

LEADERSHIP, DEMOCRACY, AND CULTURE

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

THE post-war reaction against democracy and free political institutions continues with undiminished vigor. Dictatorships thrive; parliamentary government is becoming a byword and reproach in Europe; even in France certain groups and journals have been demanding a national committee of safety and the suspension of the constitution as the only available means of averting financial anarchy and civil strife.

Books and articles continue to be written and published to express disillusionment in respect of democracy. The confident and optimistic predictions of the early champions of democracy, we are told, have been sadly falsified by events; democracy is neither just, reasonable, nor appreciative of the blessings of civil and religious liberty. Majorities are often bigoted, wrong, intolerant, perverse; the servants, so-called, of the majority in legislative or executive departments of government are compelled to lie, pander to popular prejudices, flatter the mob, vote for silly and unenforceable bills, fight policies they believe in and know to be sound and beneficial. In short, as one recent writer gloomily, not to say despairingly, put it, "democracy vulgarizes everything it touches!"

Is there any reason in such indictments of democracy? Let us appeal to experience. Did democracy vulgarize or corrupt Washington, Jefferson, the Adamases, Lincoln, Tilden, Cleveland, Benjamin, Harrison, Wilson? In every congress and in every legislature or city council, there are men who cannot be bribed, bullied or flattered into deliberate betrayal of trust or violation of principle. True, there are not *many* such public servants, but there *never* were many men of that type. Were there no sycophants, time-servers, demagogues, cowards, ignoble schemers under autocracy, or limited monarchy, or oligarchy? To put the question is to answer it

There are not many sincere, high-minded, rigorously honest artists in the modern world, but *what age had more?* There is a greater demand for rubbish or third-rate work today, because of widespread elementary education and the ubiquitous press, but what is there is to prevent the conscientious artist from being true to himself, or to his ideals, and ignore the noisy market place? It was not yesterday, nor in contemplation of democracy, that the love of money was declared to be the root of all evil, or that the Psalmist prayed to be saved from poverty, on the one hand, and superfluous wealth, on the other. Thousands of years ago wise and noble men preached the gospel of the simple life. Devotion to the values of the spirit, to science, art or philosophy, has always been incompatible with riches, or excessive gregariousness, or thirst for popularity and fame.

Democracy has its vices, but what about aristocracy and plutocracy? When Matthew Arnold complained, fifty years ago, of the lower middle classes, did he have words of praise for the upper middle classes, or for aristocracy?

When artists and scholars depended chiefly or largely on powerful or wealthy patrons, on dukes and petty princes and counts, was high merit certain of quick recognition and encouragement? Let Dr. Samuel Johnson answer that question, or let us seek the answer in the biographies of Johann Sebastian Bach. How many of his great compositions did Bach hear or manage to get performed? His patron preferred mediocrities whose very names have long since been forgotten, and even Bach's fellow-composers and children failed to appreciate his genius. Perhaps a little more democracy in government and art might have helped Johann Sebastian!

The strongest man, said Ibsen, is he who stands alone. That will be true to the end of time. Yet he who is true to his inner light and indwelling monitor; he who first and last thinks only of ideals and standards to be lived up to; he who knows that all the honor lies in doing one's part as well as possible, is not necessarily condemned to neglect, obscurity, poverty and isolation. Not *every* prophet is made to drink hemlock; not *every* pioneer and leader is rejected and scorned by the multitude. Genius, beauty, intellect, power, nobility slowly make their way to the hearts of men.

Democracy, the herd, the mob, we are told, dislike originality and heresies of all kinds. Conformity is demanded by the masses in religion, in morals, in literature, and thus in many cases hypocrisy is forced on the minority. There is some truth in this charge, but

also much exaggeration. Conformity is demanded by the pundits and the arbiters, by the professional and recognized critics, as well as by the average body of human beings. Was not Jesus assailed by the scholars of his day? In the domain of art, was not Beethoven told by the musicians of his time that he violated every canon of symphonic composition? Was not Wagner derided by the erudite critics for his chaotic and empty noise, for alleged ignorance of the elements of music?

Books have been written on the farcical mistakes and the strange crimes of the professional critics. They are said to have driven poets, novelists, essayists and others to commit suicide, and their savagery and inhumanity are said to have embittered and wrecked many writers of rare talent who, with a little encouragement, might have left enduring and first-rate work.

It would be easy to make a plausible argument in support of the contention that civilization, culture, liberty, and every human possession of worth are in reality much safer with democracies than they are, or would be, with dictators, whether proletarian, military or aristocratic. After all, as contemporary writers have pointed out, there is no "public": there are *many* publics, with different tastes, aspirations and actual or potential capacities. There is a public for the ten-cent shocker or thriller; there is a public for the sensational and blatant demagogue; there is a public for the mendacious quack; but there is also a public for the writer or artist or man of science who has something important to say and who says it very quietly and in the style appropriate to his matter. There is a public for Proust, for Miss Cather, for Virginia Wolff, for Conrad. The yellow editor and the picture paper boast of tremendous circulations, but these circulations have *not* been gained at the expense of the serious, self-respecting, intelligent and useful newspapers and reviews.

Mr. H. Belloc said in a recent indictment of popular government that democracy has been "found out"—given a trial, a fair chance, and found wanting. But Mr. Belloc forgets that democracy has spread and taken root precisely because autocracy, monarchy, oligarchy and dictatorships had previously been "found out," and pronounced obsolete and rotten.

It is idle to indict the form of government called democracy for the sins and vices of the overwhelming majority of human beings. The late James Bryce said truly and profoundly that "*democracies are what their leaders make them.*" Democracies may be fickle and

unstable, but in that very circumstance the true, courageous, unselfish leader often finds his opportunity. If windbags are able to influence democracies for evil, forceful and magnetic statesmen and orators of the noble and pure type can and do influence them for good. Not that all history can be correctly interpreted on the Carlyle theory of hero-domination and hero-worship. The leader is not an accident; he is a product of his soil, time and environment. He is the voice of inarticulate or half articulate millions; he gives dramatic expressions to aspirations, visions, impulses of hosts of very ordinary men and women. But he is valuable and often indispensable because of that function of his. It makes a vast difference whether a democracy or an electorate is guided and inspired by a reactionary or a liberal leader, by a preacher of hate or an apostle of concord and tolerance. It makes a vast difference whether a leader is sober-minded, patient, generous, or whether he is rash, suspicious, vain and arrogant.

The greatest virtue of democracy lies in that fact that its "other name is opportunity," in the words of Emerson. The only equality possible is equality of opportunity, including, of course, equality before the law, and *that is inseparable from democracy*.

It is said, indeed, that equality before the law no longer exists in America, and Volsteadism with its padlocks and contempt of court provisions is cited as the most flagrant violation of that basic democratic principle. But who wrote that violation into the law—the people, the "herd," the majority? No; very virtuous and righteous minorities!

Those disappointed democratic philosophers who say that they have lost faith in the people never understood what sort or degree of faith in the people democratic principles required of them. The present foes of democracy in government and in society need a course in political science, in history (including the history of art) and in constitutional law.

Such a course would teach them that the alleged failures of democracy are, in most cases, the failures of the opposition to democracy, though that opposition is usually unconscious. When minorities in a legislature obstruct and filibuster in order to prevent the majority from passing measure deemed by it proper and necessary, they violate the democratic principle. When parties split into factions and sub-factions, and when bitter dissensions over small issues paralyze governments, it is not democracy that breaks down because the democratic principle implies acquiescence in majority rule

after fair and ample discussion of a given question, and it also implies common sense in lawmakers and rulers. "Government is compromise," said Burke, and in a democracy this dictum is particularly true. Compromise, again, implies tolerance and respect for the opinions and sentiments of those, one is constrained to disagree with and to oppose in the intellectual arena. We hear much about the deplorable and alarming growth of intolerance in the United States. The younger generation is told by college presidents and other men of light and leading that its particular mission at this juncture is to fight intolerance and to regain the individual and personal liberty that has been lost or that is being menaced by fanatical groups and reactionary tendencies. Such appeals and warnings are pertinent and necessary, but let it be noted that *they are made in the name of democratic ideals and standards*. Reject democracy, and on what ground can you fight intolerance? Reject the principle of equal opportunity and equal rights, and you commit yourself to despotism of one sort or another.

The one effective remedy for intolerance is education or knowledge. Ignorance and superstition account for all the noxious manifestations of intolerance complained of by thoughtful and broad-minded Americans. And ignorance and superstition are the result of what? Of democracy in education? Certainly not. If the masses were better informed than they are, anti-evolution statutes would be impossible. The "klans" which, in violation of every basic American principle, seek to inflame racial and religious hatreds and prejudices, and to set up discriminations contrary to the spirit of the law, are foes of democracy, not exemplars of it.

Democracy is needed in education and in culture as well as in industry and government. The most democratic and progressive of all contemporary movements is the movement for adult education. "Eternal vigilance," said Jefferson, "is the price of liberty." He might have said, "the price of democracy." But men cannot be vigilant if they do not know what it is that requires watching and protecting. Elementary education is no longer sufficient in a democracy; the higher and liberal education should become the possession of all instead of the privilege of the few. Not all men and women can go to college, but college and higher education are not synonymous. Science and culture can be acquired by reading the right books and the right magazines and newspapers, and by attending the right lectures and conferences. It is the business of men of science to make their facts and theories interesting and fascinating to

the multitude. Radio is a new instrument at their command, and the film is another. The isolation of the man of science and of the philosopher is largely responsible for the assaults upon evolution and upon the freedom of thought and expression.

It has been suggested recently that some sociological foundation ought to undertake a searching inquiry into the causes of the recrudescence of intolerance and bigotry in America. Without questioning the value of such an investigation, the present writer would point out that the principal cause of the sinister phenomenon is obviously the appalling ignorance and credulity of hosts of supposedly intelligent people. The bigots and fanatics do not know how to think straight, how to examine data and reach conclusions, and how to avoid glaring fallacies and blunders.

Those superior intellectuals who despise Main Street and the Babbits, and who sneer at the Rotarians and Philistines, had better do something for culture, civilization and liberalism among the average bodies of men and women. "Educate your masters," said the Marquis of Salisbury, a great tory statesman, after the enfranchisement of the British workers, and England has followed his advice. "Educate your sovereign voters," should be the slogan of democratic and liberal thinkers. Education is the potent preventive of stagnation and retrogression; education is the shield of genuine democracy. Knowledge alone can make the world safe for democracy.