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Democracy in a World of Tensions: A Symposium prepared by UNESCO, edited by Richard McKeon

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DEMOCRACY IN A WORLD OF TENSIONS: A SYMPOSIUM PREPARED BY UNESCO. Edited by Richard McKeon,* with the assistance of Stein Rokkan.** Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951. Pp. xviii, 540. \$4.50.

This volume is a selection from the replies of thirty-four experts in philosophy and political theory to a set of questions concerning the meaning, usage, and logical implications of the word "democracy." In a world where nearly everyone agrees that "democracy" is a good thing,¹ such a discussion as this may alleviate some of the tensions resulting from the fact that not everyone has the same definition of what "democracy" is, so that there are frequent surprises and recriminations when an agreement of certain verbal statements fails to produce expected agreement as to practical application.

Throughout the book, the selection and nature of the material and the summaries by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization experts and committees appearing at the end² accomplish what a good philosophic work should accomplish—they prevent the reader from approaching the discussion as a mere spectator; unavoidably, he soon finds himself a partner in the inquiry. Students of Professor McKeon will not be surprised at this result of his editorial enterprise.

This study is a part of a series of UNESCO projects, among which may be included a second symposium of expert opinion in response to questions intended to carry forward the present discussion of "democracy." In this review, attention is called to three considerations which most of the contributors have not emphasized in this first set of responses, and which should be treated explicitly in a second round of discussion. The necessity of UNESCO making "democracy" the theme for a second study follows directly from the undeniable desirability of having these factors specifically considered.

In the first place, a greater effort should be exerted to obtain from each author a clear statement of the meaning he attaches to "democracy." "Clear" here is thought of in the traditional sense in which a concept is called "clear" when all of its constitutive parts have been explicitly stated, and when every latent assumption appears as an explicit statement. In the present case, there is a strong tendency toward simplifying premises which detract from clarity.

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1. This fact is certainly one of the most important discoveries of the symposium; its significance is discussed by the Editor in his Introduction.

2. Appendix II: "Statement of the Members of the Committee Concerning the Importance of the Problem," pp. 522-526; Appendix III: "Report of the Committee on the Philosophical Analysis of Fundamental Concepts," pp. 532-537. There is also a somewhat longer analysis in the "Analytical Survey of Agreements and Disagreements," by Arne Naess and Stein Rokkan, pp. 447-513.

The sharpest differences appear between two groups of contributions which we may roughly characterize as those defining democracy as essentially economic, and those defining it as essentially political. There is an artificiality to the sharpness of these differences, because each group has neglected to state some of the premises relevant to its position. Each writer is in fact thinking about "democracy" as a property of a functioning society; for purposes of sharp definition, most tend to isolate an essential property without which no society could be what they mean by "democratic." But in applying and using such definitions, the essential property is once more thought of as present in a concrete society, and other properties are tacitly added on. For example, if the essential feature of democracies is a certain political structure, then a democratic society is one in which such a structure exists and functions. But such a democratic society is possible only when certain attitudes, education, and economic practices are present. These further properties are really implicit in the definition, which provides that a society is "democratic" only when the given essential political structure does persist and function. But it is not adequate analysis to leave them unspecified in discussing the definition; these further conditions require separate and explicit statement. Particularly if a thinker forms his idea of what a "society" is from his own immediate experience, he is likely to overlook the fact that such characteristics as high literacy are not inevitably properties of all communities, and he should not use such latent premises without including them as explicit addenda to his definition.

The Marxist contributors frequently point out that definitions in terms of political institutions are "purely formal," and that one could build hypothetical societies where those institutions were present, but "democracy" in a political sense was not. This of course overlooks the fact that the political definitions assume not only that these institutions exist, but that they continue and function. But the contention does point out that more explicit statement is needed of just what properties we assume in postulating such a preservation and functioning. For the most part, there is at least an equal lack of full analysis in the contributions defending "economic" definitions of democracy.³ Especially when the reader is told that in a society meeting certain economic conditions, certain political conditions "must" or "must not" be the case, he is justified in wishing for a fuller statement of the latent premises supporting such asserted necessity.

The difficulty of becoming aware of and stating all of one's implicit as-

3. The fact that spokesmen for the Marxist position are drawn from "Western" democracies may be unavoidable, but it probably explains the general lack of concrete positive illustrations of their positions; they do much better in concrete illustration of their criticisms. One of the best statements of actual Soviet institutions and their concrete functioning is given by Lord Lindsay of Birker in an Essay originally part of his Powell Lectures at Indiana University. Pp. 172-186.

sumptions is very great. It is not limited to law (where readers of this Journal will certainly recognize it) nor to political problems (where readers of the UNESCO symposium will likewise recognize it), but occurs in science and mathematics as well. Until quite recently, mathematicians were far from clear as to the conditions they were assuming in talking about the "inside" and "outside" of a closed figure in a plane. There can be no advance in clarification of concepts and issues until more effort is taken to analyze and state all the presuppositions of a given position.

A second suggestion toward clarification of discussion, both between contributors to such symposia as this and between readers, is the need for closer attention to the difference between ideal and fact. In its final analysis, the UNESCO committee points out the temptation to defend our own ideals, while at the same time criticizing our opponents because of the shortcomings of their actual practices.⁴ By doing this, each party to an argument can in turn convince himself of his superiority over his opponent; and unless the cycle is somehow interrupted, there is no limit to the length to which such a crossed monologue might be carried. If we are going to appeal to actual fact to show the weakness of an opponent, the same appeal to fact is the only legitimate ground on which to defend our own superiority. If we base our case on a statement of our high ideals, this is conclusive only when we can show these are superior to the ideals of an opponent.

Both factors mentioned—lack of clarification and crossing of modality between ideal and actual—operate to produce the sharpening of the apparent disagreement between the groups roughly identified above as contributors proposing essentially political and those proposing essentially economic definitions of "democracy," and it is in this context that the UNESCO committee's comment was made. There remain contributors of a third group, who ground their definitions of democracy in basic notions of morality, such as a Kantian respect for law and for human dignity. For this group, lack of clarification and crossing of modality operate in the opposite direction, the effect of which is to hide rather than sharpen differences in alternative definitions. Probably such basic moral principles as thinkers of this group propose would be accepted as good by proponents of each of the other definitions of democracy; but with the qualification that not much help with the specific question at hand can come from equating what is "democratic" with what is "good." From this point of view, all three groups share certain basic ideals, and the only problem is to decide between or test the means each proposes. Since the ends are ultimately the same, and since the efficacy of means can in theory be objectively tested, it appears that there could be no ground for hostility and conflict between nations sincerely cooperating in a common inquiry and enterprise.

4. Appendix III, pp. 532-537.

The difficulty here is that this statement of the case confuses an ideal with an actual notion of "testing." Different designs of motors and refrigerators, for example, can be tested objectively because there is detailed agreement on standards of measure, and because there is a laboratory where models can be operated under controlled conditions, one at a time. But the actual situation is more like that of trying out rival models at the same time in a laboratory which does not afford enough space and power to provide optimum conditions for either, and with the static and vibration of each interfering with the other.⁵ Under those conditions, the most reasonable engineer may lose patience, believing that an appeal to performance would issue in his favor if only the other-model would stop shaking the laboratory and using up so much of the available power. The confusion of actual and ideal is therefore also operative in an analysis of this third kind, where it leads to overlooking the actual incompatibility that obtains in fact.

At least as critical as the needs for clarification and for distinction of ideal and actual, suggested above, is the need to test the abstractions used in describing actual situations. One cannot tell from their logical coherence alone how adequate sets of concepts are to the content of the concrete situations they are used to describe. A. N. Whitehead has shown some of the consequences of the concept of "simple location" in Western thought.⁶ The notion prevalent from Descartes to the twentieth century was that reality is made up of isolated small "places," in which "things" are located. The notion of such isolation of "place" was a very high echelon abstraction, formed by attending only to properties of separateness and insulation; the willingness to equate this with the full content of the concrete led into a maze of problems. As common sense came to interpret spatial metaphors in the light of this "separative" function of space, the "sensible" man could see a factory as nothing other than the sum of its separate employees and machines, each isolated from the others; he could see "knowledge" only as an aggregate of simply located, neatly boxed "facts" which scholars memorized and counted.⁷ Whitehead called this acceptance of incomplete abstractions as identical with the full content of experience "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness." This danger is a different complicating factor in discussion from a confusion of actual and ideal; it appears as a distortion of what is actual, and is a danger whenever habit or authority persuade one to accept inadequate abstractions as tools for describing the concrete situation.

As a case in point, the Marxist contributors who are applying their

5. One extension of this analogy is to suppose the machines are designed so that each can only function efficiently while there is interference from the other. This, of course, is the line of thought that George Orwell follows in his novel, 1984.

6. WHITEHEAD, *SCIENCE AND THE MODERN WORLD* (1925). Particularly relevant here are cc. III-V.

7. WHITEHEAD, *op. cit. supra* note 6, c. XIII.

"science of society" give an impression of dogmatic rationalism to the Western reader. Their deductions from their key postulates and definitions as to what our experience as members of a capitalist society should be run counter to what this experience in fact is.⁸ Upon investigation, the reason for this may prove to be that concepts devised to describe economic and business practice in the nineteenth century are temptations to commit fallacies of misplaced concreteness in the twentieth. This suggestion is confirmed to some extent by the interest of some American students of business in reformulating key concepts of selling and management in a manner which avoids identifying concrete fact with "simple location." Such a reformulation is never undertaken lightly in the business field, because a mistake may be very costly economically. But in spite of that risk, the reformulation is being vigorously attempted, since the traditional abstractions miss so much when they are applied to contemporary situation-description. The "separative," "individualistic" abstractions that motivated Scrooge in his unregenerate days never did catch all they should have of reality, and are very inadequate when we try to apply them to the contemporary structure of American business and society.⁹

Although any observer with a sense of irony can find one or two examples of current American practice that do agree with deductions from Marx's basic definitions and predictions, the basic concepts of a Marxist (or any other) science of society should be carefully assessed in terms of adequacy to the total range of current institutions and practices. One suspects that many of the non-Marxist contributors are also thinking about "business" and "capitalism" with the aid of inherited abstractions; probably some of the lack of explicitness in their statements of the economic conditions necessary in order for any society to function politically as a democracy may be traced to the unsuitability of these notions for such a statement. In reconsidering the adequacy of traditional notions to describe the actual state of affairs, UNESCO might consider breaking the tradition of keeping apart practitioners

8. For example, some of the statements that the capitalist "controlled press" suppresses all criticisms of capitalism seem very odd when they appear here in a book published by an American press and intended in part for American consumption.

9. For example, the traditional way of thinking of a failing small business as "simply located" apart from the rest of society is not a realistic one. The economic loss involved is not paid by the proprietor of the failing enterprise alone, but ultimately is borne by the whole community. (The unrealistic character of this application of "simple location" has been developed in an unpublished paper by Mr. Kendall, of the Staff of the Indiana University School of Business.) Nor is it realistic to think of management as dealing with "simply located" individual employees, apart from recognition of the fact that a factory is basically a social situation in which the "employee" takes on certain interests and attitudes from membership in the group. (The development of labor organizations is of course one factor that requires a recognition of this by management. But Professor Isaack, of the Indiana University School of Business, has shown in an unpublished paper that there is a basic contradiction between all standard definitions of "management" and the notion of the "simply located" employee.) See also note 11, *infra*.

of business and those of philosophical "speculation," prevalent since the sixth century B. C., and extending its list of experts somewhat further.

To summarize this third suggestion, we might say that one task of philosophy is not to permute rigid abstractions no longer adequate to concrete conditions, but to change them.

The purpose of this review has been to suggest several points to which attention can profitably be directed as this symposium is continued. In each case, these suggestions appear in some of the contributions themselves, but in the light of the volume as a whole, deserve more underscoring than they are given.

The first suggestion is that a more rigorous attempt be made to get explicit statement of all of the conditions contained in the divergent definitions of democracy.¹⁰

The second suggestion is that care be used to discriminate between statements about ideals and statements about present facts. If complete explicitness in definition is achieved, and the rule of not crossing modalities is observed, the first result will be discovery of a greater agreement of ideals than appears from the present symposium. The second result, in an attempt to introduce clarity into discussion of the actual, will be an attempt to discover some common and impartial ways to measure characteristics of social fact; here the various agencies of the United Nations may be appealed to to suggest and apply impartial standards in the needed way.

The third suggestion for attention in further inquiry (which, like the two preceding, is offered for consideration by the reader of this symposium as well as by the experts participating in it) is that the "description of social fact" be undertaken circumspectly. Standards of measure are of no help alone, if the abstractions that determine what and where we apply them are vitiated by some critical incompleteness. We may need some new rectification of our thinking about business, economics, and sociology, paralleling the revision of the concept of "location" which Whitehead advocated for contemporary philosophy. As a matter of fact, one excellent first step in this direction of rectification would be to determine how far our present concepts presuppose a common sense geared to "simple location," and whether alternative formulations based on other interpretations of "place" are not better intellectual tools

10. Professor McKeon's essay brings out very clearly the need and complexity of doing justice to all relevant directions of such definition and explanation. This and some of his other political writings would be a very suitable common starting-point for a second round of discussion aiming at greater clarity, if they could persuade participants to follow his example and consider political institutions, economic and cultural conditions, socially entertained ideals, and operative revolutionary tensions and forces as four dimensions that must be specified in a complete definition or explanation.

for the work in view.¹¹ In this process of evaluating the adequacy of traditional abstractions, participation of experts might include specialists in fields other than philosophy and political theory.

In any case, the reader will find this volume an incisive and challenging one, and will recognize its publication as a practical step toward lessening some of the tensions of the world in which the symposium has been carried on.

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WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ESTATE AND GIFT TAXES. By J. K. Lasser.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951. Pp. xi, 175. \$2.95.

This distillate goes half circle in reconstructing the skeleton of the estate and gift tax law in readable non-technical language. The enthusiastic publisher puffs the offering as a "must" for lawyers wherein is "all the essential information required to understand every important aspect of the Federal Estate and Federal Gift Tax." The more modest Mr. Lasser states that he writes primarily for the layman—the taxpayer; he characterizes his effort as an attempt at the "perfect chip shot to the green." Mr. Lasser's statement is the more accurate. The author has neither evolved a universal panacea nor run the gamut of the full-blown omelet which is our estate and gift tax law. Certain inaccuracies and liberties are a by-product of this simplification. With the exception of stock valuation, this book is not addressed to the important issue of establishing values for the inventory of an estate. Concededly, the work is not a penetrating analysis. It is primarily a client's book to stimulate constructive thinking as to what the client should do with his property. But this little volume is not without interest to the lawyer.

The prolific Mr. Lasser is an accountant who has enjoyed wide circulation of his tax writing. His forte is simplification for the taxpayer of the complexities of contemporary tax law. In light of the friction in some jurisdictions between lawyers and accountants as to the professional qualifications for practice in tax matters, an observation seems appropriate on Mr. Lasser's conduct in the phase of the tax field most sacred to the lawyer. This is an area in which the lawyer, above all others, should be preeminently qualified. This reviewer, who has served in the camps of both professions, will not use

11. The converse of this suggestion that "simple location" may be a distorting feature of our traditional Western concepts, is developed by Professor Pool in his essay, where he suggests that current Soviet thinking has fallen into the "organismic fallacy," a fallacy of misplaced concreteness that is created when abstractions attend exclusively to "diffuse" as opposed to "simple" location. If the early Soviet conception of "capitalism" involved extreme over-emphasis on simple location, it is easy to see why in its antithesis an antithetic notion of place appears.

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