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Thoughts on the Meaning of the Word Democracy*

In submitting this article (April 1949) I realize that I am offering comments on a subject that is outside my own specialty. Sociologists and political scientists may at first resent this impertinence. Yet it seems to me to be valuable for workers to cross the boundaries from time to time, provided that they realize (as I do indeed) that their remarks must inevitably appear naïve to those who know the relevant literature and who are accustomed to a professional language of which the intruder is ignorant.

This word *democracy* has great importance at the present time. It is used in all sorts of different senses; here are a few:

- A social system in which the people rule.
- A social system in which the people choose the leader.
- A social system in which people choose the government.
- A social system in which the government allows the people freedom of thought and expression of opinion and freedom of enterprise.
- A social system which, being on a run of good fortune, can afford to allow individuals freedom of action.

One can study:

- The etymology of the word.
- The history of social institutions: Greek, Roman, etc.
- The use made of the word by various countries and cultures at the present time: Great Britain, U.S.A., Russia, etc.
- The abuse of the word by dictators and others: hoodwinking the people, etc.

In any discussion on a term, such as democracy, it is obviously of first importance that a definition should be reached, suitable for the particular type of discussion.

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Psychology of the Use of the Term

Is it possible to study the use of this term psychologically? We accept and are accustomed to psychological studies of other difficult terms such as "normal mind," "healthy personality," "individual well-adjusted to society," and we expect such studies to prove valuable insofar as they give unconscious emotional factors their full import. One of the tasks of psychology is to study and present the latent ideas that exist in the use of such concepts, not confining attention to obvious or conscious meaning. An attempt is made in this article to initiate a psychological study.

Working Definition of the Term

It does seem that an important latent meaning of this term can be found, namely, that a democratic society is "mature," that is to say that it has a quality that is allied to the quality of individual maturity which characterizes its healthy members. Democracy is here defined, therefore, as "society well-adjusted to its *healthy* individual members." This definition is in accord with the view expressed recently by R.E. Money-Kyrle (1948).

It is the way people use this term that is important to the psychologist. A psychological study is justified if there is implied in the term the element of *maturity*. The suggestion is that in all uses of the term there can be found to be implied the idea of maturity or relative maturity, though it is difficult, as all will admit, to define these terms adequately.

In psychiatric terms, the normal or healthy individual can be said to be one who is mature; according to his or her chronological age and social setting, there is an appropriate degree of emotional development. (In this argument physical maturity is assumed.)

Psychiatric health is therefore a term without fixed meaning. In the same way the term "democratic" need not have a fixed meaning. Used by a community it may mean *the more rather than less mature in society structure*. In this way one would expect the frozen meaning of the word to be different in Britain, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., and yet to find that the term retains value because of its implying the recognition of maturity as health.

How can one study the emotional development of society? Such a study must be closely related to the study of the individual. The two studies must take place simultaneously.

An attempt must be made to state the accepted qualities of democratic machinery. The machinery must exist for the *election* of leaders by free vote, true secret ballot. The machinery must exist for the people *to get rid of* leaders by secret ballot. The machinery must exist for the illogical election and

removal of leaders. The essence of democratic machinery is the free vote (secret ballot). The point of this is that it ensures the freedom of the people to express deep feelings, *apart from conscious thoughts*.

In the exercise of the secret vote, the whole responsibility for action is taken by individuals, if they are healthy enough to take it. The vote expresses the outcome of the struggle within oneself, the external scene having been internalized and so brought into association with the interplay of forces in one's own personal inner world. That is to say, the decision as to which way to vote is the expression of a solution of a struggle within oneself. The process seems to be somewhat as follows. The external scene, with its many social and political aspects, is made personal in the sense that one gradually identifies oneself with all the parties to the struggle. This means that the external scene is perceived in terms of one's own internal struggle, and one temporarily allows the internal struggle to be waged in terms of the external political scene. This to-and-fro process involves work and takes time, and it is part of democratic machinery to arrange for a period of preparation. A sudden election would produce an acute sense of frustration in the electorate. Each voter's inner world has to be turned into a political arena over a limited period.

It would be possible to take a community and to impose on it the machinery that belongs to democracy, but this would not be to create a democracy. Someone would be needed to continue to maintain the machinery (for secret ballot, etc.), and also to force the people to accept the results.

Innate Democratic Tendency

A democracy is an achievement, at a point of time, of a limited society, i.e., of a society that has some natural boundary. Of a true democracy (as the term is used today) one can say, "*In this society at this time there is sufficient maturity in the emotional development of a sufficient proportion of the individuals that comprise it for there to exist an innate tendency towards the creation and recreation and maintenance of the democratic machinery.*" By innate I intend to convey the following: the natural tendencies in human nature (hereditary) bud and flower into the democratic way of life (social maturity), but this only happens through the healthy emotional development of individuals; only a proportion of individuals in a social group will have had the luck to develop to maturity and therefore it is only through them that the innate (inherited) tendency of the group towards social maturity can be implemented.

It would be important to know what proportion of mature individuals is necessary if there is to be an innate democratic tendency. In another way of expressing this, what proportion of anti-social individuals can a society contain without submergence of innate democratic tendency?