Practical (political)

THE SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW

VOL. XIII. No. 3.

JULY, 1921.

DEMOCRACY AND CIVILIZATION.

THE question of the survival of civilization which month by month becomes more doubtful and more urgent, does not depend on political institutions alone. Fundamentally it is a question of the available amount of moral wisdom in mankind, and it is precisely the deficit in this amount that is the main ground of anxiety. When peoples that have known law and liberty give themselves over deliberately to the alternatives of violence and despotism the outlook is dark, and when the resources of science continually add to the means of destruction the lack of moral control constitutes a standing danger of ruin on an ever-increasing scale. We can look for safety to no mere improvement of political machinery. The change must be spiritual and widespread, such as a new religion might bring. Nevertheless the spiritual change must in public affairs take effect through political institutions, and the working of democratic institutions in particular does provide some measure of the sum of moral wisdom available to control the common life. The modern world has become, at least in outward form and semblance, more democratic. The war which has ruined so much has at any rate dragged down the great military autocracies in the common disaster. Hence the character of democracy, the mode of its operation, what it has performed, and what it may yet promise or make possible, are questions of even greater interest and urgency than of old. To these questions Lord Bryce's great work on "Modern Democracies" is by far the most serious attempt at a reply which is as yet available.

Lord Bryce's method is inductive. It is an extension of the plan on which his "American Commonwealth" was based. It is founded on direct personal observation, combined with careful questioning of men, and studious examination of law and history. For the combination of zeal, detail and accuracy it is a marvel, uniting, one may say, the Herodotean method of travel observation and enquiry with Thucydidean reflection and severity. In detail Lord Bryce has limited himself to six democracies—the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, and France—omitting that which he knows best of all, England, on the self-denying ground that he has seen it too closely to judge it

dispassionately. There are, however, constant references to democracy at all times and in all places, and there are brief but useful accounts of ancient democracy and of the South American Republics. It is in fact a survey of democracy in general, pursued with great detail in six cases which cover the Old World and the New, the ancient (Switzerland), the long-established (America), the relatively new democracy in an old country (France), and the new democracies in new countries (British Dominions). It covers various constitutional forms, the federative and centralized, the Parliamentary and Presidential, the societies of great class divisions and enormous contrasts, and those of simpler manners and more equable distribution of wealth. The comparisons are wide and rich enough to exhibit many interesting points of agreement and difference, and the author is able to arrive at numerous general conclusions about democracy on a very different basis from those easy generalizations which have hitherto passed current in political discussion.

What then is the upshot, and how does it affect the great underlying question of the preservation of a civilized order? It is impossible to summarize satisfactorily in the course of an article, and the reader must be referred to the book itself—to the concluding Part if he cannot find time for more. The reviewer must content himself with recording his own most vivid impressions, and following some of the questions which seem to remain outstanding. On the whole matter then Lord Bryce's verdict seems to be this. Democracy is well enough, if you do not expect too much of it. It works no miracle. Now that it has been tested by time and by numerous instances no one could write of it with the Mazzinian glow. It does not alter human nature. Selfishness, shortsightedness, callousness remain what they were and play their part. In particular that "great heart of the people" beats but feebly. For at bottom the main defect of democracy is the comparative indifference of the majority to public interests. They will not take trouble. They will not give sustained continuous attention. There is much that in any case they cannot judge; for instance, the characters of men not known to them personally, complicated financial issues, or the bearing of a move in the diplomatic game. Nor are we to suppose that "pure art's birth is still the Republic's." Art and letters flourish, or decay, under all manner of institutions, under Louis XIV as under Pericles. Democracy neither destroys nor creates them. What is more serious, it has not reconciled peoples or classes. It has given something of liberty, and equality, but not fraternity. But after all, was it reasonable to expect that it should do these things? Why should it be supposed that the ordinary failings of mankind will be materially lessened by the

form of government any man lives under? Religion is a far more potent influence in the mind than government, but how little religion has done in public affairs! If democracy struggling for existence during, say, 140 years, is to be written down a failure, what are we to say of Christianity, supreme in European states for 1,600 years? (The question so put is the reviewer's but is suggested by much that the author says.) No, we must wipe these illusory claims off the slate, and only then does our real criticism begin. Forget the New Jerusalem, but enquire whether democracy is keeping the Old Jerusalem in fair tenable repair, as well or perhaps a little better than the old occupiers.

To this Lord Bryce answers in a cautious but sufficiently clear affirmative. Democracy has shown itself capable of performing the main functions of government, defence, order, justice, a competent executive. Not that it has done so always equally well. Order and justice in several American states leave a good deal to be desired. Even the French judicial system in its lower ranks fails to command general confidence. More widespread is a faulty economy combined with a foolish extravagance. Democracies have often so far misunderstood the meaning of equality as to suppose that one man can manage affairs as well as another. Hence they have refused sufficient payment for judges and civil servants, and have got inefficient administration and defective justice in consequence. On the question of corruption, however, Lord Bryce bears extremely interesting and valuable testimony to the improvement in the United States since his great book on that country was written. American democracy has great recuperative power, which in the long run is a richer asset than a tame impeccability. Nor has democracy shown itself incompetent in foreign politics. On the contrary, the great catastrophes have come from and through the military autocracies and oligarchies, and a succession of burning topics of the past century is set out in which the "masses" were nearer to the side justified by history than the "classes."

On the whole then democracy has given the world as good a government as its competitors. Has it also improved on them?

"Of democracy and happiness can more be said than this, that whatever governments can do to increase the joy of life is so slight . . . as to make the question not worth discussing on its positive side? With the negative side it is otherwise. The establishment of popular freedom has removed, or at least diminished, sources of fear and suffering which existed under more arbitrary forms of government. Freedom of thought and speech, if not everywhere the gift of popular government, has found its best guarantee in democratic institutions. . . . If we look back from the world of to-day to the world of the sixteenth century, comfort can be found in seeing how many sources of misery have been reduced under the rule of the people and the recognition of the equal rights of all. If it has not brought all the blessings that were expected, it has in some countries destroyed, in others materially diminished, many of the cruelties and terrors, injustices and oppressions that had darkened the souls of men for many generations."

Why has not democracy done more than this? Why has it not saved the world from unprecedented disasters? and why can we not trust it now to save us from the continuance of such disasters? We get some light on the question if we first ask, why did anyone ever expect it to do more? The answer to this question is in part that under the name of democracy a wide and a much narrower conception have been combined. Often the word stands for a far-reaching conception of life and society—for all that can be summed up in the phrase a free, co-operative commonwealth, all that seemed to follow from the lifting of the weight of class, sex, race or religious ascendancy, the releasing of the springs of spontaneous energy and common goodwill. If indeed such a society could be once realized on the grand scale, it would be something that the world has never yet known, and it would be reasonable to expect great things of it. But what experience has shown is that such an ideal is not achieved merely by the removal of certain gross and palpable barriers. The walls of Jericho may have fallen, but it is still Jericho and not a heavenly city that we enter. The ideal state was not to be attained by the simple method of establishing a form of government in which ultimate responsibility rested with the entire adult population. This is the narrower conception which conforms to the more literal meaning of democracy, and it was a mistake to transfer to this narrower meaning all the grace and glory of the ideal. The people in their millions were not going to act together like brothers all inspired by the divine wisdom, merely because they acquired the right to vote. The illusion was helped by the fact that men were fighting manifest evils and palpable cruelties and wrong in the name of democratic principle. They were fighting ascendancies, racial, national, religious, social, economic, sexual, and fighting them in the name of democracy. But it was an error to suppose that democracy as an established system of political government would be consciously and wholeheartedly set to destroy all such evils and to plead with the same public-spirited humanitarian and religious enthusiasm as the few who were giving their lives for its triumphs. The democratic machine might be made with hands, but the democratic spirit could not be provided ready made.

The more special and persistent cause of the over-estimation of democratic machinery is a piece of misapplied logic. In various forms people have been influenced by the analogy between the community and the individual. If the individual can on the whole govern his own life and pursue his own happiness, why not a community when once acting as a unit? Troubles in the community arose from the selfishness of man, the sectional interests of classes or groups, the spirit of ascendancy in rank, and of

influence in religion. Man being selfish and passionate, one individual will inflict wrong on another, one class on another, one section on another. But no man in his normal senses inflicts wrong upon himself. No more will a community inflict wrongs on itself. It will make mistakes, no doubt, as the individual makes mistakes, but in the main its face will be set always in the right direction. Every section of the community may have sinister interests, *i.e.*, interests against the community, but the community as such can have none. Its self-interest is also its true good, to promote it is the right and the duty of every one of its members. There is no fissure here between the prudential and the moral. The higher and the lower motives coincide. The selfish and evil wills cancel out against one another. The good and social remains, and has the field to itself.

This conception fails for two reasons, one being simple and obvious, the other so much more difficult to state clearly that it has occupied and is likely to occupy volumes of controversy. The simple reason is that the community no more stands alone than the individual stands alone. Self-interest is not a sufficient guide to the individual even if we allow him every possible measure of prudence, because he has to live and move among other individuals, and when he thinks first and foremost of himself he is not a pleasant neighbour. But if we are to compare the community with the individual at all it is clear that the comparison holds in this relation. The community is one among many. It has neighbours, friends, enemies, very often dependents. Will it be just, peaceable, forbearing, loyal, merely because it acts as one man? No more than the one man himself will be. There might be a high development of patriotic devotion within a community, accompanied, indeed even fortified, by rancorous enmities towards others, cruel sentiments of collective vengeance, or cold contempt for the rights of subject peoples. Democracy as such is no solvent of these vices. If confined to the dominant races, or to the independent sovereign state, imperial democracy becomes of itself an oligarchy. Sovereign democracy as one among many sovereigns may be as pugnacious or cynical as sovereign aristocracy.

But after all this is a criticism rather on partial democracy than on the democratic principle. For what is the democratic principle? Without assuming the realization of the great ideal described above, we must at least conceive it as aiming at the abolition of government by force and ascendancy, in favour of government by agreement and organized will. In principle the distinction between governors and governed disappears and is replaced by the distinction between an organized community and its ministers. Now, to carry this

principle through, humanity must be, in the first place, organized in suitable units; and, in the second place, provided with suitable machinery by which these units can co-operate for common purposes. This is no doubt the ideal which the world is now fumbling after, and not till something like this ideal is realized could the democratic principle receive a full and fair test. Short of it democracy is something broken and incomplete. Lord Bryce has not perhaps so much to say on this point as might be wished, for, excepting the case of France, the democracies with which he deals have been relatively free from foreign and imperial complications, but to the student of English democracy, I would suggest, external relations constitute the main problem. We could solve our internal questions if we had no external issues to distract us. We get a not unenlightened verdict from the constituencies, a not unreasonable public opinion on our own internal affairs, but touch questions of national pride or supposed safety, and national argument is at once lost in a whirl of passion. Too often at general elections the appeal has been from Philip sober to Philip drunk. It is a temptation to a popular government as it was to Henry IV, to escape from domestic discredit by raising the foreign or the imperial issue and appealing for consolidation of forces with the cry of "the empire in danger." I would put it therefore that the first great unsettled question about democracy is this. Understanding that democracy means self-government, is it possible to provide the mechanism by which self-government can be carried through? Can we establish self-government for the world as a whole? Can we establish self-government for the distinct communities into which history and geography have divided mankind? If we have to make exceptions and compromises can they at least be reduced within such compass as will leave the democratic principle dominant? These are the unsolved questions of the day. Let us at least clearly understand that unless and until they are solved democracy is but a partial principle haltingly and inconsistently applied, and that its failures may be due more to this incompleteness than to its inherent defects.

The second reason why a democratic community acts differently from an individual in relation to its own interest is, as has been said, more subtle and controversial. I will not attempt to set out the argument here, but must content myself with remarking that, while there are genuine resemblances between individual and collective mentality, there are also serious and deep-seated differences. Of the normal, sane individual we can generally predicate a will. It may not be a very wise or a very virtuous will, but it does ordinarily serve for the time being to give some intelligible unity of direction to his actions. Of the community it is not so easy to say that it is

normally in possession of a will. In fact it is most often in abnormal circumstances, such as war, that a true common will emerges, the reason being that it is when it is pitted against others that its members become most keenly aware that they form one body, or at least are all in one boat. One might take the whole of Lord Bryce's two bulky volumes as a running commentary on the difficulty of stimulating communities to form true wills. The difficulty is not what our forefathers feared that the admission of the masses would introduce a bad will, selfish, short-sighted, grasping, the difficulty is that too often there appears to be no will at all. No doubt some one within the community takes action and the common affairs somehow or other get themselves transacted, but the mass of the people—and here we are not meaning "mass" in any distinction from "class,"—simply do not take the trouble necessary to secure for themselves any real and effective participation in these decisions. Hence the tendency noted by Lord Bryce of democracy to relapse into a kind of natural oligarchy. Thucydides was the first to remark that what was in name a democracy had been in reality the rule of the first citizen, and whether it is one man or few, we must take this tendency as an inherent limitation on popular government. The seriousness of this limitation, however, must not be overstated. Lord Bryce very justly remarks that there is a deep distinction between what one may call the natural oligarchy of superior capacity, training and attention to public affairs, and the constitutional oligarchy of a privileged class. A democracy does perfectly right in committing administration to expert hands, indeed Lord Bryce shows very clearly that in some instances it would have done better to make more of the expert and to pay highly for his services. In the United States, in particular, one of the steps of progress that we note is the gradual replacement of the spoils system by a permanent civil service. A little democracy, as in the old world, or in a Swiss canton, may have sufficient knowledge of the limited number of questions with which it has to deal to enable it to dispense with skilled intermediaries and maintain direct self-government, but as communities increase in scale and complexity the system becomes unworkable, and democracy does best for itself by frankly realizing the situation. Its work must be supervision, not administration, and it will achieve intelligent supervision only by unloading itself of detail and confining itself to broad ends and governing necessities.

Yet this limitation raises some very lively controversies. In the first place, it means that democracy must after all lean in details of government on bureaucracy; and, in the second place, it can only control bureaucracy effectively through representative machinery. Till the other day it was in such control that democrats saw their

best hope. The most remarkable change in democratic feeling, which Lord Bryce duly notes, is the disillusionment with regard to representative assemblies. It was thought that the representative would be a picked man who could give just that detailed attention which was admitted to be beyond the power of the man in the street. The representative assembly would be the flower of the people, the ablest, most instructed, and most upright. The people would do its part in choosing such men. They would do their part in guiding the executive, keeping in close touch with detail, and insisting on principle. Each new election would bring a popular verdict on the way in which they had done their work. Perhaps at this moment we tend to exaggerate the degree in which the representative system has fallen short of this ideal, but the disappointment with the representative method is deep, and as Lord Bryce's book shows, widespread. No one could pretend that the present House of Commons, for example, represents the flower of the British nation. It represents a selection by certain qualities. Such selection is one form of success and the things making for success are in general a strange and unpredictable blend of the good, bad and indifferent. Without being unduly severe, we may put it that an election is not a competitive examination in moral wisdom. In particular it is not an examination in which either the thoughtful mind or the sensitive conscience get very high marks, and it is possible that a representative Parliament tolerates some things which a like number of men chosen by lot from the nation could not endure. Indeed, in choice of men democracy does not show itself at its best. How should it? Even in personal matters the choice of men is one of the most delicate and difficult human tasks. But if choice is a high art, even when there is considerable knowledge, what are we to expect of choice made on the basis of platform speeches, photographs in weekly papers, and a casual acquaintance with odds and ends in a candidate's public or private career? The data are ludicrously insufficient. Hence in sum representative assemblies are of very mixed character and too often fail in their function of consolidating public judgment and supervising administration in the interest of the common well-being.

Without abandoning democracy two main remedies have been proposed. The first is direct government, in legislation the initiative and referendum, in the executive direct election. As to the latter, Lord Bryce's verdict on American experience is tolerably clear. The election of many officials is utterly nugatory, for the simple and obvious reason that secondary men are insufficiently known. Hence by a Hegelian contradiction the more the choice of such officials is placed in the hands of the people, the less the power of the people to choose them. The inevitable selection is the party

machine which in the last analysis means a little oligarchy of log-rolling intriguers. With regard to high officials the case is not so clear. Many American cities have used the one-man power to clear away corruption, and on the whole it would seem with good effect. What democracy needs, Lord Bryce says, is the clear definition of responsibility, and the one man so elected is at any rate conspicuously responsible. This kind of democratic Cæsarism, however, does not seem suited for permanent good government. It is too fortuitous, too much depends on the character of the Cæsar, and in the American presidential contests, though certain aspects of personality count for a good deal, the machine seems to count for more.

Of direct government in legislation we have more than one form, the referendum, the initiative and particularly in America, constitution making, the enactment of laws as parts of the constitution. This method is very carefully discussed by Lord Bryce with results which are on the whole favourable for Switzerland and not altogether unfavourable for America. Attention is called in particular to the educative character of a direct popular vote which forces the citizen to think if anything can. Representative government performed an essential function in the development of modern democracy because without it there were no sufficient means of communication to enable people to meet and discuss common matters in the large territories occupied by modern communities. But the extraordinary improvements in communication are tending to reproduce the conditions of democracy in an ancient city state. The whole population of the United Kingdom, or of the United States can, if the press chooses to inform it, have all the data for a political judgment before it simultaneously, and, if events are sufficiently strong, an effective opinion can and does form itself rapidly throughout the land. The real trouble is that the press is an inadequate organ of information, and if we analyze the causes of this we must go behind the dispositions of great newspaper proprietors to that lack of sustained popular interest from which we started. The newspaper proprietors give the public what it wants. That is why they have succeeded. Broadly speaking, they find that what the public wants is sport, divorces, crimes, and a tincture of politics, made up of facile emotions, of which national vanities, fears, and hatreds are the most easily stimulated. Not only the comment, but, what is far more important, the selection and presentation of the news is shaped by the demand of these emotions. Hence the people do not get the full facts, at bottom because they prefer not to have them. As it was dangerous for the messenger of misfortune to tell the truth to an angry despot, so the newspaper which prints the bare unpleasant truth takes its life into

its hands. Still the thing can be done, and some truths percolate through at long last.

In any case through the rapid dissemination of printed matter we move towards a more direct democracy, not merely in the formal and constitutional manner of referendum and initiative, but more generally in the appeal from Government and Parliament to public opinion. Hence the press becomes the most important organ of the constitution, and at present it does not work well. Unfortunately things move in a vicious circle for public opinion is defective because the press does not enlighten it, and the press does not enlighten it because its peculiar form of defect is to dislike enlightenment. Nor is the familiar remedy of more education a sound one. The educated classes supply in some respect the worst elements of public opinion, and support many of the worst measures. Give us someone to educate our educators and you may solve the problem. Otherwise bitter experience must be the teacher.

Of the other much discussed remedy for the failure of representative institutions, Lord Bryce has little to say. We may suppose that he would anticipate little from the transfer of the representative basis from the territorial basis to the vocational. For the vocational system it is contended that occupation provides an effective community of outlook, and vocational questions stir a real interest served by adequate knowledge. In the locality, on the other hand, all sorts come together, and the resulting opinion, if any, is that languid and uncertain compromise which gives us our tame democracy. Mr. Hobson, in his remarkable "Problems of a New World," has shown how the "classes," having satisfied themselves that by a little judicious arrangement democracy on these lines could be made "safe," were frightened beyond measure at the prospect of a vocational system which would introduce serious fighting by organized interests. Yet I wonder whether this terror is better grounded than that with which territorial democracy inspired their followers. For the vocational representatives would have to meet, and the Guild Congress would have ultimately to combine and compromise the divergent views. After all a community is one, and at some point adjustment—in which Dr. Bosanquet has seen the special function of the state—must be effected, unless of course constitutional methods dissolve into direct action and force. For common purposes would a representative body be improved by the fact that the members were avowedly chosen to represent sectional rather than common interests? Is it not rather the fact that that is so often done unavowedly which already reduces the value of our representative bodies? Vocational organization is of great and growing importance. In particular one may hope that, cutting across state divisions, it may provide

one avenue to effective internationalism. But from its nature it does not solve the problem of reconciling opposed interests, which is after all the underlying difficulty of every government.

Apart from the exaggerated economic inequalities in many countries, democracy is faced by three great difficulties. The first is the actual structure of the political world—the independent sovereign states, their anarchial relations, the failure up to the present to institute an effective League of Nations; and, again, within many states, the unsolved problems of nationalities and dependencies. For these difficulties there are definite solutions available, and sufficiently understood to be applied if there were the men with courage and imagination to do the work. Secondly, there is the exposure of the weaker, less organized, peoples to exploitation; and here again, though as Lord Bryce rightly maintains, advance must be tentative, there has been just enough experience to indicate the lines on which it should be tried. Thirdly, underlying the others, and the cause of their seriousness, there is the moral situation to which repeated reference has been made. If, on the one hand, there is too little of sustained interest in public things, on the other there have arisen an atmosphere of passion, a disbelief in reason, a worship of force, and a tendency to identify justice with weakness, which, if not countered, must in the end be destructive of any form of free government and liberal civilization. Nothing will go right as long as this temper is in the ascendant and platitudinous as it may sound, I am afraid the remedy here is no political stroke, but a definite change in the attitude of mind. The trouble appears to germinate with the “educated” classes, who, apparently in their dread of socialism have in large measure turned their backs on political freedom and sought the idealization which is necessary to man, in military glory or imperial achievement, finding justification for class ascendancy in biology, and for national domination in racial psychology. These classes have not fulfilled their function of giving a wise lead to democracy or in inculcating the restraint of popular passions. Too often it is just the contrary. Is it within the compass of hope that the certainty of eventual catastrophe on the lines on which we are at present moving may stimulate the “educated” minds to more detached methods of thinking and a more serious effort to fulfil the functions of suggestion, criticism and leadership which falls naturally within their sphere? At any rate it can only be by a complete reversal of the prevailing standards of judgment that the civilized order, as we have known it, can be saved.

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