of democratic equality.

On the other hand, an aristocracy of fixed or hereditary classes, which is usually a masked oligarchy, gives some men special privileges and powers without regard to merit on their part. We must observe here the distinction made by Thomas Jefferson in his correspondence with John Adams about aristocracy. Jefferson distinguished between the artificial aristocracies of specially privileged classes and the natural aristocracy—the aristocracy of talent or virtue. Jefferson thought that a natural aristocracy was the most important ingredient in any society.

Applying Jefferson's insight, we can now define democracy as a politically classless society with a rotating aristocracy. Each generation has its own aristocracy, and no aristocracy that reaches the top in that generation perpetuates itself into the next. Each generation produces its own best men to perform the most important functions of government.

HISTORY OF THE MOTION TOWARD DEMOCRACY

Now let us look at the history of the progress toward democracy. Let me divide the history into two stages. The first stage runs from the sixth century B.C. to the nineteenth century; the second stage, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present day.

THE FIRST STAGE

The first stage is the story of the first great political

revolution—the revolution which sets up constitutional government.

Antiquity

The first cities were under royal rule, under despotic rule. Why? Because they actually grew out of families and tribes. Cities like Athens and Rome were nothing but amalgamations of small groups or tribes that came to live together. Since, in the family or tribe, the rule of the elders prevailed, paternal or royal rule was simply a perpetuation of the rule of the old men of the tribe. But, says Aristotle, the man who first founded the state was the greatest of benefactors. A more accurate translation of the Greek would be “the man who first *constituted* the state was the greatest of benefactors.” Aristotle thus celebrates the genius who first saw that it was possible for men to live in cities without paternal or royal rule, and under a constitution. The invention of constitutional government took place around the fifth century B.C. It was an invention more far-reaching and important than any of the mechanical inventions of our industrial life.

The first republics—Athens, Sparta, Thebes, and Corinth—were puny as compared with the great empires of Persia and Egypt. As tyrants and despots so often feel, the Persian king could not stand having these small groups of free men living in his vicinity. This finally led to the Persian attack on Greece. The Greeks, a handful of them, in the mountain passes at Thermopoli, on the plains, and on the sea, beat the Persians back. We always look upon this as a great victory of free men over slaves. It was a magnificent victory. Constitutional government defended itself and triumphed. How long did that triumph last? How long did these Greek cities endure? Less than one hundred years. Why did they collapse? Two reasons:

1. They were internally torn by class divisions. What Karl Marx calls the class war is described by Plato

and Aristotle as “the conflict between the city of the rich and the city of the poor.” Quite apart from the slave revolts in Sparta, the fight between the rich and the poor in all the Greek cities was one of the causes of their downfall.

2. The other cause was external war. The imperialism of Athens and Sparta brought on the Peloponnesian war, and so weakened these cities that Philip of Macedon could sweep down from the north and conquer them. In less than one hundred years there was not a trace of republican or constitutional government left on the face of the earth. Less than a hundred years!

The Middle Ages

After the fall of Rome, Europe was splintered by the feudal system. There were thousands of small principalities, duchies, counties—small earls and petty lords, each with his own little domain. Slowly, out of this anarchy the medieval kingdom developed. It was quite different from the kingdoms of antiquity.

The medieval king, under the feudal system, had a contractual relation with the nobles of his realm. I want to read to you the language in which the nobles of Aragon expressed their pledge of fealty to the king, at the same time that he swore his coronation oath before them. “We, who are as good as you, swear to you, who are no better than we, to accept you as our King, provided you observe all our liberties and laws; but if not, not.”

Thus we see that the king was not an absolute ruler, but was bound by constitutional limitations. When King John was made to sign Magna Carta by the nobles, the constitution was being enforced. How long did such government last? Not much beyond the fifteenth century. After that you have the emergence of the

Hapsburgs in Austria, Spain and the Low Countries; the Tudors and the Stuarts in England; and finally, the Bourbons in France. These kings dissolved the royal and political regime by throwing its constitutional aspect out, and making the government purely royal. By the time you get to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there is no vestige of constitutional government in Europe. Kingdoms were again as despotic as they had been in antiquity.

Modern Times

What happens next? The republican revolution takes place once again in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the great revolution in England in 1688, which threw the Stuarts out and brought in the Prince of Orange; the American revolution of 1776; the French revolution of 1789. This continues through the nineteenth century: in Middle Europe, in 1848; in South America, where republics emerge in the middle of the nineteenth century; right down to 1905, when Russia had its first revolution and the people obtained a parliament from the Czar.

From 1688 to 1905, a revolution was going on in the western world. What kind of revolution? A democratic revolution? Not at all! The republican revolution, the same one that the Greeks started. It has taken place again and again. And that revolution is still far from established. In our own lifetime, it has been lost in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Argentina. Do not think, therefore, that the republican revolution is an assured success. It is still something we have to preserve, because without republican institutions, democracies cannot come into being. But republican institutions are not democracies; they are the precursors of them.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max,

Another excellent Adler essay. It makes me want to yell to people to wake up, read this, understand what is happening in our society. But I am reluctantly coming to believe the majority of them are either asleep or just deliberately stupid.

Here's an item from the front page of a recent Wall Street journal:

"Bush's business donors are quite pleased with his work so far, and lobbyists have been meeting with White House officials to craft the president's 2002 agenda. They seek tax breaks, lawsuit protection, containment of health-care costs and relaxed labor and environmental rules."

Incredible!

They want more wealth without contributing anything in return... and want to take wealth from those who produce it.

I am interested to see Dr. Adler's next two essays, to see whether he considers the strong current trend toward establishing a pseudo-aristocratic class as a danger to democracy, as we all now see the very wealthy push to shirk taxation and to repress and roll back recent progress in protecting the environment and civil rights.

Terrence O'Neill

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Kathy Weaver, New Brunswick

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