

Part Four

THE CONDITIONS OF DEMOCRACY

Chapter 8

Democracy and its conditions

8.1 *Relations of democracy to its conditions*

Democracy sometimes fails, or develops incompletely, even where its presuppositions have been realized and its instruments provided. The degree of its success depends, additionally, upon various kinds of conditions that its practice requires. The conditions of democracy are many, each subject to different degrees of fulfillment. Most are difficult to realize in the concrete, and difficult to maintain once realized. All are important for the success of democracy, but the degree and nature of their importance varies. A major task for any theory of democracy is the identification and elucidation of these conditions.

This enterprise can take either of two forms. As a quest for the techniques and institutions that have proved successful in democratic government, it is the appropriate inquiry of the political scientist. The forms, procedures, machinery of government are of the first importance, their variations and consequences of enormous interest in the practice of politics. That practice also supposes, however, the fulfillment of conditions of a more general, theoretical kind. The inquiry to follow seeks not the particulars of organization or procedure, but the kinds of circumstances required for the successful operation of a democracy. The improvement of particular institutions demands an understanding of the larger purposes those institutions are created to implement; without that understanding even the best of institutions are without direction, and the democracy that employs them not likely to be well served. This theoretical inquiry into the conditions of democracy, therefore, is of the highest practical importance.

The logical relations between democracy itself and its several conditions are difficult to formulate precisely. The conditions of democracy are not its logically necessary presuppositions, in the sense in which community and rationality are [Part Two]. Unlike those, one or more of these conditions may be done without for a time, and in many existing democracies one or more of these are realized only partially. It is rarely if ever true, in fact, that in any given community any one of the conditions of democracy is entirely absent, or perfectly fulfilled.

Whether, taken as a set, these may be considered the sufficient con-

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ditions of democracy, is moot. If, in some hypothetical community, all these conditions were realized to perfection, perhaps democracy would inevitably arise. In real communities it remains conceivable, although unlikely, that each condition could be realized in substantial measure although a non-democratic government is retained. The relations involved here are not logically strict.

While neither logically necessary nor logically sufficient, these are nevertheless the practically necessary conditions of democracy. Most of them will have to be present in generous measure in any community in which democracy meets with sustained success. Transposing this we may say that if, in a given community, a significant number of these conditions are not adequately met, democracy in that community will not long continue. What constitutes a "significant" number, and what degrees of fulfillment are "adequate," are matters not decidable in general. Some of these conditions are more crucial than others; which will prove most essential for a particular democracy will depend on the special character and special problems of that community.

8.2 Relations of the conditions of democracy to one another

There is no necessary harmony among the several conditions of democracy. Some are mutually supportive; it can also happen that the maximization of one condition counters, or in some manner tends to restrict another. So, for example, the drive for economic growth, entailing large accumulations of investment capital, may conflict with the drive for an equitable distribution of the national product; economic growth and economic justice do not always go hand in hand. Or again, the need to protect a democracy against internal subversion, and the concurrent need to maintain in a democracy the widest freedom of speech and press, may create tensions not easily resolved. Such disharmonies help to explain why democracy so generally exhibits an air of incompleteness and imperfection.

On the other hand there is no necessary incompatibility among the conditions of democracy. In contributing to a single social fabric they are likely to fit well together. So, for example, the constitutional protections needed by democracy and the individual habits and attitudes it requires are likely to be mutually reinforcing, and both may be enhanced by the intellectual and economic circumstances independently required. In general, the conditions of democracy tend to prove consonant one with another, although they do not invariably do so.

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8.3 Democracy and its conditions distinguished

The ties between democracy and certain of its conditions are so close and so obvious that there is a natural but mistaken tendency to amalgamate these conditions with democracy itself.

Common misconceptions of some so-called “democratic freedoms” serve as good examples of this confusion. The freedom of speech is a crucial condition of the success of democracy, but strictly it is not a “democratic freedom” if that expression implies that such freedom is somehow a part of democracy, or associated only with it. Nor are most of the rights we prize properly considered “democratic rights” if by this is meant either that a democracy cannot curtail them or that a non-democratic government cannot protect them. Reference to the freedom of speech as a “democratic freedom” or to certain rights as “democratic rights” is very common, and springs from the correct belief that these rights or freedoms are somehow very closely and very importantly related to democracy. They are indeed, being practical necessities of its operation. But what is *required for* democracy is not thereby *part of* democracy, and should not be identified with it.

Underlying this confusion is the common supposition, reinforced by careless thinking and loose talk, that democracy must somehow embody all other political virtues. So rich and positive is the emotive content of the name of democracy in these times that everything desired in the social sphere is called by it. Freedoms cherished become “democratic freedoms”; rights are indiscriminately called “democratic rights”; and virtually all that is held by some to be properly ideal, from Christianity to the poll tax, is dubbed by its supporters “democratic.”

My complaint here is directed not against mere habits of speech, but against the philosophical misunderstandings those poor habits engender and reflect. When the term “democracy” has absorbed everything even remotely associated with self-government, the vital distinctions between democracy as a form of government, and the conditions of the successful employment of that form, are obscured. The result is confusion, not because we cannot put our finger on what is democratic, but because virtually everything we put our finger on turns out then to be “democratic.”

This is a lamentable state of affairs. It is very important and very useful to distinguish the many virtues of the political world. Democracy is one thing; freedom another; order is a third; peace, equality, security,

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are also valuable and distinguishable. All of these may be ideals of ours, but nothing is gained by forcing them all into one. Political ideals are vague and confusedly related under the best of circumstances; amalgamated they become foggier still, and even more difficult to pursue. Discourse about political theory then becomes, as it frequently has been and is, an intellectual mush.

Once distinguished, the several conditions of democracy may well prove highly desirable in their own right [14.6–14.8]. Nothing I shall say about material well-being, for example, or the toleration of dissent, or like matters, should be taken as denying the intrinsic worth they may possess, or their instrumental value in some different context. One or more of the conditions to be discussed may be necessary for individual self-realization quite apart from their connections with democracy; or they may in some other way make important contributions to the good life. My present concern with these institutions, dispositions, and states of affairs, however, is with their role as conditions of a successful democracy. If properly called “democratic,” they are so only because of their relation to the practice of democracy; only that relation is the object of my inquiry in what ensues.

8.4 The kinds of conditions of democracy

The conditions of democracy fall into several great groups or classes. Although these groupings are for the most part natural, any such classification must inevitably impose some measure of arbitrary ordering upon its materials. The several classes are not without cross-relations, to which I shall point from time to time, nor do the separate treatments of them and their sub-categories imply sharp lines of division. I distinguish five major kinds into which the conditions of democracy can be sorted.

(1) The Material Conditions of Democracy. These include such matters as geographical environment and the brute machinery of participation. They also include the material circumstances of the citizens and the economic arrangements of the community as a whole. Although they appear easy to specify and agree upon, it is with regard to these material conditions that some of the most bitter ideological disagreements arise. Ironically, these are least appreciated as conditions of democracy where they are best realized. To them I devote Chapter 9.

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(2) *The Constitutional Conditions of Democracy.* These concern the principles, embodied in the organism or constitution of a community, which protect the rights of the citizens to act as they must be able to act if they are to participate fully and genuinely in the governing process. The right to speak freely, to criticize leadership, to assemble freely, to publish without censorship—these are leading examples of the constitutional conditions of democracy. Of all the conditions of democracy these present the most difficult theoretical problems. Although honored in name, they are seldom fully met. To them I devote Chapter 10.

(3) *The Intellectual Conditions of Democracy.* These concern the capacities of the citizens to perform the tasks that democracy imposes, and the provision of the information and training essential for the proper employment of those capacities. More than any others the intellectual conditions of democracy are unstable, the levels of attainment required increasing with the advancing state of human knowledge and powers of control. They too receive universal lip-service, but pose enormous practical problems still. To them I devote Chapter 11.

(4) *The Psychological Conditions of Democracy.* These consist of a complex of dispositions and attitudes that must be manifested by the individual members of the community if democracy is to function. Fallibilism, a willingness to compromise, a capacity for self-restraint when holding power, are only some examples of the personal traits democracy requires in generous measure. About conditions in this category we know the least, and over them we appear to have the least control. They are difficult to cultivate, difficult to maintain; yet their effect upon democracy is profound. To them I devote Chapter 12.

(5) *The Protective Conditions of Democracy.* These concern the capacities of the democratic community to defend itself against external onslaught, and against internal deterioration. Defenses needed against attackers of different kinds sometimes conflict with one another; vigorous discipline to protect against attack from without may erode other conditions of democracy within. Agonizing practical difficulties are sometimes created, therefore, by these protective conditions. Unlike the others, however, they tend to be almost exclusively the concern of national democracies (or democracies otherwise sovereign); and of all the conditions these are the most extrinsically related to democracy itself. To them I devote Chapter 13.

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These five—material, constitutional, intellectual, psychological, protective—are the classes of conditions that must be met if democracy is to emerge, and to maintain itself. Some of the important things to be noted about these conditions are rather obscure; some are obvious. No harm is done by recapitulating clearly what is commonly but vaguely understood; and there is much advantage to be derived from a thorough review of all of democracy's conditions, putting into order a mass of argument and evidence rarely thought through. Specifying the conditions of democracy consists largely of laying out the common sense of the matter; but organizing the content of that common sense is essential if it is to be effectively brought to bear on practical problems.