The Meaning of Democracy

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Democracy, like all the value-laden ideas by which men live, has many meanings. The Western Democracies believe themselves to be the only real democratic states. Yet, the Soviets describe the lands behind the iron curtain as the "democratic world." To ill-fed millions in Asia, bread means democracy. To many Western citizens, democracy means a jungle capitalism, a license to cut-throat competition "red in tooth and claw."

Until a little over a hundred years ago, democracy was a scare word meaning mob rule. It was a word used to smear a political opponent. Even Sam Adams energetically disavowed being a democrat. Yet today all governments seek to wear the garb of democracy, to use this powerful idea to strengthen their causes.

What then is democracy? What is its real meaning? What does democracy mean in the life of each individual citizen? What are the principles by which a government must operate if it is to be democratic? How is democratic government to be distinguished from other forms of government?

The root doctrine in the democratic idea is the ancient Christian-Jewish belief that as sons of God, all men—however humble their worldly circumstances—are equal in dignity, importance, and transcendent worth. Every member of the family of mankind is born with certain "unalienable rights" to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Democracy a Belief . . . .

The essence of democracy is a belief in the equality of human rights, out of which the psychic and material well-being of the individual derives. Democracy has only one ultimate goal—the well-being of every individual as a distinct and significant item of humanity. Democratic government has no other end than to protect, promote and expand human rights. The state has no mystical end of its own. Its worth is measured solely in terms of its usefulness for individuals.

What are these human rights that democratic government is charged with defending and promoting? Like democracy, human rights is an idea subject to varying interpretations. But individual "freedom" or "liberty" lies at the
core of all human rights. Essentially freedom is the liberty to make choices and to act upon them.

Human freedom is not fixed and changeless in its content. Men's "freedom needs" change as men's ways of living together change. Although the freedom men possess in a democracy has broadened out and expanded as democracy has matured, the early freedoms for which the democratic rebels of the 17th and 18th century fought are still vital to the well-being of citizens.

Traditional Freedoms

The first of the traditional democratic freedoms is the right to dissent, to disagree even with majority opinions and with decisions of government. It is a freedom of conscience and judgment which exists equally for all members of a democracy. It is a right to disagree widely on vital social, economic, religious and political issues. It is the right to voice dissent through speech, press, association and petition.

So essential to the full development of the human personality is the freedom to think and to act on one's views, that the rights included in the freedom to dissent are frequently described as the rights of personality.

The rights to security of person is the second great group of traditional freedoms which men in a democracy possess. These are the rights which protect men in their use of their freedom to dissent. In a democracy, a citizen is to be free from arbitrary or unjust arrest, questioning, imprisonment and punishment. He has a series of procedural rights which, step by step, give him security of person from the time he is suspected of a crime until he is acquitted or convicted.

New Freedom Through Government

Because the democratic belief in the rights of men was developing during the 17th and 18th centuries when governments were generally cruel and unjust, human rights were first envisioned as freedom from government. Thus democratic government was to be kept weak and limited, powerless to abridge or destroy the freedoms with which men were by nature endowed.

However, as time passed men developed more effective democratic methods for controlling their government. Government became capable of performing new tasks. And new hazards from which men sought to be free developed in the modern environment. So men have turned to democratic government as a useful servant for bringing them new freedom. Freedom has become more than liberty from negative restraints.

In modern democracy, freedom
has been reinterpreted to include the power to act positively to achieve a good life. Freedom from government no longer is enough to secure the well-being of the individual. Freedom from the new hazards of modern industrial-urban living must come, at least partly, through government. For example, governmental inspection of food processing plants gives consumers "freedom" to stay alive in a day of commercial canning and prepackaging of food. Governmental regulation of monopolistic business gives little businessmen freedom to own and manage their own factories and shops. Laboring men have been partially freed from having to work under dangerous and unsanitary conditions, at sub-living wages, for over-long hours because of governmental regulation of wages, hours, and working conditions. Social security programs help to free men from some of the hazards of old age, unemployment, and physical disabilities.

Tests of Democracy . . . .

Democracy is unique because it has within it the mechanism by which its members can continuously redefine what their freedom shall be. It is the citizens' power to determine whether the freedom that government is to promote shall consist of their traditional liberties alone — or whether it shall also include those positive freedoms which make for an individual's material well-being.

A benevolent dictatorship could conceivably free its citizens from social and economic insecurities; but only a democratic government can permit its citizens to enjoy the traditional freedoms — freedom to dissent and the procedural freedoms which protect the person. For dictators can only stay in power by stifling dissent and short-cutting procedural rights to stamp out disagreement with the official government line. In a dictatorship, freedom cannot truly exist even for the small ruling clique.

Individual Freedoms . . . .

Individual freedom is at once a unique right enjoyed by men living in a democracy, and, at the same time, the indispensable foundation upon which democratic government is built. Without freedom to dissent there can be no democracy.

Democracy means the popular control of government. By definition democracy — coming from two Greek words, "demos" and "kra-tos" — means the "authority" of the "people." These are the two indispensable attributes of a democratic government: 1) freedom to dissent, and 2) popular control of government. Each has its source in the other. Each depends upon the other for its continued existence and its strength.
Popular control over government can exist only in a society which possesses the freedom to dissent. The people can control their government only when they are free to question its decisions, criticize its actions, and campaign openly to change its course of action.

Men holding minority opinions must be free to try to persuade other men to their views, to strive to get their opinions accepted by the majority. The minority must have the right of trying to become the majority and of taking over and changing the course of government in line with new majority decisions.

**Popular Control Necessary**

On the other hand, popular control of government is necessary for the continued existence of freedom. History has shown that a government can be held to the purpose of protecting and broadening individual freedom only when it is controlled by the people.

The two large tests of democratic government, then, are: (1) that the end of the state be the promotion of the well-being of the individual, the protection and expansion of human freedom to achieve a good life, and (2) that government be subject to a popular control which has its roots in the freedom to dissent.

In the effort to develop means for putting popular control in force, democracies have developed mechanisms and processes which are frequently confused with democracy itself. Although some of the procedural means which have been developed for implementing democracy have thus far proved to be almost essential attributes of democratic government, others are little more than mechanical apparatus whose usefulness is limited in time and circumstance.

Too frequently the apparatuses of democracy have been mistakenly regarded as ends in themselves. However, the mechanical devices for putting democracy into operation are only means, which are properly subject to continuous re-examination and pragmatic testing for their usefulness in serving the ends of free popular control over government and the promotion of the well-being of the individual citizen. In a changing economy with its shifting social structures, the means for achieving democracy cannot be regarded as fixed and sacrosanct if democracy itself is to grow and strengthen.

One of the mechanical devices which has thus far proved so indispensable to the functioning of democracy that it should perhaps be classified almost as an attribute of democratic government is that of popular control through *popular representation*. Only in the smallest of political societies can a *direct* democracy function. Even the Greek city-states, small as they
were and excluding as they did large segments of the population (the slaves) from citizenship, could not make direct democracy function effectively.

Although the Roman Republic was based upon the concept of popular sovereignty, men had not developed the method of popular control through representation. It was not until the 12th and 13th centuries that the apparatus of government through elected representatives, accountable to their constituencies, began slowly to develop. Today, representation is an essential in the democratic process.

The mechanisms for achieving representation are clearly in the nature of apparatus which should be subject to modification with changing needs and circumstances. Thus, the geographical bases for representation, now common to all democratic states, are not an immutable part of representative government. For example, good cases have been made by democratic theorists for representation according to the major interest groupings in society.

**Principle of Consent . . . .**

Another series of democratic conventions has grown up around the problem of consent. How is the democratic principle of consent of the governed to be carried into practice? How is consent to be measured? Majority rule has been the solution developed. Indeed, majority rule, in the eyes of many, has become an end in itself.

Yet there is nothing mystical about the figure of 51 percent. Are the 51 percent always right, and the 49 percent always wrong? Majority rule is merely a mechanical means for measuring the "will of the community." Its great value lies in the fact that, until now at least, men have found no better method for making popular control and representation work.

The second part of the problem of consent is the nature of the decisions which the individual is to make in the political process. To what is the citizen to consent? What form is the individual's participation in government to take? The popular election of those who are to manage government is the great consent citizens make in a representative democracy.

But should men's decisions in the political process be limited to the periodic election of representatives? Or does modern democracy call for new forms of citizen participation? For example, the Progressive Movement of the early 20th century brought into operation new devices for more direct democracy such as the initiative, the referendum, and the recall. With modern government stepping further into the economic lives of its citizens, new forms of citizen participation in the building of govern-
mental programs may prove of value.

Perhaps the democratic convention around which the most unpleasant connotations have gathered is that of the procedure of *compromise*. Yet, compromise, is an essential process in a democratic society. When compromise is not possible, the democratic process breaks down as it did in the 1860's with a civil war resulting.

**Procedure of Compromise** . . .

Legislatures are built for working out acceptable social compromises. The president, in the American system, is the great compromiser. As a representative of all the people, he must weigh and balance conflicting social claims and integrate them in the wisest public policy proposals possible.

At its best, democratic compromise is an integrating *process*, which prevents the centrifugal forces of society from tearing society apart and which works out the wisest adjustments of *interests* which are socially and politically acceptable.

Finally, there are several types of apparatus used by American democracy which derive from the priceless democratic belief that the individual possesses a body of rights which are inviolate from state action. The first apparatus is the limitation of the sphere of governmental authority. The belief that government can, in democratic propriety, be constitutionally limited grows out of the old social contract theory, according to which men possessed rights in a "state of nature" before they entered into a political compact to create a state. Thus, men are entitled to reserve certain areas of activities over which the state has no control.

However, when the concept of a limited government is held as an end of democratic society, it may actually thwart the true ends of democracy. For example, the pre-1937 Supreme Court decisions in the fields of labor, social security and agriculture, which turned on a belief in the sharply limited power of the federal government, were thwarting popular will on what democratic government should do to achieve the well-being of its citizens.

Another outgrowth from the belief that democracy calls for mechanical limitations on the powers of government is the development of certain formulae for dispersing the powers of government. The federal system and the separation of powers among the three branches of the national government are sometimes held up as essential ends in a democratic state. Yet they are no more than devices for preventing the consolidation of power in the hands of one level or one branch of government.
Neither a unitary nor a parlia-
mentary-cabinet system of govern-
ment means dictatorship. Many
democratic political scientists con-
tend that the British unitary and
parliamentary system is more re-
sponsive to the popular will than
is the American system.

**Dispersed Power . . . .**

The dispersal of powers among
an executive, a two-house legisla-
ture, and a supreme court, design-
ed in a day when it was believed
that the individual's welfare was
best promoted by government in-
action, multiplies the opportuni-
ties for preventing the government
from taking action which modern
democratic society may demand.

In like fashion, federalism is not
an indispensable cog in democracy.

Repeatedly in recent history, the
"states' rights" argument has been
advanced to prevent the national
government's acting to protect or
promote the well-being of groups of
individuals. Frequently, the para-
mountcy of state responsibility in
a given field of social action is
claimed merely as a means of cir-
cumventing all government action.
For many modern problems are be-
yond the capacity of the states to
solve because of their geographi-
cal scope, their cost, or because of
political obstacles present within a
state.

The glorification of local govern-
ment as an end of democracy some-
times also has the aim of limiting
the action of both the national and
state governments. Local govern-
ment offers more mechanical op-
portunities for fuller citizen par-
ticipation in government. But lo-
cal government also can be oligar-
chical government and less respon-
sive to the will of the community
than is national or state govern-
ment. The changing nature of
time-space relationships means
that the citizen can now keep in
closer touch with the workings of
his national government than he
often does with that of his town or
county government.

**Democracy More Than a Procedure . . .**

Democracy is a humanitarian
philosophy. As such it has content.
The great test of democratic gov-
ernment is its protection and pro-
motion of human rights to psychic
and material well-being. The other
essential attribute of democracy is
popular control over government
which is rooted in an equality of
freedom to dissent.

Democracy, then, is more than a
procedure or a group of proce-
dures. As the means for imple-
menting democracy, procedures are
not immutable and inviolate. The
keystone in a truly democratic
process is change. Procedures, if
they are to serve the ends of de-
mocracy, must be modified to meet
the changing needs of the environ-
ment from which government
springs.