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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 näive 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.

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?

If the war, and the evacuation scheme in particular, increased the proportion of anti-social children in Great Britain from X percent to (say) $5X$ percent, this could easily affect the education system, so that the educational orientation must be towards the $5X$ percent anti-socials, crying out for dictatorship methods and away from the $100 - 5X$ percent children who are not anti-social. A decade later this problem would be stated in this way, that, whereas society can cope with X percent criminals by segregation of them in prisons, $5X$ percent of them tends to produce a general reorientation towards criminals.

Immature Identification with Society

In a society at any one time, if there are X individuals who show their lack of sense of society by developing an anti-social tendency, there are Z individuals reacting to inner insecurity by the alternative tendency—identification with authority. This is unhealthy and immature, because it is not an identification with authority that rises out of self-discovery. It is a sense of frame without a sense of picture, a sense of form without retention of spontaneity. This is a pro-society tendency that is anti-individual. People who develop in this way can be called "hidden anti-socials."

Hidden anti-socials are not "whole persons" any more than are manifest anti-socials, since each needs to find and to control the conflicting force in the external world outside the self. By contrast, the healthy person, who is capable of becoming depressed, is able to find the whole conflict within the self as well as being able to see the whole conflict outside the self, in external (shared) reality. When healthy persons come together they each contribute a whole world, because each brings a whole person.

Hidden anti-socials provide material for a type of leadership which is sociologically immature. Moreover this element in a society greatly strengthens the danger from its frank anti-social elements, especially as ordinary people so easily let those with an urge to lead get into key positions. Once in such positions, these immature leaders immediately gather to themselves the obvious anti-socials, who welcome them (the immature anti-individual leaders) as their natural masters (false resolution of splitting).

The Indeterminates

It is never as simple as this, because, if there are $(X + Z)$ percent anti-social individuals in a community, it is not true to say that $100 - (X + Z)$ percent are "social." There are those in an indeterminate position. One could put it as shown in Table 1. The whole democratic burden falls on the $100 - (X + Y + Z)$

TABLE I   Individuals and Society

Anti-socials	$X\%$
Indeterminates	$Y\%$
Pro-society but anti-individual	$Z\%$
Healthy individuals capable of social contribution	$100 - (X + Y + Z)\%$
Total	100%

percent of individuals who are maturing as individuals, and who are gradually becoming able to add a social sense to their well-grounded personal development.

What percentage does $100 - (X + Y + Z)$ percent represent, for instance, in Great Britain today? Possibly it is quite small, say 30 percent. Perhaps, if there are 30 percent mature persons, as many as 20 percent of the indeterminates will be sufficiently influenced to be counted as mature, thus bringing the total to 50 percent. If, however, the mature percentage should drop to 20, it must be expected that there will be a bigger fall in the percentage of indeterminates able to act in a mature way.

If 30 percent maturity in a community collects 20 percent of the indeterminates while 20 percent maturity collects only 10 percent of the indeterminates, the totals will be 50 percent and 30 percent respectively of people who can be counted on to act in a mature way. Whereas 50 percent total might indicate sufficient innate democratic tendency for practical purposes, 30 percent could not be counted as sufficient to avoid submergence by the sum of the anti-socials (hidden and manifest) and the indeterminates who would be drawn by weakness or fear into association with them.

There follows an anti-democratic tendency, a tendency towards dictatorship, characterized at first by a feverish bolstering up of the democratic façade (hoodwinking function of the term). One sign of this tendency is the corrective institution, the localized dictatorship, the practicing ground for the personally-immature leaders who are reversed anti-socials (pro-social but anti-individual). This, the corrective institution, has both the prison and the mental hospital of a healthy society perilously near to it, and for this reason the doctors of criminals and of the insane have to be constantly on guard lest they find themselves being used, without at first knowing it, as agents of the anti-democratic tendency. There must, in fact, always be a borderline in which there is no clear distinction between corrective treatment of the political or ideational opponent and the therapy of the insane person. (Here lies the social danger of physical methods of therapy of the mental patient, as compared with true psychotherapy, or even the acceptance of a state of insanity. In psychotherapy the patient is a person on equal terms with the doctor, with a right to be ill, and also a right to claim health and full responsibility for personal political or ideational views.)

Creation of an Innate Democratic Factor

If democracy is maturity, and maturity is health, and health is desirable, then we wish to see whether anything can be done to foster it. Certainly it will not help to impose democratic machinery on a country. We must turn to the 100 − $(X + Y + Z)$ group of individuals. All depends on them. Members of this group can instigate research.

We find that at any one time we can do nothing to increase the quantity of this innate democratic factor comparable in importance to what has already been done (or not done) by the parents and homes of these individuals when they were infants and children and adolescents. We can, however, try to avoid compromising the future. We can try to avoid interfering with the homes that can cope, and are actually coping, with their own individual children and adolescents. These *ordinary good homes* provide the only setting in which the innate democratic factor can be created. The ordinary good home is something that defies statistical investigation. It has no news value, is not spectacular and does not produce the men and women whose names are publicly known. My assumption, based on 20,000 case histories, taken personally over a period of 25 years, is that in the community in which I work the ordinary good home is common, even usual. This is indeed a modest statement of positive contribution, but there is a surprising amount of complexity in its application.

Factors Adverse to the Functioning of the Ordinary Good Home

It is very difficult for people to recognize that the essential of a democracy really does lie with the ordinary man and woman and the ordinary, commonplace home. Even if a wise government policy gives parents freedom to run their homes in their own way, it is not certain that officials putting official policies into practice will respect the parents' position.

Ordinary good parents do need help. They need all that science can offer in respect of physical health and the prevention and treatment of physical disease; also they want instruction in child care and help when their children have psychological illnesses or present behavior problems. But, if they seek such assistance, can they be sure they will not have their responsibilities lifted from them? If this happens they cease to be creators of the innate democratic factor.

Many parents are not ordinarily good parents. They are psychiatric cases, or they are immature, or they are anti-social in a wide sense, and socialized only in a restricted sense; or they are unmarried, or in an unstable relationship, or bickering, or separated from each other, and so on. These parents get attention from society because of their defects. The thing is, can society see that the orientation towards these pathological features must not be allowed to affect society's orientation towards the ordinary healthy homes?

In any case, the parents' attempt to provide a home for their children, in which the children can grow as individuals, and each *gradually add* a capacity to identify with the parents and then with wider groupings, starts at the beginning, when the mother comes to terms with her infant. Here the father is the protecting agent which frees the mother to devote herself to her baby. The place of the home has long been recognized, and in recent years a great deal has been found out by psychologists as to the ways in which a stable home enables children not only to find themselves and to find each other, but also makes them begin to qualify for membership of society in a wider sense.

This matter of interference with the early infant/mother relationship, however, needs some special consideration. In our society there is increasing interference at this point, and there is extra danger from the fact that some psychologists actually claim that at the beginning it is only physical care that counts. This can only mean that in the unconscious fantasy of people in general the most awful ideas cluster round the infant/mother relationship. Anxiety in the unconscious is represented in practice by:

- Over-emphasis by physicians and even by psychologists on *physical* processes and health.
- Various theories that breast-feeding is bad, that the baby must be trained as soon as born, that babies should not be handled by their mothers, etc. . . . and (in the negative) that breast-feeding *must* be established, that no training whatever should be given, that babies should never be allowed to cry, etc.
- Interference with the mother's access to her baby in the first days, and with her first presentation of external reality to the infant. This, after all, is the basis of the new individual's capacity eventually to become related to ever-widening external reality, and if the mother's tremendous contribution, *through her being devoted,* is spoiled or prevented, there is no hope that the individual will pass eventually into the $100 - (X + Y + Z)$ group that alone generates the innate democratic factor.

Development of Subsidiary Themes: Election of Persons

Another essential part of the democratic machinery is that it is a *person* who is elected. There is all the difference in the world between the vote for a person, the vote for a party with a set tendency, and the support of a clear-cut principle by ballot.

The election of a person implies that the electors believe in themselves as persons, and therefore believe in the person they nominate or vote for. The person elected has the opportunity to act as a person. As a whole (healthy)

person one has the total conflict within, which enables one to get a view, albeit a personal one, of total external situations. One may of course belong to a party and be known to have a certain tendency. Nevertheless one can adapt in a delicate way to changing conditions; if one actually changes one's main tendency one can put oneself up for re-election.

The election of a party or a group tendency is relatively less mature. It does not require of the electors a trust in a human being. For immature persons, nevertheless, it is the only logical procedure, precisely because an immature person cannot conceive of, or believe in, a truly mature individual. The result of the vote for a party or tendency, a thing and not a person, is the establishment of a rigid outlook, ill-adapted for delicate reactions. This *thing* that is elected cannot be loved or hated, and it is suitable for individuals who have a poorly developed sense of self. It could be said that in a system of voting it is less democratic, because less mature (in terms of emotional development of the individual), when the accent is on the vote for the principle or party and not on the vote for the person.

Much further removed from anything associated with the word democracy is the ballot on a specific point. There is little of maturity about a referendum (although this can be made to fit in with a mature system on exceptional occasions). As an example of the way in which a referendum is un-useful can be cited the peace ballot, between the wars, in Great Britain. People were asked to answer a specific question ("Are you in favor of peace or war?"). A large number of people abstained from voting because they knew that the question was an unfair one. Of those who voted a big proportion put their crosses by the word peace, although in actual fact, when circumstances rearranged themselves, they were in favor of the war when it came, and took part in the fighting. The point is that in this type of questioning there is only room for the expression of the *conscious* wish. There is no relation between putting one's tick against the word "peace" in such a ballot and voting for a person who is known to be eager for peace provided the failure to fight does not mean a lazy abandonment of aspirations and responsibilities and the betrayal of friends.

The same objection applies to much of Gallup Poll and other questionnaires, even although a great deal of trouble is taken to avoid exactly this pitfall. In any case, a vote on a specific point is a very poor substitute indeed for the vote in favor of a person who, once elected, has a space of time in which he can use his own judgment. The referendum has nothing to do with democracy.

Support of Democratic Tendency

The most valuable support is given in a negative way by organized non-interference with the ordinary good mother/infant relationship, and with the

ordinary good home. For more intelligent support, even of this negative kind, much research is needed on the emotional development of the infant and the child of all ages, and also on the psychology of the nursing mother and of the father's function at various stages. The existence of some such studies shows a belief in the value of education, which of course can only be given insofar as there is understanding, and which can only be usefully given to the emotionally mature or healthy individuals. Another important negative contribution would be the avoidance of attempts to implant democratic machinery on total communities. (From a distance it seems that some such attempt has been made in Japan.) The result can only be failure, and a setback to true democratic growth. The alternative and valuable action is to support the emotionally mature individuals, however few they may be, and to let time do the rest.

Parent/Child Relationship

The democratic set-up includes the provision of a certain degree of stability for the elected rulers; as long as they can manage their job without alienating the support of their electors, they carry on. In this way the people arrange for a certain amount of stability which they could not maintain through direct voting on every point even if that were possible. The psychological consideration here is that there is in the history of every individual the fact of the parent/child relationship. Although in the mature democratic way of political life the electors are presumably mature human beings, it cannot be assumed that there is no place for a residue of the parent/child relationship, with its obvious advantages. To some extent, in the democratic election mature people elect temporary parents, which means that they also acknowledge the fact that to some extent the electors remain children. Even the elected temporary parents, the rulers of the democratic political system, are children themselves outside their professional political work. If in driving their cars they exceed the speed limit they come under ordinary judicial censure because driving a car is not part of their job of ruling. As political leaders, and only as such, they are temporarily parents, and after being deposed at an election they revert to being children. It is as if it is convenient to play a game of parents and children because things work out better that way. In other words, because there are advantages in the parent/child relationship, some of this is retained; but, for this to be possible, a sufficient proportion of individuals need to be grown-up enough not to mind playing at being children.

In the same way it is thought to be bad for these people who are playing at parents to have no parents themselves. In the game it is generally thought that there should be another house of representatives to which the rulers who are directly elected by the people should be responsible. In Britain this function

belongs to the House of Lords, which is to some extent composed of those who have a hereditary title, and to some extent by those who have won a position there by eminence in various branches of public work. Once again the "parents" of the parents are persons, and capable of making positive contributions as human beings. And it makes sense to love or to hate or to respect or to despise persons. There can be no substitute in a society for the human beings or being at the top, insofar as that society is to be rated according to its quality of emotional maturity.

And further, in a study of the social setting in Great Britain, we can see that the Lords are children, relative to the Crown. Here in each case we come again to a person, who holds his position by heredity, and also by maintaining the love of his people by his personality and actions. It is certainly helpful when the reigning monarch quite easily and sincerely carries the matter a stage further and proclaims a belief in God. Thus the problems that now cluster around the idea of isolationism could be postponed.

Geographical Boundary of a Democracy

For the development of a democracy, in the sense of a mature society structure, it seems that it is necessary that there should be some natural geographical boundary for that society. Obviously, until recently and even now, the fact that Great Britain is sea-bound (except for its relation to Eire) has been very much responsible for the maturity of our society structure. Switzerland has (less satisfactorily) mountain limits. The United States until recently had the advantage of a west which offered unlimited exploitation; this meant that the United States, while being united by positive ties, did not until recently need to start to feel to the full the internal struggles of a closed community, united in spite of hate as well as because of love.

A state that has no natural frontier cannot relax an active adaptation to neighbors. In one sense, fear *simplifies* the emotional situation, for many of the indeterminate Y and some of the less severe of the anti-social X become able to identify with the state on the basis of a cohesive reaction to an external persecution threat. This simplification is detrimental, however, to the development towards maturity, which is a difficult thing, involving full acknowledgement of essential conflict, and the non-employment of any way out or way round (defenses).

In any case, the basis for a society is the whole human personality, and the personality has a limit. The diagram of a healthy person is a circle (sphere) so that whatever is not-self can be described as either inside or outside that person. It is not possible for persons to get further in society-building than they can get with their own personal development. For these reasons we regard with suspi-

cion the use of terms like "world-citizenship." Perhaps only a few really great and fairly aged men and women ever get as far in their own development as to be justified in thinking in such wide terms.

If the whole world were our society, then it would need to be at times in a depressed mood (as a person at times inevitably has to be), and it would have to be able fully to acknowledge essential conflict within itself. The concept of a global society brings with it the idea of the world's suicide, as well as the idea of the world's happiness. For this reason we expect the militant protagonists of the world state to be individuals who are in a manic swing of a manic-depressive psychosis.

Education in Democratic Lore

Such democratic tendency as exists can be strengthened by a study of the psychology of social as well as of individual maturity. The results of such study must be given in understandable language to the existing democracies and to healthy individuals everywhere so that they may become *intelligently self-conscious*. Unless they are self-conscious they cannot know what to attack and what to defend, nor can they recognize threats to democracy when these arise. "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance"—vigilance by whom?—by two or three of the $100 - (X + Y + Z)$ percent mature individuals. The others are busy just being ordinary good parents, handing on the job of growing up, and of being grown-up, to their children.

Democracy at War

The question must be asked, is there such a thing as democracy at war? The answer is certainly not a plain yes. In fact, there are some reasons why, in war-time, there should be an announcement of temporary suspension of democracy because of war. It is clear that mature healthy individuals, collectively forming a democracy, should be able to go to war to defend what is valued, already possessed, etc.; and to fight anti-democratic tendencies insofar as there are people to support such tendencies by fighting. Nevertheless, it must be but seldom that things have worked out that way.

According to the description given above, a community is never composed of 100 percent of healthy, mature individuals. As soon as war approaches, there is a re-arrangement of groups, so that by the time war is being fought it is not the healthy who are doing all the fighting. Taking our four groups

- Many of the anti-socials, along with mild paranoids, feel better because of actual war, and they welcome the real persecution threat. They find a pro-social tendency by active fighting.

- Of the indeterminates, many step over into what is the thing to do, perhaps using the grim reality of war to grow up as they would not otherwise have done.
- Of the hidden anti-socials, probably some find opportunity for the urge to dominate in the various key positions which war creates.
- The mature, healthy individuals do not necessarily show up as well as the others. They are not so certain as the others are that the enemy is bad. They have doubts. Also they have a bigger positive stake in the world's culture, and in beauty and in friendship, and they cannot easily believe war is necessary. Compared with the near-paranoids they are slow in getting the gun in hand and in pulling the trigger. In fact they miss the bus to the front line, even if when they get there they are the reliable factor and the ones best able to adapt to adversity.

Moreover, some of the healthy of peace-time become anti-social in war (conscientious objectors) not from cowardice but from a genuine personal doubt, just as the peace-time anti-socials tend to find themselves in brave action in war. For these and other reasons, when a democratic society is fighting, it is the whole group that fights, and it would be difficult to find an instance of a war conducted by just those of a community who provide the innate democratic factor in peace. It may be that, when a war has disturbed a democracy, it is best to say that at that moment democracy is at an end, and those who like that way of life will have to start again and fight inside the group for the re-establishment of democratic machinery, after the end of the external conflict. This is a large subject, and it deserves the attention of large-minded people.

Reference

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