

## Chapter 3

# Some general observations about democracy

### 3.1 *Some things democracy is not: common errors*

A democratically governed community is one in which the members of the community genuinely govern themselves, in which the governed participate in making the directive decisions which affect them all. Although not new, this approach to democracy has not usually been accompanied by much refinement in the analysis of that participation which is the heart of the matter. As a result, the account of democracy as government by the participation of the governed has sometimes been held naive, unrealistic. It need not be so. It would be naive and unrealistic to suppose that participation in government must take the form of a town meeting or something much like it. This crude model of participatory government is what the critic of democracy as participation frequently means to reject. Government by town meeting being usually impractical in the world of political affairs, and being rarely employed, an account of democracy as government through participation is discarded in favor of a theory that fastens upon some other characteristics.

Such alternative accounts of democracy are often superficially plausible. Their plausibility stems from their emphases upon certain real and important consequences of democracy, or facets of it, while its essential core has been missed. The preceding discussion of the essence of democracy, and of its dimensions, makes it now possible to identify some common errors of this kind. Rather than criticize alternative accounts of democracy individually, I shall specify the kinds of oversight or mistake that have often led to the rejection of a participatory theory of democracy, and to the construction of another.

(1) The failure to appreciate the complexity of participation, or to distinguish the several dimensions along which it may take place, has been an almost universal deficiency. This failure has made it very difficult to deal intelligently with the problems these differing dimensions create for democratic theory and practice. It has been a leading cause of the identification of participatory government with the crudest and most obvious forms of direct democracy. Moreover, when participation

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in real communities proves defective in some respect, the failure to make these basic distinctions has rendered it practically impossible to specify clearly what features of the government of that community are not fully democratic. In a word, the participatory account of democracy has been often rejected because the analytic tools needed for the application of that account to actual communities had not been devised.

(2) There has been a tendency to think of democracy as a system of government found only or primarily in national communities. The result has been a grossly narrowed view of the forms and institutions democracy may employ. So one finds some theorists identifying democracy with certain representative systems, or defining democracy in terms of the conduct of political parties, or the freedom of elections, or the provisions of written constitutions, and so on. Once having focused attention upon such institutions—which are indeed the valued instruments of very large democracies—it is possible to overlook the participatory foundation, for one has thereby already excluded from attention other self-governing communities that may not need the particular devices of a national democracy. The recognition that democracy is a way in which the members of any community, large or small, may govern themselves points clearly to the need for a theoretical account that does not rely upon institutional or other features present only in communities of special kinds.

(3) Particularly regarding the dimension of range there have been unfortunate and erroneous conclusions drawn concerning what is entailed by a participatory account of democracy. Having said that democraticity is a function of the participation of the community members in their government, it is concluded wrongly that such participation must be specifiable in every important decision-making process where the democracy is genuine. There has been a common failure to distinguish sovereign from effective range, and a consequent tendency to identify the range of participatory democracy only with its effective range. Now the effective range in large democracies, as noted earlier, must be quite limited. This fact, combined with the inability of some theories to make the needed distinction, has led many political theorists to assert that democracy cannot be understood in terms of participation. For (they argue) if any actual country really is a democracy, and if in that country the vast run of decisions of public concern are not made by the public at large, it appears that that country's being a democracy must result from something else—from the presence of certain balancing tensions,

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or certain rights-protecting institutions. Thus do we get definitions of democracy as a system in which the major community interests are in rough equilibrium; or as a system in which the leaders must compete for the support of the members; or as a system in which constitutional guarantees of basic freedom are actually in force.

Such accounts of democracy mistake effects for causes. In a healthy national democracy a rough equilibrium of internal interests, and competition for votes among those seeking to be leaders, will very likely come to pass. But these conditions arise, when they do, as the consequence of participation by the citizens who are, basically, the constituents of the several internal interest groups. In such a community parties are likely to form, constitutional guarantees are likely to be developed. But they are not the democracy; that they are not is demonstrated by the fact that it is possible to imagine (and even at times identify in fact) democratic communities in which any one of these features is absent. In subsequent discussions of the principle of majority rule in a democracy [Chapter 6], and of the problems of representation in a democracy [Chapter 7], I shall explain how these several organizational features, so often praised, may function as the instruments of a large democracy. It is a common and unfortunate error to confuse these instruments with the system of self-government they are designed to serve.

(4) Some inadequate accounts of democracy are greatly reinforced by an overly narrow “realism” in which their proponents take pride. Such theorists argue, in effect, that if national democracy is to be taken seriously there must *be* perfect examples of it in the real world. They do take democracy seriously, but deny that it has the nature I have claimed for it, because the multi-dimensional ideal here described is never fully realized on a national scale. Then democracy must be understood as something else. What does seem common to the nations we call democratic? Parties, and elections, and competition for support, and so forth. These then—in the effort to be “realistic”—are chosen as its identifying and essential features. This course is triply mistaken.

(a) It misapprehends the functions of political realism and political ideals. An honest and clear-headed look at the way things really are in the world of politics is always in order, but the results of that inspection are misused when treated as theoretical ideals. Democracy is unavoidably imperfect in practice; ideal democracy—broad and deep and wide in range—may be unrealized, or even unrealizable, but functions never-

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theless as a theoretical model after which actual communities may try to pattern themselves. Of course one can, if he wishes, call what he finds in some particular communities, "democracy." This may bend the common usage of that term, but there is nothing wrong with the procedure so long as one knows what he is doing. The name "democracy," however, has an emotive attractiveness that cannot be ignored. Applying this name arbitrarily has the effect of elevating certain actual practices—in this or that actual country—to the status of ideals for national government. Every existing democracy falls short of the ideal, however, and can stand improvement. The procedure of the so-called realist makes it impossible to know how to effect such improvement. Once identified as models of democracy how can specific governments be made more democratic? In what direction are they to go next? No doubt a new set of ideals will have to be constructed for them. It would be more candid, and more theoretically helpful, to admit openly that democracy is an ideal all nations are far from achieving perfectly—although, in this or that country, certain institutions may clearly help (or hinder) the realization of that ideal. The task of the political realist is to tell us honestly and accurately where we are, but not where we want to go.

(b) The identification of democracy with particular governments, or particular sets of existing national institutions, serves only to becloud the issues that arise among competing nations over the degree to which each of them does or does not realize democracy. To claim that democracy is what certain countries are is to resolve such issues arbitrarily. The question is begged. What had been at issue was whether this or that set of national institutions was more (or less) democratic. The reasonableness of the question—indeed, the seriousness of it—is an indication of how inadequate any account of democracy must be which is based upon particular existing governments.

(c) Finally, the proclivity of "realists" to focus their attention upon national institutions, upon party structures, and upon the competition for support among leaders, etc., tends to promote the same narrowness of theory earlier mentioned: the development of an account of democracy that is applicable to nations but inapplicable to the important small communities of everyday life that surely may be said to be, in no derivative or secondary sense, democratic or undemocratic.

(5) It is very commonly said that democratic government is government based upon the consent of the governed. This claim is correct in

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one important sense, but it cannot serve as an adequate definition of democracy. The consent of the governed does not by itself *constitute* democracy, even though such consent may be *necessary* for democracy. The happy and proud acceptance by a people of the absolute dominion of their monarch has been frequent enough in history, even very recent history, to assure us of that. The governments of Japan and Germany in the years just prior to the Second World War could not be called democratic by any stretch of the imagination—but that they received the vigorous consent of their citizens cannot be seriously doubted. Without consent of the citizenry there can be no democracy; that is not at all to say that democracy is equivalent to government by consent. Consent is a necessary condition of democracy, but not its sufficient condition.

The role of consent in democratic theory cannot be dispensed with quite so shortly, however. Those who treat democracy as equivalent to government by consent are not likely to be making so elementary a mistake as that of confusing a necessary and a sufficient condition. What then have they in mind? It must be that the consent of the governed which they identify with democracy is something more than mere acquiescence or acceptance. And there is in the root of the word consent some support for an enlargement of its meaning. To “con-sent” is to “feel together”—to be of the same feeling, at least for the purposes of action in the case at hand. It is some such commonality of feeling, underlying joint action, that is probably intended in this extended concept of consent. How does this concept come to be identified with democracy? Perhaps it happens like this. It is very clear that in a democracy one must recognize the legitimacy of a great many governmental acts, some of which he does not approve of in substance. In its particular nature he may think a certain act most unwise, even though he recognizes an obligation to acquiesce in its implementation. The legitimacy of the act, in such circumstances, seems to arise from the general consent given to it. This analysis is correct as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. It is not consent alone that establishes the legitimacy of governmental acts in a democracy. The source of that legitimacy is rather the political process which gives rise to that general consent. Consent is given in these cases (even by him who objects to the substance of the act) *because* the decision so to act was reached democratically. Consent of the governed is wrongly identified with democracy; but it is an identification easy to slip into, since general consent is a natural consequence of the use of a decision-making procedure in which all

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may take part, and to which, therefore, all are committed. Thus one may consent to the implementation of a given decision even though he opposed it vigorously during its consideration. This does not mean that he must change his mind about the wisdom of the act at the moment of its passage; he may still think it wrongheaded and ill-advised. But his consent to that act of government may be genuine, nevertheless, for he has (or could have) himself taken part in the resolution of that matter. To that participatory system of decision-making he may be fully committed.

Of course, this is an account of consent by the governed *to government by themselves*. Not all or even most cases in which peoples have consented to the acts of their leaders can be analyzed in this way. This is the central point. Where general consent has such a foundation it is a democratic consent; where it does not it may be consent to the decisions of a dictator or an oligarchy. That is to say, once again, that the consent of the governed is not peculiar to democracy, although such consent will be a natural consequence of it.

In short, “the consent of the governed” can have the profound importance often attributed to it only when it flows from the adoption of certain governmental procedures. These procedures necessarily involve positive action or deliberate forbearance on the part of citizenry at large. That is why theories of democracy which rely heavily upon “consent” generally involve (although obscurely) much more than consent. These further, essential elements are the participatory processes here being explored.

To show that these mistakes and limitations may be consistently avoided with an account of democracy as government by participation—where the complexities of such participation are more fully recognized—is the burden of the present work. Only such an account, I argue, can do full justice to democracy as a governmental ideal and as a practical form of government realized to some degree in communities of many kinds and sizes, while at the same time providing a coherent explanation of the role of elections, political parties, constitutionally protected rights, and other highly-prized institutions of national democracies.

### **3.2 On appraising a democracy**

The degree to which democracy has been realized in any community depends upon a number of factors: the breadth of participation in determining community policy, the depth of that participation, and the

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range of issues upon which such participation is or can be genuinely effective. There are no formulas by which achievement on the distinct dimensions of democracy can be cross-compared, or the total complex of achievement graded. Only one of these factors is even roughly quantitative, and the other two are essentially incommensurable. All of which goes to show what a sticky business we are about. It is not only that the appropriate depth and breadth will vary with the size of the community, and with its purpose, but that differing possible combinations of breadth, depth, and range may result in governments quite different, yet all essentially democratic. Is it more democratic for all to participate to some degree on most questions of general concern, or for a smaller percentage to participate more fully on not so many of the important issues? Of course the answer is: it depends. It depends upon how much smaller the “smaller percentage” is, upon how fully is “more fully,” and upon which questions may be cut out of the range of public participation. It also depends upon whether the communities concerned are large or small, and upon what the principle is which unites the membership into one community. How genuine the democracy is, in short, depends upon a host of considerations that relate in various ways to the participation of the membership of that community in its public business.

So democracy, like most other affairs in the world of human society, is a matter of degree, and a matter of degree on many levels. The crucial questions to be answered in appraising democracy are not, ‘where is it?’ and ‘where is it not?’—but, where democracy is the professed aim and ideal, ‘how broad and deep is it?’ and, ‘upon what issues is it really operative?’

One is likely to appraise a democracy because of his desire to improve it, or at least to find out how it might be improved. But the question ‘how may democracy in this community be improved?’ harbors a serious ambiguity. Two very different kinds of things may be meant by “improvement.” One may be asking how democracy can be extended, or deepened, or in some way perfected in its kind. This is essentially the question of how a community professing democracy may realize that ideal more fully, may become more democratic. However widely the democratic ideal is accepted, it can rarely if ever be completely realized in all of its dimensions. The task of making democracy more perfect of its kind is one that concerns its enlargement, in breadth, depth, and range, within the given community. In-

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sofar as we do take democracy as an ideal, our understanding of its dimensions will enable us better to direct our efforts toward its more perfect realization. But the practical implementation of that ideal depends also upon an understanding of the conditions of the success of democratic government, and upon the development and control of these conditions [Part Four].

On the other hand, one asking how a democracy can be improved may be chiefly interested in changing (as he believes) for the better the policies of that democratic community. He may seek to make the laws it enacts juster, and its policies wiser. Such goals will involve judgments about the justice of law or the wisdom of policy in the light of some value or values—say progress, or power, or peacefulness—which are not implicit in democracy, but may or may not be realized by it. Ultimately improvement of this kind is likely to take place in a democracy only when its members are improved—that is, when there is change for the better in the beliefs and attitudes of those whose participation determines policy, or the selection of policymakers. Where people govern themselves, it is likely that the government will be better if the people are better. It is reasonable to suppose that, in the long run, wiser decisions will be made by wiser decision-makers. But specific changes of policy—toward enlargement or retrenchment, toward peace or war, and so on, are never entailed by democracy as a philosophy of government. Any changes of policy or program may be sought by the members of a democracy; only if these changes bear directly on the ability of the members to participate may they be sought in the name of democracy. So Ernest Barker has wisely written that the way of democracy “is not a solution, but a way of seeking solutions—not a form of State devoted to this or that particular end . . . but a form of State devoted, whatever its end may be, to a single means and method of determining that end. The core of democracy is choice, and not something chosen; choice among a number of ideas, and choice, too, of the scheme on which those ideas are eventually composed” (*Principles of Social and Political Theory*, 1951, p. 207). Improvement in this second sense, therefore, is very much the concern of the citizen of democracy, in his capacity as evaluator and participant—but it is not necessarily the concern of democracy itself. Nor is it my concern in discussing the principles that underlie democratic process. It is at once disturbing and reassuring to realize that, in a genuine democracy, the people will probably get the leaders and the laws they deserve.



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### 3.3 *Democratic forms and democratic processes*

The degree to which democracy is actual in a community is not determined by its formal structure. That structure may or may not be instrumental in realizing *processes* of decision-making that are genuinely participatory. Processes are goings-on, and democratic processes are a certain sort of goings-on. This is why democracy is never complete, never accomplished. It is a way of doing things, and that way is more or less fully actualized in the doing. One profound truth about democracy is that we never simply have it, or establish it, but continually realize it in action and live it.

It follows that the democracy of any community cannot be static. Participation of the membership will vary constantly, from day to day and year to year, from decision to decision, and possibly in differing directions during the same period along its several dimensions. One advantage in recognizing these distinct dimensions is the greater insight they permit into the changeableness of democracy. The verb, participate, literally means to take part (*L., partis, capere*). How universally, how deeply, and upon what issues the members of a community are taking part in their common business are not questions regarding what has been done, but what is being done now. Democracy is always in a state of being achieved, but the achievement of a democracy is never completed.

Here is the point of the commonly made distinction between the spirit of democracy and its forms. It is the distinction between the dynamics of democratic process, and the relatively stable character of institutions that may or may not embody that process. Often we may wish to attend to the character of the decision-making processes actually taking place, rather than to the formal instruments these processes employ. Genuine participation may be effected through a great variety of institutional devices; democracies are of all sizes and kinds, parliamentary and presidential, formal and informal. But the presence of any particular political device, or set of devices, is no guarantee of genuine democracy in the community in which such devices are established. Electors may be coerced, elections controlled, courts corrupted. The most noble and “democratic” of constitutions may be at once flaunted and flouted. This is not to make little of formal democratic institutions, or to disregard their important role in making participation effective. Elections and courts and constitutions can

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function as the invaluable instruments of democracy, still they cannot *be* democracy. To take them as democracy is to become so absorbed in the forms as to miss the spirit of the process they serve.

In this respect we are often deceived, not only by false democracies in countries and communities of which we are not members, but sometimes, too, by the formal but superficial character of the democracy in communities of which we are ourselves members. We must remember always that the reality or unreality of democracy is determined not by any set of institutional arrangements, but the character of the actual decision-making process, whatever the formal arrangements may be.

The spirit of democracy is of far greater import than its forms. In a working democracy, the forms will provide the framework within which constant political activity goes on. But that activity is likely to overflow, perhaps outrun its forms. If the spirit of democracy pervades the community it is improbable that any set of forms will fully encompass it. Indeed, one of the marks of a healthy democracy is that it will be constantly experimenting with its forms, creating new instruments with the aim of promoting ever more general and more genuine participation.