# Democracy or Anarchy

Charlotte Wilson

1884

Democracy is the political theory that assumes that all members of a community meet as equals on equal terms, but that nevertheless the majority have an absolute right to over-rule the minority. And it is worthwhile to look closely into the real significance of this curious non sequitur, which starting with the formula of free association ends with the formula of authority.

Where does the majority get its absolute right from? Right is a dubious word that one gets in the way of using without explanation; but I suppose that we mean by it in a general way, a claim put forward by members of a society and allowed by the rest, either because they feel it to be just or because they are afraid or unwilling to contest it - a socially recognised claim in fact. It is often said that men have no rights as against one another individually and collectively but such as they are able to maintain by superior force. And I think that though this barbarous and inhuman theory is perfectly untrue of many social rights, it is the universal explanation of the acceptance of a claim to rule. But can majority rule claim its right on these grounds?

Is it not a plain and obvious truth that supremacy in brute force by no means rests with the majority. History and daily life show us examples thick as blackberries of an energetic and resolute minority utterly defeating the majority in the most desperate trials of actual physical strength, ever since the days when a handful of Greeks defeated the mighty hosts of Persia on the plain of Marathon and Horatius and his two comrades held the Tiber bridge against the army of Lars Porsena. Providence fights on the side of the strongest battalion, but not by any means on those of the largest. And this is even more obviously true when the contest is transferred to the intellectual field.

No; the history of authority has consisted of a series of minority rules, each one of which has existed in virtue of the superior possession of the real strength of vital energy in one form or another. And where is the evidence that the dominating force is about to become or is becoming the portion of the majority? The majority today retains the relation it has always retained to the energetic minority of the population. It represents the dead blight of a blind adherence to habit and custom, of insensibility, dullness and apathy, of lazy inclination to avoid all responsibility, all reform, all enlightenment, in fact all departure from the beaten track, all need for unwonted exertion even in thought. If it is to exercise authority it will exercise it only by the dead weight of inertia, the blind force of unreasoning and irresponsible stupidity - in the sense, in fact, in which it exercises it now and always has exercised it.

No doubt "the public collectively", as Mill says, "is abundantly ready to impose not only its generally narrow views of its own interests, but its abstract opinion and even its tastes upon individuals." And if it has machinery at command for doing this without trouble it will oppress without mercy. Do you think that the majority of American citizens were any more unwilling that the Chicago men or John Brown should be hanged than the majority of Jews that Christ should be crucified? Do you think that a plebiscite of London citizens, or the inhabitants of England would maintain the right of meeting in Trafalgar Square? In the name of human progress and the spontaneous individual initiative on which it depends, we may thank our stars that the majority as yet show no sign of acquiring that right to rule founded on superior force. But if the theory of democracy or the rule of the majority cannot be based on the appeal to force which has been the basis of all other over-ruling, what, then is its basis? Shall we say expediency? It is a first approximation - a blundering attempt to return to the principle of free association, still hampered by the ideas of authority yet current in society. On all occasions for common action, or where a general understanding is desirable, one must have some principle of decision and the recent development of social feeling has rendered an appeal to the old species of authority as morally odious, as it is intellectually contemptible. It is a matter of common experience that men, like sheep and all other gregarious and social animals, have a pretty general tendency to go in masses and act together unless they are prevented by some abnormal division of interests. Each one of us is inclined by our social feeling to like in a general way to do what the rest like. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred where a number of people are met together to decide upon some common course of conduct, they will all in the end come to some definite decision in favour of one thing; because those who were at one time inclined to dissent, prefer in the end to act with the majority, if the matter is of practical importance; not because they are forced to do so by the majority over-ruling, but because the largest body of opinion has so much weight with them that they choose not to act contrary to it.

We all admit this general fact. It would be quite impossible to take any common action at all if it were not so. But the special theory of democracy is that the general tendency of humanity which becomes so apparent whenever men associate on anything like terms of economic equality, should be made by men into an arbitrary law of human conduct to be enforced not only in the ninety-nine cases where nature enforces it, but by the arbitrary methods of coercion in the hundredth where she doesn't. And for the sake of the hundredth case, for the sake of enforcing this general natural tendency where nature does not enforce it, democrats would have us retain in our political relation that fatal principle of the authority of man over man which has been the cause of confusion and disorder, of wrong and misery in human societies since the dawn of history.

"Men are not social enough to do without it," it has been said. For our part we do not know when they will be social enough to do with it. Experience has not yet revealed the man who could be safely trusted with power over his fellows; and majority rule is nothing else in practice than putting into the hands of ambitious individuals the opportunity to crush their fellows by the dead weight of the blind mass of which we have spoken.

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