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## On Some Common Misunderstandings about Democracy

### 1

Surely, democracy is a highly civilised way of conducting political affairs as compared, for instance, with the raw and often exceedingly violent power politics characteristic of international systems. Yet, this does not mean that democracy operated outside the realm of ordinary power politics, specifically, that under a democratic political regime people were not driven by power. Nor does it mean that democracy negated or rendered inoperative the laws and mechanisms underlying all power politics. Democracy is an institutional structure for regulating the struggle for power and influence in a social system, and it works via, not in spite of, the mechanisms governing all ordinary political processes. Democratic politics, then, differs quantitatively, not qualitatively, from politics in international systems like Europe or under non-democratic regimes however large the differences may sometimes appear to us. As a regulatory system, democracy may be defined by two distinct traits: (1) a comparatively large freedom to participate in the political process; and (2) the prevalence of voting and elections as methods for producing joint decisions and policies, and for filling positions of authority, respectively. Or, put in quantitative terms, we may call a regime more (less) democratic according as (1) a larger (smaller) number and variety of groups or interests are allowed to participate in the political process; and (2) a larger (smaller) proportion of public affairs is regulated by means of voting and elections. Accordingly, democracy is not the all-or-nothing affair for which it often seems to be taken, and differs quantitatively, not qualitatively from other kinds of political regimes, including those prevailing in international systems. No regime, however authoritarian, can exclude all participation in its affairs, and hardly any system is entirely without voting procedures. Conversely, in no democracy, participation is entirely neither free, nor will exclusively voting or elections govern all of its affairs.

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The advantages of a (more) democratic arrangement of public affairs if and to the degree that it actually works effectively, one should always add are relatively obvious. It is a comparatively cheap and humane way of conducting public affairs, particularly as it reduces the incidence of violence and of the costly oppression of rivals and competitors. It is, too, a highly adaptable system of government in that it permits the comparatively easy adaptation of policies, decisions, and authority relations to changes in the power structure of society, for instance as a result of technological and economic change. In addition, it is admirably suited to mobilise the energies of the nation in all sorts of collective endeavours. Small wonder, then, that the Western democracies have been so vastly more successful than authoritarian regimes in providing wealth and prosperity. And, as against the common prejudice that democracies were militarily weak, the Western democracies have been much more successful in fighting their wars than their authoritarian adversaries although, to be sure, democratic regimes may well be less suited for planning aggressive wars of their own, or in providing a timely deterrent to the aggression of others.

In view of all this, it is rather natural that, in the long struggles accompanying the establishment of increasingly democratic regimes in the West, the notion have acquired a strong ideological flavour. One of the rather unfortunate consequences of this state of affairs is that it tends to preclude a dispassionate analysis of democracy as just another kind of political regime. It renders it exceedingly difficult to see its establishment, working, and evolution as a function of the political conditions prevailing in the system concerned, just as in the case of any other regime or institutional structure. Rather than with explaining the thing, analysis and public debate tend to be dominated by ideology, by a concern for what a 'true' democracy 'really' is or should be, and by its justification on moral grounds. Moreover, such justification is commonly cast in terms that bear but a tenuous relationship to the realities of politics and social life. Specifically, democracy is still quite commonly justified as a system for expressing the people's will or the general interest, for giving people influence on public affairs, for realising freedom for all, for limiting the role and influence of government, or for checking the exercise of public authority. In fact, though, no one has ever been able to identify what the will or interest of 'the people' is. Characteristically, 'the people' consists of a variety of different, often conflicting groups and interests; and even though one might, at a very high level of abstraction, define one common or general interest such as, for instance, a high level of stable and adaptable order in society, different people or groups will typically have quite different conceptions of how to realise that interest. As regards the influence which individual people may have on public affairs, in the vast majority of cases this will probably be just as insignificant under a democratic regime as under any other kind of institutional arrangement. This even applies to a

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so-called direct democracy, still seen by not a few as a better way of expressing the people than the representative democracy with which we are familiar. For while under such a regime individual people may indeed make their voices heard in public decision-making, this does certainly not mean that they also had more than an utterly insignificant influence on those decisions. Incidentally, that representative rather than direct democracy has come to prevail in all larger systems, does not just derive from the obvious technical difficulty of making direct democracy work at all in such systems. Rather, it is because direct democracy lacks the institutions, such as political parties and interest groups, that provide reliable channels for the accommodation of all sorts of interests at lower levels, for producing more or less stable configurations of power and interest, and for channelling collective decisions back to the population at large, thus generating support and discipline. Such institutions are an essential precondition for stable government and for making a democracy work in fact. In their absence, collective decision-making is bound to become arbitrary and unpredictable, subject to demagoguery and all sorts of collective moods, frenzies and fears. In brief, direct democracy forms the ideal setting for, or leads directly to, the reign of demagogues and tyrants. Similarly, the referendum is a rather less democratic institution than it tends to be taken for. Referenda lend themselves all too easily to manipulation by the authorities of the day, and they bypass the normal play of interest politics, while their systematic use undermines those political institutions or formations that are so essential to democratic government. Small wonder, then, that they form a favourite method of government for all sorts of dictators or authoritarian leaders, while again they do not give individual people any meaningful say in public affairs.

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Without doubt, the comparatively large degree of freedom to participate in public affairs, particularly the freedom to organise new political groups or formations in order to power, which is such an essential trait of democratic government, does act as a restraint on the oppressive proclivities of authorities and majorities everywhere. After all, oppression might lead to a loss of support and authority. But while this may reduce the possibilities for arbitrary oppression, it surely does not act as a barrier against the ever-increasing role influence of government in society, nor does it in any way limit the capacity of government to discipline and control the populace — quite to the contrary.

Indeed, the participation of a wide, even increasing array of societal groups, all of which demand and require recognition and accommodation in the policies and laws of the realm, forms one of the forces driving democratic governments everywhere increase their sway over the population. It drives democratic governments everywhere to regulate or control an ever-expanding proportion of people's

affairs, and to move inexorably in the direction of what can only be called a totalitarian state.<sup>1</sup> In a way, too, the price of such freedom to participate in public affairs is a exceedingly high measure of loyalty and obedience to the state. It manifests itself in a historically unprecedented capacity of democratic governments to tax the resources of the nation, and to mobilise its subjects in military endeavours.

This conflicts with traditional democratic ideology, according to which democracy were a method for controlling and curbing government. Specifically, the prime function of parliament, democracy's supreme representative institution, is supposed to be that of checking and controlling government. In fact, however, (modern) parliaments hardly ever perform this function. Rather, as one of the chief avenues along which to influence policy, and to fight for recognition, influence and positions, parliament characteristically feeds and fires the tendency to expand the role and authority of government. Instead of the more or less extra-political agency checking the workings of ordinary government so dear to democratic ideology, parliament forms an essential ingredient of the structure of power and authority relations in a democratic system. And such control as it manages to exercise over the authoritarian or inclinations of government derives from the power-political condition that opposition and rivals may at any time emerge under the system rather than from any collective concern for checking government.

In fact, democracy does not even automatically guarantee the absence of all oppression generally. It is not just that democracies, just as other regimes, are usually quite able and willing to discipline those who do not obey its laws or precepts, sometimes even in very harsh ways — as indeed they must. But in principle a democracy may well be able to systematically oppress such groups or minorities as do not stand a chance of gaining sufficient political power or influence, the more so as they deviate from what is judged to be 'politically correct' by majority or such delusions or hysterics as may grip the populace. More generally, every democracy contains weak or badly organised groups that do systematically worse than do others, and whose needs or interests are rather less well catered for than are those of others. Thus, in the welfare states of European society, civil servants, organised labour and farmers do typically rather better than shopkeepers and small businessmen democracy is surely no method for satisfying all interests. Under democratic regimes, as under any other system, the extent to which one's interests are satisfied is a matter of relative power, specifically of potential electoral strength, rather than of abstract justice.

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Contrary to what seems to be commonly thought, then, democracy per se does not automatically guarantee fair treatment, collective or individual rights, or the absence of arbitrary oppression. To do so is rather the function of an altogether

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different condition, to wit, the rule of law. Briefly, it is a system under which the citizenry as well as the government, its executive branch, the judiciary, and, not least importantly, the legislative, operate according to fixed and stable laws known in advance to all concerned. In Western democracies, the two tend to go together. This is quite fortunate, but cannot be taken for granted at all. Indeed, an authoritarian regime may well operate under the rule of law, as in the case of the authoritarian democracy which was Wilhelmine Germany or, to an extent much greater than seems to be generally known, in the case of Tsarist Russia, certainly no democracy. Conversely, in every democracy there is always the real danger that 'legal niceties' may be set-aside by popular frenzies or fears. In fact, so it would seem, in modern Western democracies the common assumption of absolute legal sovereignty and by parliament may well help erode the predictability and legal security which is one of the prime products of the rule of law. The assumption that parliament, as long as it remains within the confines of constitutional law, had the right to make or change just any law that commands the support of a momentary majority, not bound by, and irrespective of the prior system of law and the system of 'vested interests' inevitably built around it, may well erode the certainty or reliability of the law. This, together with the vast number and variety of ever changing laws that are typically being produced in modern democracies may well end up by eroding the order, stability, predictability and certainty that form the prime conditions of orderly social, economic, and political life in modern society. Who, except the specialised lawyer, is still able to say what the law is, to find his way through the enormous maze of increasingly complex laws, to know what his rights or obligations are, and to be sure about what they will be tomorrow. Instead of producing order, modern democratic government may itself come to constitute a major source of societal disorder, something, which may welcome to undermine democratic government itself.

## 5

It is commonly thought that democracy were a matter of the particularly enlightened attitudes of 'democratic man'. Such attitudes are supposed to be characterised by such things as tolerance, respect for the opinions of minorities, and a particularly rational approach to politics inspired by the recognition that it is more efficient to decide things by counting rather than by bashing heads and that most conflicts can be better resolved by reasoned argument than by fighting. As a corollary, it is believed that such attitudes can be learned by means of proper education which, conversely, would root out the less rational notions or the more primitive impulses that are assumed to underlie non-democratic regimes. Thus, the establishment of democracy was first of all a matter of enlightenment and education.

There is not much to be said for such a conception. In all systems and under all conditions, under democratic regimes no less than in non-democratic or international systems, people's behaviour is primarily aimed at the preservation or acquisition of power, that is, of the resources and information that form the essential means for survival. How they do so, the form which such behaviour assumes, the means which they employ, and the lengths to which they will be prepared to go therein, is basically a matter of the circumstances in which they find themselves, not least importantly, of their own power (including information!), relative to that of their friends, rivals, and competitors. In democratic regimes, the struggle for power is no less intense than in other kinds of systems. If anything, it may well be more so in a democracy, as the freedom to pursue one's own interests will be greater than under other regimes.

That under an effectively working democratic regime this struggle tends to assume more humane and peaceful forms than in other systems has less to do with the supposed virtues, rationality or enlightenment of democratic man than with the conditions prevailing under such a regime. It is these conditions, notably the existence of a strong government (which in itself has not even much to do with democracy), which, in a way, force people to behave peacefully and humanely, leaving them no other choice but to suppress their darker, cruel and violent impulses. In fact, there exist very few people, if any, whose behaviour can be characterised systematically and under all circumstances by the virtues commonly ascribed to democratic man. Indeed, we see, time and again, that in different circumstances, for instance when a democratic regime breaks down or in international systems, that same creature is just as capable of perpetrating the most cruel and violent acts as next man. And even in a working democracy, authorities or people generally, when given the slightest chance or pretext, are usually perfectly willing to oppress their rivals, competitors or those that simply do not share their fancies, attitudes and convictions; to exploit those weaker than themselves; and to forbid and suppress what they do not like. The point is, though, that the power-political conditions prevailing in such a regime greatly limit the scope for such inclinations even if they do not always suppress them altogether.

It is highly doubtful, too, whether any measure of enlightened education could ever really suppress this darker side of homo sapiens after all, the holocaust was organised and executed by one of the most highly and humanely educated people on earth. Rather, one must fear that such well-meaning educational attempts as are occasionally made these days to raise the peaceful and humane democratic citizen of myth and ideology will merely result in more hypocrisy and a not tendency to deny or ignore our own darker potentialities.<sup>2</sup>

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People, especially 'ordinary people', everywhere prefer peace to the hazards and sufferings of war. War, then, must originate in the irresponsible, and, for good reasons, usually secret power-political dealings of 'the great' of this earth. As a consequence, a system of government in which the voice of ordinary people can make itself heard and felt must be inherently more peaceful than one in which this is not or less the case. Ergo, democracies must be more peaceful than other regimes, and the establishment of democracy everywhere should be an essential step towards world peace. Thus a theory, which gained wide currency towards the end of the First World War, and which, one suspects, is still believed in by not a few.

In support of this theory, it is often observed that modern democracies have tended not to fight each other. Even this observation loses some of its *prima facie* cogency, however, if it is recognised that the Wilhelmine Germany which fought the Entente powers in the First World War was in all probability not much less democratic than, say, Great Britain given, that is, the level of democracy which was common or feasible in those days. During the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular, the democracies France and Great Britain were each other's greatest rivals, and did reckon with the possibility of having to fight each other. In fact, at the occasion of the Fashoda crisis, they came very close indeed to actual war. In addition, even as late as the thirties of this century, the United States' military planned for the contingency of war against Great Britain.

For all that, warfare between the modern democracies has been extremely rare indeed. One suspects, however, that this has less to do with the supposed inherent peacefulness of democratic regimes than with the power-political constellation in the advanced, industrialised part of the world in which those democracies were and are located. After all, until very recent times, those same democracies have fought a great number sometimes very fierce colonial or imperial wars. In the First and Second World Wars, the democracies fought every bit as fiercely and determinedly as their opponents. During the period of the Cold War, the policies of the Western democracies, generally supported by overwhelming electoral majorities, can hardly be called pacifist. In addition, whatever the nature and merits of the Vietnam war or the even more one against Iraq, they hardly testify to any particular peacefulness of the democracies which fought them.

In fact, there simply are no good reasons to suppose that a democratic regime were inherently more peaceful than any other. Of course, people, not just 'ordinary people' but authorities, politicians, and diplomats as well, will ordinarily prefer to achieve their goals or realise their interests in a peaceful rather than in a usually much more costly and hazardous violent way. Yet, they

may always find themselves in a situation, whether or not of their own making, in which violence may seem to be useful, necessary or inevitable. It is hard to see why this should be different under a democracy than under another kind of regime. Indeed, both under democratic and autocratic regimes, the population at large appears to be equally susceptible to all sorts of collective, not seldom quite aggressive moods and frenzies. If anything, democracies may well be even more vulnerable to them than more autocratic regimes in which the need to mobilise the population or pay attention to its moods, prejudices or fears may be somewhat smaller.

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That in a democracy people are just as much driven by power as under any other kind of regime also means that, rather than operating outside the constraints of ordinary power politics, democracy, too, must conform, or rather: can function only if and to the extent that it conforms, to the structure of power relations prevailing in a social system. This means, briefly, that any law, institutional structure, policy or decision will be effective only if and to the extent that it forms a reasonably accurate reflection of the power relations prevailing in the system. Put negatively, this means that people or groups abide by it only if and to the extent that, in view of their relative real power, they cannot do better by not doing so. If this condition is not satisfied, it means that the system will contain such groups or people that command sufficient power as allows them to disobey the laws etc. with impunity, while they will be able to satisfy their needs and interests in other ways which, as a consequence, they may surely be expected to do.

Of course, this condition should not be interpreted too narrowly as having to be satisfied with absolute precision at each moment in time. For one thing, power relations are hard to measure with any accuracy, nor can it usually be determined with any degree of precision to what exactly one's own relative power entitles one. For another, social life is a going concern, consisting of quasi-endless sequences of decisions and processes, in which present losses or concessions are often accepted in the hope that they will be made good by future successes. Accordingly, the prime condition for effective democratic government is that people should expect it to produce results that, on average and in the somewhat longer run, will at least not be worse than what, given their own relative power, they might obtain in any other way. It should be added immediately that this principle should not be interpreted to imply that democracies were idyllic places to live in, nor that coercion or (the threat of) violence had no role to play in them. On the contrary. What people or groups may expect to obtain, or what they feel they have to resign themselves to, is just as



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much a matter of their own relative capabilities for violence as it is of their productive resources or of the support they may generate among others. And, conversely, the effectiveness and stability of democratic government inevitably rests in part on its predominant strength in military and police resources, and on its willingness to use these against those that do not obey the law as on its legitimacy and the electoral support it manages to generate.

## 8

The legitimacy of democratic government, i.e., the degree to which it is supported as a good thing by (the more powerful groups in) the population, is a powerful prop of any regime which can claim to be democratic. It considerably weakens the inclination to fight it and its policies or laws from among such powerful groups as might seriously jeopardise its functioning. In addition, it makes people more easily accept such reverses or disappointments, as they will occasionally suffer under the democratic regime.

That democratic government should enjoy such legitimacy is something which we tend to take entirely for granted, and we find it hard to understand that any non-democratic regime might ever enjoy such legitimacy despite abundant evidence, historical as well as contemporary, to the contrary. To be sure, the idea of democracy nowadays seems to enjoy worldwide support. Indeed, democracy seems to have evolved into a true taboo in at least the Western world, and a powerful ingredient of what defines the politically correct attitude. After all, who could reasonably be against such a benign, civilised, cheap and efficient kind of regime? Accordingly, almost every government or authority tends to present itself as truly democratic, and in every system oppositional forces struggling for recognition, a share of public authority, or, in not a few cases, outright domination of society, may be sure to do so in the name of democracy. Yet, while as often as not such support for the abstract notion of democracy is quite spurious or even fraudulent, it can hardly be denied that Western democracies at least do seem to enjoy a considerable measure of real legitimacy even to the extent that the mere fact that a decision is taken by democratic procedures is rather commonly believed to insure its legitimacy, and to justify full compliance with it on the part of all concerned, irrespective, that is, of its contents.

Real legitimacy, however, is a matter less of abstract ideals than of rather more concrete conditions or circumstances whose realisation or satisfaction can surely not be taken for granted. Very briefly, people may be expected to support a system or regime if and to the degree that, on average and in the somewhat longer run, it serves to satisfy their interests. One should not construe this too narrowly, however. For it means, in particular, that one of the chief

sources of support for a regime or system will be the degree to which it provides people with information, order, peace and security: does it or does it not allow people to pursue their more mundane interests in peace, and to form stable and reliable expectations as to what others, including of course the government, will or will not do. Indeed, such order or information is an essential precondition for the production of wealth and prosperity as well as for the development of civilisation in general. When a regime does produce this most important of public goods, even if it does so by means of a great deal of coercion and oppression, then we may expect it to acquire legitimacy. And when, conversely, a regime, democratic or otherwise, cannot work effectively in fact in the sense of a reliable production of laws, policies, and decisions, then it will also be utterly incapable of providing that on which its real legitimacy rests, to wit, order, information, peace and security quite irrespective of whether or not it might conform to abstract ideals or conceptions of justice and good government.

Whether or not a democratic regime might acquire real legitimacy, then, depends first of all on whether, briefly, it is able to produce stable government, such government, that is, as is able to peacefully produce effective decisions, policies, and laws, and which allows people to form reliable judgements as to what to expect from each other and from the government. That is to say, democracy requires first of all strong and effective government.

Accordingly, when this condition is not met, as in international systems, democracy will be unable to acquire any real legitimacy, except in the spurious sense of lip-service being paid to an abstract ideal. In fact, in the absence of stable government reliable expectations as to what will happen in the future are hardly possible at all. In such conditions one can never be sure whether present commitments or agreements will in fact be honoured in the future, and whether present concessions or losses will eventually be made good by future successes: there is no way to estimate average costs and benefits in the somewhat longer run.<sup>3</sup>

So, when for some reason or other a democratic regime fails to provide stable government, one may be sure that it will lose such legitimacy as it might have enjoyed, and will eventually be replaced by some other arrangement as the case of Weimar Germany, of pre-Fascist Italy, and of countless nations in the Third World demonstrates. In like manner, democratic procedures can hardly be expected to acquire any real legitimacy to speak of in international systems. For in such systems strong and stable government is usually quite impossible to begin with, except to some extent in the form of empires and hegemonies, while the lack of order which characterises such systems prevents the formation of reliable long-term expectations regarding the behaviour of others. In such conditions, it is hard indeed to be sure, whether present concessions will be made good by future gains, or whether present obligations and commitments will be honoured in the future. Then in such conditions democratic decision-making is quite impossible in the first place.

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That democratic decisions, just like those made under any other regime by the way, can work effectively only if and to the extent that they more or less accurately reflect the (perceived) power relations among those concerned, makes democracy into a very peculiar system indeed. For it means that voting and elections will work only to the degree that (on average and in the somewhat longer run), they form a sufficiently accurate reflection of the real power relations that prevail in a system. It also means that, contrary to democratic ideology, voting or election procedures serve less to express people's preferences or to apportion the benefits of societal life in a perfectly just way, than to measure the real power relations prevailing in a system.

As a corollary, too, the so-called voting paradoxes, for instance the famous Arrow paradox, which show that, very briefly, voting usually cannot faithfully reflect voters' preferences, lose much of their paradoxical character. In fact, they are paradoxes only by virtue of a somewhat dubious ideological conception of what voting does. Similarly, the problem of the 'passionate minority', which haunts current democratic theory or, rather, ideology, is largely spurious. For when a system contains such groups as are both motivated and sufficiently powerful to challenge the laws or decisions arrived at by democratic procedures, no democracy is possible in the first place.

How, then, could voting and elections, i.e., the mere counting of the (relative) numerical size of the support for specific measures or positions, ever be used as a sufficiently accurate approximation of the real power relations prevailing in a social system? After all, power relations are exceedingly hard to measure at all. Normally, it can be done only in an experimental way, by means of sometimes quite violent trial and error, as in international systems, that is, by the political process itself in which the parties concerned eventually, and often in extremely costly ways, find out what their limits and (im)possibilities are, what they can get away with or, conversely, what they have to resign themselves to.

Moreover, the real (relative) power of human groups usually has but little to do with their (relative) numerical size. Rather, it is a matter of the resources they possess, and of such intangibles as their culture, morale, degree of homogeneity, and their capacity for mobilising their members in collective action. In addition, that such matters could be accurately measured by the mere expression of support for this or that notion or position, about the minimal investment of effort conceivable, is usually ludicrous. Yet, if they do not, the decisions thus achieved will always leave dissatisfied groups with the motivation not to abide by them, and with the power to do so with impunity.

This forms the basic reason why democratic decision-making is usually quite impossible in international systems, and why, inasmuch as voting does take place, it is either restricted to quite insignificant matters, without much binding

force on those concerned, or hedged in by veto power, i.e., the acknowledged right of at least the more powerful to refuse to let themselves be bound by it and which usually prevents any decision to be taken at all. For how could (weighted) voting ever reliably express the real power differences between, say the United States and India or between Great Britain and Spain or, indeed, between any country and some (usually quite tenuous and impotent) international coalition? That is to say, How could it ever express such differences so reliably and accurately that those defeated under that regime would really feel forced to accept such defeat or systematically feel that they could not do better in any other way?

The question is of course purely rhetorical, which forms the basic reason for preserving the veto in, for instance, the Security Council of the UN. Surely, that veto power prevents all sorts of important decisions from being taken and executed. Nevertheless, it should not be supposed that its abolition would remove the underlying obstacle to effective international decision-making, or that it would mean truly effective international government. On the contrary, as it would undoubtedly induce the more important and powerful members to leave the organisation. In fact, the veto is a salutary recognition of the realities of international life, and the only way to safeguard at least a modicum of international co-operation and regular diplomacy.

For the same reason one must be extremely sceptical, indeed wary, about the introduction of majority voting with respect to such matters as foreign policy in the European Union, about which one hears so much today. Could it really be assumed that, even in that system, (weighted) voting could really express real power relations, and that the real power differences between, say Germany or the Netherlands or between Spain and Great Britain, were accurately and reliably measured by the current number of votes allotted to these nations, or that one could devise a system which did so properly? And could one really believe that majorities produced by this method could guarantee the mobilisation of truly overwhelming real, and if need be coercive power, as is usually the case in working democracies?

If, as seems most likely, these questions should be answered in the negative, decisions taken by this method will surely be ineffective, and impossible to impose against the determined opposition of any but the weakest state. In addition, attempts to impose such decisions on the more powerful members of the system against their wishes might well surely make them even more hesitant than they usually are to commit themselves to the enterprise in the first place. In other words, they might well render European co-operation and joint decision-making even more difficult than it already is even under the best of circumstances.

That the capacity for collective action of the European Union, particularly in the fields of foreign policy and defence is extremely limited is obvious enough.

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In fact, it is illustrated by its 'policies' with respect to former Yugoslavia on an almost daily basis. This impotence is rooted in the power-political structure of the system rather than in the wishes or preferences of those involved. Briefly, it stems from the impossibility to mobilise overwhelming real power in support of any collective decision, such power, in particular, as may insure its execution and implementation against any opposition, particularly from among the ranks of the more powerful nations. One may deplore this. However, it would be a grave illusion to think that it could be remedied by mere institutional gadgets, such as majority voting.

Something similar applies to the European Parliament instituted as a means for raising the democratic character of the European Community (or Union). Parliaments function effectively if and to the extent that their members command real power or influence in the sense of being able to mobilise sufficient support from among the population. However, in Europe real power is still mainly located in its component states, i.e., and the European system as a whole is still highly heterogeneous. Therefore, too, European political life, particularly its system of political parties, is still inevitably organised mainly around or at the level of the national states. This means among other things that the European Parliament can only be a relatively artificial construction in that it is not and cannot (yet) be made up of such members as command sufficient support from the (as yet somewhat chimerical European) population. Indeed, most people do not even bother to vote in European elections. Perhaps the European Parliament performs all sorts of useful functions. For quite some time to come, however, it is bound to differ essentially from Europe's national parliaments. Accordingly, too, one must be very sceptical indeed about using a strengthening of the role and authority of the European Parliament as a means for combating the (very real and potentially highly dangerous) erosion of West European democracy as a result of the process of European co-operation.

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The basic reason, then, why democracy is impossible in international systems reside in their heterogeneity. That is, such systems are composed of any number of distinct, non-overlapping and more or less stable groups, the nations, that themselves command the more or less exclusive loyalties and support of their citizens, as a result of which they are capable of mobilising power far in excess of their mere numerical size even though such power is itself highly variable as a function of (sometimes great) differences in their own culture, institutions and internal organisation. In a way, the impossibility of democracy in international systems is because such systems are composed almost exclusively of 'passionate minorities'. However, the same also goes for a great many nations of the

world. As is illustrated by many nations of the Third World, these, too, are often highly heterogeneous in the sense of consisting of non-overlapping groups such as tribes that (still) form the more or less exclusive focus for the loyalties of their members. Therefore, the prospects for truly democratic government in such nations is rather bleak as long, that is, as societal development has not yet eroded their heterogeneity, and irrespective of what their sometimes impressively democratic constitutions say.

Contrast this with the situation in the modern, industrialised nations of, in particular, the Western world. Here societal development, driven above all by the evolution of technology since the Industrial Revolution has tended to erode those stable groups or formations that used to command the exclusive loyalties of their members. Instead, that development has led to the proliferation of a very large number and variety of different overlapping and cross-cutting groups and interests, none of which any longer commands the exclusive loyalties of their members. People in such societies typically belong to many groups or categories at the same time that enmesh them in a complex web of different, not seldom conflicting, and therefore usually also weaker loyalties. In other words, in such societies people act as individuals rather than as members of this or that group or community. In such conditions, the power of societal groups and formations only occasionally exceeds the number of their members. In particular they will be incapable of making them fight over any length of time except, of course, in the case of usually quite minute and unstable groups along the fringes of society. What makes democracy work in such societies, then, is their homogeneity or its mirror image, their individualisation. Such homogeneity does not mean that everyone should think or do the same or share the same attitudes or convictions. On the contrary. Precisely modern industrialised and democratic societies are characterised by a rather variety of opinions, interests, beliefs and attitudes. The point, however, is that such opinions etc. are distributed in a relatively random way, that is, that they cannot all be predicted from a knowledge of people's location in society.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, real power is just as hard to measure accurately in a homogeneous society as it is in any other system. In a homogeneous society, however, the momentary relative numerical size of the support behind certain positions, authorities or contenders for public office, made up of all sorts of overlapping groups whose composition, moreover, is subject to sometimes quite drastic change, does provide a usually sufficiently accurate assessment of the relative power that can be mobilised. In a way, it does so simply by default, that is, by virtue of the absence of permanent and stable, more homogeneous groups that are capable of mobilising power in excess to their numerical size. Conversely, in a democratic system voting and elections may continue to work effectively as long as this condition is indeed satisfied, as long, that is, as the political process does not freeze into a contest of about equally powerful, homogeneous groups

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as it did, for instance, in the last years of the Weimar Republic. In the conditions of modern industrialised nations, too, composed as they are of floating, ever changing complexes of all sorts of groups and interests, the systematic exclusion of any such group or interest from participation in public affairs is usually quite impossible or at least much too costly to sustain. Rather, such conditions offer excellent opportunities for politicians or authorities to search for new political markets to exploit, and to tap ever-new sources of support in their struggles with each other.<sup>5</sup>

In the long process of the evolution of modern industrialised societies, it has led those politicians and authorities to gradually widen the suffrage until nowadays it has everywhere become quite general with a tendency to include ever younger age cohorts. By the same token, it has led to the gradual development of those institutional structures, particularly of political parties<sup>6</sup> and interest groups, that are required for the stable articulation and mobilisation of interests and people, and that are indispensable for the proper working of a modern mass democracy. Indeed, one of the things which makes the development of democracy in Eastern Europe after the demise of the Soviet Union and empire so very difficult is precisely that such reliable institutions do not yet exist. In addition, inasmuch as they did exist or were developing in the past, before the Communist take-over, that is, they were destroyed by that regime's policy of *Gleichschaltung* and 'totalitarian atomisation'. It forms another instance of the destructive character of the Communist experiment, and one, which will surely take a long time to repair.

## 11

In view of the great and obvious advantages of democratic government, it is rather natural that, particularly in the West, governments and the public alike tend to use it as the standard against which to measure every other regime, and to insist on its establishment everywhere. Therein, however, we all too often ignore or forget that, as should again be emphasised, the advantages of (more) democratic government can be realised only if and to the degree, that such government actually works effectively. But this is not a matter of choice and of just introducing the proper constitutional laws, not even when all concerned were truly convinced that such a system were best. Rather, it is determined by a complex set of structural conditions, none of which are of our own making or are under human control. Thus, that Western industrialised nations have grown sufficiently homogeneous to make (more) democracy possible, indeed: imperative, is the product, not of our own wishes, preferences or policies, but of a deep societal transformation which, in its turn, has resulted from the evolution of our technology and economy. Neither have the particular institutions of our

democracies, their constitutional laws as well as their parties and interest groups, been set up by fiat. Instead, they evolved in a long process of adaptation to the changing structure of society. In brief, democracy is not something that could have been invented and established or imposed, but an important aspect of the political evolution of a social system. In fact, this also applies to the development of democratic ideology itself. Because this is perhaps the most visible or audible manifestation of the process, it is not uncommonly regarded as its prime mover. Democracy, then, is supposed to have developed because the people, fed up with an oppressive, even 'tyrannical' Ancien Régime, and led by enlightened thinkers who articulated and shaped their deepest wishes, began to demand freedom and representation. Of course, to some extent this is indeed what happened. Yet, it is but the outer form as it were of the process. For that such democratic ideas could assume a politically significant role, that they could appeal to a sufficiently large public, that it became worthwhile to develop and articulate them at any length in the first place, and that freedom and representation could grow into important political issues, it is all a matter less of intellectual, ideological or even moral development than of the emergence of powerful societal groups and interests that could no longer be accommodated by the institutions of the Ancien Régime. The development of democratic ideology, then, represents a kind of intellectual adaptation to the transformation of the deep structure of society, thereby giving voice to the new interests and power relations, which this transformation was producing. That such ideology, in its turn, may have shaped and inspired people's subsequent behaviour, and that it may therefore have added impetus to the process, is highly likely, but a different matter altogether.

## 12

It is quite commonly believed that democratic government required a sufficient measure of economic prosperity and security. To be true, we find the system for the most part in the more prosperous nations of the world, while effective democracies hardly exist in the less prosperous nations of, in particular, the Third World. Similarly, it can hardly be denied that the failure of the Weimar democracy had something to do with the dismal economic conditions prevailing in Germany, particularly after the crash of 1929. On the other hand, in such countries as Great Britain, the US, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, democracy survived the hardships of the Great Depression and even, in the case of Great Britain and the US, the Second World War. Neither are there any *prima facie* reasons for assuming any direct relationship between economic prosperity and democratic government. Indeed, the relation between economic development and prosperity on the one hand, and democracy on the other



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turns out to be a good deal more complex and indirect than is often believed. For the previous discussion leads to the conclusion that, rather than from economic prosperity per se, (increasingly) democratic government stems from the homogenisation of society which, in its turn, represents the product of the technological and economic evolution which particularly Western nations have undergone since the eighteenth century. Surely, this development has also produced a great deal of prosperity. As far as democracy is concerned, however, such prosperity is a by-product rather than the source of that development. Conversely, a fall in prosperity need not in itself endanger a working democracy. What does endanger democracy, however, is its perceived inability to provide stable government or some kind of solution for the problems that confront society. This inability may stem from internal reasons, specifically, from a situation of political deadlock in which stable majorities appear to be impossible, or from the impossible strains to which the system is being subjected. Weimar's demise was due to a most unfortunate conjunction of both of these strains. Stable majority government proved to be impossible as none of the main contenders for power was strong enough to impose its will on the others, while all of them were too strong to make them bow to the will of any of the others or even to agree to a working coalition among themselves. Moreover, the Great Depression presented the system with urgent problems both highly unfamiliar and of an unprecedented magnitude for which, in these conditions, the system was utterly incapable of finding any kind of solution at all. In fact, none of the other major Western democracies was capable of an effective response to these desperate problems. Moreover, in all of them, democratic government was under quite severe strains. However, in none of them was this combined with the kind of political deadlock and the breakdown of orderly government under which Germany suffered.

## 13

Modern mass democracy, then, is a regime which evolved as a natural response to the gradual growth of a more homogeneous and individualised society which, in its turn, resulted from the development of technology and the economy since the eighteenth century. Indeed, that development made democracy necessary or even imperative in the sense that no other regime provides the kind of stable and adaptable order required by the conditions of advanced industrial society.

Of course, the process of industrialisation itself, especially in its earlier stages, usually took, and takes, place under rather less democratic or even downright authoritarian regimes. In fact, as long as society has not yet grown sufficiently homogeneous, and as long as stable institutional structures for the

reliable articulation and mobilisation of interests have (therefore) not yet emerged, more or less authoritarian regimes are usually the only ones that are able to provide the kind of stability required by industrialisation and economic development. Yet, when as a result of that process, society diversifies, individualises and homogenises, one may expect that pressures for a greater measure of democracy will make themselves felt, while one will find out that the pre-existing authoritarian regime will begin to fail, to become much too costly, to stifle further technological and economic development, and to prevent society's timely adaptation to change in the international environment as the sorry performance and eventual demise of Communism illustrates abundantly.

On the face of it, this would seem to suggest the eventual, inevitable triumph of democracy in the modern industrial or industrialising world. What may seem to be necessary, however, need not always happen. The historical evolution of societies or social systems generally, no less than that of biological species, essentially proceeds through relatively blind trial and error rather than by design, in which errors may sometimes mean destruction, and in which nothing guarantees success or timely adaptation to changing circumstances.

Strongly authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, precisely because they tend to prevent further technological or economic development, may well keep themselves in being for very long times indeed. In addition, the disarray, instability, chaos and uncertainty which their demise typically produces may for very long times prevent the emergence of more democratic regimes. Instead, such chaos etc. may just set the stage for a quasi-endless violent sequence of dictatorial or totalitarian experiments, perhaps inspired by different ideologies, but all equally unproductive.<sup>7</sup> Thus, one must fear, the conditions produced by the demise of the several Communist regimes in Eastern Europe are hardly propitious to the rapid establishment of true and effective democracy there. At the very least, the development of the stable government and institutional structures generally that is so indispensable for effective democratic government will surely take the nations concerned much more time than seems to be commonly expected in the West. Moreover, one should not be surprised at all when that process will be occasionally accompanied by quite some violence or by the recurrence of all sorts of authoritarian movements or even regimes.

However, even in the established democracies of the industrial West, the continued viability of democratic government cannot be taken for granted at all either. Thus, nothing guarantees that such regimes will always be able to produce the stable majorities that are so essential to effective government.<sup>8</sup> Neither can one be complacent about the ability of (democratic) government to find some kind of politically acceptable and effective solution to the large and unfamiliar problems raised by such things as the volatility and instability produced by individualisation, the globalisation of the economy, continued technological development and the more or less permanent economic and social change

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which it produces, the creation of a large underclass of the permanently unemployed, massive immigration, and the level of crime which seems to accompany an increasingly international, mobile, and individualised society. For the solution of such problems, traditional political ideologies, recipes, and programs do not offer much guidance. Failure to find such solutions, however, may eventually erode the legitimacy of democratic government itself, undermine the political parties that are so essential to its proper functioning, and lead the way to all sorts of authoritarian or totalitarian movements and experiments.

### *Notes*

For a full discussion of the theory of democracy that underlies this construction, see de Vree (1990).

- <sup>1.</sup> In principle, the, this tendency stems from the structure of (increasingly) democratic decision-making rather than from this or that ideology, particularly that government should and could shape the evolution of society, and remedy all its ills and injustices. Surely, that particular kind of belief or ideology has done nothing to limit the growth of modern democratic government. Yet, one suspects, as much as anything else, this belief represents the predictable product of modern mass democracy with its struggles and fights among an increasing number of politicians and authorities, who all seek to raise support for their own positions.
- <sup>2.</sup> This does not mean, of course, that education is unimportant. Quite to the contrary. A modern democracy could hardly function in the absence of a relatively highly literate and informed population. And it would seem natural to assume, too, that a high level of education and information could form some kind of barrier against the crasser forms of demagoguery and the collective hysterics that might otherwise take possession of people. On the other hand, it is well to be aware of the fact that in former Yugoslavia it was precisely the (vast majority of the) nation's intellectuals and journalists who developed and fanned the hysterical nationalism, which inspired such horrendous atrocities.
- <sup>3.</sup> Similarly, democracy calls for a high level of stability and predictability. When chaos prevails, when social systems are subject to large-scale, erratic change, or when more or less stable patterns of power relations are eroding or have not yet emerged, democracy will be hard to establish or preserve. It is one of the reasons why one can scarcely be optimistic about the chances for working democracy in present-day Eastern Europe.
- <sup>4.</sup> Before concluding those homogeneity and individualisation therefore represented 'good' things, one should also consider the other side of the coin. It is that it robs people of the protection which the still powerful groups or subsystems to which they used to belong could give them. In a homogeneous system the individual stands weak and naked before the central government, powerless against anything which, democratically or not, that government might decide for him. Homogenisation and individualisation entail the 'atomisation' of which Hannah Arendt so eloquently described the totalitarian or dictatorial variant. And, as is now becoming ever clearer, the individualisation of society tends to erode and destroy the more or less informal cultural and institutional ties, and the networks of mutual obligations and control relationships that link the individual to his brethren, and that provide him with protection, security, support, and certainty. Such bonds and networks form a major, and much underestimated component of the order in any society, perhaps more important even than its formal governmental structure, democratic or not.
- <sup>5.</sup> It is interesting to note that the homogenisation of a social system also restricts the influence of politicians over their supporters. They will not like this, the less so when they are still fighting for

recognition and an acknowledged place in public affairs, as in the case of the several emancipatory movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In such circumstances, then, one should expect them to try and increase their control over their supporters by means of more 'totalitarian' ideologies, and by extending their grip over as many of their adherents' non- or less political activities and relations as possible, or by thoroughly politicising these. It is perhaps most clearly visible in the so-called 'polarisation' which was such a typical feature of the Dutch political landscape during, roughly, the first seventy years of the present century not, it should be emphasised, as an ingrained feature of Dutch society (to be overcome, as a popular theory has it, by benignly accommodating politicians at the top), but as the product of politicians and political groups competing for a stable share of an enlarging political market.

6. Among other things, political parties and their ideologies, in particular, are devices for providing a more or less stable political ordering among the population or electorate, steering the political process and the formation of political opinions and interests along more or less regular and predictable channels. In their absence (and their evolution or establishment usually takes quite some time), the electorate becomes an inchoate and volatile mass of individuals, subject to random and erratic moods, and an easy prey for demagogues and totalitarian or millenarian movements. Accordingly, their erosion, for instance as a result of an all too systematic use of the referendum, or of their inability to develop credible and convincing alternative solutions to the problems facing society, undermines democracy itself.
7. This is anything but improbable. For the evolution of (stable and adaptable) order in society appears to be governed by a most tragic, non-linear law, to wit, that the chances that a higher level of societal order will in fact be achieved are higher according as the system's initial level of order is already higher. In brief, the chances that a system will improve are higher according as it is already in better shape. But it also means that, conversely, the likelihood that a system will achieve a more stable and adaptable order, as in the case of a democratic regime, are lower, according as that system is (still) more unstable or chaotic. Therefore, unstable or disordered societies or social systems may become locked in an endless sequence of more or less violent upheavals or experiments, none of which succeeds in producing any appreciable increase in their internal order. In fact, it is what we see happening in the history of modern Europe, while the conscious efforts to achieve a higher level of such order in (Western) Europe after WW-II suffer from precisely the same constraint. See De Vree (1994; 1996).
8. In this respect, the Anglo-American system in which 'the winner takes all' seems to be in a somewhat better position than the European systems of proportional representation systems, by the way, that are equally democratic except, perhaps, in terms of traditional democratic ideology. However, in principle the struggles that inevitably occur within the majority party under the former system may just as well result in deadlock and governmental impotence, as do those between the several parties under systems of proportional representation.