

Being an expert tight-rope turn
by an eminent British educator

Two Versions of Democracy

By JULIAN HUXLEY

The Listener, British Broadcasting Corporation

AMERICANS are apt to think that our democracy is rather a sham, because it is different in so many ways from theirs, and especially because of our monarchy and our class system. However, we must remember that democracy is not something fixed. Any particular democracy is an attempt to realize the democratic ideal. And that is, historically speaking, something very recent. It is first of all the belief that individual human beings are what matter most—more than the State, or the total of national wealth, or anything else whatsoever. Then it is the belief in equality, in the sense that everyone should have certain basic opportunities. The European political theorists of the eighteenth century thought in terms of “natural rights”; the American Declaration of Independence speaks of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Today we are more inclined to use phrases like “privileges and opportunities.”

But what each age has meant is that everyone should have an equal chance to a reasonable development as individual human beings, irrespective of accidents of birth or fortune. The democratic ideal is also the belief that governments should exist not only to benefit but to represent the people as a whole. So democracy, since it thus presupposes government by consent, implies tolerance; since it presupposes equality, implies equal opportunities; and since it presupposes the ultimate value of individual men and women, implies freedom.

That is the democratic ideal. Actual democracies represent attempts at realizing this ideal. But to date they are still sadly imperfect; and also they have pursued different methods in different countries.

So democracies can differ in two quite different ways. They can be more or less imperfect. There are democracies in which considerable sections of

the people are not allowed to vote. That was so in Britain a century ago; and it still is so in the Southern United States (for it does not matter whether people are disfranchised under the constitution or, in fact, just are not allowed to vote). Such democracies are obviously less perfect than those where there is real universal suffrage.

But besides differing on an up-and-down scale, they can also differ sideways, just like different kinds of animals. A dogfish is a higher kind of animal than a jellyfish. But no one can say whether it is higher or lower than a lobster. So with democracies. The American and British brands are both on about the same level of progress toward the ideal; but they are very different in their organization.

The chief difference lies in the British class system. In the United States, color and nationality take the place of class, to a certain degree. On the whole, Negroes and recent immigrants get fewer opportunities, in the same sort of way as the working classes in Britain get fewer opportunities. It is also true that, with the intense growth of industrialism in the United States, and with the closing of the frontier, a new class system, based mainly on money, but in part (in the East) on ancestry, is beginning to grow up. But the British class system is much more rigid, and it is also historically ingrained, being a gradual evolution from the feudal system centuries back. In fact, the development of British society and institutions has almost always been gradual. It was this organic quality which Edmund Burke defended so eloquently against the theo-

rists who wanted to imitate the French Revolution by making a clean sweep and starting again from as near scratch as possible.

I am not trying to make out that the British class system is the best way, or even a good way, of organizing a democracy. All I am concerned with is to try to make it clear that it isn't incompatible with a reasonable amount of



—Reynolds News, London

democracy (and also with a reasonably rapid progress toward more and better democracy) and that it has still, and has had in the past, quite a lot of merits—orderliness and a sense that everyone has a job of work to do for the community: the idea among the more fortunate of service; a very considerable amount of freedom within the boundaries set by the system: suf-

ficient fluidity to give talent a reasonable chance to rise, and to allow new classes, as they became important, to take their share of leadership and responsibility; plenty of opportunity for people to take part in their own local government; and still more opportunity for them to form voluntary associations to look after their own interests. This is a very important aspect of democracy; for, to quote again from Burke, "To be attached to the Subdivision, to love the little platoon, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections."

About the monarchy I needn't say much. Everyone should, I hope, even in the republican United States, realize that being a king means something very different to George VI from what it did to George III. The British King is no longer an autocrat, and indeed has lost almost every vestige of political power. He is now in one sense only a symbol of the unity of the nation, and of the Empire. But symbols can be very important, and our twentieth century kings are very active, hardworking, and useful members of the community, focussing loyalties, giving the necessary personal touch to the vast impersonal machinery of a modern state, and infinitely more democratic than the Führers or the Dukes, with their bodyguards and their pomp. The American President, too, is a democratic personal head; but Presidents are also members of political parties, and some of the smoke and powder of politics inevitably hangs around them.

There is naturally another side to the picture. The traditional side of monarchy can be overdone, and may

make its ritual too much of a survival of the past, too little representative of today. Some people felt that about the Coronation ceremonies. It is difficult for the existence of a Court not to encourage a certain not very desirable snobbery. Certain traditional vested interests may manage to entrench themselves under the sheltering wing of monarchy.

Similarly with the British class system. It undoubtedly stimulates snobbery. Many among the privileged classes come to take their privileged position for granted, and rather forget their obligations of service. In small communities like the village, the local bigwigs may easily become petty tyrants instead of leaders or public servants. The fear of losing privileges consciously or unconsciously may generate hostility or overbearingness toward the so-called lower classes, while, conversely, jealousy may make the under-privileged bitter and resentful. Most important of all, the class system does mean a considerable deprivation of equal opportunity; and this is a very real negation of the democratic ideal.

All the same, British democracy manages to work reasonably well, in spite of obvious and numerous defects. The best proof of that is that our system has, in the last hundred years, become more, and not less, democratic—in spite of all the undemocratic handicaps it has inherited from the past, and all the new anti-democratic burdens that the laissez-faire period managed to pile on its back.

Democracy means something real to the average Englishman today.

First, Britain is politically democratic. There is real universal suffrage. We have never had any anti-democratic organization so powerful as the Ku Klux Klan during its brief but unenviable prominence, nor any political machines so ruthless and corrupt as those of certain American States, or as Tammany in its bad old days.

Our local government has on the whole been in the hands of local people, duly elected to represent the balance of local interests; the small political boss, with his inevitable atmosphere of graft, has never played so prominent a role here as in parts of the U.S.A. And our local government is largely in the hands of working people. The mayor of a small city, or a member of a Borough Council, is just as likely to be a working man as an aristocrat, or a rich merchant, or a business man.

Britain's legal system is reasonably democratic. The high cost of going to law is its only serious handicap. There has been very little corruption, among either judges or police, which is more than some regions in the United States used to be able to say of themselves; and racketeering has never been able to become a major scandal in this country. Our Civil Service is appointed by the democratic system of examination: the undemocratic "spoils system" has never played the part it has in the United States. Then we must remember that Britain was a pioneer of religious freedom, as well as of political freedom. The growth of nonconformity, with its myriads of active, independent, and earnest congregations, played a great part in encouraging in-

dividual independence and all kinds of crusading movements. Democracy can come alive in various ways, and one of them is by having a sense of mission about various democratic ideals. The British anti-slavery movement was a notable example of this.

THIS Protestant tradition of independence also found embodiment in all sorts of organizations for self-help. Our British trade unions, our innumerable friendly societies with their mutual insurance schemes, and later, our co-operative movement, all came into being as vigorous expressions of British democracy. Press, speech and opinion are as free with us as in any country in the world.

In its labor relations, Britain has on the whole been more democratic than the United States. Our strikes have never been marred by such violence as in America, nor turned into miniature civil wars; and we have not suffered so much from illegal or extra-legal vigilante organizations. Collective bargaining and political trade unionism are among the useful machinery by which British democracy has come to express itself.

As regards education, elementary education is free and universal, secondary education is now cheap and of high standard, and, after many years, university education has become pretty thoroughly democratized. Voluntary effort is very prominent in this field, and works on the whole in a democratic direction. It has resulted in the extreme variety and the freedom from regimented uniformity which our educational system enjoys and which part-

ly compensate for its class-structure.

We still have great inequality of wealth, though our taxation destroys a considerably greater amount of that inequality than in America; and the remarkable growth of our social services insures that nobody shall fall below a certain minimum standard of life, that unemployment and sickness shall not spell destitution, and that the stigma of receiving charity or poor relief has been now replaced by pensions and other benefits which men and women can accept as rights without any loss of self-respect.

Finally, British democracy in its imperial aspect has made one great invention—that of the Commonwealth of free and equal Dominions, bound together by common values and ideas instead of by compulsion or even by a formal constitution.

So I think it is fair to say that the

average Englishman has had the sense of being reasonably free to do and say what he likes, of being able to express his political views freely and fairly effectively, of being free to organize with others to stand up for his rights and interests, of belonging to a country which on the whole has consistently stood for freedom, of being given a reasonable opportunity to make something worth while out of his individual life. And that is a real form of democracy, if very far from a perfect one.

Of late years that sense has been somewhat shaken by economic insecurity and the threat of war looming over from Europe. But the Englishman is now very much determined that the freedoms and opportunities he has achieved in the past shall not be lost; and this is another expression of the democratic spirit.

Animals on Trial

That white Peking duck which has turned into a drake is lucky to live in the twentieth century. In the year 1474 a cock was tried, condemned to death, and executed at Basle for having laid an egg. (The hapless bird thus convicted of witchcraft was presumably an old hen; old hens do sometimes assume cock's plumage.) The practice of bringing animals to trial was not very uncommon in French courts from the twelfth to the eighteenth century. A sow was condemned to death (for having killed and eaten a child) in 1457, and so recently as 1740 a cow was legally executed. One's only record of an animal's having been tried in recent years on a "superstitious" charge comes from Malta, where police and the courts were reported to have taken action against a parrot which took the name of St. Anthony in vain and uttered other blasphemies. The bird was executed.

—"Lucio" in the *Manchester Guardian*, England

'The Great Dictator' Overseas

IT IS natural that Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* should not be exhibited in Germany, Italy, Japan, Holland, Belgium, Luxemburg, Poland, Norway, Denmark, Rumania, Hungary and France. But it is also prohibited in Buenos Aires and in some cities of Brazil and Peru. Whether this is because of direct pressure from totalitarian embassies or consulates or because of personal sympathies toward the dictatorships, must be left to the judgment of the reader. In Mexico, Nazi protests were rejected, and the film had a sensational success, and similarly in Panamá. In Chile, in the face of Nazi protests, on the opening night four movie houses netted 140,000 pesos (\$5,600), an amount unprecedented in Chilean movie history. It was first shown in Uruguay on January 15 at the Cine Trocadero in Montevideo and the Cine Stella in Colonia. Special boat trips have been arranged between Buenos Aires and Colonia for those inhabitants of the Argentine capital who are determined to see it even if they must go to Uruguay to do so. The first showing in Bolivia will take place in La Paz sometime in the middle of March.

Russia has purchased two copies of *The Great Dictator* to try out in Leningrad and Moscow. If it is decided that the film is only a satire, eighty more will be imported for distribution throughout the Soviet Union.

Under the headline "The Clownish Stupidity of Charlie Finds in London

Spectators Worthy of It," Mussolini's *Il Popolo d'Italia* prints the following dispatch from Berlin: "The unlucky vicissitudes of this Jewish production are significant, because they were lost twice when crossing the Atlantic destined for England, when British ships carrying them were sunk. In America, also, the clownish propaganda piece of Charlie suffered a fiasco everywhere. But in London, the Jew Chaplin found a public worthy of him." In contrast to this is the statement from United Artists, producers of *The Great Dictator*, that while the picture has not yet been generally released, it is already well on the way to earning more revenue than *Modern Times*, the most successful heretofore of the Chaplin pictures.



We've all just seen 'The Great Dictator'

—News Chronicle, London