

# THE SPIRIT OF DEMOCRACY

BY LYMAN ABBOTT

A SERIES OF ARTICLES IN WHICH THE AUTHOR CONSIDERS THE EFFECT OF DEMOCRACY IN THE FAMILY, IN EDUCATION, IN INDUSTRY, AND IN GOVERNMENT<sup>1</sup>

ELEVENTH PAPER

## IN GOVERNMENT—WHO SHOULD GOVERN?

GOVERNMENT is power to enforce command; government is just when the commands enforced are in accord with the great eternal laws of right and wrong. The function of government in the enforcement of these laws is primarily the protection of the four fundamental rights of man—the rights of the person, the rights of the family, the rights of property, and the rights of reputation. Government may exercise other functions; but if it does not exercise this function, it is inefficient and incompetent. On whom is the duty of protecting the rights of persons and property laid? Upon whom does it devolve in a self-governing community?

Says Abraham Lincoln: "When the white man governs himself, that is self-government; but when he governs himself and also another man, that is more than self-government; that is despotism." That is true in its immediate application to slavery; absolutely and unqualifiedly true. For one man to govern another man, to take charge of him, determine what are his interests and control his actions, is despotism. It may be a benevolent despotism; it may be a just despotism; but, whether benevolent and just or malevolent and unjust, it is despotism. When a criminal is put into State prison, where all his actions are determined for him by another, he is living under a despotism.

But Abraham Lincoln also said: "The legitimate object of government is to do for the people what needs to be done, but which they cannot by individual effort do at all, or do as well for themselves." When the people do collectively what needs to be done, but what they cannot by individual effort do at all, or do as well for themselves,

that is not despotism: that is social self-government, although in that social self-government each individual exercises a certain amount of control over the actions of every other individual. The community by its collective action not only establishes a public school, but compels the parents to send their child to school; it not only digs a sewer, but it compels the individual householder to connect his house with the sewer and send the waste, which otherwise would be a nuisance to the community, through the sewer; it not only constructs a highway, but it determines the rate of speed at which the automobile may be driven along the highway. Social self-government necessarily involves the government of one individual by other individuals; that is, the compelling of one individual to do what he does not wish to do, or to abstain from what he does wish to do, because his will is oppugnant to the will of the community. Who have the right to take part in this social self-government, in its determining what the individual may do or may not do? The advocates of universal suffrage claim that every member of the community of adult age may take part in this social self-government. Starting with the assertion, as an axiom, that every man has a right to govern himself, they deduce the conclusion that every man has a right to take part in the government of others. The conclusion does not follow from the premise. On the contrary, I believe it may be laid down as a political axiom, on which all self-governments should be based, that—

*No man has a right to take part in governing others who has not the intellectual and moral capacity to govern himself.*

The close of the eighteenth century was an epoch of revolution. It was characterized by an uprising of an oppressed people against their oppressors. In France and in America, following the ex-

<sup>1</sup> These articles are based on and in part condensed from a series of lectures on "The Spirit of Democracy" delivered by the author on consecutive Sunday afternoons before the Brooklyn (New York) Institute in January and February, 1910.

ample which had been set in the preceding century by the Puritans in England, the common people demanded their rights. The question of political philosophy was, What are the rights of the common people? The claim of despotism was that the common people had no political rights; they were children who were to submit without question to the authority of their parents. Louis XVIII, returning from his exile in England to Paris, thus defined, with curious *naïveté*, the Bourbon conception of the relation between king and people: "If my right to the throne were not altogether founded on that law [the divine right of kings, recognized by the ancient law of France], what claim should I have to it? What am I apart from that right? An infirm old man, a miserable outlaw, reduced to begging, far from his country, for shelter and food. That is what I was only a few days ago; but that old man, that outlaw, was the King of France. That title alone sufficed to make the whole nation, when at last it understood its real interests, recall me to the throne of my fathers. I have come back in answer to the call, but I have come back King of France."<sup>1</sup>

In such an epoch the emphasis, alike of leaders and of people, was laid upon rights. This view we have inherited from our fathers. We have formed the habit of looking at all the political duties as rights and privileges, as something to which we have a claim, something which will confer a benefit upon us. All men, we think, have an equal right to hold office, and when one man has held office four years, his neighbor says, it is now my turn. The ballot we think of as something by which we are to protect our own interests and promote our own welfare. We select a Representative, who must come from our political district, and who, in the House of Representatives, will seek such legislation as will promote our local welfare; we select Senators who will represent our State and promote the interests of our State in the National legislation.

The next step is easy and natural. Special interests send representatives to Congress. Appropriations for public buildings,

or for river or harbor improvements, and special advantage for special industries in the protective tariff, are engineered by skillful politicians, each seeking, with perhaps personal disinterestedness, to promote the pecuniary advantage of his own clientele. Under the corrupting influence of this false conception the professional politician becomes scarcely less an advocate of a special interest in Congress than is the paid counsel before the courts.

But the evil effect of this point of view does not stop with the professional politician. The individual voter votes for his own interests: one man to secure a higher protection for his manufactured goods, another to get a contract from the Government, a third to get a job from the contractor, and a fourth to get a five-dollar bill from the political committee. The story is told—I believe it is authentic—that a Western cowboy arrested for murder wrote to Mr. Roosevelt for financial aid in securing competent defense, but subsequently returned the contribution, saying: "I do not need it; we have elected the district attorney!"

It is high time that we changed our point of view; high time that we realized that suffrage is not a natural right—is not a right at all. It is a sacred duty; a right only as every man has a right to do his duty. "Public office is a public trust." How that sentence rang through the land! It was better than a speech. Suffrage is a public office, and therefore a public trust, and no man is entitled to have that public trust committed to him unless he is at least able to govern himself. The Southern States have in this respect set an example which it would be well if it were possible for all the States to follow. Many of them have adopted in their Constitution a qualified suffrage. The qualifications are not the same in all the States, but there is not one of those States in which every man, black or white, has not a legal right to vote provided he can read and write the English language, owns three hundred dollars' worth of property, and has paid his taxes. A provision that no man should vote unless he has intelligence enough to read and write, thrift enough to have laid up three hundred dollars' worth of property, and patriotism enough to have paid his taxes, would not

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Stenger, "The Return of Louis XVIII," p. 177.

be a bad provision for any State in the Union to incorporate in its Constitution.

We talk about giving to the negroes, to the Filipinos, and to the Porto Ricans self-government. What President Wilson, of Princeton University, has said on this subject would be well worth printing on a card and sending to every voter :

We cannot give them self-government. Self-government is not a thing that can be "given" to any people, because it is a form of character and not a form of constitution. No people can be "given" the self-control of maturity. Only a long apprenticeship of obedience can secure them the precious possession, a thing no more to be bought than given. They cannot be presented with the character of a community, but it may confidently be hoped that they will become a community under the wholesome and salutary influences of just laws and a sympathetic administration; that they will after a while understand and master themselves, if in the meantime they are understood and served in good conscience by those set over them in authority.<sup>1</sup>

Hitherto the duty of protecting the fundamental rights of persons and property in civilized communities has devolved upon the men. There is a small but very earnest minority of women who insist that women should share in this duty of protection. Are they right? Does this obligation rest upon them, or are they exempt from it? To answer that question let us consider briefly the problem of life. What are we on this earth for? Is there any interpretation of its enigma, any rational meaning to existence?

We are born; grow up in families, under the protection and guidance of father and mother. We are nursed, taught, trained for life's work. We grow to maturity; marry; children are given to us; we provide for them until they are old enough to provide for themselves; govern them until they are old enough to govern themselves; then they marry and children are given to them. We tarry a few years as grandparents, to enjoy the privilege of the children without the responsibility, and then pass off the stage. And so the process goes on, generation after generation; every generation growing a little in knowledge, wisdom, and virtue; but each member of every generation, if the parents are capable and efficient, growing

from ignorance to knowledge, from folly to wisdom, from incapacity to ability, from innocence through struggle to virtue. What does it all mean?

What can it mean but this? that we are in one stage of an existence the future stages of which no one can foresee, any more than the acorn can foresee the oak, or the seed the flower, or the caterpillar the butterfly. What can it mean but this: that life is itself a preparation for life, a long schooling, and death a graduation?

And in this process woman is the creator of life. She is physiologically its creator. She is, in the order of nature, the custodian of the infant in all the earlier stages of its existence. She is the one who feeds and nurses and leads and trains and educates it. And while she is thus absorbed in the highest and divinest ministry, in serving the very end of life itself, the man is the breadwinner and protector. He goes out to wrest from nature food for the supply of the family. If enemies attack it from without, he arises to defend it from assault. If criminals by violence or by fraud endeavor to rob it of its sustenance, he is its natural guardian from the wrong-doer. His influence is not unneeded in the training of the children, but it is incidental and secondary; it must be incidental and secondary, because, if mother and child are to be fed, sheltered, and protected, he must be, during most of the hours of the day, away from home. There is a pathetic story in the Old Testament, a transcript from life, which illustrates this parental relationship. A boy is with his father and the reapers in the field. The hot sun overpowers him. He cries out, "My head, my head!" The father says to a servant, "Take him to his mother," and goes on with his work. And the child lies on his mother's lap until noon, and then dies. It is the instinctive message of father and mother the world over, and will be while the world stands. From the father, "Carry the child to his mother." From the mother, "Give me the child." By a law of nature written in the constitution of the family, written in her constitution and in his, written in their physical nature and in their mental and moral nature, she is the creator of life and the minister to life, and he is the bread-

<sup>1</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "Constitutional Government in the United States," p. 53.

winner and protector while she fulfills her sacred task.

If she is wife and mother, this high, sacred, supreme creative duty demands and has all her thought, all her life. If she is not, still she finds in supplemental service opportunities for this ministry to life. She teaches in the school, she nurses in the hospital, she ministers in the charities of the community and of the church, she co-operates as domestic, as sister, as aunt, with the overworked and overburdened mother in carrying on the life of the household. Hers is the vital, the essential service. His is necessary that she may do hers. They cannot possibly exchange. In the nature of the case he never can do hers. Shall she take his in addition to her own, and become not only the life-giver, but also the breadwinner and the protector; not only the mother, the nurse, the teacher, but also the magistrate, the policeman, the tiller of the soil, the sailor of the ship, the worker in the town? Can she do both kinds of service and do them well?

I do not wish to speak in derogation of the advocates of woman suffrage. Among them are some noble, womanly women, driven or drawn into the movement by the faith that the suffrage in woman's hands would be an instrument of incalculable value in the work of life ministry. But not many of the mothers devoting their lives to husband and children at home, not many of the teachers absorbed in the fascinating task of making men and women out of boys and girls, not many of the women active in the philanthropic work of our Christian churches or in our public charities, are among those whose names are bruited in the newspapers as advocates of this revolution. How can they be? They have too much of more important work to do. How can the agitators be simultaneously caring for their own children or the uncared-for children of others? They are absorbed in the one task of getting the ballot as the one important and essential achievement for the redemption of society.

I am an advocate of woman's rights—her right to be exempt from the duty of protecting persons and property; to be exempt from sharing in the burdens and responsibilities of government; her right

to give herself wholly and unreservedly to the task which God has given her of being the creator and developer of human life, the maker of character. It would be the grossest injustice for us men, who have hitherto had this duty to perform, to shirk our duty and impose it upon woman, except upon the most conclusive demonstration that she desires to assume it. At present all the evidence points us to the conclusion that she has no such desire. This is indeed an uncontested point, admitted by the more intelligent and fair-minded of the advocates of the great revolution. And I urge all women whom my voice can reach or my words can influence not to follow the blind leaders of the blind, not to be cheated by a false political philosophy and a false social sentiment, not to turn aside from their great vocation, the ministry to life, which no one can take up if they lay it down, in order that they may take up the lower and lesser vocation. To protect life and property is not so great a service as to use property in ministering to life. To promote by political action the general welfare is not so great a service as to create and develop the individual for whose creation and development governments exist, and whose personal character is the supremest factor in the general well-being.

How shall a self-governing community ascertain the judgment and the will of the members of the community? In a pure democracy the people pass on every proposition, as in the old-time New England town meeting or in the present democratic government in Switzerland. In representative government the people elect representatives into whose hands they intrust the work of the government. They select the men, but the work of carrying on the government is intrusted to the men whom they select. There is a movement in our day in America toward more pure democracy, toward less representative government. Theoretically, we elect our Presidents by an electoral college; that is, by representative government. In fact, we elect them by a popular vote. Theoretically, the election of our Senators is left to the representative bodies in the various States; but in an increasing number of those States the election is generally effected by the people directly.



On the other hand, our tendency in other than political circles is toward representative government rather than pure democracy. In our great corporations the stockholders do not vote on such questions as what stock they will issue, what branch roads they will build, what rates they will charge. The stockholders elect certain trusted men, and leave the decisions of these questions in their hands. As in the great commercial enterprises, so in the great philanthropic and religious organizations. The churches do not pass in detail upon the questions that come before the church. They elect a board, and the board elects an executive committee and secretaries, and the administration in detail is left in the hands of these executive committees and of the secretaries. I need not undertake to discuss in this connection the relative advantages of pure democracy and representative government. It is enough to point out to my readers that if representative government is really representative, if the persons elected do really represent the judgment and the will of the electors, a representative government is as truly democratic as a pure democracy.

Representative government has been injured in our country by the false notion that if we elect a great many officials we are more democratic than if we elect a few, whereas, in fact, we are more democratic if we elect a few than if we elect many. In New York State we elect a Governor and five heads of departments: a Secretary of State, a Comptroller, an Attorney-General, a State Engineer, a Treasurer. How many New York readers of this article could tell the names of these officials for whom many of those readers voted in the last election? Nay, more than that—how many think themselves competent to elect an Attorney-General or a State Engineer? I confess frankly that I am not. I can form some judgment as to the man whom I am willing should act for me in choosing an Attorney-General familiar with the law, or a State Engineer competent to supervise the engineering work of the State, but I have neither the personal knowledge nor the professional knowledge which fits me to make the selection myself.

In the Federal Government we pursue a wiser and really a more democratic course. We elect a President and a Vice-President, and the President appoints his heads of departments. He can, therefore, rightly be held responsible for all that is done, or left undone, in the various departments. Under the present method in our Federal elections we select one man and hold him responsible for results; in many of our States, in New York State, for example, we cast our vote between two sets of candidates selected for us by leaders whom we often do not know and whom we cannot hold responsible if the selection does not prove satisfactory.

Government is by parties, and in a self-governing community the parties ought to be self-governing. To-day they are not self-governing in fact, whatever they may be in theory. The forms and methods differ in different communities, but the following description may serve by way of illustration:<sup>1</sup> The members of the party in a given district meet in some appointed place in what is known as a primary. In fact, the meeting is composed almost exclusively of place-hunters and their friends. To this meeting a list of delegates to a nominating convention, or a series of nominating conventions, is presented by a committee which is practically self-constituted, although it has been formally elected by a previous primary. The character of these primaries as conducted in the "good old times"—that is, a quarter of a century ago—is indicated by the fact, reported by Mr. Bryce, that "of the 1,007 primaries and conventions of all parties held in New York City preparatory to the election of 1884, 633 took place in liquor saloons."

There has been some improvement since then, and in many of the States the primaries are now recognized and regulated by law. But the personnel remains largely what it was formerly. If independent voters attend, they are generally outvoted, or, if that by any chance proves impossible, they are out-

<sup>1</sup> I follow James Bryce, "The American Commonwealth," Chaps. LIX, LX, LXI, and LXII. Some material improvements have been made, and in some of the States radical and revolutionary changes, since this work was written (1888), but these chapters still remain an excellent description of the primary method of nomination as devised and operated by the professional politician.

maneuvered, and the prepared list of delegates put forward by the committee is elected either without opposition or despite an opposition which is futile. These delegates attend the nominating conventions—town, county, and State—and nominate the candidates previously designated by the committee, and usually previously designated to the committee by the boss. So well is this understood that newspaper men, when the Convention meets, rarely interview the delegates, except such as are known to be near the boss and likely to be acquainted with his orders. Occasionally public sentiment in a State runs so strongly for a particular man that the boss yields, or the convention overrules the boss. But this rarely happens, and it never happens except in the case of some important office like that of Governor or United States Senator. When the election takes place, the two sets of candidates nominated in this fashion, nominally by a convention, really by a small and irresponsible committee, or a still smaller and more irresponsible boss, are put before the voter, and his sole function in politics is to select between the two. How far this method of nominating a host of candidates for all the offices, and nominating them by an irresponsible oligarchy, is from self-government the following paragraph from Mr. Bryce's "American Commonwealth" makes very clear:

The elective offices are so numerous that ordinary citizens cannot watch them, and cease to care who gets them. The conventions come so often that busy men cannot serve in them. The minor offices are so unattractive that able men do not stand for them. The primary lists are so contrived that only a fraction of the party get on them; and of this fraction many are too lazy or too busy or too careless to attend. The mass of the voters are ignorant; knowing nothing about the personal merits of the candidates, they are ready to follow their leaders like sheep. Even the better class, however they may grumble, are swayed by the inveterate habit of party loyalty and prefer a bad candidate of their own to a (probably no better) candidate of the other party. It is less trouble to put up with impure officials, costly city government, a jobbing State legislature, an inferior sort of Congressman, than to sacrifice one's own business in the effort to set things right. Thus the Machine works on, and grinds out places, power, and the opportunities for illicit gain for those who manage it.

The remedy for this condition is very plain: it is such a reconstruction of party machinery that the voters will be enabled not merely to choose between candidates placed before them, but also to determine who those candidates shall be. Various plans have been proposed, and some plans are now on trial having for their desired object the accomplishment of this result. It does not come within the scope of this article to discuss the merits of these different plans. Such comparative study as I have been able to give to them leads me to regard as the best method yet devised the one urged by Governor Hughes on the Legislature of New York State. That plan would appear, more successfully than any other of those proposed, to secure party organization and efficiency and at the same time to put them under democratic control. Two things are, however, to me very clear: on the one hand, that any efficient plan of transferring political power from the oligarchy to the people will be fought by resourceful and unscrupulous politicians; and, on the other hand, that the increasing insistence of an awakened people on their rights and duties will eventually perfect the machinery of a self-governing Republic by making the parties self-governing.

Our free institutions are threatened by two foes: plutocracy and mobocracy, lawless wealth and lawless passion. These are the two serpents that have always come up out of the sea to strangle liberty. They destroyed Greece; they destroyed Rome; will they destroy America? America as a self-governing community is as yet only in its experimental stage. We can hand it down to our posterity, purified and strengthened, only by being true to the oath which Abraham Lincoln, in one of his early public addresses, proposed to the young men of Springfield, Illinois: "Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well-wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution never to violate in the least particular the laws of the country, and never to tolerate their violation by others."<sup>1</sup> We must recognize the divine nature of law and its

<sup>1</sup> Address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1837. Complete Works, p. 12.

sacred sanctions ; we must make the Republic not only a community of self-governing individuals but a self-governing community ; we must cure the evils of present democracy by a truer and more consistent democracy ; we must reconcile liberty and law by making law the instrument of liberty ; and we must carry both liberty and law not only into our government but into all our institutions. We who have emancipated the laborer from chains must emancipate him from dependence on the capitalists ; we must begin by making capitalists and laborers partners in a common enterprise, and end by making the capitalists also laborers and the laborers also capitalists. We must bring the home, the school, and the church into a closer and more cordial co-operation in the work of education, and so extend that

education, both in the character of the subjects treated and in the classes of population taught, that it will provide a fair equipment of all the people, in all the arts of life, for all honorable vocations, and so fit them by self-education to be both self-supporting and self-governing. And we must recognize the home as the fundamental social organization, underlying all other organizations, and marriage as no mere commercial or social partnership founded on contract, but a divine order founded on the natural comradeship between man and woman, essentially different and essentially equal. What is the type of religious life that fits for such a self-organizing, self-educating, and self-governing community I shall consider in the next and closing paper of this series.

## THE NEGRO: A PORTRAIT

BY A SOUTHERN WOMAN

This article is not a scientific study of the Negro, but it is an interesting, and we think useful, human impression prompted by such a study. It is by a Southern woman vitally interested, as all intelligent Southerners are, in the so-called Negro problem. In her hands we placed recently a scientific book on the subject. This volume is entitled "Social and Mental Traits of the Negro: A Study in Race Traits, Tendencies, and Prospects." It is one of the Columbia University series in Political Science, its author is Henry W. Odum, Ph.D., and it is published by Messrs. Longmans, Green & Co. The special interest of the article seems to us to lie in the fact that it is a friendly Southern view of a friendly Northern study of what is essentially a Southern problem.—THE EDITORS.

THE book seems to me a fair presentation of the facts. That is its fault—it is a presentation only and not an argument. The author has armed himself with a mass of statistics and statement of facts which do not appeal because back of them there is no literary style. Such a book should be undertaken only by a man who is skilled in the art of writing. An idea may be powerful in itself, but few realize the latent possibilities of an idea until it is transformed by the alchemy of the writer. But what the author of this book has to say seems to be without prejudice. In his treatment of the degradation of the negro little is left to the imagination, nor does he belittle the difficulties which the Southerner meets

with in his dealings with the negro. In fact, I had read more than half through the volume before I began to suspect that it was written by a Northern man.

Throughout the book slight mention is made of two facts which I think should be more emphasized—the Southerner's indifference to the negro's fate, and the indifference of the negro himself to his own fate.

The negro does not take himself seriously, and therefore does not achieve; and the inevitable consequence of this feeling on the part of the negro is that he occupies no place in the white man's esteem. In either the individual or the race, achievement brings recognition and respect. Judged from the standpoint of achievement, the negro race is a failure,