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April 2, 1985

Donald McDonald, Editor  
The Center Magazine  
Center for the Study of Democratic  
Institutions  
P.O. Box 4068  
Santa Barbara, CA 93103

Re: The Future of Democracy

Dear Mr. McDonald:

I was struck by Samuel Huntington's observation that the presence of democratic institutions is, where they exist, in large part due to British and American influence. It has been my view of history that the extent to which the British society has remained democratic is owed to the conservative counterrevolutions of its primary formal colonies, particularly that of the United States. This argument was made in 1942 by Peter Drucker. In The Future Of Industrial Man, he concludes:

The American Revolution brought victory and power to a group which in Europe had been almost completely defeated and which was apparently dying out rapidly: the anticentralist, antitotalitarian conservatives with their hostility to absolute and centralized government and their distrust of any ruler claiming perfection. It saved the autonomous common law from submersion under perfect law codes; and it re-established independent law courts. Above all, it reasserted the belief in the imperfection of man as the basis of freedom.

The aristocratic and elitist makeup of Parliament found new expression in the North American provincial governments; participatory government was being nurtured by a growing individualism on free land. This second factor, the access to an unclaimed frontier, is also identified by Drucker as a requirement to the democratic experience. I have yet to hear a reasoned argument that disputes his observation that,

... the possibility of emigration to the free soil and the equal opportunities of the United States were the safety valves ... which kept the European social system from blowing up.

At least for England and its evolving constitutional-monarchy.

Access to free (or very cheap) land and the accompanying freedom of action available to the colonists in England's North American lands, in Australia, New Zealand and Southern Africa sparked the growth of the democratic process abroad and weakened the aristocratic hold at home.

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The American character -- with our love of freedom and distrust of authority -- was forged because of those unique circumstances. Our break from England was, therefore, conservative on the one hand in its aim to protect the high degree of individual freedom and of access to land (i.e., as the source of wealth); and against the threat of a strong, centralized authority on the other. Nothing short of a duplication of these conditions will provide the environment necessary for democracy to arise and achieve lasting success.

In France, Germany, Poland, Spain, Portugal and Russia the people were unable to escape the strangle-hold of elitist government. Revolutions simply imposed new forms of monopolistic control.

Only one frontier remains, space; but we are still far from being able to harness sufficient physical capital to colonize the universe. Now that the earth's inhabitable lands have been largely settled, the conflict between the propertied and the propertyless has again intensified. Two Englishmen of the recent past recognized this danger and attempted to warn us. The first was a political economist, Max Hirsch. In 1901, his book Democracy Versus Socialism, pointed the way for the survival of the democracies:

Individualism, the full freedom of each individual, limited only by the equal freedom of all others, has never yet been reached, and the social injustice now prevailing exists, not on account, nor in spite, of Individualism, but through limitations of Individualism imposed or acquiesced in by the State.

Max Hirsch was writing in strongly critical terms of state-sanctioned monopolies, and particularly of those policies leading to the concentrated control of a nation's land and natural resources in the hands of either a few private interests or with the state itself. A similar position was later taken by Winston Churchill. Both Churchill and Hirsch believed democracy would only survive under circumstances of voluntary cooperative-individualism. In a speech delivered at King's Theatre, Edinburgh, on May 17, 1909, Churchill attacked what he viewed as the greatest threat to the democratic experience:

In this country we have long enjoyed the blessing of free trade ..., but against these inestimable benefits we have the evils of an unreformed and vicious land system. In no great country in the new world or the old have the working people yet secured the double advantage of Free Trade and Free Land together, by which I mean a commercial system and a land system from which, so far as possible, all forms of monopoly have been vigorously excluded.

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Churchill ended his speech with a quote from Cobden: "You who shall liberate the land will do more for your country than we have done in the liberation of its commerce." Keep in mind that Churchill was referring to a world substantially industrialized and technologically advanced, not an agricultural society controlled solely by a landed aristocracy. Because we have failed to recognize these truths, democracy will continue to experience losses to the totalitarian and authoritarian regimes.

In the United States, and in the other former British colonies settled by displaced Englishmen (as well as Scots, Welsh and Irish), as population has increased and the frontier lands have come under private control the tendency toward concentration has gained strength. With the land monopolization has come the other challenges to cooperative-individualism -- protectionism, unionism, special interests and nationalization. This would not have surprised Max Hirsch, who concluded:

... where democratic governments have undertaken the conduct of industrial functions, the task has generally fallen into unreliable and incompetent hands. Universal experience proves that the more detailed governmental functions become, the more they deal with industrial matters, the less lofty is the type of politician. Abuse of power, neglect of duty, favouritism and jobbery have been the almost universal accompaniment of industrial politics.

Democracy cannot thrive where State control is called on to displace private monopoly. As Hirsch warns, state control eventually becomes more repressive despite whatever motives are claimed. Churchill chose the only real practical solution (one offered in its most potentially effective form by Henry George, writing in Progress and Poverty); simply impose a levy or tax on land equal to its potential annual rental value -- on all land used for all purposes by private interests. Then, to the extent possible, tax nothing else; not wages nor physical capital. It is time this proposal is dusted off and once again brought to bear on the discussions within the political arena. As we have heard from Samuel Huntington and others, the stakes have become very high.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Dodson