

Part One

THE NATURE OF DEMOCRACY

Chapter 1

What democracy is

1.1 Some short definitions of democracy

Democracy is government by the people. This is a definition most dictionaries report and one likely to meet with general approval. It also fits the etymology of the term: *demos*, the people, and *kratein*, to rule, are its Greek roots. Ancient philosophers and statesmen used this concept in a reasonably straightforward way. “We are called a democracy,” said Pericles, “because the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few.” Aristotle, after distinguishing several kinds of democracy, says at last, “We may lay it down generally that a system which does not allow every citizen to share is oligarchical (*oligos*, few) and that one which does so is democratic” (*Politics*, IV, 6). In more recent times, Abraham Lincoln’s often quoted phrase, “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” suggests the same general idea. Democracy is a system in which the people govern themselves.

Short expressions that purport to define democracy do not explain much, however, even when they meet with general accord, because they seek to put too simply a matter that is not at all simple. Some further examples are: “Government by consent,” “Rule by the majority,” “Government with equal rights for all,” “Sovereignty of the people,” and so on. Such epigrammatic definitions are usually not mistaken, but they cannot reach the heart of the matter. When we examine any such expression critically its inadequacy becomes apparent. Government by consent of whom? Consent to what? Equal rights to what? What constitutes consent or equality of right? What is sovereignty, and when do the people possess it? Rule by the majority of whom? Is majority rule always democratic, and do democratic decisions always require majority approval? Surely there is a difference between government *for* the people and government *by* the people; what shall we say of a government that is one and not the other? Where does government *of* the people fit in? Puzzles of this sort abound. It is necessary to begin afresh if we are to understand clearly and thoroughly what is meant by the correct assertion that democracy is government by the people.

THE NATURE OF DEMOCRACY

1.2 *The paradox of self-rule*

We say that in a democracy the people rule themselves, that the people are sovereign. This is a figurative mode of speech from at least one point of view. The concepts 'rule' and 'sovereign' are relational: there is no ruler without ruled, no sovereign without subject. Part of what is involved in ruling is the power of over-ruling, of compelling the ruled or of acting against their will. In this important sense the people cannot rule themselves, although one part of the people may rule another part. "It was now perceived," John Stuart Mill wrote in 1859, "that such phrases as 'self-government,' and 'the power of the people over themselves,' do not express the true state of the case. The 'people' who exercise the power are not always the same people with those over whom it is exercised . . ." (*On Liberty*, Chap. 1). Almost a century later this concern had hardened into these assertions by Walter Lippmann: "The people . . . cannot administer the government. They cannot themselves perform. They cannot normally initiate and propose the necessary legislation. A mass cannot govern" (*The Public Philosophy*, 1955, p. 19). No one has put the point more elegantly than Gladstone: "No people of a magnitude to be called a nation has ever, in strictness, governed itself; the utmost which appears to be attainable, under the conditions of human life, is that it should choose its governors, and that it should on select occasions bear directly on their action" (*The Nineteenth Century*, July 1878).

In the world of practical politics it is evident that the people cannot, in the sense indicated, rule themselves. The government obeyed may be of the people's own selection, but the people do not enact or execute the laws. This distinction between rulers and ruled, at least in large communities, is not difficult to draw. Most men are governed but not governors.

Still the notion of self-government is not foolish, and when we use the expression to describe certain states of affairs we seem to make sense. Democratic government *is* self-government, government of the people by themselves. In some contexts such government is a reality. Yet if the earlier objection be taken seriously the people cannot govern themselves. How is this paradox to be resolved?

Consider the use of the expression "self-government" in a non-political context. We speak of an individual as potentially self-governed, governed by himself alone. The usage may be figurative here also, for no single person can over-rule himself, although conceivably his higher

What democracy is

faculties may over-rule his lower faculties, if that distinction among faculties can be drawn. Nevertheless, the distinction between governing one's self and being governed by others is of the first importance to every human being. An understanding of self-government on this personal level may serve as the key to the resolution of the paradox of community self-rule.

As an individual I enjoy self-rule when I am not directed, controlled by anyone else. I govern myself when I decide for myself the goals I shall seek, and choose my own means for attaining them. Every man experiences such individual control in at least some of the affairs of his life. Where then is the difficulty? The paradox arises from the fact that the verb "to govern" has a double meaning. In one sense the power to govern includes the power to over-rule, to compel, and therefore implies a bifurcation of governors and governed. This may be called the *administrative* sense of government. In another, deeper sense, to govern is to establish goals or policy, to give direction to the body governed. The latter is the original meaning of the verb "to govern," coming from the Latin *gubernare*, and in turn from the Greek *kybernan*, to steer, or pilot a ship. This may be called the *directive* sense of government.

In any community the government may command, forbid, over-rule; these are its administrative functions experienced directly in daily life, and the ones focused upon by those who argue that a community cannot govern itself. More fundamentally, however, who governs the community guides it, steers it. When this directive function is understood as primary in governing, the paradox of self-rule melts away. Insofar as government is conceived administratively, it involves the conflict of wills and the subordination of some to others, and it must be a portion of the community that governs, not the whole. But insofar as government is conceived directly, involving the determination of policy and the objectives which guide communal life, it may be a few or it may be the many who govern. In principle it is possible for all the members of a community to participate in the establishment of the ends sought in common. If all, or most, do participate in this task, we may fairly describe that community as self-governed.

1.3 The essence of democracy

Democracy is a kind of community government. To specify the nature of democracy, therefore, it is necessary to differentiate this kind of

THE NATURE OF DEMOCRACY

community government from all other kinds. This, in turn, requires an appreciation of the great scope of the concept of community, treated more fully in Chapter 4. There is no practical limit to the number or variety of human communities. The purposes that bind men into community may range from the trivial to the world-shaking; the size of communities may range from very small to very large. The boundaries of a community need by no means be geographical; the principle of its unity may lie in fraternal, charitable, ethnic, religious, or economic concerns. What is held in common by the members of a community may be of passing or secondary concern to them, or it may call forth their most permanent and profound loyalties. In reflecting upon the communities in which democracy can subsist, it is most important that one not focus exclusively upon national states. These are very important communities, and we are understandably very much interested in the way democracy functions in them. But a satisfactory theory of democracy must be applicable to a range of community types and sizes far exceeding that of national states. Communities of greatly different kinds and sizes may be governed democratically.

What does the democratic government of a community entail? The analogy between the life of a community and the life of an individual is again helpful. An individual can be self-governing in choosing his own ends; he can be self-directing, autonomous. Such self-direction or autonomy on an interpersonal scale is democracy [16.1].*

Democracy is government by the people in that it is the system within which the people, the members of the community, participate in the determination of policy for the community as a whole. The directive function of government is central to any account of self-government; it is the fact that this directive function can be widely shared that renders democracy possible.

What is involved in the notion of determining policy for the community as a whole? Clearly that is not a function that the members of a community can perform once and be done with. Policy is constantly being formed and re-formed; the direction of a community requires continual attention. Self-government, therefore, requires a continuing series of decisions, of greater or lesser importance, and it is in the making of these decisions, choices, that participation in policy-making becomes concrete. When the most important decisions of the com-

*Bracketed references indicate chapters and sub-sections found in this book.

What democracy is

munity are reached through the general participation of its members, we may call that community self-governed.

Which decisions are the most important ones, those upon which the entire membership of the community should have some voice? The natural reply is that the membership should have a voice in making decisions that affect them all, or that seriously affect them all. But which decisions are these? This question has no general answer. In many specific contexts it is answered clearly enough by the nature of the community. In other contexts there just may be no agreement upon which issues are rightly dealt with by the membership at large. Conflict on this matter may stem from disagreement over the basic purposes of the community; or (if these be agreed upon) conflict may lie in disagreement over what spheres of activity must be under collective control if those larger purposes are to be realized. Which issues are the proper business of the community is inevitably a controversial question.

Happily this question, however difficult in particular cases, does not have to be answered in order to grasp the essential nature of democracy itself. A statement of that essence, a definition of democracy, I now present with the understanding that it is to receive a good deal of further refinement. *Democracy is that system of community government in which, by and large, the members of a community participate, or may participate, directly or indirectly, in the making of decisions which affect them all.*

Upon this foundation we can build a coherent theory of democracy. A necessary first step is the more careful analysis of *participation* and its dimensions. Two purposes will be served by this. First, democracy itself will be further explicated by such an analysis, since participation is the key notion in its definition. Second, an understanding of what participation concretely involves will make possible a rational estimate of the degree(s) of democracy realized in any actual community.