The Prospects of Democratic Government

Harold J. Laski
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An address delivered by

HAROLD J. LASKI

at

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

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President Bryan, Ladies and Gentlemen:

No place is so fitting as the hall of a great university for the discussion of fundamental problems. Here we are removed from the dust of the arena outside. We have the leisure and opportunity to cut principles from the tangled mass of bewildering fact. We can seek to trace out the emerging pattern of a world in which nothing is certain save the perpetuity of change. Not least, we can seek, by the process of discussion, to establish those values that alone can give meaning to the process in which we are involved. No university can hope to remain aloof from the battle which rages in the world outside its walls. But a university can, as not the least significant of its functions, strive to make plain the strategy of the battle, and the purposes for which it is waged. It is not, it cannot be, an ivory tower in which scholars seek escape from the issues which impinge upon their fellows. Rather it should strive to be a lighthouse whose beam makes plain the direction of events. For most men, in this complicated world, are like sailors upon an uncharted sea. Only as they become aware of the direction of their course is there the prospect of a safe end to their journey.

We meet in the midst of momentous events; and nothing is gained by the denial that, all over the world, democratic societies are challenged to justify
their existence. What Mr. Wells has termed the "raucous voices" are lifted up to deny its premises. Those men conquer who take power as their end, and are careless of the means whereby their ends are attained. Already their victims are numbered by millions, and the end of this epoch of suffering is not even dimly discernible. At such a time, it becomes necessary to go back to foundations. We cannot fight the enemies in our midst unless we are clear both about that for which we are fighting and why it is worth while to fight. Sometimes, as it seems to me, both ends and means have been lost sight of in the dash of battle. I do not, therefore, offer any apology for calling your attention again to first principles. A victorious army must know for what it is fighting. It is the idea that gives strength to the soldiers in the field.

Democracy is not merely a form of government; it is also a way of life. It is an insistence upon the eminent and inherent worth of the common man. It is an attempt, therefore, to find the institutions through which that worth may attain its full expression. We cannot confine those institutions to the political field. It is no use giving to the common man the power to define his own destiny, and then to rule out portions of the field of life as inadmissible to his entrance. If democracy is valid in the political realm, then it is valid in social life and economic life. If the common man is to be free, then, throughout the pattern of existence, he must be guaranteed the necessary conditions of freedom. He cannot be free while he suffers from economic insecurity. He cannot be free if he lacks the intellectual weapons which will enable him to find his way about the world, to make
effectively articulate his experience of life, to be certain that his experience will count in the making of decisions. He cannot be free unless he can find either significance in his daily work, or, alternatively, enjoy a leisure which he is able to use for creative ends. He cannot, finally, be free unless he is certain that the rules under which he lives are shaped in terms of a genuine and continuous consideration of the demands he has to make upon the stock of common welfare. These are the values to the importance of which all history of which we are aware has borne testimony. These, too, are the values today so widely challenged. Our business is not merely their reaffirmation. Our business also is the statement of the conditions upon which they can be successfully reaffirmed.

I do not believe that democracy can be maintained in an unequal society. Men think differently who live differently; and in a society where men live as differently as with ourselves, there is an absence of that unity of thought about fundamentals which is fatal to the power of reason to maintain its empire over the minds of men. That inequality has led to a regime of privilege which divides the commonwealth into a small group of conquerors and a great mass of hewers of wood and drawers of water to whom life offers no prospect of rich fulfillment. Because they live so differently, they draw their notions of good and evil, right and wrong, from the way they live; and there is no bond of effective common understanding between them. In such a world, as Hobbes said, they stand in the posture of armed gladiators the one to the other. Neither group feels secure; neither group is capable of tolerance because it is insecure. They are afraid; and where men are afraid passions are
aroused which destroy their capacity to settle their argument by consent. It is only where men feel that they are granted an equal claim or, alternatively, that the differences in response to claim are capable of rational justification in terms of function, that they will maintain the foundations of an ordered society. No one can say of ours that, submitted to this criterion, it can hope successfully to pass the test.

No doubt men are satisfied with inequalities in a period of social expansion. Then, there are hope and patience, the prospect that legitimate expectations will be satisfied. But in a period of social contraction—and that is the period in which we live,—every irrational inequality is felt as a challenge to be maintained and resisted. In a period of crisis, in a word, a society as unequal as our own, means war both without and within. Democracy on the political plane then becomes a menace to the holders of power; for the masses seek to use it in order to redress a balance they feel to be unjust. And the holders of power recognising that, as Madison pointed out, the only durable source of faction is property, will prefer rather to overthrow democratic government than to suffer the abrogation of the privileges associated with property. That, in essence, is the history of Germany and Italy and Spain. It is significant that there the things the American ideal has always cherished, freedom of thought, freedom to choose one's own rulers, freedom of association and even of religious belief have all gone. With them, I beg to remind you, have gone also that freedom to bargain collectively which is the necessary concomitant of giant industry; for, as Mr. Justice Holmes once said, liberty of contract begins where equality of bargaining power
begins. Those who have challenged the democratic way of life, always in the interest of an unequal society, have deliberately denied all those values which, since the Reformation, men have been striving to make an established part of the common inheritance. The issue of our time is whether the denial is to be universal; or whether it is still possible to arrest the extension of its authority.

There is nothing new in either Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy; an old tyranny wears a new mask. It is democracy that is new; and I do not need to remind you of the immense part America has played in its making. It is new to urge that the fulfillment of personality is not something to be confined to a few. It is new to urge that the riches of civilization belong, as of right to the common man. It is still more new to insist upon the organization of institutions to make that right effective. We ought not to be surprised that such insistence provokes violent dissent. It disturbs wonted routines; and there are few things of which a privileged class is more afraid than the disturbance of a wonted routine. That class associates with its possession of authority all that makes life worth living for itself. It sees in the democratization of our economic and social structure a threat to its own way of life. It was prepared for a surrender of the outer breastwork of the fortress. It has never been prepared for the surrender of its inner citadel of power.

This phenomenon of fear is not new in history; it has accompanied all profound social changes, and has made most ages of social reconstruction ages of fear and of violence. Our problem is the grave one that violence in our own age makes the very survival of civilization a doubtful matter. We have had con-
licts before for liberty. But this is the first time in
history in which a conflict for liberty has been set in
the context of equality. That is the inner and ultimate
significance of the battle that is raging now. An
economic system has passed its apogee. It is no longer
capable of satisfying the established expectations of
the masses. They therefore seek—it is wholly in-
telligible that they should seek—such a transformation
of its foundations as shall make its potentialities
available to themselves. They take the view that the
power of the state should be invoked to mitigate the
consequences of social and economic inequality. If
they cannot achieve that by the normal means of a
given constitutional organization, they will be driven
to extra-constitutional means to attain it. They have
begun to understand that contemporary civilization is
disfigured at every point by needless suffering—in
deprivation of health; in lack of economic security;
in standards of life; in cultural opportunity. They
cannot see that those who enjoy those things are
those who are entitled to enjoy them by reason of the
contribution they directly make to social well-being.
What, therefore, they ask is simple in essence, even
if it is momentous in consequence.
They ask that the democracy which has, with all
its faults, proved so liberating an influence on the
political plane should be extended to the economic
plane also. They realize that, in a civilization like
our own, the fulfillment of personality is impossible
without that extension. Freedom without equality is,
as they increasingly understand, a name of noble
sound and squalid result. A society, in a word, which
trusts its whole fortunes to the profit making motive
must be enormously successful if it is to obtain the
allegiance of its citizens. It must be able continuously to translate its success into the perceptible terms of their material welfare. It must give them, in the realm of the spirit, the sense that they share in the mastery of their own lives. In an increasing degree, our civilization is failing on both these counts. We have found that an unequal society is in its foundations an unjust society; and the grim contrasts it affords drive home increasingly the implications of that injustice. Put in a sentence, the fact is that the age of individualism is over; the mere conflict of private interests will not produce a well-ordered commonwealth. What occurs is a sequence in which cutthroat competition is succeeded by monopolistic combination; this cannot distribute the products its technological efficiency achieves. It then offers the paradox of poverty in the midst of potential plenty, and men use the instruments of political democracy to try and resolve the paradox. What becomes necessary at that stage is either the admission of the right of democracy to express its will, or the suppression of democracy in the interest of the owners of economic power in its present configuration.

When, in 1832, the House of Commons was debating that Reform Bill which turned the rule of the aristocracy in England, Macaulay used a phrase which seems to me of special significance at the present time. "Reform if you would preserve," he said, "is the watchword of great events." It is surely clear enough, on any showing, that we have reached one of those periods of history when immense adaptations are called for. We can meet them with magnanimous understanding; and there is no spirit more likely to secure the accomplishment of necessary change in terms of peace. For
measures of lenity are, as Burke said, always means of conciliation. Or we can meet them in that spirit of blind resistance to any adaptation which led to the English Civil Wars of the seventeenth century, the French Revolution in the eighteenth, the Russian Revolution in our own day. We all know what that implies. It will drive men to violence; violence will produce recrimination in the name of law and order. Civil liberties will be threatened here, and suspended there. The voice of moderate men will be stilled; the pace and direction of policy will be set by the more extreme elements on either side who are impatient of the solutions of reason. The procedures of right will give way to the procedures of might. There will be no room for the calm and dispassionate survey out of which settlements men recognize as just can be made. An acquisitive society which denies the principle of equality denies democracy and thereby denies the prospect of government by discussion. Its alternative is the concentration camp; and that alternative is incompatible with the dignity of the human spirit.

"Choose equality and flee greed"; so said Antiphon the sophist nearly twenty-five hundred years ago. That is still the vital formula of social justice. It is well for us to remember that the insight of Antiphon has been the insight of every major prophet in our history. I do not need to remind you that when Tocqueville surveyed the United States in the Jacksonian epoch he recognized that he had come across a new fact in civilization—the discovery that the essence of democracy is equality. And it was the achievement of that equality for the great mass of your citizens until the closing of the frontier that made America for so many million Europeans the land of limitless hope. The
American dream, if I may say so, cannot live by its past; it must be renewed in each generation by providing it with the institutional environment that is necessary to its fulfillment. You are a new world called into existence to redress the balance of the old. That is your inheritance and your obligation. You have to seek by your energy to be worthy of them.

Perhaps you will allow me, as a university teacher, to say something of the function of the universities in this regard. I do not share that view which would make of the scholar a detached spectator of a drama in which he has no part as an actor. To think significantly he must live significantly. To live significantly he must recognize that, as Plato said, true knowledge compels to action. His business is to cut truth from the raw material and, as best he can, to explain and to evaluate it. His highest duty lies there. The scholar is not less a soldier because his weapon is his mind and not the sword; and he must hazard his life, like the soldier, for the truths he believes himself to possess. He must, of course, fulfill the obligation to arrive at his truths in a spirit of critical enquiry and emotional independence. He must not speak until he has sought, as best he can, to verify the insights he attains. But he must recognize that he owes to the world the communication of his insight; the teacher is by vocation not less a citizen than the business man or the politician.

I know, I think, the risks of this attitude: at least I have the right to claim awareness of the penalties of nonconformity. But it has been my observation that, where the teacher is silenced, the machine guns come into action. It has been my observation, also that men seek to suppress ideas only because they are
afraid of their impact. It is, moreover, the glory of a
democratic society that, alone of all institutional
forms, it can afford that competition of ideas out of
which men grope their way to the truths each genera-
tion requires. Enforced conformity with any given
system of presuppositions is fatal to the end a uni-
versity has in view. I do therefore plead here, with
all the force I may, that this University maintain the
amplitude of academic freedom with a fulness that
recognizes no boundaries. A university in the uniform
of some special creed ceases to be a university at all.
The world lives by its power to experiment with
thought. Nothing is so fatal as to proclaim that the
attempt at experiment is subject to penalty if its
consequence be recommended innovation. There is
hardly a doctrine that is commonplace in our time
that did not, to some earlier age, seem monstrous
error. A university that is intellectually restrained
is a university which cannot fulfill its function; for the
restraint of thought is, in this sphere, the final sin
against the light. I want the university teacher,
therefore, to regard his mission as not less high than
that of Heine when he proclaimed himself a soldier in
the liberation war of humanity. I want him to insist,
that, whatever the pressure of authority and interest,
he shall have the unfettered right to seek for truth
and to proclaim the truth he finds. For, in the end,
that unfettered search is the only high-road to freedom.