

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Jan '02

Center for the Study of The Great Ideas

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THE DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION *

Part 3 of 3

by Mortimer Adler

THE SECOND STAGE

I turn now to the second stage, which has taken place within the last 150 years. Let me divide my story into two parts: first, what happened in the world of action; and second, what happened in the world of thought.

If I were forced to put my finger on a point in history, a time and place of which I could say “Here in the world of action, the stirrings toward democracy first showed themselves,” I would put my finger on the dateline of 1647. At that time, on a field in Putney, England, in the midst of Cromwell’s army, a group of men called the Levellers, led by Major Rainborough and Sir John Wildman told Cromwell and Colonel Ireton (his son-in-law) what they wanted when the war against King Charles was won. They said, “We would like to know, after we have won this war against the King, who are going to be the *people* of England?”

That is quite a question, isn’t it? “Who are going to be the people of England?” Rainborough and Wildman took the position that “every he who breathes the air of England has as much interest in this land, and as much right to have a voice in his own government as the richest he among us.” Ireton and Cromwell said No to this demand; for they felt that if every man had an equal voice in the affairs of England, then those with a fixed and permanent interest in landed estates and commercial ventures patented by the King would soon be voted out of their property. To protect the rights of property, they believed it was necessary to restrict suffrage to the men of property. This seemed a reasonable position at the time. If you gave every man an equal voice, the poor would dominate Parliament and it would not be long before they would find a way to change the property relationships.

In 1789, our forefathers met in Philadelphia for two years to debate the framework of our Constitution. The question of suffrage was raised, but no one spoke out for

universal suffrage. They could not agree about the precise extent to which suffrage should be restricted. They left this matter to the separate states.

In New York State, in 1821, there was a convention to reform the Constitution of New York. It was called for the purpose of broadening the suffrage. Before 1821, only farmers in upstate New York with a freehold of five hundred pounds a year elected the Senators of the Upper House. The people with less property than that could vote only for the Assembly. The proposed reform was to enable everyone to vote for Senators as well as for Assemblymen.

Chancellor Kent, one of the great legal figures in New York State, speaking against this in 1821, said exactly what Ireton and Cromwell had said: “This mania for universal suffrage jeopardizes the principles of property and the principles of liberty.” That it jeopardizes the principles of property is perfectly clear; that it jeopardizes the principles of liberty is not so clear. The only liberty that is threatened is the greater freedom of the rich as against the poor. Equal suffrage would make their freedom equal.

In England, the three great reform bills of the 1830s, 1860s, and 1880s—and finally the House of Lords Act in 1911—were required to bring about the constitutional changes by which the English form of government approached democracy. Even then, the Women’s Suffrage Act, which enfranchised one-half of the population, did not take effect until 1918 in England.

In this country, there were no suffrage reforms in the Jacksonian period. We talk about Jacksonian democracy; but during the period of Jackson and for ten or fifteen years afterward there were men in this country who carried ball-and-chain and were indentured servants. There was a vast, disfranchised horde of those

who may have had some *protection* from the state, but certainly had no *privileges* in the state—no voice in their own government. The Civil War amendments began to change the picture, but you have to wait until 1920 in this country before the female half of the population is enfranchised. This indicates how very recent democracy is in the two most advanced countries in the world.

Let us look now at the realm of political thought. When did political philosophers first come to regard democracy as ideal? No thinker prior to 1800 had ever spoken a good word for democracy. In the vast literature of political theory, there are no proponents of democracy prior to 1800. With the possible exception of Robert Owen, the first voice that speaks for democracy is raised in 1835. It is the voice of a Frenchman, Alexis De Tocqueville, who came to this country and wrote a book—not for Americans, but for Europeans to read—called *Democracy in America*. I cannot recommend any book more highly. It is not only an amazing journal of observation, but an amazing book of prophecy. De Tocqueville, in effect, said: “For the first time in the history of mankind, a people is beginning to experience equality of conditions. America is setting up a society in which, eventually, equality of conditions will prevail.” This is what he meant by democracy, and quite rightly. And he said to his European brethren: “This revolution, once started, will never stop. It may be misguided, it may have abuses, it may fall short of its own great destiny, but it will never be stopped. It will sweep the world.”

De Tocqueville’s work was not, however, a great work in political theory. The first great book of political theory which holds democracy up as the ideal is dated 1863. It is John Stuart Mill’s *Representative Government*. Even so, John Stuart Mill, like many of us today, was a reluctant democrat. He wanted universal suffrage, but he also wanted it unequal. He wanted to give the brighter people, the technically more advanced people,

more votes than the rest. He could not bring himself to trust the laboring classes in 1863. Yet he spoke out for women's suffrage. All in all, Mill represents the first advocate of universal suffrage among the great political philosophers.

THE DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION IN PROCESS—HOW FAR IT HAS SUCCEEDED

Let me first ask why it took so long to get started? Why, if democracy is the ideal, did it take so long for men to recognize it? The answer, I think, is not that men are obtuse or blind to the truth; it is not that men are intrinsically unjust or hard-hearted. None of these things is the answer. The answer is that no one could see the truth prior to industrialization. That is why we are absolutely wrong if we think we can carry democracy to India or China today, to the Middle East or Middle Europe. In no place where industrialization is not yet advanced can democracy either exist or be understood.

I will have more to say about this in my next lecture. Industrialization brings about an indispensable emancipation of men, which makes democracy possible in fact and thinkable to the mind. This explains why most of the world, which is still at a low level of industrialization, is still not ready to think or act democratically.

Now the question we must face is, does democracy fully exist anywhere, even on paper? I know it does not exist in England and the United States. It may exist in Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand. In England, even though the House of Lords is just a vestige of its former self, even though the Lords are almost shorn of power, nevertheless, the existence of the House of Lords, constitutionally, is undemocratic. And in our country, the poll tax, which operates against universal suffrage, must be abolished from every state by an amendment to

the federal constitution.

But even if these changes took place—even if we had the poll tax amendment ratified and in operation—would America be a democracy, a working democracy, a democracy in social fact and actual practice? Anyone who reads the daily newspapers knows the answer.

THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy has three major obstacles to overcome. The first is that conditions of equality must be more than conditions of political equality; they must be conditions of economic equality, too. Economic democracy is needed for political democracy.

Secondly, conditions of equality require equal educational opportunity for all. That does not mean an equal number of years in school for all. It means that the *best* education, the education once given to the few, must now be given to all.

Until these problems are solved, the democratic revolution will not be completed. It may take us at least one hundred years to solve them.

The third obstacle to the prosperity and completion of the democratic revolution is the one that Arnold Toynbee mentioned—the evil of war.

The Evil of War

Even if we remove the evil of class, we still have to face the evil of war.

War consumes too much of our wealth. Democratic education and economic democracy require us to make a better use of wealth. But this is only part of the reason why war threatens democracy. The other is the one that

Alexander Hamilton stated so succinctly in *The Federalist Papers*. Let me read you what he said: “The violent destruction of life and property, incident to war, the continual effort and alarm attendant on a state of continual danger, will compel nations the most attached to liberty to resort for repose and security to institutions which have a tendency to destroy their civil and political rights. To be more safe, they at length become willing to run the risk of being less free.”

We know this to be true in our own day. The threat of war is inimicable to the best interests of democracy. Liberty, justice, rights, cannot be preserved in a state of war—the cold war which we have suffered so long.

Democracy and capitalism—these two great revolutions—need world peace in which to develop and prosper.

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



IN MEMORIAM

Robert M. Hutchins (Jan. 17, 1899 - May 17, 1977)

He would have been 103 today. In his memory I'll quote from his 1935 University of Chicago commencement address. I don't suppose any commencement

speaker ever told it like it is more than he did here, and it's every bit as true today as it was then.

Dr. Jay Gold, Senior Fellow
Center for the Study of The Great Ideas

My experience and observation lead me to warn you that the greatest, the most insidious, the most paralyzing danger you will face is the danger of corruption. Time will corrupt you. Your friends, your wives or husbands, your business or professional associates will corrupt you; your social, political, and financial ambitions will corrupt you. The worst thing about life is that it is demoralizing.

“Getting on” is the great American aspiration. The way to get on is to be safe, to be sound, to be agreeable, to be inoffensive, to have no views on important matters not sanctioned by the majority, by your superiors, or by your group. We are convinced that by knowing the right people, wearing the right clothes, saying the right things, holding the right opinions, and thinking the right thoughts, we shall all get on; we shall all get on to some motion-picture paradise, surrounded by fine cars, refreshing drinks, and admiring ladies. So persuasive is this picture that we find politicians during campaigns making every effort to avoid saying anything; we find important people condoning fraud and corruption in high places because it would be upsetting to attack it; and we find, I fear, that university presidents limit their utterances to platitudes. Timidity thus engendered turns into habit.

So I am worried about your morals. This University will not have done its whole duty to the nation if you give way before the current of contemporary life. Believe me, you are closer to the truth now than you ever will be again. Do not let “practical” men tell you that you should surrender your ideals because they are im-

practical. Do not be reconciled to dishonesty, indecency, and brutality because gentlemanly ways have been discovered of being dishonest, indecent, and brutal. As time passes, resist the corruption that comes with it. Take your stand now before time has corrupted you.

For more memories of Robert Hutchins go to:
www.bayarea.net/~kins/AboutMe/Hutchins_as_Frame.html

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max and Fellow Members:

I just purchased a excellent book: Jean Vanier's *Made for Happiness—Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle*. It is put out by House of Anansi Press Limited, Toronto. It's website is www.anansi.ca The price is about \$21.95 Canadian. The chapter headings include "The Ethics of Desire", "Pleasure and Friendship: The Spice of Life", "The Hunger for Truth", "Virtues Great and Small", "The Time for Growth", "The Shortcomings and Value of Aristotelian Ethics".

You may wish to check it out.

Rob Sutherland, Senior Fellow
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MEMBER'S DISCUSSION FORUM

Max,

I would like to take issue with Mr. O'Neill's recent Letter to the Editor [#159] wherein he criticized U.S. Corporations for their lobbying efforts on behalf of lower taxes, lawsuit protection, etc., he summarizes his criticisms by claiming "They [U.S. Corporations] want

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

While I would agree with Mr. O’Neill that corporations often lobby for policies that serve parochial interests at the expense of the general good, (the steel industry’s call for import protections for example), I believe that he has carried his argument to an illogical extreme.

First, who is the “they” that Mr. O’Neill refers to as wanting more wealth without earning it? U.S. Corporations are, of course, not real people. They are legal fictions and they distribute all of the wealth that they create to one of three groups. Does Mr. O’Neill mean to refer to the shareholders, a group which includes more than 50% of U.S. households, or to the management or to the employees? Each of these groups has a strong vested interest in the prosperity of the corporation and each of these groups pays individual taxes, at highly progressive rates, on whatever share of corporate wealth creation they are able to claim.

Second, Mr. O’Neill’s claim that “[they] want to take more wealth from those who produce it”, while ambiguous, is disturbingly reminiscent of the failed ideas of Marxism. Is there anyone remaining on this planet who would argue against the necessity of employing, and adequately rewarding, capital in order to produce the wealth required to ensure that human beings have the opportunity to live a good life?

Jim Reardon

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WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Nick Hordyk, Saskatchewan

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

E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com

Homepage: TheGreatIdeas.org

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

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