

Part Six

THE PROSPECTS OF DEMOCRACY

Chapter 17

Why democracy is not likely to succeed

17.1 A note on political prophecy

It is fitting to conclude this treatise with a look to the future of democracy, partly to assuage our understandable curiosity, partly to help in the guidance of practice. The foregoing account of the nature of democracy, its conditions and presuppositions, gives no ground for prophecy, but does permit reasonable speculation about the prospect before us. The number and kind of human communities being unlimited, democracy is sure to thrive in some, sure to deteriorate (or never develop) in others. In political communities the future of democracy is of special concern. Its success in this sphere will remain always a matter of degree, of course, and its appraisal, or improvement, in any particular community will require much study in the sciences of society. Even now, however, some general observations may be made, some broad tendencies noted, which bear directly upon the realization of the conditions and presuppositions of democracy, and thus affect the probable success of democracy itself. My conclusion will be that, in bodies politic, the prospects for democracy are not very good.

17.2 The material prospects of democracy

One grave obstacle to the improvement and spread, and perhaps even retention, of democracy throughout the world is the non-realization of its material conditions. Long-range success for democracies in political communities will require the attainment of a standard of living for the masses of the world far higher than that they presently enjoy, and it will require a considerable reduction of the gross economic inequalities that presently divide men. That such material objectives can be achieved, or that they will be achieved before economic pressures explode the present world fabric entirely, appear now to be matters of serious doubt.

The picture is not altogether black. Human productivity constantly rises; old resources are replaced, new ones found. New realms for exploration—new sources of energy from sun or tides, new sources of food from oceans or deserts—leave open the question of what material levels may be reached in time. Spectacular strides in the sciences of

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communication, moreover, render participation in government by all persons, regardless of condition or residence, possible in the future as it was never dreamed possible in the past.

But if there is some reason to hope that the material conditions of democracy may be improved over the coming decades, there is greater reason to fear that they will not be adequately realized. The outcome, affected by a host of complex factors, will be ultimately decided by the winner of a global race between human productivity on the one hand and human reproductivity on the other. Reproductivity has, and promises to retain, a commanding lead. At the time of the present writing the population of the Earth has just passed three billion; that population continues to grow at terrifying speed. If this growth is not halted or greatly slowed—and it seems now certain that it will not be, unless hundreds of millions are killed by war or famine or both—the fourth billion of humans will arrive by about 1985, the fifth billion by 1995, and sixth billion within another five years, by the end of this century. What will happen from that point is almost beyond the power of present prediction, and probably also beyond the reach of present belief. These estimates are generally agreed to be conservative; some others, from United Nations sources, predict an even more rapid rise in world population. And the history of population predictions reveals that numbers estimated for the future almost invariably prove lower than the actual population when that future arrives.

It is a certainty that the size of the Earth's population must somehow soon be limited. What remains uncertain is the method of that limitation—whether it be accomplished intelligently and justly, or by chance and catastrophe—and the timing of it. The problems posed by population growth may be temporarily met through agricultural or technological ingenuity, but cannot ultimately be solved in this way.

In the realm of the purely arithmetical, it can be shown that if the rate of increase in world population remains the same as it is today, doubling every generation, our present 3.5 billion people will increase in 30 generations (900 years) to 3 sextillion, 758 quintillion, 96 quadrillion, 384 trillion people—4,550 people for each square foot of the Earth's land surface.

In the realm of the possible, careful efforts have been made to determine how many people the Earth could support under the most favorable conditions. Assuming that all the energy in the sun's rays could be captured, and every resource utilized, including even the

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atomic energy in granite, the most optimistic of reputable estimates is that—if mankind could be satisfied subsisting on the products of algae farms and yeast factories—the Earth might support as many as 50 billion people. At the present rate of population increase there will be 50 billion people on Earth in four more generations, about 120 years.

In the realm of the probable, one should note that in some parts of the world serious famines have already begun; within a decade or two of the present writing, if present trends continue, famine is likely to spread over large portions of the globe, assuming almost indescribably calamitous proportions.

This grim picture has immediate bearing upon the prospects of democracy. Great size is always a problem for a self-governing community; the larger the membership the more difficult it is for each member to have his voice heard, and the more minute must be the contributions of each, relative to the whole. Systems of representation can sometimes maintain effective participation, but the larger the number represented, and the larger the number of representatives, the more indirect and less responsive is the democracy likely to be. These difficulties are already with us. Sheerly numerical difficulties are compounded, however, when the great mass of a political community do not enjoy the material circumstances that render participation in government a practical possibility. The difficulties of achieving such material circumstances are further compounded by the fact that it is precisely among communities already so impoverished that population growth is fastest and promises to become faster. In such communities, already encompassing the majority of the world's population, and soon to encompass its overwhelming majority, the hope for democracy must grow dim. This bleak outlook is more than a speculation; the conditions foreseen are already ugly realities over much of the planet.

In the United States one often hears of the need to eliminate “pockets” of poverty; it is a real need. From a global perspective, however, the two hundred million Americans (some 6% of the present world population) constitute a pocket of wealth, one of very few. Vigorous international efforts now go on to overcome misery and economic destitution, but little progress is being made. As quickly as increased productivity is achieved, rising populations gobble it up. With it they gobble up the savings that need to be reinvested by the community in social overhead (schools, roads, hospitals, etc.) and in productive industry. Poor communities with swelling populations live in a world very

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much like that of Lewis Carroll's Red Queen: "Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else you must run at least twice as fast as that."

The unfortunate effects of rapid population growth, and the effects of the generalized poverty that normally accompanies it, are manifold. One could go on to show in detail: (1) how poverty erodes the intellectual conditions of democracy, limiting the funds and efforts that can be devoted to education, both by the individual family and by the community; (2) how material circumstances influence the quality of the lives lived by the citizens of any community, and can affect adversely both constitutional and psychological conditions of democracy; (3) how even the protective capacities of the community are reduced when the standard of living goes down. Democracy is plainly threatened by growing world poverty.

In Europe and North America where, relatively speaking, wealth is the rule and poverty the exception, these threats are commonly ignored or gravely underestimated. Among hungry and miserable masses, on the other hand, the awareness of gross economic inequalities becomes ever more widespread and more acute. How much material deprivation these masses of the Earth will tolerate, and how long, no man can say. But if reproductivity continues to win the race against productivity, the prospects for the realization of the material conditions of democracy, and for democracy itself in the political sphere, will continue to deteriorate.

17.3 The intellectual prospects of democracy

The prospects for the increasing realization of the intellectual conditions of democracy—the maintenance of a well-informed and well-educated citizenry—are somewhat more hopeful than its material prospects, but on the whole are not encouraging.

On the brighter side it is certainly true that the power to acquire and store information, and the power to communicate and manipulate it, now develops with a speed and range never known before. Radio and television are almost universal, and soon will be completely so; new methods of direct communication will be derived. Published research in every sphere swells our libraries at an enormous rate, and new systems of information retrieval are already being created to render this mass of intellectual material usable. New methods of instruction, some employing advanced technology, make basic education a possibility

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among masses for whom it was once undreamed of. On other fronts, the increased understanding of the human nervous system, continuing experimentation in the conditioning of animals by electrical stimulation of the brain, research into the power of pharmaceuticals in controlling human behavior, research into the nature of human memory, and into the possibility of learning during sleep—all open vistas of possible intensified learning and teaching that are as exciting as they are threatening. What the human mind may master, and the speed at which it may do so, has no clear limits. If these developing powers are quickly put to the service of democracy there is reason for encouragement.

Unfortunately, while the improvement of techniques in education and communication is a challenge that is being met, the command of such techniques presents a further challenge that is not being met—that of developing the principles that ought to guide the employment of this new and powerful technology. Like the sorcerer's apprentice the democracies of the world have set in motion instruments of extraordinary power but do not know how to control them. Several manifestations of this absence of control are worthy of specific notice.

First: without proper guidance the power to instruct becomes the power to inculcate—a term derived from the Latin *inculcare*, to tread upon. Inculcation of doctrine in some areas—in history, or politics, or philosophy—may result in a net reduction in the capacity of the members to make the moral and political evaluations democracy requires of them. Inculcation in matters political or philosophical distorts the educative process, casts it in the role of instrument for partisan ends. So employed, education becomes indoctrination, brainwashing, the very antithesis of what democracy requires. The most impressive command of facts cannot replace the ability to use intellect creatively in judging ends and ideals. If new methods or machines are employed without the concomitant development of that creative ability, such devices may prove to be more the enemies of democracy than its friends.

Second: dangers arising out of advances in techniques of instruction are matched by dangers flowing from the misuse of the media of mass communication, upon which large scale democracy depends. Here again, technical marvels may be used to manipulate the process of participation rather than to serve it. Enormous power lies in the hands of those who control these media; that control already lies in few hands and moves steadily into fewer. There are no easy safeguards against the abuse of this power. Private control may be unscrupulous or naive. Public control, instituted to correct these evils, may result in the greater

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centralization rather than diffusion of power over the content of what is communicated. I make no brief here for either private or public ownership of the media of mass communication; whatever the forms of their operation, balance in their regulation is fearfully difficult to achieve. Concentration of power in this sphere appears unavoidable, and this growing concentration seems certain to reduce the quality and effectiveness of individual participation. Most national democracies are already afflicted with this deterioration; there is no good reason to suppose that it will cease. With the possibility of growing control over human behavior on the one hand, and the steadily concentrating power over the media of communication on the other hand, it seems unlikely that the intellectual conditions of national democracy will much improve, and very possible that they will go almost wholly unrealized in some communities. Whether, in the government of large bodies politic, participation in depth can long continue, is an issue that for the present remains moot.

Third: from a global perspective there is an ever-increasing gap between the capacities of the well-educated few and those of the ill-educated or uneducated masses, a gap that seems certain to become yet greater over the coming decades. Well intentioned efforts to narrow this gap often have the opposite effect. On the one side the progress of medical science cuts the mortality rate in impoverished lands, resulting in the preservation of masses who have little hope for an education; on the other side vigorous research results in a forward surge on the part of those already educated. An intellectual disparity already threatening is steadily exacerbated.

This split between the educated and the ignorant has direct, adverse effects upon democracy. Knowledge *is* power; great disparity in intellectual development gives inordinate power to the educated few, increasing the likelihood that the masses will be used to the advantage of others. Campaigns by the intellectual elite to “educate” the masses frequently become covert attempts to indoctrinate them, sometimes, but not always, with good intentions. This growing imbalance between the intellectual attainments of the many and of the few renders it increasingly more difficult for the masses to play the proportionate role in government that democracy requires of them.

The most pressing educative task in democracies, therefore, now becomes not to teach more to the few, but to teach enough to the many. The former task is easier, more exciting, more immediately rewarding; so intellectual achievement in the community is often measured by the

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speed and success with which those already on the frontiers of knowledge advance yet further. The outcome in practice has been continuing support for an intellectual elite who plunge ahead ever more rapidly, while the masses find themselves less and less able to understand or keep up. Even in American society, where universal public education is well-established, the gap between the better educated few and the average many has become unhealthily enlarged; tension between the extremes is aggravated by growing mutual distrust. It is essential, therefore, if democracy is to survive, both within the American nation and on the global scale, to consolidate educational ranks. Advances on intellectual frontiers must not be slowed, of course, but proportionally greater effort must be made to bring to a decent intellectual level those who have been left behind. Mass education, carefully safeguarded against indoctrination, must somehow be instituted successfully in poor lands, by poor people, for themselves. Progress being made in this enterprise is far from encouraging. Over much of the world literacy rates remain essentially stable, or even dip, and the absolute number of illiterates—for whom the role of democratic citizen is practically impossible—steadily rises. Where mass education is vigorously pursued, its dogmatic, doctrinal content is often as antithetical to the spirit of democracy as the ignorance it seeks to erase. Steering a course between the twin threats of mass ignorance and mass indoctrination is the foremost intellectual challenge facing political democracies over the next half century.

Dangers to democracy created by the gap between the well-educated and the ill-educated are increased by the steadily rising intellectual requirements for the operation of political democracy. The intellectual conditions of democracy in any community are functions of its concrete circumstances [11.4]. A tribe of aborigines, totally without formal education, may be able to maintain a democracy if the judgments to be made by the membership do not suppose a level of intellectual attainment higher than that their society makes possible for its members. But it is foolish and even cruel to expect an aboriginal population to govern itself democratically under circumstances demanding judgment and evaluation beyond their intellectual attainments. With the rapidly increasing complexity of human society, with ever more difficult issues to be resolved by community governments, there comes a correlative rise in the minimal level of general intellectual development essential for the success of self-government. Many technical questions can be left in the hands of representatives and hired administrators, but it re-

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mains necessary to select such deputies, evaluate their service, and face directly some large questions of general policy. As difficulty heightens, so also does the level of needed sophistication. The moral is clear: continuing success for democracy in large political communities requires what now seems unlikely—that universal intellectual development will keep pace with the complexities of human government. Existing tendencies toward improvement at one end of the intellectual spectrum and deterioration at the other do not present a cheerful prospect for democracy.

17.4 The fraternal prospects of democracy

Recent decades have witnessed a rapid intensification of community consciousness in some parts of the world manifested by the growing nationalism of Asian and African peoples. The drives for “independence” and “freedom”—meaning chiefly independence from colonial supervision, and freedom from external interference—are rooted in strong and spreading feelings of national unity. Political unity and independence is no guarantee of democracy, of course, but there can be no political democracy without it. The movement toward the national independence of people is, in this sense, a step toward their genuine self-determination. This is true whether the nation in question is small and weak, like Senegal or Belize, or large and powerful, like Indonesia or India. Where community consciousness, fraternity, has not developed, democracy cannot even begin.

Sometimes independence comes to a people prematurely, their resulting government taking a form very far from democracy. Community affairs may be free of foreign interference while the masses have as little share in governing themselves as ever they did under colonial rule. Democracy and national independence ought not be confounded; democratic government may be a more distant prospect for the subjects of an absolute, native autocrat than for the citizens of a colony governed by a reasonably enlightened foreign power. Whether the government be colonial or indigenous, however, there is no chance for democracy until a spirit of political community has arisen.

Unfortunately, the nationalistic form in which that spirit has been chiefly manifested has, while furthering democracy in some contexts, rendered it a practical impossibility (for the present, at least) in the most important of all contexts, that of the global community. The effective formation of a genuine world community has been largely stymied

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by national allegiances and national hatreds. Some faint recognition of a global community there has been, but for the present and near future it appears too weak to sustain any significant democracy.

National communities have been the leading institutional agents in world affairs since the end of the fifteenth century. The state, with all that it stands for both ignominious and noble, has been the focus of men's highest loyalties. This was satisfactory so long as human well-being required a community no larger, and circumstances rendered larger communities virtually impossible. That day is over; men must look now much beyond the interests of their sovereign state. It is a commonplace that the world is one. Instruments of communication and transportation have shrunk the globe; the web of modern industry leaves no significant community isolated or self-sufficient. Global interdependence in most spheres of human life has been accompanied by mankind's disheartening refusal to recognize that interdependence in the largest sphere of all, the political. This refusal, whatever its reasons, has serious consequences for democracy.

National democracy is no longer enough. On the one hand the economic interdependence of peoples, and on the other hand the threat posed by future military conflicts of nations, bind the masses of humans into one genuinely global human community encompassing and surpassing in importance all national communities. Problems of common concern now face the citizens of this global community. Mouths multiply, famine has already begun; the nuclear weapons that may destroy us all not only exist but rest in hands often irresponsible; the planetary environment deteriorates. These grave problems affect everyone. They can be dealt with democratically only if the community they create is concretely recognized, and everyone, everywhere, is given opportunity to participate, through representatives, in their resolution. Present arrangements in world politics obviously do not permit this.

My purpose here is neither to propose some scheme of world government, nor to predict its coming. Mankind has managed to survive for a long time without democracy on the planetary scale, and may be able to do so for a long time yet. But it is on that scale precisely that the most serious problems of men now arise and will continue to arise. Their satisfactory resolution depends upon a concrete recognition of that global community in the form of its intelligent government. For these objectives the growth of new nationalisms, and the irrational dance of national powers in coalitions and confrontations aimed at advancing the interests of some sovereign states at the expense of others, do not augur

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well. The prospects for democracy on the global scale, where it is perhaps most essential, are not good.

17.5 Realism and world democracy

Global democracy is generally considered an unrealistic ideal, in view of the enormous difficulties standing in the way of its accomplishment. All previous attempts to plan or develop a world government have proved failures; no new schemes appear to offer any greater promise. Moreover, any world democracy would appear to require what seems almost unreasonable to hope for, the sacrifice of national loyalties and national sovereignties. The chances for success in such a venture are not great.

From the fact that the prospects of success are poor, however, it does not follow that efforts to achieve that success are foolish or unrealistic. Even the skeptic must grant that success is not totally out of the question. Repeated failures may have been a necessary prelude to the development of a viable world government; the presence of planetary dangers and destructive potentials unlike any known before may induce remarkable changes in the political attitudes of those threatened with personal catastrophe. Such changes are possible at least.

The refusal to pursue such possibilities may prove criminally shortsighted, because of the dearth of satisfactory alternatives. The absence of such government of the global community may lead to nuclear wars, to the death of tens or hundreds of millions, and even perhaps to the death of all. Even without war, present international anarchy seems perfectly incapable either of avoiding stupendous population growth, or of mitigating the awfulness of its consequences. War or no war, a continuation of the existing state of human government seems likely to render the lives of all or most men impoverished and miserable within decades. Outcomes so grim are not certain, but their probability needs to be weighed honestly in deciding what present sacrifice is justified in the effort to avoid them.

The nation-state has not always been the form of human political government, nor is it likely to remain so forever. Common sense requires that we plan for its replacement before some replacement is thrust upon us by circumstances out of rational control. It is neither wise nor fair to call him who talks of the mutual sacrifice of national sovereignty unrealistic, and him who plans for the demolition of cities and the annihilation of millions a realist. The development of a global democracy need not

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be utopian, but even supposing that it were, the wildest utopian scheme could not be more clearly and concretely insane than the present conduct of international war.

The citizens of wealthy, Western democracies are now obliged to pass rational judgment upon the wisdom of pressing for the democratic government of a world community. This calls for an honest appraisal of the costs, economic and other, that global democracy might impose upon us, and an honest appraisal, too, of the costs of the other long-range alternatives open to us. What then will emerge as realistic, and what as unrealistic, is a matter that remains for the present undecided.

17.6 A concluding note on the future of democracy

Although the prospects of democracy in many political communities are rather bleak, it is important that these prospects be wisely viewed. Undue pessimism regarding the future of democratic governments can prove self-justifying; excessive optimism may blind us to the difficulties democracy must overcome. Neither pessimism nor optimism is the wisest attitude, but a *meliorism* that calls for our best efforts to see things as they are and, so far as is within our power, make them better. Supporters of democracy have reasons to be gravely concerned about its future, but have some grounds for hope as well. It remains to do what can be done to improve the conditions of democracy; in many communities such efforts may meet with continued, even increasing success.

Finally, whatever may be the world-wide prospects of democracy, it remains true that within those limited contexts in which democracy has been or will be substantially realized, human lives are likely to be lived more wholesomely, more richly, and with more satisfaction than under any other form of human government. Alexis de Tocqueville concluded *Democracy in America* in 1835 “full of apprehensions and of hopes,” perceiving “mighty dangers which it is possible to ward off, mighty evils which may be avoided or alleviated.” The future of democracy is not so bright now as it was then, but neither should it be foreclosed. What de Tocqueville said then of democratic nations we may hope will prove true of a democratic global community as yet not realized—that for its citizens to be virtuous and prosperous, they require but to will it.

Democracy now excites the imagination and inspires the hopes of all the peoples of the globe. It is a just system of government, rightly prized and defended. But there is no magic power in it. Democracy

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cannot accomplish for a community what is not within the material or intellectual capacities of its members. Whether democracy, if realized, will lead the peoples of the world to a life of culture and material well-being or to collective poverty and wretched conformity, is a question only answerable by future historians. We help to determine what that answer will be. It is at once the weakness and strength of democracy, its danger and its glory, that the fate of its members lies largely in their own hands. Where government rests ultimately upon the participation of the governed it is their wisdom, collectively formed and expressed, that must determine its failure or success.