

CHAPTER XXII

DEMOCRACY

"What is Democracy? . . . A meaning it must have, or it would not be here. If we can find the right meaning of it, we may, wisely submitting, or wisely resisting and controlling, still hope to live in the midst of it; if we cannot find the right meaning, if we find only the wrong or no meaning in it, to live will not be possible!"

— Carlyle.

What is Democracy? what is the purport, mission, and meaning of that mysterious something which has been described by one of the most impartial and philosophic of its students as "the most uniform, the most ancient, and the most permanent tendency to be found in history"? Even though forms of government have had to be modified in accordance with its development, it is something more than a mere form of government. Even though social customs, laws, and institutions have had to be transformed in accordance with its dictates, it is something more than any given or ideal system of laws and institutions. Even though modes of production and systems of distribution have had to be changed in accordance with its demands, it is something more than any formulated system of production and distribution. Even though it may involve that all should have an equal voice in the administration of affairs in which they have a common and joint interest, it obviously means something more than this. For an ignorant people, following ignorant leaders, might initiate and maintain a domestic and foreign policy directly at variance with the fundamental principles of Democracy, might forge fetters for themselves, and a scourge for their neighbours, which, if defended in the name of Democracy, would tend to make it a byword and reproach among the thoughtful of the world.

Like so many other important terms, e.g. life, it is difficult, if not impossible, to confine the full meaning of Democracy within the strict limits of an artificial definition. As a matter of fact, our conception of Democracy, like our conception of life, necessarily varies with our intellectual development. Hence, as it seems to us, we should be careful to make all definitions, more especially of important and comprehensive terms, as elastic as possible, so as to allow of the inevitable expansion and growth in their meaning.

Apart, however, from these somewhat irrelevant considerations, Democracy may provisionally be defined as a certain principle of association, a certain basis of social union, and may, perhaps, best be understood by comparing it with its antithesis, Aristocracy or Oligarchy. Aristocracy, too, whatever else it may be held to include,

denotes a certain principle of association, a certain basis of social union. The essential and characteristic element of Aristocracy is Privilege or License : for it involves the recognition and enforcement of the special claims of some, of a privileged class or caste. The essential and characteristic element of Democracy, on the other hand, is Justice or Liberty: for it involves the recognition and enforcement of the equal claims of all. And this, as our study of Universal History, of Social Evolution, forces us to recognise, is, in truth, the goal toward which "the most uniform, the most ancient, and the most permanent tendency to be found in history," constantly impels mankind.

The goal toward which, despite temporary aberrations and transient periods of reaction, the civilisation of Western Europe constantly impels mankind, may then be summed up in the one word Democracy, using this term to denote a Social System, as well as a Social Creed, based upon Justice, upon the Law of Liberty, upon the Golden Rule of Righteousness, upon the recognition and enforcement of the equal claims of all to life, to liberty, and to the pursuit of happiness, and all that this involves.

Justice, as we have already seen, involves Liberty: a liberty which finds its natural limitations in the equal liberty of others. For, in accordance with this fundamental, social, or ethical principle, whatever liberty of action a man may claim for himself, he must necessarily concede as a matter of right to his fellows. As already sufficiently emphasised, if Justice is to be done, if Equal Liberty is to be secured, if we are to recognise and respect the equal claims of all to life, then the opportunities of Nature, included in Economics under the term "land," must be made available to all on equitable terms, and to each must be secured his equal and joint share in the bounties of Nature, and the exclusive and absolute right to dispose of his own activities, and the fruits of his own activities, as he may deem desirable, provided only he in no way infringes on the equal liberty of others.

Justice, moreover, involves Toleration, in the widest sense of the term: toleration of differences in religion and civilisation, in habits, manners, customs, laws, beliefs, attributes and aspirations. For, jealous of his own liberty, of his own independence, of his own claim to live his own life according to his own desires, the individual who accepts Justice as the basis of his Social Creed, will necessarily be impelled to respect the similar claims of others. Thus, in a community accepting Justice as the basis of its Social Faith, just as Justice would be inculcated as the first right of man, so, too, Toleration would be inculcated as the first duty of man. Toleration is, in truth, the necessary corollary of Justice, is, in fact, the only means by which Justice can be made a real, living, breathing reality, and installed as sole arbiter of the social relations of the individuals within a community of individuals, of Nations within the community of Nations.

Thus Justice involves also Peace; not only social peace within the narrow limits of the family, tribe, community, or nation, but that Universal Peace, that peaceful, harmonious association and co-operation, based upon a reciprocal exchange of services, of the peoples of the world, which has long been the inspiration, aspiration, and despair of the ethical seers and prophets of our race.

Privileges abolished, equal liberty secured, the present class divisions and caste system would disappear, the identity of interests of all the co-operating working units, now obscured by the din and turmoil of conflicting class interests, would become manifest, and thus the reign of social peace within the limits of the community would be inaugurated. Moreover, communities thus organised would soon arrive at the full realisation of the inspiring fact that the social and industrial interests of the workers of the world are, in truth, identical, that it was but the privileged classes — who previously dominated and directed their international relations — who had conflicting interests. In other words, the inspiring light of Justice would reveal to them that fundamental identity of social and industrial interests which, even today, despite conflicting class interests, racial animosities, differences in civilisation, in religion, habits, manners, beliefs, customs, and laws, constantly tend to weld the workers of the world into one harmonious social whole. Thus, too, the reign of international peace would be inaugurated on the safe and sure foundations of identity of interests, safeguarded and supported by those fundamental pillars of the Democratic Faith, Justice, Liberty and Toleration.

Moreover, communities thus organised, though they would be prepared if necessary to defend themselves, or even others, against aggression, would find no motives impelling them to disturb the peace of other communities. However convinced they might be of the undeniable super-excellence of their own civilisation, of the undoubted superiority of their own beliefs, superstitions, ideas, habits, manners, customs, laws, and institutions, those who accept Justice as the basis of their Social Creed, could never feel themselves impelled to undertake the quixotic task of improving by force civilisations differing from their own. For Justice not only imposes as the most sacred duty of individuals, toleration of the idiosyncrasies of other individuals, but it also imposes, as the most sacred duty of communities and nations, toleration of the idiosyncrasies of other communities and nations. Hence, they would be compelled to realise, not only in the abstract, but as the animating principle of their foreign as of their domestic policy, that they had and could have no right whatever to impose by force their own views, beliefs, and aspirations on others. Thus, the main source, cause and motives of both "righteous" and "unrighteous" wars would be removed, and the reign of peace between peoples in various stages of social evolution, differing in habits, customs, beliefs, and phases of civilisation, would be inaugurated.

To sum up: Democracy means a Social System, as well as a Social Creed, based upon Justice. The purport of Democracy is to promote Justice; today, as of old, the message of Democracy is Peace on Earth and Good-will to all; its mission is to promote Peace and Good-will; and Reason, not Force, Justice, not the Sword, is the means by which its glorious mission can be fulfilled, and its blessings diffused amongst all the peoples of the world. "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even unto them: for this is the law and the prophets."

As already pointed out, as regards the foundation of its Social System, as of its Social Creed, society's choice is very limited. Practically it has to choose between recognising and enforcing the equal claims of all, or recognising and enforcing the special claims of some. In other words, the choice is between Justice and Privilege, between Liberty and License, between a polity based upon equality of rights and tending to produce equality of conditions, and one based upon inequality and tending to produce inequality. In still other words, the choice is between Democracy and Aristocracy as the guiding principle of the prevailing social polity, as the animating principle determining and dominating the relations and interrelations of individuals, as of nations, and the social destinies of the race.

Aristocracy, using the term to denote a social system, as well as a social philosophy, based upon Privilege, is the necessary and natural fruit of the predatory instincts and tendencies. For it is the system, the polity, the social philosophy to which the predatory instincts prompt mankind which would instinctively be adopted by a conquering class or caste, and which would necessarily prevail, more or less modified, in any community, the fundamental institutions of which had originated in or been moulded by conquest. Under such conditions the predatory instincts of the conquerors have free play; they are able to enforce their own terms; the lives, liberties, and possessions of the conquered are at their mercy; and unless they secure some power over these, they would deem their victory fruitless. Hence it is that in all such societies we find laws and institutions securing to a special class or caste privileges, or rights (?),¹ denied to the rest of the community; privileges securing to some special power over the lives and liberties, or at the very least enabling them to command the unrequited services, of the rest. Being based on an inequality of rights, such institutions naturally produce, as indeed they are intended to produce, an inequality of conditions. Slavery and serfdom are their typical fruits; poverty, with its attendant train of misery, vice, and crime, their necessary accompaniment and result. Once established, however, such institutions tend to continue. In course of time society adapts itself to them, and they and their results come to be regarded by the unthinking, aye, sometimes even by the thoughtful, as both natural and inevitable.¹ But, however modified, however changed in outward form, however long they may have been

allowed to continue, such institutions are the product of Force, not of Reason, of Might, not of Right; they are the results and manifestations of Privilege, not of Justice, of License, not of Liberty, of Aristocracy, not of Democracy: and their fruits betray the source whence they sprang. "For a good tree bringeth not forth corrupt fruit; neither does a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. For every tree is known by his own fruit. For of thorns men do not gather figs, nor of a bramble bush gather they grapes."

1 In India, as Buckle points out, the mass of the people have from time immemorial been subject to most repressive laws and regulations, a law having been enforced forbidding them to accumulate wealth. In Egypt, according to the same authority, "under no circumstances was the possession of land allowed to an agricultural labourer, to a mechanic, or indeed to anyone except the king and clergy." In both Peru and Mexico the ruling classes were the descendants of a conquering race who had enforced their rule on the people, and had passed laws practically placing their lives, liberties, and possessions at the disposal of the privileged classes.

1 In his great work, "History of Civilisation in England," Book I., chap. ii., Buckle labours to show that the slavery, poverty, and misery of the masses, more especially in countries where man's labour is most productive, and man's requirements are at a minimum, are traceable to "physical causes" and "physical laws." He says: "For in India slavery, abject, eternal slavery was the natural (?) state of the great body of the people; it was the state to which they were doomed by physical laws utterly impossible to resist. . . . There is no instance on record of any tropical country, in which wealth having been extensively accumulated, the people have escaped their fate; no instance in which the heat of the climate has not caused an abundance of food, and the abundance of food caused an unequal distribution, first of wealth, and then of political and social power." (Italics are ours.) By what process of reasoning an abundance of food can be held responsible for the unequal distribution of wealth, we are at a loss to imagine, nor has a careful perusal of the chapter served to enlighten us. Physical causes are, indeed, potent factors in determining the character, development, and history of every people; but it may be questioned whether social customs, laws, and institutions are not even more potent.

These, then are the alternatives between which we have to choose. In all cases and at all times the choice remains between Justice and Privilege, between Liberty and License, between Right and Might, between Democracy and Aristocracy. Social customs, laws, and institutions must be framed in accordance with one or other of these principles, and by no possible means can they be reconciled one to the other. To attempt to build up a Democracy upon a foundation of laws and institutions recognising and enforcing special privileges, is but labour wasted to no purpose. Privilege and Justice, License and Liberty, cannot co-exist. The survival of the one involves the sacrifice of the other. Moreover, though many of us weak mortals, tolerant of ancient wrongs, intolerant of new truths, would willingly deem otherwise,

there is, in truth, no special moment in the history of a nation when it can decide once and for all, and expect to determine by their decision the destinies of the generations that are to follow. As one of the great path-breakers of modern social thought expressed it: "Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself, in all cases, as the ages and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies." And yet the consequences of our decision are so momentous that we may well pause before we venture to choose. For, though we cannot bind, yet will our decision influence the destinies of the generations that are to come. Accepted laws and institutions, like once established habits, tend to continue, and are powerful for good or for evil, so powerful and so tenacious of existence, indeed, that there is solemn truth in the impressive warning of the poet that, "They enslave their children's children who make compromise with sin."

On our part, of course, there can be no question of compromise. We have not been called upon to act, but to investigate. Our aim has been to reduce social phenomena to their simplest elements, to discover the mainsprings of human actions, with the view of ascertaining the causes constantly at work impelling man, not only to activity, but also to voluntary association and co-operation with his fellows, so that we might be able to throw some light on those fundamental ethical principles, in accordance with which our social relations should be shaped if the race is to progress to a higher civilisation, to a higher plane of individual and social life. Today the higher promptings of morality cannot be obeyed by the majority of our race; the brutalising competition for the material needs of life tends to stifle every generous impulse, every higher aspiration. Their necessities prompt them to immoral, anti-social actions, regardless of their desires or their will. They must trample on others, or themselves be trampled down; even many who would gladly and willingly sacrifice themselves are compelled to have recourse to means they loathe and hate, for the sake of those nearest and dearest to them.. The function of Social Ethics is to teach us how to establish industrial freedom, economic freedom; and the end of economic freedom is to make moral freedom possible. To opportunities of development, moral development, social development, all have equal claims; and this development is stunted and hindered by the prevailing economic slavery, and can only be made possible by establishing economic freedom. We should never allow ourselves to forget that social conditions are amongst the main factors shaping and modifying what is vaguely called "human nature"; that social customs, laws, and institutions are the determining factors of selection in human society, deciding what qualities in man shall be favoured and developed, and what qualities in man shall be stunted and crushed out. Hence, if we desire to alter "human nature," to encourage certain attributes we deem conducive to human happiness and social well-being, the only effectual means at our command is to provide social conditions favourable to their

existence, growth, and development. Changes in the constitution of society will necessarily produce corresponding changes in the character of the units composing it. Nor need we fear that the law of human progress is beyond our ken; for as the greatest of modern ethical teachers expresses it —

"The law of human progress, what is it but the moral law? Just as social adjustments promote justice, just as they acknowledge the equality of right between man and man, just as they ensure to each the perfect liberty, which is bounded only by the perfect liberty of every other, must civilisation advance. Just as they fail in this, must advancing civilisation come to a halt and recede. Political economy and social science cannot teach any lessons that are not embraced in the simple truths that were taught to poor fishermen and Jewish peasants by One who, eighteen hundred years ago, was crucified — the simple truths which, beneath the warpings of selfishness and the distortions of superstition, seem to underlie every religion that has ever striven to formulate the spiritual yearnings of man."