A HOT STREAK FOR DEMOCRACY

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Robert A. Dahl's "Democracy and Its Critics" could not have come at a more opportune moment. Events in Moscow and Warsaw, as well as in Beijing, have kept the word "democracy" on our front pages for many months. In the flurry of discussion, reporters have frequently asked how well the Russians or the Poles or the Chinese really understand democracy. Most of these journalists - like most of the rest of us - have complacently assumed that the question does not apply to Americans: who, if not we, understands government by the people? Yet when the idea of a McDonald's in Red Square is taken as a token of the triumph of democracy in the Soviet Union, one might well ask if we are entirely clear on the concept.

What Mr. Dahl, Sterling Professor of Political Science Emeritus at Yale University, has done, in a magisterial work that sums up and goes beyond his many decades of distinguished publications, is clearly and reasonably to describe what democracy means, both historically and at present; why our own democracy is still deeply flawed; and how we could reform it so that it would accord more closely with its claims. "Democracy and Its Critics" is a work of extraordinary intelligence and, what is even rarer, a work of extraordinary wisdom.

Mr. Dahl writes clearly and effectively, keeping technical jargon to a minimum, so that he is accessible to the educated lay reader. But this is not an easy book. He does not flinch from giving detailed philosophical arguments for democracy, for the chief alternatives to democracy - namely, anarchism and guardianship - and for the defense of democracy against these rivals. He gives careful consideration to such issues as who is to be included in a democratic association; the virtues and difficulties of majority rule; and whether minority domination is inevitable even in a democracy. On all these questions, the discussion is fresh and illuminating, the treatment of alternative views careful and respectful, the difficulties in his own views spelled out in detail. An attentive reader of this book will receive a real education in the meaning of democracy.

Still, the power of the book comes not only from Mr. Dahl's careful regard for the arguments but from the historical framework in which he places the development of the democratic process. He describes two great historical transformations: the birth of democratic city-states in ancient Greece and Rome, and the emergence in the 18th century of large-scale representative democracies, which became more numerous and successively more inclusive in the 19th and 20th centuries (even though they still remain a minority among existing nations).

Finally, he asks - and this, I think, is his most important contribution - whether we may not be on the threshold of a third democratic transformation, involving a significant increase in citizen participation in our economic and political life. His raising this prospect is particularly refreshing at a time when others can only lament the decline of voter participation and the cynical manipulation of our political campaigns. It is clear that Mr. Dahl thinks a third transformation, though not historically inevitable, is necessary if we are to continue the moral progress of our recent past, which has included the involvement of women.
and minorities in the political process. It is the book's aim to help us envision the possibility of this change.

The third transformation does not mean, on the analogy of the second, the rise of large-scale representative democratic entities at the supranational level. With the exception of the Western European community, Mr. Dahl does not foresee such entities emerging in the immediate future. International relations, he believes, can be rendered democratic to only a limited extent, and chiefly through the influence that democratic forces within nation-states can bring to bear on transnational institutions. Here he may underestimate the strength of international public opinion, influenced by transnational voluntary associations such as Amnesty International, but he is surely right to be modest in his expectations about global democracy at this point.

He argues, however, that even nations whose independence of action is quite circumscribed can have vigorous democratic institutions domestically. Some of the smaller European states, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, are examples. Furthermore, in his view, democratization is a process that can and ought to go on at many levels below that of the nation-state, in the regions and localities of countries.

Still, the chief challenges to the possibility of the third transformation come at the national level and have to do with remaining political inequalities that limit the degree of democracy. He sees three major forms of inequality at the present time: "differences in resources and opportunities for employing violent coercion; in economic positions, resources, and opportunities; and in knowledge, information, and cognitive skills."

In his discussion of violent coercion, Mr. Dahl shows how the development of military technology requiring the participation of large numbers of ordinary people has helped the growth of democracy. In ancient Greece, armed infantry replaced the chariot warfare of the nobility, and in early modern Europe, the use of large numbers of musket- and later rifle-bearing infantry broadened the ranks of the citizen-soldier. Conversely, he demonstrates how the monopolization of the means of violence by small elites has operated to inhibit democracy. He recognizes that the technology of modern warfare has moved in a direction that has historically been associated with antidemocratic tendencies, but he holds that political control of the military in modern democracies mitigates the dangers.

One might argue that the emergence of nuclear arms and the proliferation of high-technology weapons since World War II have created, certainly in the United States, a powerful sector of society largely invulnerable to democratic control. In this view, national defense in the nuclear age has become such a trump that it gives the President extraordinary powers not envisaged in the Constitution and virtually voids legislative control over the decision to go to war. If this argument has merit, a significant shift toward international disarmament may be a prerequisite for the third transformation. Unfortunately, Mr. Dahl does not give this perspective sufficient attention.

With respect to economic inequalities, Mr. Dahl has argued before, and incisively again here, that there is a great anomaly in our business sector: institutions like corporations, where most of us spend a significant portion of our lives, are governed by forms of guardianship shading toward despotism, yet the society as a whole is supposed to be democratic. He takes it as axiomatic that: "In an advanced democratic country the economic order would be understood as instrumental not merely to the production and distribution of goods and services but to a much larger range of values, including democratic values. The economic order would be seen as intended to serve not merely consumers but human beings in all the activities to which an economic order may contribute."

Since economic resources are so decisively related to the acquisition and utilization of political power, only the institutionalization of effective economic democracy will move us forward in this respect. For example, Mr. Dahl would encourage not only the participation of workers in decisions involving the production process, which is already occurring in a number of American companies, but also worker representation on corporate boards of directors.

Finally, Mr. Dahl argues that the third democratic transformation requires us to reduce existing inequalities with respect to knowledge, information and
cognitive skills. The danger here comes from monopolization, not by business managers, but by intellectuals, particularly policy makers. Mr. Dahl does not believe, as some have argued, that intellectuals form a "new class," with a common ideology and common interests. He argues that the profound cleavages and disagreements among them help to lessen any such danger. But he does believe that only an educated general public and a series of "attentive publics" concerned with particular policy spheres can genuinely democratize the operation of the modern bureaucratic state, preventing rule by experts with no claim to superior moral insight - indeed, whose insight may even be impaired by their excessive specialization.

In short, beneath all the moderation and devotion to intellectual clarity that are so evident in this book, there is the moving presence of a profound passion for democracy. For Mr. Dahl, this remains the essential vision "in the search for a society in which people may live together in peace, respect each other's intrinsic equality, and jointly seek the best possible life."
A timocracy in Aristotle’s Politics is a state where only property owners may participate in government. The more extreme forms of timocracy, where power derives entirely from wealth with no regard for social or civic responsibility, may shift in their form and become a plutocracy where the wealthy rule. Solon introduced the ideas of timokratia as a graded oligarchy in his Solonian Constitution for Athens in the early 6th century BC. His was the first known deliberately implemented form of timocracy. We don’t need drive-by journalism in this country, which has the same nutritional value as drive-by food: there’s no fiber, there’s no context. It’s full of hot air. How have corporate-media allowed Iraq to essentially become center-stage? The Administration sets the agenda.