The Case Against Democracy: The More Things Change, The More They Remain the Same

Written by Carl Watner for The Voluntaryist*, August 1990.*

Democracy. For many, the word sums up what is desirable in human affairs. Democracy, and agitation for it, occurs all over the world: the Pro-Democracy movement in China during 1989; the democratic reform movements taking place in Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. resulting in the breakup of the Communist Party's monopoly over electoral activity; and the U.S. invasion of Panama to restore democratic government.

Future historians may label the Twentieth Century as the Age of Democracy. From Woodrow Wilson's salvo, "Make the world safe for democracy," and the ratification of the 19th Amendment (1920) giving women the vote, to a 1989 observation of one Philippine writer—"In the euphoria of the (democratic Aquino) revolution, people expected that with the restoration of democracy all the problems of the country would be solved"—little has changed. Democracy has been hailed as the solution to many political problems. However much we would like to believe in democracy, we still need to recall that democracy is nothing more than a form of statist control. The purpose of this article is to briefly review the history and development of democratic political theory from a voluntaryist perspective, and to explain why the world-wide movements toward democracy (the more things change) do not alter the nature of the State (the more they remain the same).

Democracy. The word is ultimately traceable to two Greek roots, referring to "the rule of the common people or populace."' As *The American College Dictionary* puts it, democracy is "government by the people; a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them or their elected representatives under a free electoral system." In the ancient democracies of Sparta and Athens, every free citizen was entitled to attend legislative assemblies and vote, but not every person was a freeman (slaves, women, and children were denied participation). The modern western democracies of the 19th and 20th Centuries have tended to be based on the assumption of equality of all human beings (though children, convicted felons, and the mentally incompetent may not vote) and upon the idea of representation, where the people elect representatives to conduct the affairs of State.

It is no exaggeration to conclude that the modern concept of democracy has emerged as the result of the age-old search for "the best and most equitable form of government." Most commentators would agree that the essentials of modern democracy, as we know it today, include: 1) "holding elections at regular intervals, open to participation by all political parties, freely administered, where the voting franchise is universal"; and 2)

“respect for fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, and freedom of association,” based upon the “fundamental assumption of the equality of all individuals and of their equal right to life, liberty, and their pursuit of happiness.” It is important to note, at this point, that the advocate of democracy already presupposes that we need a State. By focusing on the less important question of “what kind of government is best,” democracy and its spokesmen through the ages have ignored the more fundamental question of “why is any form of the State necessary?”

Why does democracy appear to be the “best form of government?” The answer to this question helps explain its persistence. Ever since political philosophers and politicians have tried to justify the State and the exercise of political power, they have been faced with solving the problem of political obligation. Why should some people obey rules and laws, so called, passed by other people? How do the actions of the legislators bind those who refuse to recognize their authority? By what right do the governors wield force to enforce their edicts? In short, what makes one form of government legitimate and another form not? Defenders of democracy answer these questions by pointing out that the history of democracy is largely the history of the inclusion of more and more people of a given country in the exercise of the ballot. It is through the idea of the right of the people to vote (to govern themselves) that the question of political obligation is answered. George Washington pointed out that, “The very idea of the right and power of the people to establish government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government.” By involving the whole community, or as many people as possible, democracy garners support for the “laws” passed in its name by the people’s representatives. It does so by creating the theory that all the factions participating in an election agree to accept its outcome. In other words, the minority agree to abide by the decision of the majority in the electoral process.

Why should anyone agree to such an implicit contract? Why should one person, or some group of people, be bound by the outcome of an election—what other people think is advisable? The only possible answer is that it is a precondition to participation. But then, why should anyone participate? Democratic theory has never really answered this question because it already assumes that government is a social necessity. The importance of this point is found in the observation that “every ruling group must identify with a principle acceptable to the community as justification for the exercise of (its) power.” In other words, if there is to be a ruling class in society, if political power is to be exercised, then the rulers must obtain some sort of sanction from the ruled. Democracy admirably serves this purpose because it focuses on the apparent right of the whole community to share in the direction of State.

The idea of political freedom is a charade. The appearance is that the populace has some say in the direction of its government, whereas the reality is that they are being

manipulated by a system which has been designed to minimize the effects of their input. If people think that their activities influence the outcome of elections and policy-making, then they are likely to be complacent in abiding by the outcome. In short, this involves a process of co-optation, in which the participants are deluded into thinking that their involvement has a significant effect, whereas in reality it matters very little. The purpose of participation is to focus on "how shall we be ruled? " rather then "should we be ruled?". Democracy has survived and has been the most popular solution to the problem of justifying political authority because it has most successfully and most persuasively kept the political game within this framework.

Events in Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. serve to illustrate this thesis. When a ruling class loses or lacks a preponderance of force, or when force no longer serves as a threat to enslavement, the only alternative is to obtain the voluntary compliance of the people through the participatory and representative mechanisms of democracy. Thus a *Wall Street Journal* reporter was able to write on June 7,1989 that, "Far from undermining the Communist leadership, the Soviet 'democracy' movement has actually strengthened Mr. Gorbachev's political legitimacy,..." Indeed, that is the whole purpose of democracy. As Benjamin Ginsberg in his book *The Consequences of Consent*, has noted:

> *(Democratic) institutions are among the most important instruments of governance. Elections set the limit to mass political activity and transform the potentially disruptive power and authority. Governments, ..., rule through electoral institutions even when they are sometimes ruled by them. [p.244]*

Thus it is plain to see why the communist systems are ready to accept some form of democracy or "democratic socialism." Democratic institutions are likely to emerge where the public "already possesses—or threatens to acquire—a modicum of freedom from governmental control." As Ginsberg explains, "democratic elections are typically introduced where governments are unable to compel popular acquiescence." [p.245] Ginsberg theorizes that "elections are inaugurated in order to persuade a resistant populace to surrender at least some of its freedom and allow itself to be governed."

Democratic participation in elections is offered as a substitute for the people's natural freedom. In the days prior to the Constitution, social power in the Untied States was stronger than or at least equal to political power. The populace could not have been compelled to accept a government it did not desire because there was no military force strong enough to overcome its resistance. Social power not only rested on the bearing of weapons, but on the strength of private associations, churches, and community groups

which could be voluntarily organized if the need arose. Several framers of the Constitution urged the adoption of a democratic form of government on the grounds that the people would otherwise refuse to accept the new Constitution. Generally speaking, wherever and whenever rulers lack a clear preponderance of force, they tend to become much more concerned with the acquisition of voluntary compliance through democratic methods. As Ginsberg puts it:

> *When sizable segments of the public possess financial, organizational, educational, and other resources that can be used to foment and support opposition, those in power are more likely to see the merits of seeking to persuade rather than attempting to force their subjects to accept governance. [p.247] …It is, in a sense, where the citizens have the means to maintain or acquire a measure of freedom from governmental authority that they must occasionally be governed through democratic formulas. And it is in this sense that freedom is an historical antecedent of democracy. [p.248]*

The rulers in a democracy must obscure the inherent conflict between personal freedom and governmental authority. They do so by largely relying on the electoral mechanism and citizen involvement with government. How, the rulers ask, can a government controlled by its citizens represent a threat to the freedom of those who vote and participate? They do so by consistently ignoring the fact that all government, by its very nature, is arbitrary and coercive. As Sir Robert Filmer asked during the 17th Century, if it be tyranny for one man to govern, why should it not be at least equal tyranny for a multitude of men to govern?

> *We flatter ourselves if we hope ever to be governed without an arbitrary power. No: we mistake; the question is not whether there shall be an arbitrary power, whether one man or many? There never was, nor ever can be any people governed without a power of making laws, and every power of making laws must be arbitrary.*

To the voluntaryist, a man is still a slave who is required to submit even to the best of laws or the mildest government. Coercion is still coercion regardless of how mildly it is administered. Most everyone (this author included) would prefer to live under a democratic form of government if the choice is between “forms of government,” but that is not the point at issue. As Aristotle recognized in his *Politics* (though he was not opposed to it), “The

most pure democracy is that which is so called principally from that equality which prevails in it: for this is what the law in that state directs; *that the poor shall be in no greater subjection than the rich*" (emphasis added). From the voluntaryist point of view, neither the rich nor the poor should be under any "subjection" or coercion at all. The search for democracy is like the search for the "fair" tax or "good" government. Due to the nature of the "beast" there can be no such thing. Yet the clamor for democracy has persisted for at least 2500 years. The more things change, the more they remain the same!