

DEMOCRACY AS A FORM OF EXPERIMENTALISM.

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TO interpret as sheer experimentalism any form of the state—and particularly the democratic form, which during the last century has, as Viscount Bryce notes,¹ been establishing itself as the universal norm—is of serious moment. The seriousness of such an interpretation grows chiefly out of the unique ubiquity of the political state: uncertainty in the ultimate authority infects with uncertainty all lesser associations. Man's fondness for absolutes indicates his dislike for contingency. With Luther, men turned from infallibility of Church to infallibility of Bible and from infallibility of Bible to guidance indeed more vague but hardly thought less infallible, an immutable Law of Nature.² Human nature seems such that it cannot stay content at its job until it feels its back against the wall of the universe. In order to tackle any problem with concentration and whole-hearted devotion, man needs some assurance that all other (potential) problems will for the time being stay out. The human terror at having too many things become problematic at once, has made men slow to welcome democracy and reluctant even after its coming to recognize it for what it is—a form of genuine experimentalism.

And so the implied guarantee *about things in general*, derived from the infallibility of king or pope or book or nature, has for long seemed to men ample compensation for the infinite trouble *about things in particular* caused by those who claimed the infallibility. So thoroughly does the "turbulency of the crowd" terrify even the crowd itself, in prospect or in retrospect, that for long men chose to bear the ills they had (under autocracy) rather than fly to those they knew not of (in an experimenting democracy). Hobbes' insight is essentially sound in that men do prefer *less* with more se-

¹ *Modern Democracies*, 1:3.

² Ritchie, *Natural Rights*, pp. 13-14.

curity for enjoying it, to *more* conditioned by continual uncertainty of tenure. Men will gladly exchange many "liberties" for a very little order, if they think that order cannot be had in any other way. This profound human desire for an absolute guarantee of the future, for infallible guidance, has had a marked influence on men's notions of how democracy is to justify itself. These notions may be grouped under three general philosophies of democracy.

The first of these philosophies has to do with the individual-as-such, his nature and his capacity; the second with the group-as-such, its nature and its capacity; and the third, with a combination of the two eventuating in a logic of scientific control.

I. *A Philosophy of the Individual.*

The individual-as-such—i. e., the individual guided neither by God from above nor by an immutable law of nature from beneath—has been universally adjudged impotent. "It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps." On this conviction kings have appointed themselves keepers of men; on this conviction men have gladly suffered these self-appointed rulers. Had not inheritance provided tyrants, fear of the future would have raised them up. This inherited view of human nature, democracy has not entirely overcome, but has sought to reconcile in the curious notion that though a man as a man may be ignorant and fallible, as a voter he is wiser and more dependable. This faith may be based, as Bryce suggests,³ on the tacit assumption that to bestow the ballot, bestows also the will to use it, and that to establish a popular system of education, guarantees that suffrage will be used wisely. Or it may be based on the more naive view that when a mere man approaches the ballot box (which has gathered a kind of halo from current discussions of its purity, etc.), he somehow enters a sanctuary of authority from which he, like the Pope, speaks *ex cathedra*.

Whatever be its basis, it can hardly be doubted that this comforting faith is abroad in democratic societies. This view of the individual might possess some validity if on the ballot he as a voter were confronted with a sharp issue either alternative of which would lead to better results than he unaided could produce. This would, however, obviate the need of his voting at all. Moreover, no party is willing to admit that the issue on which the common man votes is not a live alternative, fraught with genuine significance to his country. No mystic faith can get more virtue out of a ballot box than party leaders and voters have put into it. If it is not in man that

³ *Modern Democracies*, p. 70.

walketh to direct his steps, then no electoral machinery can mysteriously endow him with power from on high.

II. *A Philosophy of the Group.*

But if reassurance cannot be found in the individual, let us seek it in the group. A group, it is argued, is more than an aggregation of individuals; and out of this "more" comes super-direction. May not the decision of twelve ignorant jurors be a wise verdict? The admitted fallibility of the individual is supplanted by a new kind of infallibility when many separate men become a group. The actual increase of power and wisdom, so this view would hold, corresponds in some mystic way with the *feeling* of heightened security which a gregarious animal feels upon joining his group. Decisions that would not inspire the isolated individual with confidence seem quite the inevitable thing when one is a member of a great group. This feeling of rightness and wisdom probably arises from the fact that a crowd is mightier and is therefore better able to enforce its desires than is the individual. But if we are to preserve any distinction between might and right, we can hardly take this as evidence of the wisdom or rightness of the crowd. Moreover, the crowd is more likely to be swayed by uncontrolled primitive emotions (the very antithesis of wisdom) than is the individual, as mob actions testify. This doctrine does not greatly gain in plausibility even when stated in the impressive terms of a "real will" which, whether men know it or can know it, coincides with the good of all, though it may override the concrete wishes of every member of the group.⁴ While, then, we may grant that a democracy may conduce materially to the feeling of security, it does not appear wherein it really has any assurance other than what Hobson has called "the hitherto baffling hope which has deluded several generations of democrats, the power of numbers."⁵ No more in the crowd-as-such, then, than in the individual-as-such, do we find any superior excellence of a democracy.

Indeed, it will be seen, I think, upon close analysis, that to the extent that democracy has emphasized either of the foregoing motives, it is not really democracy at all. People who emphasize either of these motives are in search of a new kind of Absolute. On the one hand, they are looking for a magic that will make the voter as

⁴ Hobhouse in *The Metaphysical Theory of the State* appears to me to do full justice to this view, both in his refutation and in his evaluation.

⁵ J. A. Hobson, *Democracy After the War*, p. 159.

voter infallible; they seek a substitute for intelligence. Either divine power or natural law must guarantee the outcome. Professor Croly has remarked that "the faith of Americans in their country is religious, if not in its intensity, at any rate in its almost absolute and universal authority."⁶ "The powers that be are ordained of God." The voter of the popular faith is but the lineal descendant of the king, and so the voter as sovereign can do no wrong either. Here, then, instead of one, we have many kings, each being the same sort of absolute sovereign as was the ancient king. It seems, on the other hand, that this same sanction is not lacking in the philosophy of those who find efficacy in the democratic group-as-such. The old adage expresses this truth literally, *vox populi, vox dei*, the first implication of which is the guarantee of infallibility. The upshot of both of these philosophies seems to be this: we do not want to go wrong, and consequently we cannot do so.⁷ But when we seek some rational guarantee of the validity of this naive but elemental logic, God or Nature seems the final sanction. Verily the soul of man will not rest until it rests in certainty. If this be in fact democracy, it is democracy made bearable by undemocratic blessings. It is democracy builded on absolutistic foundations.

On the contrary, we are coming to admit for the first time that democratic institutions must rest on democratic foundations; and a democratic regime must, if it be bearable at all, be rendered so by democratic assurances. If such foundations and such assurances cannot be found, then we must frankly resign ourselves either to despair or to absolutism once more. Our political theory cannot exist half slave and half free. This conviction brings us face to face with a third philosophy of democracy.

III. *A Philosophy of Scientific Control.*

This is the philosophy of experimentalism. Negatively put, this philosophy does not seek to read out of the individual-as-such or out of the group-as-such an infallible guarantee of success. It rests its case neither in divine guidance of king or of sovereign voter nor in any law of nature that pushes us up—willy-nilly—toward an inevitable goal. It is equally distrustful of any optimism the basis of which is laid in a hypothetical "real will" that may do violence to

⁶ *The Promise of American Life*, p. 1.

⁷ Cf. James description of the bases of selfishness: "Whatever is me is precious; this is me; therefore this is precious; Whatever is mine must not fail; this is mine; therefore this must not fail." *Psychology*, I:318.

the "will of all" as it journeys to the Absolute, the reconciler of all contradictions. These are all would-be short-cuts to that Land of Promise whereunto there is in truth no royal road. Indeed, these remnants of absolutistic hopes are more than excrescences upon a genuinely democratic order; they are verily among the worst enemies of democracy. As Croly has vigorously declared: "To conceive the better American future⁸ as a consummation which will take care of itself,—as the necessary result of our customary conditions, institutions, and ideas,—persistence in such a conception is admirably designed to deprive American life of any promise at all."⁹ Such views are forces of retardation because they encourage a soft dependence upon mystic, if not magic, means; they encourage instead of a belief in the efficacy of human effort, indolence born of faith in a "manifest destiny;"¹⁰ they lead us to judge institutions, not by their results, but by their pretensions—a procedure that has been at the expense of mankind from the beginning; and, finally, such views give us the feeling of security without the security itself and at the same time cause us, in the enjoyment of the feeling, to neglect the attainment of genuine security in the only way possible, through intelligent and far-sighted control.

On the positive side, democracy as experimentalism makes it clear that, in whatever other sense equality prevails, we are at least all equally devoid of infallibility. Instead of an *a priori* deduction of inevitable goods, we have only our own confessedly imperfect instruments with which to brave the future. "Trial and error" is here king of all. Genuine democracy represents man come of age. He now must take himself for better or for worse. This is a game at which we must throw our cards—our lives, our honor, or sacred all—upon the table of contingency and look for no other sanction

⁸ Croly has elsewhere said that on the whole we "still believe that somehow and sometime something better will happen to good Americans than has happened to men in any other country". *The Promise of American Life*, p. 3.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 5. Cf. also J. A. Hobson, *Democracy After the War*, p. 162. "One of the most subtle defences of conservatism has been the modern notion, sedulously sown, that democracy was a process so inevitable and predestined in the evolution of society that no clearly conscious and purposive direction was required. . . . Democracy cannot be brought about by a drift or tendency of unconscious purpose; it needs conscious organization and direction by the co-operative will of individuals and nations."

¹⁰ Croly says (*ibid.* p. 4 *supra*): "The American calls his country, not the Land of Promise, but the Land of Destiny, and quotes H. G. Wells as saying: "When one talks to an American of his national purpose, he seems a little at a loss; if we speak of his national destiny, he responds with alacrity".

than that provided by the experiment itself. Democracy, like all things else, must submit to the test of time. "That such an experimental philosophy of life," says Dewey, "means a dangerous experiment goes without saying. It permits, sooner or later it may require, every alleged sacrosanct principle to submit to ordeal by fire—to trial by service rendered."¹¹ But the very danger of the challenge banishes fear and trembling and arms man with a new strength as he goes forth to work out his political salvation.

But since this philosophy confesses its only instrument to be experiment, trial and error, and since it proposes to apply this instrument to the state, upon which under our present system practically all our other institutions and cherished values vitally depend, it must be prepared to show evidence—if there be any—that its hit-or-miss experiments will not be more "miss" than "hit," that its trial-and-error will not be all error.

Briefly put, the answer to this legitimate and highly important question is found in the fact that man is a *learning* animal, that he can profit by past experience. This human endowment expresses itself in both passive and active adaptation to the environment (i. e., first in fitting man to his environment and then in fitting the environment to man.) This enables man constantly to change his mode of reaction to the changing world. There is nothing here of infallibility; so long as the future remains the future, it will remain contingent. Time is time, and the road in front is entirely open.¹² And herein is the element of risk, here is the genuine experimentalism. But in man's ability to learn is the ground for hope that his trial and error plan may be made to yield more successes than failures. And here the group fortifies the individual; here the individual enriches the group. For if we will avoid abstractions, we shall not contrast the individual and the group; but shall remember, as Professor Tufts has said, that we have "a social individual," "a society which reflects individuality."¹³ Through collaboration and comparison of experiments generalized conclusions can be had. Isolation of conditions can be effected, and improvement be made continuous, though the generations come and go.¹⁴ In the social nature of the individual and in his consequent ever-enlarging co-opera-

¹¹ *German Philosophy and Politics*, pp. 125-6.

¹² It is interesting to note that concurrent with the growth of democracy, new philosophies emphasizing the reality and significance of time—Bergsonism and Pragmatism particularly—have arisen.

¹³ *Philosophical Review*, 5:379.

¹⁴ As for technique, compare Will Durant's proposal for a Society of Social Research, in *Philosophy and the Social Problem*.

tion¹⁵ lies the possibility of intelligent control, both of mankind and of mankind's environment. It is in the concept of continuing and ever-increasing control that there is to be found a substitute for absolutism. Through a never-ending series of experiments so set as to eliminate the errors of the preceding ones, we can gradually approach as a limit, happier adaptation to and completer mastery of, our world.

Distrust of such a conception of democracy ought to be lessened by noting the fact that the suggestion really is that we apply science to the problem of government. If democracy is ever to be scientific, it must consciously and frankly become experimental. Science knows no Absolute; its progress is indeed in inverse ratio to the *a priori* element in it. It is an interesting fact that political theory is the last great interest of life to falter at the threshold of science. Why, even religion has entered the kingdom before politics! As was suggested at the beginning of this paper, the innumerable interests¹⁶ that the state includes has made political theory the citadel of conservatism. But as rapidly as it becomes indubitably clear that the security that absolutistic theories promise is false, so rapidly, it seems certain, will democracy, now spread throughout the world, seek the only basis that can promise well for the long future. Grief over loss of impossible infallibility or of specious certainty will in time be replaced by a new found joy in creating manifold new values in our human world. Experimental democracy means a turning at last from magic to a growing control of such means as can most surely realize whatever ends we set up as constituting the goods of life.

¹⁵ The need of and the progress of co-operation is suggestively sketched by Professor Tufts in his *Ethics of Co-operation*.

¹⁶ For the state, to which alone the term democracy has as yet been seriously applied, even in democratic countries tends to swallow up all other interests and organizations. To what extent this has come true, Hobson vividly shows. *Democracy After the War*, p. 160.