

INDIVIDUALITY, LEADERSHIP,
AND DEMOCRACY

There is a growing concern in the western world with the nature and function of democracy, a concern induced by outside pressures of conflicting ideologies and by internal development of protective devices. The latter source of concern, which finds its highlight in America in congressional investigative techniques, has its origins in the practical and political arena. The issues it raises are tremendously significant for the future growth of democratic processes of government. The struggles which it has released will be a long time abating. But behind these local issues of democracy there lies a more subtle and less popular difficulty, the difficulty of harnessing enlightened political consciousness to the broad-based electorate required by democratic theory. This particular difficulty is not without its practical ramifications and applications; in fact, it is the nub of the struggle over investigative techniques in America. But the problem of uniting political wisdom with an extended franchise has a closer connection with the theory of democracy than does the problem of technique of investigations: it raises, in fact, the critical theoretical question of whether democracy is possible. Put more carefully, the question to which I have reference asks whether democracy is possible as government directed from below by the electorate, or from above by the intelligentsia.

The philosopher, George Santayana, has for long argued against the first alternative in favor of the second, as indeed have many of his philosophical predecessors, among them Plato. But more recently, sociologists and political theorists have directed their attention to this question.¹

The modern forms of democracy have raised this problem of political wisdom in large part because of the growing size of the political unit, which not only reduces man's liberty by making him a unit in a large mechanism, but also tends to render impotent the individual's ability to select or to become a leader.² Such impotency is brought about through several causes. One direct result of the size of contemporary forms of democracies is that political life issues from the movements of large groups. The men put up for office are usually not selected by the mass of the electorate but rather by a small power group acting within some definite organization. Power groups give rise to pressure groups and their consequent concern to persuade regardless of the facts of the issues or the talents of their candidates. Advertisements have been placed at the service of political parties; television programs to catch the eye but not the mind replace debates and careful weighing of objective evidence. The situation becomes more hazardous in virtue of the complexity of the issues, a complexity which requires even more imperatively intelligent and well-informed voters and leaders than in the past. But the chances of obtaining, through popular vote, the leaders needed to guide the country become increasingly fewer. Add to this situation the many factors tending towards conformism and uniformity and the problem of generating political wisdom from below begins to appear nearly impossible of solution. The typical personality trait is what Riesman has called "other-directed," the follow-the-leader pattern which supplies the cues for action through the group to which the individual belongs. Individual initiative becomes stale, judgment stereotyped. The ideal of equality which motivated democracy in its inception now turns into an equality of mediocrity. Culture in the honorific sense becomes replaced by uniformity. "One way of defending

1. David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1953) and *Individualism Reconsidered* (Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1954), Karl Mannheim, *Freedom, Power and Democratic Planning* (New York, Oxford, 1950); Max Beloff, in *Encounter*, Spring, 1954, and *The Times Literary Supplement*, June 18, 1954, which carries an editorial on Beloff's article.

2. We must not overlook the point made by Riesman that the very "impersonality" of our present day society is sometimes a releasing mechanism freeing us from the strains of sociability (*Individualism Reconsidered*, pp. 34-35). But in the context of the voter facing political decisions, the impersonality and size of the group to which the decision refers hampers the freedom and the precision of the judgment.

Individuality, Leadership, and Democracy

the democratic ideal is," Santayana cynically observes, "to deny that civilization is a good."³ Modern mass society has fathered a "homogenized culture."

Like nineteenth-century capitalism, Mass Culture is a dynamic revolutionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, taste, and dissolving all cultural distinctions. It mixes and scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture. . . . Mass Culture is very, very democratic: it absolutely refuses to discriminate against, or between, anything or anybody. All is grist to its mill, and all comes out finely ground indeed.⁴

The Stranger in Santayana's *Dialogue on self government* traces the source of such homogenization to the cult of fashion: "There is nothing that recommends any opinion or custom to us more than to hear that it is the latest thing, that everybody is adopting it, and that it is universal nowadays in the leading circles."⁵ Fashion, conformity to the ruling norms, finds its current exemplification in the round of loyalty oaths and discriminations which permeate our present-day society from top (governmental agencies and academic circles) to bottom (civic organizations, women's clubs, community projects).

Two ideals at least have pervaded modern forms of democratic politics, that of liberty and that of equality. Liberty has been interpreted in a negative way as freedom from constraint: that government is best which governs least. In economics, it has been the laissez-faire doctrines which have given expression to this form of liberty. Liberty has embodied the individualistic strand of democracy; each man is to have the freedom to do what he wishes so long as it does not encroach upon the freedom of his fellows. Equality, on the other hand, has formed the expressive pattern for the conforming and non-individualistic tendencies. Equality and liberty struggle together as defining traits of modern democracy, with now one and now the other dominating and establishing the personality of a period. But even the individuality tends to come in standardized varieties: e.g., the avant-garde artist has now become typed, and that fashion demands its own conformity for those who chose to follow it. There are faces in the crowd but the crowd tends to determine the shape of the face. There would be nothing alarming or paradoxical about the double play of individual and crowd if the leadership role were typified along genuine leader-

3. *The Life of Reason* (New York, Scribners, 1954), p. 144.

4. Dwight McDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," *Diogenes* No. 3, July 1953, pp. 11-12.

5. *Dialogues in Limbo* (New York, Scribners, 1926), p. 94.

like patterns, but the result of the pull of fashion is usually to stay on the surface with any particular type. Thus the avant-gardist need not bother too much about his proficiency so long as he fulfills the behavioral expectancies. Similarly, the political leader finds it necessary only to appear in the traditional role, and in general make a show of leading while actually following what he takes to be the wishes of the crowd. There is very little demand for, and hence little supply of, leadership. Some of the lack here is traceable to a vagueness in the criteria of democratic leadership: "is a parliament a central exchange for current demands or is it an *élite* commissioned to govern justly?"⁶ Santayana's *Stranger* finds this kind of dilemma tragically characteristic of democracy: "it is the tragedy of those who do as they wish, but do not get what they want. It is the tragedy of self-government."⁷ Behind the fashion fads, behind the peculiar characteristic of democracy where "no man governs himself in anything, but . . . each is governed in everything by all the others,"⁸ there lies for Santayana the theoretical mistake of democracy which leads inevitably into the death of culture and the death of leadership qualities. The emphasis upon equality leads toward communality and commonness, while the stress upon classlessness leaves everyone with a rudimentary education but no taste for culture and no desire to have leader-personalities to violate the inviolate value of equality.

Genius, like goodness . . . would arise in a democratic society as frequently as elsewhere; but it might not be so well fed or so well assimilated. There would at least be no artificial and simulated merit; everybody would take his ease in his inn and sprawl unbuttoned without respect for any finer judgment or performance than that which he himself was inclined to.⁹

In the conviction that every man is as good as the next, we sacrifice distinction and merit for a levelling equality. The process is of course discernible in present day society and especially in America, only as one of the dominant directions of contemporary democracy. Santayana would not have claimed that his analysis of the theoretical evils of democracy was fully verified by the actual practice of democracy in any country. While he may be said to be outdated in his continued criticism of democracy for these evils, that being out of touch with living democracies he has failed

6. *Dominations and Powers* (New York, Scribners, 1951), p. 389.

7. *Dialogues in Limbo*, p. 93.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *The Life of Reason*, p. 148.

Individuality, Leadership, and Democracy

to see the various practical ways in which these tendencies are being avoided, I do not think these observations militate against the force of his analysis. For he speaks of a tendency which has become real enough in many areas of our society. What he has not shown is that the tendency towards homogenization is inherent in the nature of democracy rather than being a particular temporal problem which must be met and resolved. His conviction in the connection between theory and practice in this respect finds its counterpart in his belief in the inseparable relation between culture as an honorific term and aristocracy. "What we have rests on conquest and conversion, on leadership and imitation, on mastership and service. To abolish aristocracy, in the sense of social privilege and sanctified authority, would be to cut off the source from which all culture has hitherto flowed."¹⁰

Behind most political theories there can be found a view of the nature of man which molds the general outlines of the theory. Hobbes is perhaps the clearest example of this close relation between sociology and political theory; for the social contract, the rigid social controls, and the power of the ruler all follow for him from man's being essentially selfish, motivated by fear and glory. Locke's milder social polity derives from his more sanguine view of man; man for him even in the state of nature is for the most part law abiding and has rights and duties. For Locke, the political society carries forward what the state of nature began but did not finish, while for Hobbes, the State quells through power the constant conflict of those who live outside its bounds. It is more difficult, because of the greater diffusion, to state what view of man's nature lies behind modern democracies. That this view is sanguine cannot be doubted; it is much too sanguine for writers like Reinhold Niebuhr.¹¹ The doctrine of inalienable rights born with man or bestowed upon him in virtue of his being a man also functions to determine the social structure in present day society.¹² The function of the political group is then interpreted as the protection and extension of these rights, as providing the proper environment within which they can be expressed and made consonant with the general social aims. But it is the weakness of recent trends in democratic society that these beliefs have not been realized to their fullest extent in the social structure. The difficulties over the extension of rights arose, in part at

10. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

11. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York, Scribners, 1944).

12. The defense of natural law is by no means dead. See also Leo Strauss's recent *Natural Law* (1954).

least, in the age of liberalism, in the nineteenth century, where material comfort ran beyond social and individual development. During this period “the people had been freed politically and individually by being given the vote, and enslaved economically in being herded in droves under anonymous employers and self-imposing labour leaders.”¹³ The quest for equality in all phases of life seems frequently to outdistance the extension of freedom. Individual diversity which requires freedom for its protection and nourishment has often been ignored and stifled by a standardization equal at the same time in material comforts and moral principles.

This ideal of a perfect ultimate democracy rests on two assumptions: that human nature in all men is essentially similar, and that consequently mankind could not fully develop its vital liberty without coming to a unanimous vision of the world and a cooperative exercise of the same virtues.¹⁴

Liberty constitutes a fundamental value for Santayana, but he insists that it must be used to develop and protect the natural diversities in men. Nature herself is hierarchical; men vary in what they value; goals change according to individuals. The good society must, for Santayana, preserve this diversity.

It has been a flagrant violation of human nature to try to force one form of life upon all men. As Riesman points out, “the idea that men are created free and equal is both true and misleading; men are created different; they lose their social freedom and their individual autonomy in seeking to become like each other.”¹⁵ Santayana was convinced that it is precisely this domination of other-directedness which is inherent in the democratic ideal as a political unit. What he seems to have overlooked, or to have deemed inadequate, is that in actual practice democracy has not required an agreement on basic moral principles.

Yet the fact is that our democracy, like that of Switzerland, has survived without securing such agreements. In our country, this has been attained by a party system that serves as broker among the special interest groups: the parties do not ask for agreement on fundamentals—certainly, not on ideological fundamentals—but for much more mundane and workable concessions.¹⁶

Santayana’s point, however, is that the survival of political democracy should not be taken as the development of social democracy. The party

13. *Dominations and Powers*, p. 319.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 351.

15. *The Lonely Crowd*, p. 373.

16. *Individualism Reconsidered*, p. 36.

Individuality, Leadership, and Democracy

system has worked in many countries of the west as a means of expressing various and diverse attitudes, but it has just as assuredly served also to submerge minority groups as well as to transfer individualism to “groupism.” There is no hope for a solution, within existing political structures, for this dislocation of individuality, as far as Santayana is concerned. The only possibility lies in a return to smaller and more natural groups, to the ideal of social or spontaneous democracies exemplified in frontier groups, primitive societies, or disaster units where people cooperate willingly and for definite purposes, without losing their individuality. The spontaneity of such groups can be extended to define the nature of social groups *per se* by following what Santayana distinguishes as the rational order of society. This order must not be forced, as all political democracies have tried to do. It is

a purely vegetative growth in the psyche, that easily spreads by contagion to a group of psyches, and forms a political party or philosophic sect. The germ of this political growth is not itself political but biological and moral: it is the seedling of the life of reason sprouting within the secret self, and spreading as it finds the psychic soil favorable and the surrounding climate clement and sunny.¹⁷

Santayana’s own presuppositions concerning human nature come to light in his ideal of moral communities, bound together by the similarities of interests and goals of their members and rooted in the natural growth of the internal and hidden psyche. What the individual is and should be is determined by the psyche. Each man is split into two, the real and the superficial self. Spontaneous democracy which unites individuals according to their real self-interest merges the superficial and real self. Thus, good government is determined not by “the topmost wishes” or “the ruling passions” of individuals but “by their hidden nature and their real opportunities.”¹⁸ If we must have political governments—and Santayana is romantic enough to find them objectionable (the most democratic of governments is “no government at all”)—they must be run by an élite who have the knowledge of the hidden nature of the members. When democratic governments talk about representation, they confuse mechanical with moral representation.

17. *Dominations and Powers*, pp. 295–296.

18. *Dialogues in Limbo*, p. 106.

A government is not made representative or just by the mechanical expedient of electing its members by universal suffrage. It becomes representative only by embodying in its policy, whether by instinct or high intelligence, the people's conscious and unconscious interests.¹⁹

The best representative is the member of a spontaneous democracy, a truly moral society, since any member of such a group in speaking his own mind expresses the true interests of every other individual in the group.²⁰ For one person to be the moral representative of another requires the utmost skill and insight and may even necessitate his violating the present wishes of the one he represents. Government is always a superimposition of a political organ upon a natural society. Whereas Hobbes and Locke—and most of early Western tradition in political theory—have found it necessary to move beyond the state of nature, Santayana's primitive romanticism compels him to argue that what is required in the modern world is a return to natural units, to an idyllic state of nature. The utopian standard envisaged by Santayana consists of a world of many and diverse communities, each with a modicum of political and governmental machinery, working within themselves for common goals, expressing shared mores and rituals. In *Dominations and Powers* he toys with the possibility of uniting these many units under one general political control to form a genuine united nations, but he does not really have much faith in the practicability of such a unified world. Cooperation on such a grand scale is at best tenuous and short lived. Democratic cooperation, whether in the soul or in the world state, rests upon absolute unanimity.

Where any superficial diversity of thought or will cannot be reduced to agreement by a moment's reflection, a dualism is established between that part of the soul or of the people whose will is done, and that part whose will is defeated and ignored. Then to say that the soul or the people governs itself can mean only that the power that dominates it is native to it, and one strain in its own life.²¹

Domination then replaces rational control.

Santayana's moral societies demand the very agreement on fundamentals that he criticized political democracies for trying to attain. The obvious difference in his own mind is that the agreement in his ideal would arise naturally from the psyche, while it is always forced and unnatural in political democracies. He assumes, in his political analysis, a Roycean

19. *The Life of Reason*, p. 142.

20. *Dominations and Powers*, p. 385.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 409.

Individuality, Leadership, and Democracy

concept of “community,” a group of kindred souls possessed with a common past and shared goals. Social analysis is thus extended by making society, as Plato had said it was, the individual magnified. The success of society depends upon the leader’s ability to know the individuals with whom he must deal, to anticipate their needs and the goals which will be expressive of their real selves. Utopian though Santayana’s social ideal is, it serves the important function of directing our attention upon the need for a prior analysis of the individual. His faith in the individual does not allow him to find in every person, or in the large groups of persons characteristic of modern forms of democracy, the qualities of leadership; some must lead by understanding those they lead, while others must follow. But Santayana’s goal ceases to be utopian precisely at this point with his emphasis upon the qualities within the individual necessary for proper leadership, for political intelligence and insight. Recent sociological analysis supports Santayana in this emphasis. Mannheim also believed in the necessity of a strong ruling class, even within the democratic ideal. But it was the degree of access to this ruling class which characterized for Mannheim the nature of a democracy.

In our view the quality of a society should not and cannot be evaluated by the presence or absence of a ruling class but by its methods of selecting leaders, the range of opportunities for ascent, and the social value of leadership functions in the ruling class.²²

He strongly advocates scientific methods of testing for leadership qualities (I.Q. and aptitude tests, case studies in schools, etc.), calling attention to the presence of such methods in civil service employment. Neither is he adverse to open competition as one method of selecting leaders, as long as this does not become the only method. But all methods of testing for leadership will be ineffective unless there is leadership material already in existence.

Obviously a change of heart is needed and a new mental climate to encourage, not suppress, men of ideas and vision. In other words, a democracy on the defensive must be turned into one that is constructive and militant. Intellectual initiative, of course, can come only from men who are open to change and can view things in a new perspective.²³

It was one of Santayana’s keener insights to have perceived that the fate of modern democracy depends upon just such intellectual initiative, which

22. K. Mannheim, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

he felt was inevitably killed by the social pressures for equality. Our contemporary “other-directed” culture indicates that the problem of leadership is one of how to encourage the other-directed personality to become autonomous. For Riesman, “the ‘autonomous’ are those who on the whole are *capable* of conforming to the behavioral norms of their society . . . but who are free to choose whether to conform or not.”²⁴ The difficulties of leadership arise on the individual level. If we do not have a social atmosphere which encourages those personality traits requisite for leadership roles, we can hardly expect to provide society with strong, virile leaders. But the effort towards autonomy in the individual is very much like the demand Santayana made for knowing the true nature of the individual. What has apparently happened to many individuals in other-directed democracies has been a piling up of superficial play-acting to fulfill the demands expected by society from the individual, both in his work and in his leisure. The end result has been that the individual has lost his capacity for working or playing as he himself would like to, has lost the insights into his own self.

The individual striving for autonomy also needs a great deal of self-consciousness to differentiate between actions he takes because they will be tolerated and those he takes because he really wants to. Indeed, it is just this type of heightened self-consciousness that, above all else, constitutes the insights of the autonomous in an era dependent on other-direction.²⁵

The socialization of the individual has gone too far. The individual today must re-individuate himself.

His autonomy depends not upon the ease with which he may deny or disguise his emotions but, on the contrary, upon the success of his effort to recognize and respect his own feelings, his own potentialities, his own limitations. This is not a quantitative matter, but in part an awareness of the problem of self-consciousness itself, an achievement of a higher order of abstraction.²⁶

False personalization in work relations and enforced privatization in play are two of the strongest barriers that, for Riesman, prevent autonomy. His own suggestion is that autonomy will first have to be achieved in the area of play, where the individual can learn again to make his own choices freed from the directives of social pressure. Work must also be de-per-

24. *The Lonely Crowd*, p. 287.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

26. *Ibid.*

Individuality, Leadership, and Democracy

sonalized by use of the machine so that the false pressures of personalization can be redirected to other more profitable uses. Only after the individual has regained his autonomy will he be in a position to exert judgment unguided by other-directed forces. Riesman does not wish to suggest that political imagination and wisdom will follow automatically once autonomy has been achieved among individuals, but he would seem to have singled out an important prerequisite for regaining genuine democratic leadership.

Santayana would not, I think, be willing to accept a translation of his doctrine of the psyche into social terms. He would not allow us to say that the terminology of "real self" and "superficial self" has its only meaning in the social context, for his psyche is a biological determinant of both individual and society. But Riesman's concept of the other-directed self and of the autonomous self do translate Santayana's distinction into more acceptable and clearly realistic terms. The demand which Santayana criticized in the traditional concept of democracy, i.e., that all the members of society must believe in the same fundamental principles, becomes the major criterion of a good society in his own utopian construction. There has been no violation of his own basic belief in the value of diversity, however; for with the concept of a Roycean community of shared values and goals, there is, in Santayana's analysis, a strong insistence upon individual diversity. His point is that there can be no diversity over long-term goals and initial values without some domination and undemocratic action occurring. There is still some divergence between this analysis of community and the heterogeneity which Riesman finds actual and possible within the democratic polity; but when we translate Santayana's analysis of the individual into Riesman's terms we find a fundamental agreement. There has been a divorce of the individual from himself; he has been split by both public and private forces peculiar to modern forms of mass democracy. The goal of re-structuring democracy in order to achieve competent leadership selection and leadership roles lies in bringing this severed self together, in making it possible for the autonomous individualistic person, characteristic of Santayana's social or spontaneous democracies, to become the dominant socialized personality.