

## Part II

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# Elites in Democracy and Democratization— Classical Analyses

### Introduction

The earliest class analysis of democracy—presented in the previous part of this volume—stems from the middle of the nineteenth century. By contrast, elite theory in general, and the elite conception of democracy in particular, did not make its appearance until the turn of that century. Once it appeared on the scene, however, it did so with triple strength: the three founding fathers of the mainstream of this school of thought—Pareto, Mosca, and Michels—made their appearance almost simultaneously. The contributions by Pareto and Mosca open this part of the volume, while (for reasons that will become clear further on) that by Michels has been reserved for Part V.

Having made their appearance virtually at the same time, Pareto and Mosca fell into a dispute over the paternity of elite theory (which Mosca lost). They need not have done so, however, for their ideas, while displaying some similarities, also show that each of them has been a highly original (and influential) thinker.

Pareto distinguishes between a governing and a nongoverning elite, adding that, although in principle, elites (including governing elites) are made up of people who excel, this is not always so in practice. As long as a governing elite, or class, is composed of people

with the proper qualities of excellence, and is open to absorb into its ranks the most talented people from the nonelite—while shedding the more degenerate of its own members—this ensures a circulation of elites that keeps society in a state of equilibrium and gradual change. When, however, this circulation is impeded, the social equilibrium is upset, and society becomes prone to violent upheavals. In all this, so-called democracy—as Pareto refers to it—makes little difference. It does not spell popular representation within the governing elite or class, but merely leads that governing class to use different ways of manipulating the people.

Where Pareto refers to those who govern as a governing elite or class, Mosca dubs them the ruling class.<sup>1</sup> In all societies, including democracies, there is a small organized class that rules and a large unorganized one that is ruled. According to democratic theory, majorities rule minorities. In fact, even in a democracy, the domination of an organized minority over an unorganized majority is inevitable.

According to critics, Pareto's and Mosca's notion—that in all societies there are those who govern and those who are governed—is self-evident. To transcend this platitude, it would have to be shown that the governing elite/class has some internal unity, which exacerbates its power. This, in fact, is the thesis of the prominent postwar elite theorist, Mills. Mills sees democratic (especially American) society, as dominated by the upper political, military, and corporate economic personnel. These three groups are in a perpetual though uneasy coalition with each other, and together they form a conglomeration of power, or a power elite. Members of congress, trade unions, and interest group leaders make up the middle levels of power. And at the bottom there are the masses, the mostly passive and powerless receiving end of the power elite's manipulation and rule.

Overall, these classical elite theorists—known as mainstream elite theorists—have a common focus in viewing extant democracies, no less than nondemocracies, as divided into the wielders of power and those who are subject to it, who have little power of their own. Thus they have little to say on what it is that still makes democracy (with all its iniquities) a distinctive regime.

It fell to the lot of other classical theorists—known as liberal, democratic elite theorists—to fill this void. These include Weber, Schumpeter, Aron, and (surprisingly) also Mosca in some later de-

velopments of his thought. Foremost among these is Weber, a contemporary of Pareto and Mosca. He, too, admits that even in a democracy the demos itself never governs. But democracy (embodied in elected charismatic leaders and parliaments) is still of prime importance as a counterbalance to the expanding, frightening, practically indestructible, rule of bureaucracy. No less frightening is the prospect that democracy may give rise to leaders who gain the faith of the masses, hence power, by means of demagoguery. But a properly working parliament can restrain the power of such leaders as well, even though, in the end, democracy must make concessions to them.

This brings us back to Mosca who, despite losing out to Pareto in his paternity suit over elite theory, still has an advantage over Pareto. For he alone may be regarded as both a mainstream and a democratic elite theorist. While he sees a ruling class as inevitable in a democracy, in his later ideas he also stresses that democracy divides that class into separate branches: that derived from bureaucratic appointment, and that derived from popular suffrage, the popularly elected assembly. Like Weber he believes that parliamentary assemblies curb what would otherwise be the pernicious power of bureaucracy. Importantly, however, he also believes that the bureaucratic and judicial branches of the ruling class, if autonomous, fulfill an equally essential democratic role in curbing the corrupting power of elected politicians. With all its faults, democracy thus accords some liberty and some influence to the public.

During and in the wake of the Second World War, some prominent thinkers expressed like-minded ideas. Rejecting the notion that democracy ensures popular participation in the decision-making process, Schumpeter sees its essence in the arrangement whereby leaders gain the power to make decisions through a competition for the people's votes. This implies considerable freedom of discussion, but it lends the electors only limited control over the elected. Hence the latter's power, together with the range of political decisions, must be (and in fact is) limited through independent agencies or elites. These include—besides the judiciary, the top of the state bureaucracy, and the central bank—universities, or academic elites.

Similarly, for Aron, what most clearly distinguishes Western democratic from autocratic regimes is the dissociation and indepen-

dence of leading minorities, or elites. Also distinctive to democracy is the free and legitimate mutual competition of the claimants to such positions, based on free elections and on consensus over the rules of the game. All this cannot ensure effective participation in the decision-making process for all, but it ensures some elite response to the needs and demands of the public.

Democratic elite theorists thus share the idea that the distinctiveness of democracy lies not only in free competitive elections, but also in the autonomy of elites from each other, which enables them to countervail each other's power. Thereby power restrains power, increasing the liberty of the public and the elites' responsiveness to its demands. In opposition to this it has been argued that these supposed virtues of democracy are more fiction than reality, that those who believe in them are overly complacent with respect to democracy. Further, the argument is that these theorists have offered not merely an elite but an *elitist* theory of democracy, one which applauds elite rule, while paying insufficient attention to the democratic role of the public. As well, they are said to have disregarded the exploitative nature of capitalism—the economic system in which democracy prevails—and its persistent economic inequalities. Before deciding in favor or against these critiques, those against whom they are leveled must be allowed to have their say.

## Note

1. Mosca's concept of the ruling class differs substantially from the Marxist conception of this class, as evident from the pertinent writings in Part I of this volume.

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# The Governing Élite in Present-Day Democracy

*Selections from the Work of  
Vilfredo Pareto*

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## [Élites and Non-élites]

Let us assume that in every branch of human activity each individual is given an index which stands as a sign of his capacity, very much the way grades are given in the various subjects in examinations in school. The highest type of lawyer, for instance, will be given 10. The man who does not get a client will be given 1—reserving zero for the man who is an out-and-out idiot. To the man who has made his millions—honestly or dishonestly as the case may be—we will give 10. To the man who has earned his thousands we will give 6; to such as just manage to keep out of the poor house, 1, keeping zero for those who get in . . .

So let us make a class of the people who have the highest indices in their branch of activity, and to that class give the name of *élite* . . . It will help if we further divide that class into two classes: a *governing élite*, comprising individuals who directly or indirectly play some considerable part in government, and a *non-governing élite*, comprising the rest. So we get two strata in a population: (1) A lower stratum, the *non-élite*, with whose possible influence on government we are not just here concerned; then (2) a higher stratum, the *élite*, which is divided into two: (a) a governing *élite*; (b) a non-governing *élite* . . .

## [The Circulation of Élites]

The manner in which the various groups in a population intermix has to be considered. In moving from one group to another an indi-

vidual generally brings with him certain inclinations, sentiments, attitudes, that he has acquired in the group from which he comes, and that circumstance cannot be ignored. To this mixing, in the particular case in which only two groups, the *élite* and the *non-élite*, are envisaged, the term "circulation of *élites*" has been applied . . . We must pay special attention (1) in the case of one single group, to the proportions between the total of the group and the number of individuals who are nominally members of it but do not possess the qualities requisite for effective membership; and then (2) in the case of various groups, to the ways in which transitions from one group to the other occur, and to the intensity of that movement—that is to say, to the velocity of the circulation . . .

The upper stratum of society, the *élite*, nominally contains certain groups of people, not always very sharply defined, that are called aristocracies. There are cases in which the majority of individuals belonging to such aristocracies actually possess the qualities requisite for remaining there; and then again there are cases where considerable numbers of the individuals making up the class do not possess those requisites . . .

Aristocracies do not last. It is an incontestable fact that after a certain length of time they pass away. History is a graveyard of aristocracies . . . Where, in France, are the descendants of the Frankish conquerors? The genealogies of the English nobility have been very exactly kept; and they show that very few families still remain to claim descent from the comrades of William the Conqueror. The rest have vanished. In Germany the aristocracy of the present day is very largely made up of descendants of vassals of the lords of old. The populations of European countries have increased enormously during the past few centuries. It is as certain as certain can be that the aristocracies have not increased in proportion.

They decay not in numbers only. They decay also in quality, in the sense that they lose their vigour, that there is a decline in the proportions of the residues<sup>1</sup> which enabled them to win their power and hold it. The governing class is restored not only in numbers, but—and that is the more important thing—in quality, by families rising from the lower classes and bringing with them the vigour and the proportions of residues necessary for keeping themselves in power. It is also restored by the loss of its more degenerate members . . .

In virtue of class-circulation, the governing *élite* is always in a state of slow and continuous transformation. It flows on like a river, never being today what it was yesterday. From time to time sudden and violent disturbances occur. There is a flood—the river overflows its banks. Afterwards, the new governing *élite* again resumes its slow transformation. The flood has subsided, the river is again flowing normally in its wonted bed.

Revolutions come about through accumulations in the higher strata of society—either because of a slowing-down in class-circulation or from other causes—of decadent elements no longer possessing the residues suitable for keeping them in power, and shrinking from the use of force; while meantime in the lower strata of society elements of superior quality are coming to the fore, possessing residues suitable for exercising the functions of government and willing enough to use force . . .

### **[How the Governing Élite in a Democracy Bamboozles King Demos]**

Everyone recognizes that in our day “democracy” is tending to become the political system of all civilized peoples. But what is the exact meaning of the term “democracy”? It is even more vague than that vaguest of terms, “religion.” We must therefore leave it to one side and turn to the facts that it covers . . .

We need not linger on the fiction of “popular representation”—poppycock grinds no flour. Let us go on and see what substance underlies the various forms of power in the governing classes. Ignoring exceptions, which are few in number and of short duration, one finds everywhere a governing class of relatively few individuals that keeps itself in power partly by force and partly by the consent of the subject class, which is much more populous . . .

A governing class is present everywhere, even where there is a despot, but the forms under which it appears are widely variable. In absolute governments a sovereign occupies the stage alone. In so called democratic governments it is the parliament. But behind the scenes in both cases there are always people who play a very important role in actual government. To be sure they must now and again bend the knee to the whims of ignorant and domineering sovereigns or parliaments, but they are soon back at their tena-

cious, patient, never-ending work, which is of much the greater consequence . . .

King Demos, good soul, thinks he is following his own devices. In reality he is following the lead of his rulers. But that very often turns out to the advantage of his rulers only, for they, from the days of Aristotle down to our own, have made lavish use of the arts of bamboozling King Demos . . . Among the derivations<sup>2</sup> which they use to show that their rule is to the advantage of a country, interesting is the assertion that the public is better qualified to pass on general questions than on special ones. The fact, in reality, is the precise opposite. One has to talk only for a very brief time with an uneducated person to see that he grasps special questions, which are usually concrete, much more clearly than general questions, which as a rule are abstract. But abstract questions have the advantage for people in power that whatever the answers that are given them by the public, they will be able to draw any inference they choose from them . . .

### **[How the Governing Élite in a Democracy Maintains Its Power]**

For purposes of maintaining its power the governing class uses individuals from the subject class, who may be grouped in two divisions corresponding to the two principal instruments for holding power secure. The one group uses force, and is made up of soldiers, police of one sort or another; . . . the other uses skill, and ranges in character and in time all the way from the clientage of the old Roman politicians to the clientèles of our contemporary politicians. Those two groups are always with us, but never in the same actual proportions, nor, much less, in the same visible proportions. One extreme is marked by the Rome of the praetorians, where the chief *de facto* instrument of governing, and even more so the visible instrument, was armed force. The other extreme is represented by the United States of America, where the chief actual instrument of governing, and to a somewhat lesser extent the apparent instrument, is the political "machine."

These cliques work in various ways. The principal way is the least conspicuous. The administration in power "looks after" the interests of the speculators,<sup>3</sup> and often without any explicit understanding with them. A protectionist government, for instance, gets

the confidence and the support of the manufacturers it protects without having to come to explicit terms with all of them, though it may have some agreement with outstanding individuals. The situation is the same with public works, though agreement with the big contractors is becoming the rule.

Other ways are better known—they are less important from the social standpoint, but are commonly regarded as more important from the ethical standpoint. Among them is the bribery of voters, elected officials, government ministers, newspaper-owners, and other such persons, which has its counterpart under systems of absolutism in the bribery of courtiers, favourites, male and female, officials, generals, and so on—an old form of corruption that has not altogether disappeared. Such means have been employed in all periods of history, from the days of ancient Athens and republican Rome down to our own . . .

And that is why the numberless attempts which have been made to “purify” politics have been failures and still remain such. Witch-grass may be cut as often as one chooses, but it sprouts only the more rankly if the roots are left untouched. Our democracies in France, Italy, England, and the United States are tending more and more to become demagogic plutocracies and may be following that road on the way to one of those radical transformations that have been witnessed in the past . . .

Evolution towards “democracy” seems to stand in strict correlation with the increased use of that instrument of governing which involves resort to artifice and to the “machine,” as against the instrument of force. In ancient times, that was clearly observable towards the end of the Republic in Rome, where there was a conflict between precisely those two instrumentalities, force winning the final victory in the Empire. It is even more apparent in our own day, when the régimes in many “democratic” countries might be defined as a sort of feudalism that is primarily economic and in which the principal instrument of governing is the manipulation of political followings, whereas the military feudalism of the Middle Ages used force primarily as embodied in vassalage.

### **[Conclusion: The Iniquities of Democracy]**

A political system in which “the people” expresses its “will”—given

but not granted that it has one—without cliques, intrigues, “combines,” “gangs,” exists only as a pious wish of theorists. It is not to be observed in reality, either in the past or in the present, either in our Western countries or in any others. Such phenomena, long the subject of remark, are usually described as aberrations, or “degenerations,” of “democracy”; but when and where one may be introduced to the perfect, or even the merely decent, state from which said aberration or “degeneration” has occurred, no one ever manages to tell . . .

It is further to be noted that the defects in various systems of government may differ from each other, but, taking things as a whole, it cannot be held that one type of régime is very different in that respect from any other. The criticisms that are levelled at modern democracy are not greatly different from those that were levelled at ancient democracies, the Athenian, for instance; and if there are cases of corruption in democracies old and new, it would not be difficult to find cases just as bad in absolute and constitutional monarchies, in oligarchical governments, and in any other sort of régime . . .

### **Notes from the Editor**

1. Pareto conceives of residues as psychic states: manifestations of sentiments and instincts.
2. Pareto conceives of derivations as representing the workings of the mind—reasoning, ideological justifications—which account for residues.
3. By this Pareto means business people.

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# The Ruling Class in Representative Democracy

*Selections from the Work of  
Gaetano Mosca*

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## [The Ubiquity of the Ruling Class]

Among the constant facts and tendencies that are to be found in all political organisms, one is so obvious that it is apparent to the most casual eye. In all societies—from societies that are very meagerly developed and have barely attained the dawning of civilization, down to the most advanced and powerful societies—two classes of people appear—a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first, in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent, and supplies the first, in appearance at least, with material means of subsistence and with the instrumentalities that are essential to the vitality of the political organism.

In practical life we all recognize the existence of this ruling class (or political class) . . . We all know that, in our own country, whichever it may be, the management of public affairs is in the hands of a minority of influential persons, to which management, willingly or unwillingly, the majority defer. We know that the same thing goes on in neighboring countries, and in fact we should be hard put to it to conceive of a real world otherwise organized—a world in which all men would be directly subject to a single person without relationships of superiority or subordination, or in which all men would share equally in the direction of political affairs. If we reason other-

wise in theory, that is due partly to inveterate habits that we follow in our thinking and partly to the exaggerated importance that we attach to two political facts that loom far larger in appearance than they are in reality.

The first of these facts—and one has only to open one's eyes to see it—is that in every political organism there is one individual who is chief among the leaders of the ruling class as a whole and stands, as we say, at the helm of the state . . . The second fact, too, is readily discernible. Whatever the type of political organization, pressures arising from the discontent of the masses who are governed, from the passions by which they are swayed, exert a certain amount of influence on the policies of the ruling, the political, class.

But the man who is at the head of the state would certainly not be able to govern without the support of a numerous class to enforce respect for his orders and to have them carried out; and granting that he can make one individual, or indeed many individuals, in the ruling class feel the weight of his power, he certainly cannot be at odds with the class as a whole or do away with it. Even if that were possible, he would at once be forced to create another class, without the support of which action on his part would be completely paralyzed. On the other hand, granting that the discontent of the masses might succeed in deposing a ruling class, inevitably there would have to be another organized minority within the masses themselves to discharge the functions of a ruling class. Otherwise all organization, and the whole social structure, would be destroyed . . .

### **[Why Even in Representative Democracy Minorities Rule Majorities]**

We think it may be desirable, nevertheless, to reply at this point to an objection which might very readily be made to our point of view. If it is easy to understand that a single individual cannot command a group without finding within the group a minority to support him, it is rather difficult to grant, as a constant and natural fact, that minorities rule majorities, rather than majorities minorities. But that is one of the points—so numerous in all the other sciences—where the first impression one has of things is contrary to what they are in reality. In reality the dominion of an organized minority, obeying a single impulse, over the unorganized majority is inevitable. The power

of any minority is irresistible as against each single individual in the majority, who stands alone before the totality of the organized minority. At the same time, the minority is organized for the very reason that it is a minority . . .

Many doctrines that advocate liberty and equality, as the latter terms are still commonly understood—doctrines which the eighteenth century thought out, which the nineteenth perfected and tried to apply and which the twentieth will probably dispense with or modify substantially—are summed up and given concrete form in the theory that views universal suffrage as the foundation of all sound government. It is commonly believed that the only free, equitable and legitimate government is a government that is based upon the will of the majority, the majority by its vote delegating its powers for a specified length of time to men who represent it . . .

[Yet] what happens in other forms of government—namely, that an organized minority imposes its will on the disorganized majority—happens also and to perfection, whatever the appearances to the contrary, under the representative system. When we say that the voters “choose” their representative, we are using a language that is very inexact. The truth is that the representative *has himself elected* by the voters, and, if that phrase should seem too inflexible and too harsh to fit some cases, we might qualify it by saying that *his friends have him elected*. In elections, as in all other manifestations of social life, those who have the will and, especially, the moral, intellectual and material means to force their will upon others take the lead over the others and command them.

The political mandate has been likened to the power of attorney that is familiar in private law. But in private relationships, delegations of powers and capacities always presuppose that the principal has the broadest freedom in choosing his representative. Now in practice, in popular elections, that freedom of choice, though complete theoretically, necessarily becomes null, not to say ludicrous. If each voter gave his vote to the candidate of his heart, we may be sure that in almost all cases the only result would be a wide scattering of votes. When very many wills are involved, choice is determined by the most various criteria, almost all of them subjective, and if such wills were not coordinated and organized it would be virtually impossible for them to coincide in the spontaneous choice of one indi-

vidual. If his vote is to have any efficacy at all, therefore, each voter is forced to limit his choice to a very narrow field, in other words to a choice among the two or three persons who have some chance of succeeding; and the only ones who have any chance of succeeding are those whose candidacies are championed by groups, by committees, by *organized minorities* . . .

How do these organized minorities form about individual candidates or groups of candidates? As a rule they are based on considerations of property and taxation, on common material interests, on ties of family, class, religion, sect or political party. Whether their component personnels be good or bad, there can be no doubt that such committees—and the representatives who are now their tools, now their leaders or “bosses”—represent the organization of a considerable number of social values and forces. In practice, therefore, the representative system results not at all in government by the majority; it results in the participation of a certain number of social values in the guidance of the state, in the fact that many political forces which in an absolute state, a state ruled by a bureaucracy alone, would remain inert and without influence upon government become organized and so exert an influence on government . . .

### **[The Influence of the Voters]**

The great majority of voters are passive, it is true, in the sense that they have not so much freedom to choose their representatives as a limited right to exercise an option among a number of candidates. Nevertheless, limited as it may be, that capacity has the effect of obliging candidates to try to win a weight of votes that will serve to tip the scales in their direction, so that they make every effort to flatter, wheedle and obtain the good will of the voters. In this way certain sentiments and passions of the “common herd” come to have their influence on the mental attitudes of the representatives themselves, and echoes of a widely disseminated opinion, or of any serious discontent, easily come to be heard in the highest spheres of government.

It may be objected that this influence of the majority of voters is necessarily confined to the broad lines of political policy and makes itself felt only on a very few topics of a very general character, and that within limits as narrow as that even in absolute governments

the ruling classes are obliged to take account of mass sentiments. In fact the most despotic of governments has to proceed very cautiously when it comes to shocking the sentiments, convictions or prejudices of the majority of the governed, or to requiring of that majority pecuniary sacrifices to which they are not accustomed. But wariness about giving offense will be much greater when every single representative, whose vote may be useful or necessary to the executive branch of government, knows that the discontent of the masses may at almost any moment bring about the triumph of a rival . . .

### **[The Importance of Checks and Balances]**

Many objections are now being urged against representative government in general, and especially against those forms of it in which the democratic ideal may be said to have been best realized, in view of a broad-based popular suffrage and the political preponderance that has been acquired by elective "lower houses." . . . The best founded of all, relates to the excessive interference, not so much by lower houses as political bodies as by individual members of lower houses, in the courts, in public administration, in the distribution of the large portion of the social wealth that is levied by the state in the form of duties and taxes and applied to various public services, and in the distribution of that portion, also large, of the social wealth that is concentrated in banks, in great industrial speculations and in public charities . . . Anyone can see that, in highly bureaucratized systems such as ours are, continuous pottering, interloping and officiousness on the part of members of lower houses must be an exceedingly baneful thing . . .

[But] the defects of parliamentary assemblies, and the evil consequences which their control of power and their participation in power produce in all representative systems, are merest trifles as compared with the harm that would inevitably result from abolishing them or stripping them of their influence. Under the conditions that prevail at present in society, the suppression of representative assemblies would inevitably be followed by a type of regime that is commonly called "absolute." We believe it might better be termed "exclusively bureaucratic," since its chief characteristic is that it alienates from public life all political forces, all social values, except such as are represented in the bureaucracy. At the very least, it completely

subordinates all other forces and values to the bureaucratic element . . . We need give no long demonstration of that thesis . . . as to the dangers and drawbacks involved in giving absolute predominance to a single political force that is not subject to any limitation or discussion whatever . . .

People of our time have come to take for granted the advantages of a system in which all governmental acts are subject to public discussion. That alone can explain why superficial observers among our younger generations fail to realize at a glance the moral ruin that would result from the downfall of such a system. That ruin would take the form of a series of violations of juridical defense, of justice, of everything that we commonly call "liberty"; and those violations would be far more pernicious than any that can be laid to the charge of even the most dishonest of parliamentary governments, let alone of representative governments . . . It cannot be denied that the representative system provides a way for many different social forces to participate in the political system and, therefore, to balance and limit the influence of other social forces and the influence of bureaucracy in particular. If that were [its] only possible consequence, . . . it would clearly be advantageous to accept it on that ground alone . . .

The soundest point in the criticisms that for a good half century past have been leveled at representative governments is the excessive and exclusive power that is given by many of them . . . to the elected representatives. The prime and real root of the evils that are being so generally lamented lies in the facts that where parliamentarism is in force the ministry directing the vast and absorbing bureaucratic machine issues from the ranks of the elected chamber, and, more serious still, the fact that prime ministers and their cabinets stay in power as long, and only as long, as it pleases the majority of the elected chamber to retain them. Because of these two facts, discussion of governmental acts in our parliaments and the control that representatives should exercise over governmental acts almost always go astray under pressure of personal ambitions and party interests.

Because of the same facts, the natural desire of governors to govern well is continuously and effectively thwarted by their no less natural desire to serve their own personal interests, and the sense of professional duty in ministers and representatives is always balanced

by all sorts of ambitions and vanities, justified and unjustified. Finally, the courts and the administrative departments become parts of a great electioneering agency with a corresponding cost in public money and in moral atmosphere; and a demand on the part of any important vote-getter upon the representative who needs him, or on the part of the minister who needs the representative, is often enough to silence any respect for equity and law. In a word, because of a constant, flagrant and manufactured contradiction between the duty and the interest of the man who governs, and of the man who should judge and limit governmental action, the bureaucracy and the elective elements, which should control and balance each other, end by corrupting and denaturing each other . . .

It is not hard to imagine modifications in present institutions that might effectively contribute toward attenuating the evils of parliamentarism. No one, for instance, can fail to see how helpful it would be to increase guarantees of the independence of the courts by assuring to magistrates in all countries that real permanency of tenure which is now established in only a few, and by raising the social position and prestige of judges in fact and not merely in words. No one can fail to see how advantageous it would be to France, for instance, and not to France alone, to introduce the system that prevailed in imperial Germany, whereby all public officials of high rank were responsible for their acts to really independent administrative tribunals, and at the same time were free from the jurisdiction of ministers, and therefore of representatives. Financial control also could be better organized by increasing the independence of our auditing departments . . .

It is a matter of common knowledge that the defects of parliamentary government in Europe almost all come down to improper interference with elections to central and local elective bodies by bureaucracies, acting mainly through prefects appointed by the ministries, and to equally improper interference with the bureaucracies by representatives elected to the national chambers. All this gives rise to a shameful and hypocritical traffic in reciprocal indulgences and mutual favors, which is a veritable running sore in most European countries . . .

All the same . . . specialization in the various political functions and cooperation and reciprocal control between bureaucratic and

elective elements are two of the outstanding characteristics of the modern representative state . . . As for safeguarding against any excesses on the part of bureaucracy, it seemed sufficient to entrust to parliaments control over income and expenditure and the right to audit and criticize the state administration as a whole; and, in countries governed by parliamentary systems, to put the various branches of the bureaucratic machine in charge of men who came largely from the membership of the elective chamber itself, and who therefore issued indirectly from popular suffrage . . .

### **[Civil Liberties in Representative Democracies]**

In modern Europe, and in all countries of European civilization in general, the conception of political liberty has not been applied solely by instituting representative government. Almost everywhere the latter has been supplemented to a greater or lesser extent by a series of institutions that assure individuals and groups of individuals not a few effective guarantees as against holders of public power. In countries that have so far rightly been reputed free, private property cannot be violated arbitrarily. A citizen cannot be arrested and condemned unless specified rules are observed. Each person can follow the religion of his choice without forfeiture of his civil and political rights. The press cannot be subjected to censorship and is free to discuss and criticize acts of government. Finally, if they conform with certain rules, citizens can meet to engage in discussions of a political character, and they can form associations for the attainment of moral, political or professional ends.

These liberties, and others like them, may be looked upon as real limitations which the state has imposed upon its own sovereign powers in its relations to individual citizens. They are largely imitations of laws that England had adopted at the end of the seventeenth century, after the "Glorious Revolution," or even at later dates. They are necessary complements to representative systems, which would function very badly if all free political activity on the part of individuals were suppressed, and if individuals were not fairly well protected against arbitrary acts on the part of the executive and judiciary powers. At the same time, those liberties find their maximum guarantee in the existence of the representative system, which provides that legislative power, which alone has the right to remove or

restrict them, should emanate from the same political forces that are interested in conserving them. Far harder to put into practice has been the concept of equality, for equality is contrary to the nature of things, and is also less real, less concrete, than liberty in the sense just mentioned . . .

**[Conclusion: The Achievements of Representative Democracy]**

In conclusion . . . majority government and absolute political equality, two of the mottos that the century inscribed on its banners, were not achieved, because they could not be achieved, and the same may be said of fraternity. But the ranks of the ruling classes have been held open. The barriers that kept individuals of the lower classes from entering the higher have been either removed or lowered, and the development of the old absolutist state into the modern representative state has made it possible for almost all political forces, almost all social values, to participate in the political management of society.

This development, it should be noted, has divided the political class into two distinct branches, one issuing from popular suffrage, and the other from bureaucratic appointment. This . . . has made it possible to distribute the sovereign functions, or powers, of the state, and that distribution, whenever social conditions are such as to make it effective, constitutes the chief virtue of representative systems . . . Rousseau set himself an unattainable goal when he tried to show that the only form of legitimate government was one that was founded upon the express consent of the majority of citizens. Montesquieu stated a much more practical and profound idea when he maintained that if a nation is to be free, in other words governed according to law and not according to the arbitrary will of its rulers, it must have a political organization in which authority arrests and limits authority, and in which, therefore, no individual and no assembly has the power to make laws and at the same time the power to apply them. To make that doctrine complete, one need add that a controlling and limiting political institution can be effective only when it represents a section of the political class that is different from the section represented by the institution to be limited and controlled.

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If, again, we take due account of the individual liberties that protect the citizen from possible arbitrary acts on the part of any or all of the powers of the state, especially of liberty of the press, which, along with liberty of parliamentary debate, serves to call public attention to all possible abuses on the part of those who govern, one readily sees the great superiority of the representative system. That system has permitted the establishment of a strong state, which has been able to canalize immense sums of individual energies toward purposes related to the collective interest. At the same time it has not trampled on those energies or suppressed them. It has left them with sufficient vitality to achieve remarkable results in other fields, notably in the scientific, literary and economic fields. If, therefore, the nations of European civilization have succeeded in maintaining their primacy in the world . . . the fact has been due in large part to the beneficent effects of their political system . . .

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# Democracy and the Countervailing Powers of Bureaucracy, Charisma, and Parliament

*Selections from the Work of  
Max Weber*

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## [Bureaucratization and Democratization]

Bureaucracy inevitably accompanies modern mass democracy . . . The progress of bureaucratization within the state administration itself is a phenomenon paralleling the development of democracy, as is quite obvious in France, North America, and now in England. Of course, one must always remember that the term “democratization” can be misleading. The demos itself, in the sense of a shapeless mass, never “governs” larger associations, but rather is governed. What changes is only the way in which the executive leaders are selected and the measure of influence which the demos, or better, which social circles from its midst, are able to exert upon the content and the direction of administrative activities by means of “public opinion” . . .

Once fully established, bureaucracy is among those social structures which are the hardest to destroy. Bureaucracy is *the* means of transforming social action into rationally organized action. Therefore, as an instrument of rationally organizing authority relations, bureaucracy was and is a power instrument of the first order for one who controls the bureaucratic apparatus. [As] rationally organized and directed action [it] is superior to every kind of collective behavior and also [to] social action opposing it. Where administration has been completely bureaucratized, the resulting system of domination is practically indestructible . . .

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Excerpts from Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 2 vols., trans. and ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978): chapters X, XIV; appendix II. Copyright © 1978 The Regents of the University of California. Reprinted by permission of the Regents of the University of California and the University of California Press. Bracketed headings have been created by the editor of this volume.

### **[Democratization of Charismatic Leadership]**

In radical contrast to bureaucratic organization, charisma . . . is self-determined and sets its own limits. Its bearer seizes the task for which he is destined and demands that others obey and follow him by virtue of his mission. If those to whom he feels sent do not recognize him, his claim collapses; if they recognize it, he is their master as long as he “proves” himself. However, he does not derive his claims from the will of his followers, in the manner of an election; rather, it is their duty to recognize his charisma . . . The pure type of charismatic rulership is in a very specific sense unstable, and all its modifications have basically one and the same cause: The desire to transform charisma and charismatic blessing from a unique, transitory gift of grace of extraordinary times and persons into a permanent possession of everyday life . . .

For charismatic leadership, if it wants to transform itself into a perennial institution, the first basic problem is that of finding a successor to the prophet, hero, teacher or party leader. This problem inescapably channels charisma into the direction of legal regulation and tradition. Given the nature of charisma, a free election of a successor is originally not possible, only the acknowledgment that the pretender actually *has* charisma . . . However, charisma is not alien to all . . . democratic forms of election. Certainly the democratic system of so-called plebiscitarian rulership—the official theory of French caesarism—has essentially charismatic features, and the arguments of its proponents all emphasize this very quality . . .

[Also] acclamation by the ruled may develop into a regular electoral system, with standardized suffrage, direct or indirect election, majority or proportional method, electoral classes and districts. It is a long way to such a system. As far as the election of the supreme ruler is concerned, only the United States went all the way—and there, of course, the nominating campaign within each of the two parties is one of the most important parts of the election business. Elsewhere at most the parliamentary representatives are elected, who in turn determine the choice of the prime minister and his colleagues. The development from acclamation of the charismatic leader to popular election occurred at the most diverse cultural stages, and every advance toward a rational, emotionally detached consideration of the process could not help but to facilitate this transformation.

However, only in the Occident did the election of the ruler gradually develop into the representative system . . .

### **[Bureaucratic Rule and the Countervailing Power of Parliamentary/Political Leadership]**

In a modern state the actual ruler is necessarily and unavoidably the bureaucracy, since power is exercised neither through parliamentary speeches nor monarchical enunciations but through the routines of administration. This is true of both the military and civilian officialdom. Even the modern higher-ranking officer fights battles from the "office." Just as the so-called progress toward capitalism has been the unequivocal criterion for the modernization of the economy since medieval times, so the progress toward bureaucratic officialdom—characterized by formal employment, salary, pension, promotion, specialized training and functional division of labor, well-defined areas of jurisdiction, documentary procedures, hierarchical sub- and super-ordination—has been the equally unambiguous yardstick for the modernization of the state, whether monarchic or democratic; at least if the state is not a small canton with rotating administration, but comprises masses of people. The democratic state no less than the absolute state eliminates administration by feudal, patrimonial, patrician or other notables holding office in honorary or hereditary fashion, in favor of employed civil servants. It is they who decide on all our everyday needs and problems . . .

Given the basic fact of the irresistible advance of bureaucratization, the question about the future forms of political organization can only be asked in the following way: (1) How can one possibly save any remnants of "individualist" freedom in any sense? After all, it is a gross self-deception to believe that without the achievements of the age of the Rights of Man any one of us, including the most conservative, can go on living his life. But this question shall not concern us here, for there is another one: (2) In view of the growing indispensability of the state bureaucracy and its corresponding increase in power, how can there be any guarantee that any powers will remain which can check and effectively control the tremendous influence of this stratum? How will democracy even in this limited sense be at all possible? . . .

This brings us straight to the discussion of [that] power which

can be a controlling and directing force in the modern constitutional state, next to the all-encompassing officialdom: . . . the *parliament* . . . Modern parliaments are primarily representative bodies of those ruled with bureaucratic means. After all, a certain minimum of consent on the part of the ruled, at least of the socially important strata, is a precondition of the durability of every, even the best organized, domination. Parliaments are today the means of manifesting this minimum consent . . .

The control over the raising of revenues—the budget right—is the decisive power instrument of parliament, as it has been ever since the corporate privileges of the estates came into being. However, as long as a parliament can support the complaints of the citizens against the administration only by rejecting appropriations and other legislation or by introducing unenforceable motions, it is excluded from positive participation in the *direction* of political affairs. Then it can only engage in “negative politics,” that means, it will confront the administrative chiefs as if it were a hostile power; as such it will be given only the indispensable minimum of information and will be considered a mere drag-chain, an assembly of impotent fault-finders and know-it-alls. In turn, the bureaucracy will then easily appear to parliament and its voters as a caste of careerists and henchmen who subject the people to their annoying and largely superfluous activities.

Things are different when parliament has accomplished the following: Either, that the administrative heads must be recruited from its midst . . . or that they need the express confidence of its majority for holding office or must at least resign upon losing its confidence—the *parliamentary* selection of the leaders; that they must account for their actions exhaustively to parliament, subject to verification by that body or its committees—parliamentary accountability of the leaders; further, that they must run the administration according to the guidelines approved by parliament—*parliamentary* control of the administration . . .

Nowhere in the world . . . can the parliamentary body as such govern and determine policies. The broad mass of deputies functions only as a following for the leader or the few leaders who form the government, and it blindly follows them *as long as* they are successful. *This is the way it should be.* Political action is always deter-

mined by the "principle of small numbers," that means, the superior political maneuverability of small leading groups. In mass states, this caesarist element is ineradicable. However, this element alone guarantees that *responsibility* toward the public, which would evaporate within an assembly governing at large, rests upon clearly identifiable persons. This is especially true of a democracy proper . . .

Only a working, not a merely speech-making parliament can provide the ground for the growth and selective ascent of genuine leaders, not merely demagogic talents. A working parliament, however, is one which supervises the administration by continuously sharing its work . . . Officialdom has been brilliant wherever it had to prove its sense of duty, its impartiality and mastery of organizational problems in the face of official, clearly formulated tasks of a specialized nature . . . But here we are concerned with political, not bureaucratic achievements, and the facts themselves provoke the recognition which nobody can truthfully deny: That bureaucracy failed *completely* whenever it was expected to deal with *political* problems.

This is no accident; rather, it would be astonishing if capabilities inherently so alien to one another would emerge within the same political structure . . . But the heads of the bureaucracy must continuously solve political problems . . . Parliament's first task is the supervision of these policy-makers. However, not only the tasks assigned to the top ranks of the bureaucracy but also every single technicality on the lower administrative levels may become politically important and its solution may depend on political criteria. *Politicians must be the countervailing force against bureaucratic domination* [italics supplied]. This, however, is resisted by the power interests of the administrative policy-makers, who want to have maximum freedom from supervision and to establish a monopoly on cabinet posts . . .

Effective supervision over the officialdom depends upon certain preconditions. Apart from being rooted in the administrative division of labor, the power of all bureaucrats rests upon *knowledge* of two kinds: First, technical know-how in the widest sense of the word, acquired through specialized training. Whether this kind of knowledge is also represented in parliament or whether deputies can privately consult specialists in a given case, is incidental and a private matter. There is no substitute for the systematic cross-examina-

tion (under oath) of experts before a parliamentary commission in the presence of the respective departmental officials. This alone guarantees public supervision and a thorough inquiry . . .

However, expertise alone does not explain the power of the bureaucracy. In addition, the bureaucrat has *official information*, which is only available through administrative channels and which provides him with the facts on which he can base his actions. Only he who can get access to these facts independently of the officials' good will can effectively supervise the administration. According to the circumstances, the appropriate means are the inspection of documents, on-the-spot inquiry, and, in extreme cases, the official's cross-examination under oath before a parliamentary commission . . . The parliamentary right of inquiry should be an auxiliary means and, for the rest, a whip, the mere existence of which will force the administrative chiefs to account for their actions in such a way as to make its use unnecessary.

The best accomplishments of the British parliament have been due to the judicious use of this right. The integrity of British officialdom and the public's high level of political sophistication are largely founded on it; it has often been emphasized that the best indicator for political maturity lies in the manner in which the committee proceedings are followed by the British press and its readers. This maturity is reflected not in votes of no-confidence, indictments of ministers and similar spectacles of French-Italian *unorganized* parliamentarism, but in the fact that the nation keeps itself informed about the conduct of its affairs by the bureaucracy, and continuously supervises it. Only the committees of a powerful parliament can be the vehicle for exercising this wholesome pedagogic influence . . .

### **[Mass Leaders/Demagogues and the Countervailing Power of Parliament]**

We are concerned here not with the issue of democratization in the social sphere, but only with that of democratic—that is, equal—suffrage in its relation to parliamentarism . . . Parliamentarization and democratization are not necessarily interdependent, but often opposed to one another . . . In England the old parliamentarism was indeed, as befits its feudal origin, not really “democratic” in the Continental sense, even after the Reform Bill and up until the [First

World] War . . . But the existence and formal power position of the parliaments are not threatened by democratic suffrage. This is demonstrated by France and other countries with equal suffrage, where the governments are ordinarily recruited from parliament and rely on parliamentary majorities . . .

The political question is: What are the consequences of progressive democratization of the means and organizational forms of political combat for the structure of the political enterprise inside and outside of parliament? . . . The decisive point is that for the tasks of national leadership only such men are prepared who have been selected in the course of the political struggle, since the essence of all politics is struggle. It simply happens to be a fact that such preparation is, on the average, accomplished better by the much-maligned "craft of demagoguery" than by the clerk's office, which in turn provides an infinitely superior training for efficient administration . . . Democratization and demagoguery belong together . . . insofar as the masses can no longer be treated as purely passive objects of administration, that is, insofar as their attitudes have some active import . . .

Active mass democratization means that the political leader is no longer proclaimed a candidate because he has proved himself in a circle of *honoratiore*s, then becoming a leader because of his parliamentary accomplishments, but that he gains the trust and the faith of the masses in him and his power with the means of mass demagoguery. In substance, this means a shift toward the *caesarist* mode of selection. Indeed, every democracy tends in this direction. After all, the specifically caesarist technique is the plebiscite. It is not an ordinary vote or election, but a profession of faith in the calling of him who demands these acclamations . . .

The contrast between the plebiscitary and the parliamentary selection of leaders is quite real. However, the *existence* of parliament is not useless for that matter. Vis-à-vis the factually caesarist representative of the masses it safeguards in England (1) the continuity and (2) the supervision of his power position, (3) the preservation of civil rights, (4) a suitable political proving ground of the politicians wooing the confidence of the masses, and (5) the peaceful elimination of the caesarist dictator once he has lost the trust of the masses.

However, since the great political decisions, even and especially

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in a democracy, are unavoidably made by few men, mass democracy has bought its successes since Pericles' times with major concessions to the caesarist principle of selecting leaders. In the large American municipalities, for example, corruption has been checked only by plebiscitary municipal dictators, whom the trust of the masses gave the right of establishing their own administrative agencies. And wherever democratic mass parties found themselves confronted with great tasks, they were obliged to submit more or less unconditionally to leaders who held the confidence of the masses . . .

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# The Power Elite

*C. Wright Mills*

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## The Higher Circles

The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by the everyday worlds in which they live, yet even in these rounds of job, family, and neighborhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern. “Great changes” are beyond their control, but affect their conduct and outlook none the less. The very framework of modern society confines them to projects not their own, but from every side, such changes now press upon the men and women of the mass society, who accordingly feel that they are without purpose in an epoch in which they are without power.

But not all men are in this sense ordinary. As the means of information and of power are centralized, some men come to occupy positions in American society from which they can look down upon, so to speak, and by their decisions mightily affect, the everyday worlds of ordinary men and women. They are not made by their jobs; they set up and break down jobs for thousands of others; they are not confined by simple family responsibilities; they can escape. They may live in many hotels and houses, but they are bound by no one community. They need not merely “meet the demands of the day and hour”; in some part, they create these demands, and cause others to meet them. Whether or not they profess their power, their technical and political experience of it far transcends that of the underlying population. What Jacob Burckhardt said of “great men,” most Americans might well say of their elite: “They are all that we are not.”<sup>1</sup>

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Excerpted from *The Power Elite* by C. Wright Mills (New York, 1956), 3–4, 7–9, 298–300, 323–324. Copyright © 1956 by Oxford University Press, Inc.; renewed 1984 by Yaroslava Mills. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

The power elite is composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women; they are in positions to make decisions having major consequences. Whether they do or do not make such decisions is less important than the fact that they do occupy such pivotal positions: their failure to act, their failure to make decisions, is itself an act that is often of greater consequence than the decisions they do make. For they are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society. They rule the big corporations. They run the machinery of the state and claim its prerogatives. They direct the military establishment. They occupy the strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centered the effective means of the power and the wealth and the celebrity which they enjoy.

The power elite are not solitary rulers. Advisers and consultants, spokesmen and opinion-makers are often the captains of their higher thought and decision. Immediately below the elite are the professional politicians of the middle levels of power, in the Congress and in the pressure groups, as well as among the new and old upper classes of town and city and region. Mingling with them in curious ways which we shall explore, are those professional celebrities who live by being continuously displayed but are never, so long as they remain celebrities, displayed enough. If such celebrities are not at the head of any dominating hierarchy, they do often have the power to distract the attention of the public or afford sensations to the masses, or, more directly, to gain the ear of those who do occupy positions of direct power. More or less unattached, as critics of morality and technicians of power, as spokesmen of God and creators of mass sensibility, such celebrities and consultants are part of the immediate scene in which the drama of the elite is enacted. But that drama itself is centered in the command posts of the major institutional hierarchies . . .

Within each of the big three, the typical institutional unit has become enlarged, has become administrative, and, in the power of its decisions, has become centralized. Behind these developments there is a fabulous technology, for as institutions, they have incorporated this technology and guide it, even as it shapes and paces their developments.

The economy—once a great scatter of small productive units in autonomous balance—has become dominated by two or three hun-

dred giant corporations, administratively and politically interrelated, which together hold the keys to economic decisions.

The political order, once a decentralized set of several dozen states with a weak spinal cord, has become a centralized, executive establishment which has taken up into itself many powers previously scattered, and now enters into each and every cranny of the social structure.

The military order, once a slim establishment in a context of distrust fed by state militia, has become the largest and most expensive feature of government, and, although well versed in smiling public relations, now has all the grim and clumsy efficiency of a sprawling bureaucratic domain.

In each of these institutional areas, the means of power at the disposal of decision makers have increased enormously; their central executive powers have been enhanced; within each of them modern administrative routines have been elaborated and tightened up.

As each of these domains becomes enlarged and centralized, the consequences of its activities become greater, and its traffic with the others increases. The decisions of a handful of corporations bear upon military and political as well as upon economic developments around the world. The decisions of the military establishment rest upon and grievously affect political life as well as the very level of economic activity. The decisions made within the political domain determine economic activities and military programs. There is no longer, on the one hand, an economy, and, on the other hand, a political order containing a military establishment unimportant to politics and to money-making. There is a political economy linked, in a thousand ways, with military institutions and decisions. On each side of the world-split running through central Europe and around the Asiatic rimlands, there is an ever-increasing interlocking of economic, military, and political structures. If there is government intervention in the corporate economy, so is there corporate intervention in the governmental process. In the structural sense, this triangle of power is the source of the interlocking directorate that is most important for the historical structure of the present.

The fact of the interlocking is clearly revealed at each of the points of crisis of modern capitalist society—slump, war, and boom. In each, men of decision are led to an awareness of the interdepen-

dence of the major institutional orders. In the nineteenth century, when the scale of all institutions was smaller, their liberal integration was achieved in the automatic economy, by an autonomous play of market forces, and in the automatic political domain, by the bargain and the vote. It was then assumed that out of the imbalance and friction that followed the limited decisions then possible a new equilibrium would in due course emerge. That can no longer be assumed, and it is not assumed by the men at the top of each of the three dominant hierarchies.

For given the scope of their consequences, decisions—and indecisions—in any one of these ramify into the others and hence top decisions tend either to become co-ordinated or to lead to a commanding indecision. It has not always been like this. When numerous small entrepreneurs made up the economy, for example, many of them could fail and the consequences still remain local; political and military authorities did not intervene. But now, given political expectations and military commitments, can they afford to allow key units of the private corporate economy to break down in slump? Increasingly they do intervene in economic affairs, and as they do so, the controlling decisions in each order are inspected by agents of the other two, and economic, military, and political structures are interlocked.

At the pinnacle of each of the three enlarged and centralized domains, there have arisen those higher circles which make up the economic, the political, and the military elites. At the top of the economy, among the corporate rich, there are the chief executives; at the top of the political order, the members of the political directorate; at the top of the military establishment, the elite of soldier-statesmen clustered in and around the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the upper echelon. As each of these domains has coincided with the others, as decisions tend to become total in their consequence, the leading men in each of the three domains of power—the warlords, the corporation chieftains, the political directorate—tend to come together, to form the power elite of America . . .

### **The Mass Society**

In the standard image of power and decision, no force is held to be as important as The Great American Public. More than merely another check and balance, this public is thought to be the seat of all

legitimate power. In official life as in popular folklore, it is held to be the very balance wheel of democratic power. In the end, all liberal theorists rest their notions of the power system upon the political role of this public; all official decisions, as well as private decisions of consequence, are justified as in the public's welfare; all formal proclamations are in its name.

Let us therefore consider the classic public of democratic theory in the generous spirit in which Rousseau once cried, "Opinion, Queen of the World, is not subject to the power of kings; they are themselves its first slaves."

The most important feature of the public of public opinion, which the rise of the democratic middle class initiates, is the free ebb and flow of discussion. The possibilities of answering back, of organizing autonomous organs of public opinion, of realizing opinion in action, are held to be established by democratic institutions. The opinion that results from public discussion is understood to be a resolution that is then carried out by public action; it is, in one version, the "general will" of the people, which the legislative organ enacts into law, thus lending to it legal force. Congress, or Parliament, as an institution, crowns all the scattered publics; it is the archetype for each of the little circles of face-to-face citizens discussing their public business.

This eighteenth-century idea of the public of public opinion parallels the economic idea of the market of the free economy. Here is the market composed of freely competing entrepreneurs; there is the public composed of discussion circles of opinion peers. As price is the result of anonymous, equally weighted, bargaining individuals, so public opinion is the result of each man's having thought things out for himself and contributing his voice to the great chorus. To be sure, some might have more influence on the state of opinion than others, but no one group monopolizes the discussion, or by itself determines the opinions that prevail.

Innumerable discussion circles are knit together by mobile people who carry opinions from one to another, and struggle for the power of larger command. The public is thus organized into associations and parties, each representing a set of viewpoints, each trying to acquire a place in the Congress, where the discussion continues. Out of the little circles of people talking with one another, the larger

forces of social movements and political parties develop; and the discussion of opinion is the important phase in a total act by which public affairs are conducted.

The autonomy of these discussions is an important element in the idea of public opinion as democratic legitimation. The opinions formed are actively realized within the prevailing institutions of power; all authoritative agents are made or broken by the prevailing opinions of these publics. And, insofar as the public is frustrated in realizing its demand, its members may go beyond criticism of specific policies; they may question the very legitimations of legal authority. That is one meaning of Jefferson's comment on the need for an occasional "revolution."

The public, so conceived, is the loom of classic, eighteenth-century democracy; discussion is at once the threads and the shuttle tying the discussion circles together. It lies at the root of the conception of authority by discussion, and it is based upon the hope that truth and justice will somehow come out of society as a great apparatus of free discussion. The people are presented with problems. They discuss them. They decide on them. They formulate viewpoints. These viewpoints are organized, and they compete. One viewpoint "wins out." Then the people act out this view, or their representatives are instructed to act it out, and this they promptly do.

Such are the images of the public of classic democracy which are still used as the working justifications of power in American society. But now we must recognize this description as a set of images out of a fairy tale: they are not adequate even as an approximate model of how the American system of power works. The issues that now shape man's fate are neither raised nor decided by the public at large. The idea of the community of publics is not a description of fact, but an assertion of an ideal, an assertion of a legitimation masquerading—as legitimations are now apt to do—as fact. For now the public of public opinion is recognized by all those who have considered it carefully as something less than it once was.

These doubts are asserted positively in the statement that the classic community of publics is being transformed into a society of masses. This transformation, in fact, is one of the keys to the social and psychological meaning of modern life in America . . .

The idea of a mass society suggests the idea of an elite of power. The idea of the public, in contrast, suggests the liberal tradition of a society without any power elite, or at any rate with shifting elites of no sovereign consequence. For, if a genuine public is sovereign, it needs no master; but the masses, in their full development, are sovereign only in some plebiscitarian moment of adulation to an elite as authoritative celebrity. The political structure of a democratic state requires the public; and, the democratic man, in his rhetoric, must assert that this public is the very seat of sovereignty.

But now, given all those forces that have enlarged and centralized the political order and made modern societies less political and more administrative; given the transformation of the old middle classes into something which perhaps should not even be called middle class; given all the mass communications that do not truly communicate; given all the metropolitan segregation that is not community; given the absence of voluntary associations that really connect the public at large with the centers of power—what is happening is the decline of a set of publics that is sovereign only in the most formal and rhetorical sense. Moreover, in many countries the remnants of such publics as remain are now being frightened out of existence. They lose their will for rationally considered decision and action because they do not possess the instruments for such decision and action; they lose their sense of political belonging because they do not belong; they lose their political will because they see no way to realize it.

The top of modern American society is increasingly unified, and often seems willfully co-ordinated: at the top there has emerged an elite of power. The middle levels are a drifting set of stalemated, balancing forces: the middle does not link the bottom with the top. The bottom of this society is politically fragmented, and even as a passive fact, increasingly powerless: at the bottom there is emerging a mass society.

### **Note from the Editor**

1. Jacob Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1943), 303 ff.

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# An Elite Theory of Democracy

*Selections from the Work of  
Joseph A. Schumpeter*

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I think that most students of politics have by now come to accept the [following] criticisms leveled at the classical doctrine of democracy.<sup>1</sup> I also think that most of them agree, or will agree before long, in accepting another theory which is much truer to life and at the same time salvages much of what sponsors of the democratic method really mean by this term. Like the classical theory, it may be put into the nutshell of a definition.

## **[Another Conception of Democracy]**

Our chief troubles about the classical theory center in the proposition that “the people” hold a definite and rational opinion about every individual question and that they give effect to this opinion—in a democracy—by choosing “representatives” who will see to it that opinion is carried out. Thus the selection of the representatives is made secondary to the primary purpose of the democratic arrangement which is to vest the power of deciding political issues in the electorate.

Suppose we reverse the roles of these two elements and make the deciding of issues by the electorate secondary to the election of the men who are to do the deciding. To put it differently, we now take the view that the role of the people is to produce a government, or else an intermediate body which in turn will produce a national executive or government. And we define: the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in

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Excerpts from Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge [Unwin], 1954), 268–297. Reprinted by permission of Routledge. Bracketed headings have been created by the editor of this volume.

which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.

Defense and explanation of this idea will speedily show that, as to both plausibility of assumptions and tenability of propositions, it greatly improves the theory of the democratic process. First of all, we are provided with a reasonably efficient criterion by which to distinguish democratic governments from others. The classical theory meets with difficulties on that score because both the will and the good of the people may be, and in many historical instances have been, served just as well or better by governments that cannot be described as democratic according to any accepted usage of the term. Now we are in a somewhat better position, partly because we are resolved to stress a *modus procedendi* the presence or absence of which it is in most cases easy to verify . . .

Second, the theory embodied in this definition leaves all the room we may wish to have for a proper recognition of the vital fact of leadership. The classical theory did not do this but, as we have seen, attributed to the electorate an altogether unrealistic degree of initiative which practically amounted to ignoring leadership. But collectives act almost exclusively by accepting leadership—this is the dominant mechanism of practically any collective action which is more than a reflex. Propositions about the working and the results of the democratic method that take account of this are bound to be infinitely more realistic than propositions which do not. They will not stop at the execution of a *volonté générale* but will go some way toward showing how it emerges or how it is substituted or faked. What [may be] termed Manufactured Will is no longer outside the theory, an aberration for the absence of which we piously pray; it enters on the ground floor as it should.

Third, however, so far as there are genuine group-wise volitions at all—for instance the will of the unemployed to receive unemployment benefit or the will of other groups to help—our theory does not neglect them. On the contrary we are now able to insert them in exactly the role they actually play. Such volitions do not as a rule assert themselves directly. Even if strong and definite they remain latent, often for decades, until they are called to life by some political leader who turns them into political factors. This he does, or else his agents do it for him, by organizing these volitions, by

working them up and by including eventually appropriate items in his competitive offering. The interaction between sectional interests and public opinion and the way in which they produce the pattern we call the political situation appear from this angle in a new and much clearer light.

Fourth, our theory is of course no more definite than is the concept of competition for leadership. This concept presents similar difficulties as the concept of competition in the economic sphere, with which it may be usefully compared. In economic life competition is never completely lacking, but hardly ever is it perfect. Similarly, in political life there is always some competition, though perhaps only a potential one, for the allegiance of the people. To simplify matters we have restricted the kind of competition for leadership which is to define democracy, to free competition for a free vote. The justification for this is that democracy seems to imply a recognized method by which to conduct the competitive struggle, and that the electoral method is practically the only one available for communities of any size.

But though this excludes many ways of securing leadership which should be excluded, such as competition by military insurrection, it does not exclude the cases that are strikingly analogous to the economic phenomena we label "unfair" or "fraudulent" competition or restraint of competition. And we cannot exclude them because if we did we should be left with a completely unrealistic ideal. Between this ideal case which does not exist and the cases in which all competition with the established leader is prevented by force, there is a continuous range of variation within which the democratic method of government shades off into the autocratic one by imperceptible steps. But if we wish to understand and not to philosophize, this is as it should be. The value of our criterion is not seriously impaired thereby.

Fifth, our theory seems to clarify the relation that subsists between democracy and individual freedom. If by the latter we mean the existence of a sphere of individual self-government the boundaries of which are historically variable . . . *no* society reduces that sphere to zero—the question clearly becomes a matter of degree. We have seen that the democratic method does not necessarily guarantee a greater amount of individual freedom than another political

method would permit in similar circumstances. It may well be the other way round. But there is still a relation between the two. If, on principle at least, everyone is free to compete for political leadership by presenting himself to the electorate, this will in most cases though not in all mean a considerable amount of freedom of discussion *for all*. In particular it will normally mean a considerable amount of freedom of the press. This relation between democracy and freedom is not absolutely stringent and can be tampered with. But, from the standpoint of the intellectual, it is nevertheless very important. At the same time, it is all there is to that relation.

Sixth, it should be observed that in making it the primary function of the electorate to produce a government (directly or through an intermediate body) I intended to include in this phrase also the function of evicting it. The one means simply the acceptance of a leader or a group of leaders, the other means simply the withdrawal of this acceptance. This takes care of an element the reader may have missed. He may have thought that the electorate controls as well as installs. But since electorates normally do not control their political leaders in any way except by refusing to re-elect them or the parliamentary majorities that support them, it seems well to reduce our ideas about this control in the way indicated by our definition. Occasionally, spontaneous revulsions occur which upset a government or an individual minister directly or else enforce a certain course of action. But they are not only exceptional, they are, as we shall see, contrary to the spirit of the democratic method . . .

According to the view we have taken, democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the term "people" and "rule." Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them. But since they might decide this also in entirely undemocratic ways, we have had to narrow our definition by adding a further criterion identifying the democratic method, viz., free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate . . .

The conditions which I hold must be fulfilled for the democratic method to be a success—in societies in which it is possible for it to work at all—I shall group under four headings; and I shall confine myself to the great industrial nations of the modern type.

### **[The Requirement for a High-Quality Leadership]**

The first condition is that the human material of politics—the people who man the party machines, are elected to serve in parliament, rise to cabinet office—should be of sufficiently high quality . . . There may be many ways in which politicians of sufficiently good quality can be secured. Thus far, however, experience seems to suggest that the only effective guarantee is in the existence of a social stratum, itself a product of a severely selective process, that takes to politics as a matter of course.

If such a stratum be neither too exclusive nor too easily accessible for the outsider and if it be strong enough to assimilate most of the elements it currently absorbs, it not only will present for the political career products of stocks that have successfully passed many tests in other fields—served, as it were, an apprenticeship in private affairs—but it will also increase their fitness by endowing them with traditions that embody experience, with a professional code and with a common fund of views. It is hardly mere coincidence that England, which is the only country to fulfill our condition completely, is also the only country to have a political society in this sense . . .

### **[The Requirement for the Autonomy of Elites]**

The second condition for the success of democracy is that the effective range of political decision should not be extended too far. How far it can be extended depends not only on the general limitations of the democratic method which follow from the analysis presented in the preceding section but also on the particular circumstances of each individual case . . .

Of course there cannot be any legal limits to what a parliament, led by the prime minister, might subject to its decision, if need be, by means of a constitutional amendment. But, so Edmund Burke argued in discussing the behavior of the English government and Parliament with respect to the American colonies, in order to function properly that all-powerful parliament must impose limits upon itself. Similarly we may argue that, even within the range of matters that have to be submitted to parliamentary vote, it is often necessary for government and parliament to pass measures on which their decision is purely formal or, at most, of a purely supervisory nature . . .

Democracy does not require that every function of the state be subject to its political method. For instance, in most democratic

countries a large measure of independence from political agencies is granted to the judges. Another instance is the position held by the Bank of England until 1914. Some of its functions were in fact of a public nature. Nevertheless these functions were vested with what legally was just a business corporation that was sufficiently independent of the political sector to have a policy of its own. Certain federal agencies in this country are other cases in point. The Interstate Commerce Commission embodies an attempt to extend the sphere of public authority without extending the sphere of political decision. Or, to present still another example, certain of our states finance state universities "without any strings," that is to say, without interfering with what in some cases amounts to practically complete autonomy . . .

**[The Requirement for an Independent Bureaucracy]**

As a third condition, democratic government in modern industrial society must be able to command, for all purposes the sphere of public activity is to include—no matter whether this be much or little—the services of a well-trained bureaucracy of good standing and tradition, endowed with a strong sense of duty and a no less strong *esprit de corps*. Such a bureaucracy is the main . . . answer to the question about how our second condition can be fulfilled whenever the sphere of public control is wide.

It is not enough that the bureaucracy should be efficient in current administration and competent to give advice. It must also be strong enough to guide and, if need be, to instruct the politicians who head the ministries. In order to be able to do this it must be in a position to evolve principles of its own and sufficiently independent to assert them. It must be a power in its own right. This amounts to saying that in fact though not in form appointment, tenure and promotion must depend largely—within civil service rules that politicians hesitate to violate—on its own corporate opinion in spite of all the clamor that is sure to arise whenever politicians or the public find themselves crossed by it as they frequently must . . .

**[The Requirement for Self-Restraint by the Opposition and the Public]**

The fourth set of conditions may be summed up in the phrase Democratic Self-control. Everybody will of course agree that the demo-

cratic method cannot work smoothly unless all the groups that count in a nation are willing to accept any legislative measure as long as it is on the statute book and all executive orders issued by legally competent authorities. But democratic self-control implies much more than this . . . In particular, politicians in parliament must resist the temptation to upset or embarrass the government each time they could do so. No successful policy is possible if they do this. This means that the supporters of the government must accept its lead and allow it to frame and act upon a program and that the opposition should accept the lead of the "shadow cabinet" as its head and allow it to keep political warfare within certain rules . . .

The voters outside of parliament must respect the division of labor between themselves and the politicians they elect. They must not withdraw confidence too easily between elections and they must understand that, once they have elected an individual, political action is his business and not theirs. This means that they must refrain from instructing him about what he is to do . . . If [this] principle be accepted, not only instructions as formal as those French *cabiers* but also less formal attempts at restricting the freedom of action of members of parliament—the practice of bombarding them with letters and telegrams for instance—ought to come under the same ban.

We cannot enter into the various delicate problems which this raises concerning the true nature of democracy as defined by us. All that matters here is that successful democratic practice in great and complicated societies has invariably been hostile to political back-seat driving—to the point of resorting to secret diplomacy and lying about intentions and commitments—and that it takes a lot of self-control on the part of the citizen to refrain from it.

### **[The Requirement for Tolerance and Compromise]**

Finally, effective competition for leadership requires a large measure of tolerance for difference of opinion. It has been pointed out before that this tolerance never is and never can be absolute. But it must be possible for every would-be leader who is not lawfully excluded to present his case without producing disorder. And this may imply that people stand by patiently while somebody is attacking their most vital interests or offending their most cherished ideals—or as an alternative, that the would-be leader who holds such views re-

strains himself correspondingly. Neither is possible without genuine respect for the opinions of one's fellow citizens amounting to a willingness to subordinate one's own opinions.

Every system can stand deviating practice to a certain extent . . . And nowhere will that self-control stand tests beyond a varying degree of severity. In fact the reader need only review our conditions in order to satisfy himself that democratic government will work to full advantage only if all the interests that matter are practically unanimous not only in their allegiance to the country but also in their allegiance to the structural principles of the existing society. Whenever these principles are called in question and issues arise that rend a nation into two hostile camps, democracy works at a disadvantage. And it may cease to work at all as soon as interests and ideals are involved on which people refuse to compromise . . .

### **Note from the Editor**

1. The democratic theory that came into being in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as that by J. J. Rousseau and J. S. Mill.

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# The Ruling Minorities in Western Societies

*Selections from the Work of  
Raymond Aron*

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Government today must, as it always has, manage the external affairs of the collectivity, arbitrate conflicts between interest groups, establish rules according to which individuals may compete, maintain public order, and safeguard the interest of the nation. Those who govern make decisions affecting the lives of everyone (peace or war); a few make these decisions in *the name of all*. Every society develops a system which determines the method by which these few are chosen, and the way in which they exercise power.

## **[The Dissociation of the Ruling Minorities]**

The originality of industrial societies does not reside in the permanence of a political subsystem, but in the differentiation of the ruling hierarchies. In Western societies the same men do not control public administration and private enterprise; legislators and public officials are for the most part professional politicians. Scholars, artists, writers, professors are all christened intellectuals and consider themselves dependent in their own activities solely upon the judgment of their peers; officials of trade unions do not obey the captains of industry; priests neither command nor obey the scholars or the political rulers. In short, the apparently characteristic order of Western industrial society consists of a dissociation of powers. Temporal authority is shared by business leaders, politicians, popular leaders, and military commanders; spiritual authority by theologians,

intellectuals, and ideologues. The primary datum, then, is the plurality of ruling minorities, a plurality that permits objective comparisons of the various regimes.

There are certain leading roles to be performed in any industrial society, and consequently the same kinds of men appear to perform them. According to Saint-Simonian doctrine, productive labour is the primordial activity; organized within the framework of an enterprise, it requires competent leaders from foreman to general manager and continuing through the various echelons of the technical or administrative bureaucracy. At the higher level of the state, regulations must be promulgated or decisions made from day to day, no matter how much weight is given to planning or to operation of the free market. In the Soviet Union, managers of enterprises and political administrators constitute a single corps. In the West, where most businesses are not the property of the state, business and government administrators are selected in a different manner and do not go through the same mill, although movement back and forth from private to public life is becoming more common even in countries still regarded as capitalistic . . .

Both the Communist single party and the multiple parties of the West are indispensable organs of what sociologists call the political subsystem. Government personnel are chosen and replaced by means of this subsystem. The single party is essential to the formula of Soviet legitimacy . . . [In the West], multiple parties are engaged in peaceful competition for power in accordance with the formula of democratic legitimacy based on the process of free elections. Western parties—at least those which abide by the rules of the democratic game—are not “total” organizations. Their activity is limited and secondary, except at election time. In no case do they constitute a hierarchy paralleling that of the official administration; they have no formal representatives in business, in most regional and municipal administrative bureaucracies, or in the armed forces; they do not dominate the labour unions.

A multiple-party state limits the influence of the political on the social order; the one-party state (where the state and single party are practically one) places the stamp of the political upon the entire social order. It does not suppress the political or governmental function but rather tends to confuse it with the administrative function

by suppressing the neutrality of the latter . . . Thus the Western social order, characterized by dissociation of the ruling minorities, stands in contrast to the social order in the Soviet Union, China, and the people's democracies, where all such groups are unified in the single-party system . . .

One line of attack on the West attempts to demonstrate that the pluralism of the strategic minorities is but an illusion and one minority is really behind the curtain, the master of the game . . . How much truth resides in the Marxist and the neo-Machiavellian charges<sup>1</sup> against Western pluralism? . . .

### **The Distribution of Power**

Let us now go over the evidence again. Power is unequally distributed among individuals in all collectivities, partial or global. Even when they freely elect their representatives, most individuals do not feel that they have real influence over the course of events or the conduct of diplomacy. In a complex society no regime can promise all its members effective participation in ultimate decision-making and rarely do they give any assurances of such participation. It is probably not misleading to assert that even in the United States only a few thousand people have any *direct* influence on the conduct of foreign affairs.

The issue raised by both Marxists and neo-Machiavellian polemics can be summed up in these questions: Is the dissociation of ruling minorities genuine? Does a minority overtly or clandestinely dominate all other minorities so that pluralism is only fiction, as is true competition between parties? Marxist-Leninist propaganda denounces political monopolists; C. Wright Mills equated this with a power elite; the disciples of Mosca and Pareto discerned the persistence of a ruling class behind the veil of democracy. Attacks of this kind are difficult to refute because they oscillate between banality and paradox, advance facts that are accurate but draw false conclusions from them.

Regimes of the Western type become stable when the representatives of the different minorities accept almost unanimously the regime itself and agree upon the rules of the game. If we presume that a portion of the ruling minorities, the leaders of the masses in unions or political parties, say, and the intellectuals or ideologists

are hostile to the regime, its defenders will tend toward solidarity in the face of common danger and unite against those who, once in power, would set up a radically different system and thereby remove the heads of the erstwhile regime. (Historical experience, of course, proves that privileged groups have not always been able to unite against an absolute enemy.)

When the ruling minorities all rally to the existing order, and refuse to cooperate with those who are not of their group, Marxists and neo-Machiavellians would find it easy to demonstrate that the categories really constitute a single group with a single purpose. As soon as "the essential" is at issue, it is enough for the demonstration to give an appropriate definition of "the essential." For example, the Marxist will say that only the complete nationalization of the means of production is essential. From that he will deduce that all ruling categories are in agreement when the essential is at stake and that pluralism is a fiction . . . However, there are many tests to demonstrate that dissociation of groups within the power structure is not an empty fiction. Empirical studies show that while business leaders do have effective influence in Western democracies they are merely one of many pressure groups shaping government policy. Depending on which capitalist country one is talking about, and on the policy at issue, this influence varies in importance . . .

Speaking more generally, the sources of power appear to be separated rather than joined at all levels, in small cities as well as in central governments. The same men do not have all the prestige simultaneously nor do they exert influence simultaneously in all domains. This does not mean that the notables of the community, the leaders of the nation—high officials, legislators, business leaders, journalists, presidential advisers—pay no attention to one another. They have to know each other, and they have to cooperate. But the hierarchy that characterizes each segment of social activity is not so clear-cut in the so-called Establishment created by all the leaders of the various categories when they are taken together. In their relationships they come together more or less as equals, and the prevailing mode of intercourse is one of discussion and dialogue.

Is it proper, then, to lump together as the ruling class all the leaders of the various groups, clustering around the politicians who are directly linked with the principle of legitimacy? This is a matter

of semantics. What matters is not to ascribe to this ruling class a coherence and a continuity handed down from generation to generation which it does not possess. It is in fact a wide-open class, in accordance with the basic principles of today's democratic order. No one occupies a definitive place in it permanently. The electoral process exposes today's victor to the inconstancy of fortune and offers the vanquished an opportunity for revenge. Aside from politics, many are given the chance to climb to an establishment into which they were not born—by the trade unions, the business community, the universities, the military, the church, the intellectual community, and the research laboratories.

Actually, the agencies through which individuals join the Western social order are more often threatened by the absence of *one* ruling class than by the existence of any approximation of absolute power; it is more threatened by the division of parties and the conflict of ideas than by the conspiracies of monopolists. The early theoreticians of industrial society feared the consequences of lost spiritual unity; what could be the basis of any *consensus* if, as a consequence of the weakening of the religions of salvation, the members of society no longer believed in the same God and no longer acknowledged the sovereignty of the same modes of thought? The industrial societies of today are even further removed from spiritual unity than they were a century ago when these fears were first voiced. They have not split up, but during the period between the two world wars the danger of such a disintegration at times appeared imminent.

In any case, as the example of the new countries often demonstrates, what renders the order of pluralistic societies precarious, when the old oligarchies are broken up by industrialization, is not the fact of oligarchy, nor the inadequacy of democracy, but the dissociation of the ruling minorities and their quarrels. The process of modernization must create an order acceptable to the majority as well as to the privileged few; this requires a continuous dialogue among interest groups, political parties, and ideologies to further the establishment of an effective authority based on a common purpose . . .

### **[The Dissociation of the Ruling Minorities and the Public]**

It is easy to point up the originality of the Western regimes. To be

sure, the electoral process does not always or in every circumstance guarantee that the people, the “common man,” will have an effective influence . . . Even the introduction of universal suffrage does not guarantee that the governed will effectively influence the rulers. When land owners and factory owners, the present day “feudal lords,” control locally all the reins of power, representative institutions serve as an instrument of social conservatism . . .

[Yet] with increasing diversity of the roles to be played, accompanied by impersonality of individual relationships, the electoral process no longer furthers the manipulation of the masses by those in power; rather, it becomes a challenge of sorts launched against the powerful, who themselves are divided into groups, each of which hopes to maintain the existing order. The way these groups triumph over their rivals is to obtain the most votes, which requires some response to the needs and demands of the voters.

As society becomes more and more modernized, the dissociation of the ruling minorities results in the increasing effectiveness of the electoral process. Pressure groups, intellectuals, and ideologists represent numbers, ideas, diverse levels of society, and contradictory claims. They exert a direct or indirect influence on the politicians and the rulers. The leaders of some categories at least are themselves obliged to heed the complaints and the demands of those whom they represent. Indirectly, by means of social pluralism and competing political parties, industrial society is nearing the democratic ideal. This is not to say that the people govern or that they have a “general will” of their own apart from the incessant exchanges between individuals and groups; but free discussion between the controlling majority and its opposition, between labour unions and pressure groups, between intellectuals and those in power—despite the iron law of oligarchy—assures the ruled those guarantees which they may reasonably expect and gives the rulers little opportunity to misunderstand the profound desires of the masses . . .

### **Note from the Editor**

1. Here Aron refers to the critiques of Western democracy by the mainstream elite theorists, such as Pareto, Mosca, and Mills (see the contributions by these theorists in this volume).