

Roland N. Stromberg

Democracy as Halfway House

Current concern that democracy may be, in the recent words of Daniel Moynihan, "where the world was, not where it is going", that the wave of the future is moving toward some sort of managerial oligarchy or that, at the very least, democracy is barely holding its own¹ marks a sharp contrast with the nineteenth century when almost everyone, triumphantly or regretfully, assumed that nothing could stop its inevitable march. "Democracy is everywhere the inexorable demand of these ages, swift fulfilling itself," Carlyle noted in *Past and Present* (1843); he echoed Tocqueville and would be echoed by countless others. "The great tide of democracy is flowing on, and no hand can stay its majestic force," Sir Wilfrid Lawson intoned at the time of the 1867 Reform Act in England. James Fitzjames Stephen, to whom the tide was not majestic, nevertheless conceded, in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (1874) that "The whole current of thought and feeling, the whole stream of human affairs, is setting with irresistible force in that direction." If idealists endowed democracy with the status of a providential decree, soberer thinkers like Matthew Arnold ("Democracy", 1861) thought it a "principle of human nature" that civilization gradually spreads downwards as the condition of the common folk improves. The advance of democracy involved the whole idea of progress, for if in material as well as spiritual ways Western civilization was relentlessly improving, then in the end this improvement must include everybody and not just a few.

It is true that Hegel did not see the modern state as recognizably democratic in its political organization, while Marx learned to distinguish the socialist goal from "bourgeois democracy", but even these historicists admitted the power of the movement toward an increasingly popular kind of society. Amid a good deal of late-century disenchantment, democracy still impressed almost everyone as it did James Bryce, in *The American Commonwealth*, as destined to inevitable world triumph "as by a law of fate". "The flood has become an ocean, into which the entire society plunges."²

If the "relentless advance" in accordance with inevitable laws of progress was a nineteenth-century paradigm of the democratic process, a second one, not entirely absent earlier but more typical of recent times, is the tendency to see democracy as restricted to a peculiarly advantageous set of circumstances. In Victorian England, Erskine May (*Democracy in Europe: A History*, 1878) provided some examples of the Englishman's characteristic view of himself as uniquely fitted for free and enlightened (though not necessarily fully democratic) government; some places, alas, not only tropical and Asiatic but Celtic, are destined to be "the everlasting abodes of despotism". But it has mainly been since 1945, with the manifest failure of dreams of "world democracy" extruded during World War II³, that discussion has centered on those special conditions under which democracy may flourish and survive. In particular, the steady sound of falling parliamentary regimes in the Third World of *jeunes états*, replaced by various sorts of dictatorship, provided the background for a wide-ranging discussion of the preconditions of democratic government as understood in the West. These were found to include a preliminary social unity, on which any system of government by agreement must rest, and which may require authoritarian means to shape a large territorial, "national" unit out of local particularisms.⁴ "Democratic procedures are risky in a nation in which national identity is not yet firmly established."⁵ A certain level of sophistication which produces the paradox of disagreement-in-agreement, or discord without impairing consensus, requires perhaps centuries of experience. Poor and undeveloped lands, of course, might find democracy a luxury they cannot afford; no system is so expensive and so demanding. Sweeping reform and rapid changes involved in the attempt to telescope stages of development may require elite guidance.⁶ There was nevertheless a tendency for students of "modernization" to see democracy as the end product of this process, as for example did Daniel Lerner in his *Passing of Traditional Society* (1958).

The "special circumstances" model could be applied also in the region of democracy's birth. The explanation of Fascism and Nazism as anomalies relating to certain more or less ingrained abnormalities of the Italian and German peoples (national character or peculiar circumstances), never very persuasive, became less so after France's Fourth Republic collapsed into De Gaulle's arms. Democracy was clearly in trouble even in the "advanced" countries of Western Europe. Research into democratic institutions often focused on the unique feature of each nation's traditions and structures. To the view of

democracy as dependent simply on quite unusual historical and economic circumstances, such as happened to exist in Western Europe and her offshoots, was added the point that each individual Western state has worked out a special set of political customs which contrive to make the very complicated procedures of democratic government work more or less smoothly. Serious examination of democracy in the postwar years stressed the different ways in which nations build these special conventions of their "civic culture" which make the system workable.⁷ Or these customs might overlap national boundaries while remaining less than European-wide, as in Geoffrey Gorer's conviction that only Protestant societies, marked by a keen sense of guilt, can evolve the political style suitable to democracy.⁸ Such "civic cultures" are highly precarious. Far from being the inevitable *telos* of all history, democracy seemed to be a highly peculiar animal, viable in a complex environmental balance which is not only rarely found but can easily decay where it exists.

Civic decay, embracing loss of faith in institutions of government, obviously existed in the democratic societies of western Europe and the United States, along with increasing suspicions that even in its homeland democracy might not be able to adjust to the needs of a modern technological, statist economy and society. Size itself works remorselessly against the democratic principle, a point long familiar but now more starkly evident.⁹ Large collective groups replaced the individual as the unit effectively operating on governments. Replacing democracy by a term such as "polyarchy"¹⁰ registered this fact that plural elites compete for power in the vast nation-state (itself increasingly blurred over by "multinational corporations", international organizations and pressure-groups of all kinds, and world economic or political processes.) As more and more tasks were thrust on governments, the cumbersome processes of elective democracy, behind which stood an increasingly ill-informed public unable to keep up with the bewildering profusion of issues, became more and more obviously inadequate. There were those who theorized that pluralistic democracy works best with a certain amount of voter apathy, is even capable of stability only because the masses fortunately do not intervene too often and directly in the decision-making processes of state—clearly a subversive line of thought.¹¹ Among more commonly noticed phenomena were that Parliaments steadily lose influence at the expense of prime ministers or presidents, and that the permanent bureaucracy gains at the expense of both, along with the powerful "lobbies" of big labor as well as big business.

Added to the perspectives on democracy as a difficult achievement requiring rare good luck, and as something threatened by recent social and economic developments, there is one perhaps less often noted but at least equally provocative: democracy as a mode of government dependent upon a certain equilibrium in time between the pre-modern and the modern society, i.e. between a society possessing natural social solidarity and one marked by total "anomie" or ego-emancipation. On this view democracy does indeed, as the nineteenth-century commentators thought, possess historical momentum at one point in time; but this momentum fades so that today in the advanced modernized societies of the West it is threatened; and there is also a sense in which it depends upon "special conditions" infrequently attained. So this theory has the merit of combining or making room for several others which appear at first sight to be contradictory. Political democracy is a transitory state of development. The insight that "The development of democracy in the nineteenth century (in Europe and America) was a function of an unusual configuration which cannot be repeated"¹² is usually blurred into the "special conditions" argument but is obviously an historical judgment, lacking however the explanation of just what this "unusual configuration" was.

The explanation is this: democracy requires a kind of half but not wholly modernized society, marked by a partial but only partial decay of social solidarity; by individualism but not too much individualism. There must be a consensus, yet there must also be an incipient departure from this consensus toward individual egoism.

In a sense this has long been realized, for no comment on the preconditions of democracy is more familiar than Balfour's "a people so fundamentally at one they can safely afford to bicker" (made some seventy years ago) while numerous other analyses contain this point implicitly or approach it. For example, Frederick Jackson Turner's concern lest the eclipse of the "frontier" in the United States with its concomitant institutions and character qualities, spell the doom of democracy included a fear of creeping anomie in the new industrial, statist configuration; the frontier society embraced elements of both individualism and social responsibility which a hyper-urban one replaces with massist selfishness-cum-slavery. Likewise familiar is the point that the majority principle is tolerable only on the tacit assumption that the majority will not oppress the minority but will take its views into account and mitigate the application of the majority will in ways that prevent a bitter alienation. Also, that discussion can be meaningful only where the participants share both a basic good will and a common set of mean-

ings: rational debate is disagreement within agreement. In brief, a community must exist as the basis for a workable democracy. Excessive division on basic matters, whether of race, culture, class, religion or ideology, handicaps the operation of democracy as majority rule or as elected representative government, as permission of opposition with free access to the podium, or whatever definition one prefers.¹³

But a total community, a *gemeinschaft* in Friedrich Tönnies' famous term, a "traditional" or pre-modern society does not practice modern democracy; its tribal solidarity bars any but the most informal and organic procedures of majority rule. It scorns elections and opposition parties, instinctively rejecting this disunity as immoral (as most of the "young states" do today). The high European conservative tradition, with its roots in the medieval organic society, still clings to some so-called organic processes of politics as its link to the feudal past, as for example in the British Conservative party's tradition of letting leadership emerge spontaneously ("we recognize the man") rather than by the "mechanical" processes of ballot-box election. Consensual government leads to highly authoritarian or charismatic modes; dissent is not tolerated, power delegated to the chiefs or a small elite is close to absolute, sustained by the powerful cement of cultural unity suppressing individual egoism. Hitler and the Nazis attempted to revive this ancient order in the modern state with appalling consequences; it is suited to the small community based on a simple economy. (There was a moment in the eighteenth century when such a community, which is Rousseau's model, was identified with democracy, but as is well known Rousseau's democracy has little in common with the modern kind that grew in the nineteenth century; he rejected representation, appealed to a "general will" unanimity, and thought the large state could never be democratic.)

Democracy emerged from the disintegration of the ancient traditional society, becoming possible only with a degree of social dissolution leading intellectually to scepticism and socially to individualism. In the economic sphere, it may be noted, "capitalism" relied upon this tenuous equilibrium of individualism within a framework of social discipline. As all students of the "classical" political economists know, they were far from advocating pure "laissez-faire" or negative government; they took for granted a secure "infrastructure" of law and order which would enforce contracts, defend property, prohibit monopolies and trade unions and in general uphold the conventions on which the competitive, free enterprise economy rested. A strong sense of community enabled this structure to be maintained with only a minimal amount of "government". Even a great majority of the poor accepted the rules of

capitalism when it was in its heyday. Despite what Marxists may say, this was due less to class ideological propaganda than to surviving elements of "feudal" solidarity.¹⁴ (Socialists often half-realized this, as in the debate about the Russian *mir*, in Carlyle, and other examples of a nostalgia for the feudal past even though in theory this was inferior to capitalism.) As the sense of community fades and naked egoism replaces individualism-within-solidarity, pure capitalism ceases to be workable and must increasingly be administered and regulated by law.

Similarly do democratic processes, as reflected in meaningful elections, representative lawmaking bodies and political parties in a pluralistic society, turn out to have been dependent upon an ephemeral situation, that of the half-modernized society. For the process of dissolution, of emancipation, of modernization, once begun cannot be halted short perhaps of the totally anomic society, without any sort of natural solidarity, the "society of strangers" which can only be governed (if at all) by legalism and bureaucracy. In the anomic society those "special conventions" of the civic culture decay along with everything else customary, and tacit understandings lose their force. The bitter *incivisme* that leads citizens to look upon their government as an alien power as well as to look upon their fellows as potential enemies; the *stasis* which undermines the rules of the political game are signs that the people are no longer so strongly united that they can safely bicker. In resolving disputes informal "neighborly" procedures (whether benevolent or malevolent) give way to lawsuits, while all manner of crime increases. In the beginning, the powerfully entrenched feeling of solidarity that was a legacy of traditional society banned dissent, individualism, political disagreement. In the end, the devices of accommodation which the half-modernized society learned and contrived to make work (in some parts of Western society better than in others) break down not because of solidarity but because of its total opposite, egoism.

There is another perspective which this model subsumes, one found often enough among an embittered minority of nineteenth-century writers: democracy as decadence, product of the dissolution of "natural" human bonds and firmly held values—an idea as old as Plato. For in a sense democracy is this, if we think of it as a result of the partial breakdown of the ancestral order. Indeed, to think of democracy as the half-modernized society sheds light on criticisms commonly directed against it from both left and right. The Right has deplored the decay of social solidarity and lamented the coming of egoism, permissiveness, cultural anarchy, the breakdown of morals, etc. Conservative intellec-

tuals since the time of Maistre, Carlyle and Ruskin have seen democracy as a destructive element corroding values and leading to decadence. From the Left, a criticism familiar from Marx to Marcuse has alleged that democracy in its generally accepted form merely sanctifies the status quo, inhibiting desirable social change; they see it as a conservative force. These seem to be contradictory theses, yet both make sense if democracy is a moment half way between two more or less stable forms. Democracy clings to elements of the old conservative, hierarchical society, while at the same time it departs from and subverts that society. Viewed from one direction it is the cutting edge of drastic change; from the other it appears as resistance to change. This is because it is an order in transit from the conservative to the emancipated society.¹⁵

The from-solidarity-to-anomie model sheds light on many features of the dynamics of democracy. When we distinguish between kinds of democracy, especially social and political, we find that democracy as social equality or "levelling" clearly is faring better than democracy as elected, representative, popularly controlled government. This is because the emancipation of individual egos from bondage to custom leads to fierce demands for equality, replacing the accepted hierarchical, functional inequality that was ingrained in the organic society. It is an unstable equality, to be sure, since each ego really wants to be on top, not equal; yet the dynamics of emancipation make for steadily growing revolt against "keeping one's place" and accepting anything less in the way of rights and privileges—and now also *results*—than others get.¹⁶ In the totally anomic society this jealous defence of ego privileges may be expected to continue. Democracy as social equality does not die. But democracy as popular government in its traditional forms wanes because these forms rest on basic communal solidarity, transformed into highly precarious understandings, conventions, practices.

If the thesis presented above has any validity, we may indeed expect democracy in its familiar political forms to be "where the world was, not where it is going", at least in western Europe and its offshoots where democracy flourished in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. Some of the young countries, on the other hand, might be growing into it. They may be experiencing their Age of Despotism which in Europe preceded and actually prepared the way for democracy, by performing the essential preliminary task of creating a national community. Even the Soviet Union may be expected to display a momentum toward democratization. For the Communism of the USSR, contrary to the

ideological illusions of its rulers, is not so much what follows capitalism and "bourgeois democracy" as what precedes "emancipation", in a recently pre-modern society engaged in a process of rapid, force-fed modernization. To be sure, other factors and forces may deflect peoples from the democratization course, but we may postulate a natural momentum in this direction as societies are being modernized. The halfway house model clearly is not the only one applicable to the analysis of democracy.

As for the West, including the United States, what political forms await its post-modern society, the society of strangers totally anomized? Technocratic elites, uneasily facing a restive herd whom they can govern only by a combination of deceit and bribery? Saul Bellow's Mr. Stammler's vision of narcotized hippies living in slums as they expand their consciousness, while the bureaucracy rules? A society which perishes from civil strife, crime, endless lawsuits, bureaucratic impaction, or some combination thereof? A recurrence of Hitlerian or Stalinist charisma with totalitarian tyranny? Or just perhaps a brighter world, freed from the agony of political campaigns, corrupt and ignorant politicians, irrational electorates wavering wildly between inconsistent policies? Social and political scientists dream of policies formed "rationally" by professors equipped with computers and information banks. It is impossible to predict the future, as everyone but the "futurologists" knows. But some of the keenest social theorists in recent years hold, with Habermas, that the most basic crisis among the many crises facing our beleaguered civilization is the "legitimation" crisis, which reduces to motivation: people's willingness to accept naturally and voluntarily an authority and an order, out of an instinctive sense of community. When this sense diminishes beyond a critical point, the result is less likely to be a liberal or socialist utopia than some sort of post-democratic tyranny.

NOTES

1. See Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, 1971), p. 209.
2. Emile Vacherot, "La Démocratie," *Le Correspondant*, April 10, 1887.
3. See for example Herbert Agar and sixteen others, *The City of Man: A Declaration on World Democracy* (New York, 1940).
4. Cf. Claude Ake, *A Theory of Political Integration* (Homewood, Ill., 1967); Claude E. Welch, ed., *Political Modernization* (2nd ed., Belmont, Calif., 1971), part 5; Lucius W. Pye and Sidney Verba, ed., *Political Culture and Political Development* (Princeton, 1965); O. Ola,

- "The Cultural Basis of the Crisis of Parliamentary Government in Africa," *Civilizations*, vol. 22 (1972), nos. 3 and 4; and a host of special studies. Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Politics and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley, 1968) and Gerhard Lehmbuch, *Proporzdemokratie: Politisches Systems und Politische Kultur in der Schweiz und in Oesterreich* (Tübingen, 1967) note exceptions to the rule about basic cultural unity being a necessity for democracy, making clear the highly exceptional circumstances which are present.
5. Raymond F. Hopkins, *Political Roles in a New State: Tanzania* (New Haven, 1971), p. 225.
 6. See e.g. Professor Dandekar, in *Der Spiegel*, 24 September, 1973, p. 140.
 7. G.A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, 1963).
 8. Geoffrey Gorer, *The Danger of Equality and Other Essays* (London, 1966), p. 25.
 9. Robert A. Dahl and Edward R. Tufte, *Size and Democracy* (Stanford, 1973).
 10. See Dahl, *Who Governs?* (New Haven, 1961), and *Pluralist Democracy in the United States* (Chicago, 1967); Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism* (Boston, 1967).
 11. Harry Eckstein, *Theory of Stable Democracy* (Princeton, 1961); E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People* (New York, 1960).
 12. Karl de Schweinitz, *Industrialization and Democracy* (New York, 1964), p. 11. Also, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul E. Sigmund, *The Democratic Experience* (New York, 1969), p. 25; D.E. Neubauer, "Some Conditions of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* vol. 61 (1967), 1002-1009.
 13. Cf. Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth A. Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies: A Theory of Democratic Instability* (Columbus, 1972) and Ian Budge, *Agreement and the Stability of Democracy* (Chicago, 1970).
 14. A Critical Marxist, Jürgen Habermas, concedes that "Bourgeois society lives parasitically off the remnants of tradition." *The Legitimation Crisis* (transl. Thomas McCarthy; Boston, 1975, p. 76.
 15. In this scheme, democracy corresponds roughly to the Marxist conception of "capitalism"; Marx saw capitalism as a short, unstable, immensely dynamic period, destroying the old order as it prepared for the new. That Marx greatly exaggerated the economic aspects of the "great transformation" is today widely conceded even by Marxists. The change from traditional to modern society is basically a psycho-social one of which both politics and economics are facets.
 16. In the early stages of democracy it was possible to compromise the equality issue by granting claims to equal rights while permitting this competition to result in inequality of condition: a typical compromise of the halfway era involving elements of *both* social solidarity and individualism.