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Larman C. Wilson
THE DEGRADATION
OF THE DEMOCRATIC DOGMA

BROOKS AND HENRY ADAMS, RALPH ADAMS CRAM,
WALTER LIPPMANN, AND HENRY L. MENCKEN

Democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few.—G. B. Shaw.

Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.—R. Niebuhr.

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century—especially since World War I—has witnessed an increasing number of indictments against democracy and attempts to depreciate the Democratic Dogma. These indictments, which have been frequent in the 1960's and the 1964 presidential campaign, particularly from the right of center and often with a racial basis, provide quite a contrast to the "High Tide of Democracy" at the turn of the century and its "Golden Age" from 1900 to 1918—using the labels of Edward McBurns (*Ideas in Conflict*). Although these condemnations have various focal points, most of the critics of democracy predicate their rationales upon the alleged incompetence of the average man to govern himself and thereby indict democracy as an incompetent political system. Certain developments and trends in society have brought out in sharp relief the role of the common man vis-à-vis public affairs—thus making him more vulnerable to those impugning the Democratic Dogma. For example, the increasing technology and complexity inherent in contemporary society—due to the completed transition from an agriculturally oriented economy and society to that with an industrial base—have placed herculean demands upon the individual. It is the apparent inability of the common

man, "the unintellectual man—unaware of intellectual traditions and the history of thought" (William Albion, *Modern Public Opinion*), to adjust to the social and political milieu and to consider and decide more complicated issues, that has provided democracy's critics their *raison d'être*.

Although the twentieth century attempts to deprecate the Democratic Dogma fell into several categories, the scope of this article will be limited to the "incompetence" category—i.e., to those critics who dwell upon the incompetence of the average man in indicting democracy. This category is selected from David Spitz's *Patterns of Anti-Democratic Thought* in which he delineates and then analyzes the various categories of antidemocratic thought. Our examination will be limited to the following democratic critics: Brooks and Henry Adams, Ralph Adams Cram, Walter Lippmann, and Henry L. Mencken.

THE HOUSE OF ADAMS

It was the general skepticism and pessimism toward democracy emanating from the two Adams brothers, Brooks and Henry, that set the stage for their own, as well as other critics', polemics against the Democratic Dogma. Two factors tended to condition their final outlook, which had evolved from an initial optimism toward democracy. The first was the Adams' attempt to bring about a rapprochement with American capitalism; and the second, especially by Brooks and Henry, to explain and reconcile themselves to the demise of the Adams family in American politics.

Charles Francis Adams, the two brothers' father, came the closest to achieving the rapprochement with capitalism; but even he could not surrender to State Street (Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*). Neither could his two sons make the compromise, least of all Brooks. It was their inability to adjust to the era that excluded them from exercising a role in American politics commensurate with their ability—for the attainment of power requires both ability and adjustment to the environment. It was the ability of both John Adams and John Quincy Adams to adjust that explained their rise to the presidency. However, the changes in America brought about by Jacksonian democracy and the transition from agriculture to industry made it more difficult and virtually impossible for their offspring, although still competent and able, to adjust.

Brooks Adams (1848-1927) maintained that the decline in the faith

of democracy was exemplified by the political and diplomatic decline of his family on the American scene. In order to portray this decline he collected into a volume several of Henry's essays—"The Tendency of History" (1894), "A Letter to American Teachers of History" (1910), and "The Rule of Phase Applied to History" (1909)—and entitled the collection *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (1919). It was in the introduction to these essays that Brooks presented his case that the Degradation had run its course in the Adams family—from John Quincy to Brooks and Henry. In his attempt to portray the movement in thought in the Adams family, Brooks admitted that the faith in the Democratic Dogma had been "strong in his family" a century ago and had found expression through his grandfather, John Quincy Adams. Although both Brooks and Henry had inherited a "strong belief" in democracy, certain events caused them to become disillusioned with it as John Quincy also reacted to his 1828 defeat for a second term by Andrew Jackson.

Brooks Adams' early optimism and faith in democracy while a young lawyer in Boston "had been shaken by personal experience in politics and by the events attending the panics of 1893" (Thornton Anderson, *Brooks Adams, Constructive Conservative*). These events led him to speculate on the causes of social decline and resulted in an 1895 volume, *The Law of Civilization and Decay*. In this work he developed the theory that civilization, the product of social energy, adheres to the physical law of mass: accelerating or retarding in ratio to the density of population. As population concentration (or industrialization) increases, a centralization in social energy and mass results. This centralization soon leads to its own disintegration, which causes the social energy and mass to be decentralized. Thus the social ebb and flow, or history, is always from dispersion to concentration to centralization and back again to dispersion. However, there are two phases of thought—"manifestations of human energy"—that motivate the transitional oscillations between "barbarism and civilization": fear and greed. Fear, which culminates in the social rule of the priest, conduces primitive or limited centralization; and greed, which is epitomized in the social rule of the merchant, conduces accelerating centralization. Therefore, civilization proceeded in cycles propelled by fear and greed; fear gave rise to religion and imagination, which soon produced an accelerated social movement that led to a civilization governed by greed; greed, in the quest for profits, dissipated through war and commerce the social energy that religion had accumulated. Brooks, after developing and

elaborating this theory, was convinced that the determining factors in the rise and fall of empires were geography and economics.

Employing the theory developed in his 1895 volume, Brooks Adams discerned that American capitalism was exemplified in the dominance of greed and centralization. His application of this theory to America was the main thesis of the resultant work, *The Theory of Social Revolutions* (1913). Although in the United States centralization was dominant with the capitalist in charge, he saw their incapacity to maintain their own order. It was the inability of the capitalists in the skill of administration—since advances in civilization represented advances in administration as directed by the governing class—that would subsequently lead to a social dispersion. A further factor contributing to the destruction of American capitalism was the dominance of the profit motive, which had transcended all other skills. Thus the ineptness of the capitalists in the skill of administration and the omnipotence of the quest for profits would break the sinews which kept American capitalism unified.

It is apparent that Brooks Adams' investigations and theories led him to a most dismal view of man and democracy. His concept of progress—the inexorable alternations between fear and greed—completely excluded man as having any place of influence in the formula. In his introduction to the *Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* he indicated certain tenets of his final philosophical position. As a result of certain "difficulties in middle life," he came to look on man as a "pure automaton, who is moved along the paths of least resistance by forces over which he has no control." He admitted his reversion to Calvinistic philosophy and the belief that the strongest human passions were fear and greed.

Henry Adams (1838-1918), his older brother, developed a theory of history and a science of society related to natural science—analogue to the laws that were in operation in the field of physics. To construct his theory of history he selected the Second Law of Thermodynamics: in the transformation of heat into energy, or vice versa, there is a certain amount of heat that is unavailable to be converted into energy. This unavailability impressed Henry Adams and caused him to believe in the constant dissipation of energy. As a result of his study of thermodynamics, he adopted the metaphysical theory of dualism: there were two kinds of force in experience—viz., centripetal and centrifugal. The first, center-seeking, made for unity and was called religion by man; the second, outer-seeking, made for multiplicity

and was called science by man. Henry Adams contended that these two forces were discernible in human experiences; e.g., the highest peak of unity had been reached by man during medieval Christianity, and the height of disunity was reflected by American capitalism. In the former period religion predominated, in the latter science.

Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres: A study of Thirteenth Century Unity (1905) is Henry Adams' interesting analysis of the unity achieved by man during the thirteenth century by the adoration of the Virgin Mary. It was this adoration that unified the era by transcending man's instincts and desires. However, the discovery of the inductive method and its subsequent application caused a change in the center of focus. Now science supplanted man as the dynamic center of the universe. The disintegration of faith in the thirteenth century and the subsequent enthronement of science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries stimulated Henry Adams to find the symbol of power that had replaced the Virgin Mary. It was while he was attending the Paris Exhibition in 1900 and observed the dynamo that he came to believe the machine was the modern symbol.

The formulation of his law of the dissipation of energy led Henry Adams to certain pessimistic conclusions relative to the universe and man. He could not believe that this was a teleological universe; it was just the opposite. It was a universe of accelerated and dissipated decline that would lead to the eventual destruction of all life. The theory of evolution was a fallacy, as postulated by Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859): life was not progressing upward, but was retrogressing. This was a mechanistic universe of mechanical forces that were ruling the actions of man and society. This view he expressed concisely in his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams: A Study of Twentieth Century Multiplicity* (1907), as follows: "Modern politics is, at bottom, a struggle not of men but of forces." Another reflection of his view of democracy was contained in the novel *Democracy*, published anonymously in 1879. In this novel—in which the hero, Senator Ratcliffe, a master of political organization who covers his dishonesty with religion—the economic sources of political corruption are ignored and evil is attributed to the principle of democracy.

Thus both Brooks and Henry Adams arrived at a position of gloomy pessimism vis-à-vis the universe, humanity and democracy. In keeping with their deterministic historical rationales, which completely excluded the human element from the equation, their lack of faith in democracy as a political system was obvious since there was no faith

in humanity. They could not believe that man had the power or ability purposely to control and direct his institutions. At least Henry found a refuge in the thirteenth century when man had achieved the epitome of unity to which he could turn; Brooks had no escape but to await the chaos that he had prognosticated.

RALPH ADAMS CRAM

Mr. Cram (1863-1942) observed certain atavistic tendencies in contemporary society and, like Henry Adams, found refuge in the Middle Ages. Not only had Cram read Adams' *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, but he wrote the introduction to the first public edition expressing his praise. According to his view, man had achieved the high point in his political development during the medieval era. He designated this high point as High Democracy and its "antithesis," the level prevalent in the twentieth century, as Low Democracy. Cram, in his *Convictions and Controversies* (1935), defined democracy so that its medieval orientation was apparent: ". . . a democracy of status and of diversified function, under an heirarchical, not an egalitarian system of organization." The transition from High to Low Democracy was the result of society's nonobservance of the central truth of politics; viz., that the determining factor in government is the human factor, and that the significant element within the human factor is quality (*The End of Democracy*, 1937). Therefore the history of man is the conflict between the "qualitative" and "quantitative" factors.

Cram maintained that the deterioration of democracy was due to its being controlled by men of "quantity" rather than those of "quality." This was attributable to the erroneous assumption in human equality and perfectability. The first law in the "Book of Man" was inequality—in intelligence, character, and so on; for he accepted the view, as posited by certain sociologists and biologists, that the majority of people have the mentality of a fourteen-year old child. The great mass of men—Neolithic Man, as he called them—are not capable of organizing society, coping with its problems, or of self-government—for they are of "deficient capacity." Cram further charged that democracy went out when "universal suffrage came in" since it meant the submerging of "quality" by "quantity," by numerical ratios for determination. It was in this regard that Cram referred to General Jackson as the "veritable Nemesis of true democracy."

The travesty upon democratic rule in the twentieth century, according to Cram, was that the majority failed to select the most qualified leaders. Instead, they selected leaders in their own image, which led to the Nemesis of Mediocrity (a title Cram assigned to a diminutive book that reflected his disillusionment resulting from World War I). On account of this selective process, statesmanship was extinct and leadership had degenerated to a level equal to that of the general mass of voters. Thus the "reign of mediocrity" resulted wherein democracy became a greater menace than autocracy.

It was only by reversing the retrogressive trend in the quality of leadership, by eliminating the indiscriminate franchise, making it once again a privilege instead of a right, that society could break out of the historic sequence of repetition: Democracy-Degeneration-Anarchy-Dictatorship-Slavery-Revolution. Cram reversed President Wilson's famous slogan that "the world must be made safe for democracy" to read that "democracy must be made safe for the world."

It was in this manner that Cram, perhaps taking his cue from the Adams brothers, directed his polemics against the competence of the average man to govern himself and choose qualified leaders, and therefore the competence of democracy in which the role of the average man loomed decisive.

WALTER LIPPMANN

This current writer (born in 1889)—"a latter-day Platonist yearning for government by an informed elite," in the words of Edward McBurns (*Ideas in Conflict*)—contends that the people in the United States, through the franchise, lack the requisite information and experience to decide the complex issues that confront contemporary government. This deficiency is especially apparent relative to matters of peace and war: "The unhappy truth is that the prevailing public opinion has been destructively wrong at the critical junctures. The people have imposed a veto upon the judgements of informed and responsible officials." (*Essays in the Public Philosophy*, 1955). The genesis of this assertion is found in two of Lippmann's earlier works, which dealt with the nature of public opinion and the public.

In a volume entitled *The Phantom Public* (1927), the author posited the question: "The environment is complex. Man's political capacity is simple, can a bridge be built between them?" The thesis

of the book, to answer the posited question, was that the public cannot and does not "successfully intervene in a controversy on the merits of the case." Instead, they judge externally and act only supporting one of the interests directly involved. The "public," according to Lippmann, is not a fixed body of individuals; it is only those that are personally affected by an action that make a decision. Another explanation revealing the individual's inability to decide is that man's and society's knowledge advances at a slower rate than that at which action must be taken (*Public Opinion*, 1922). The existence of a time differential means that a decision made by the government, after the view of the public has been ascertained, is no longer appropriate to solve the original problem for decision. A further complicating factor is the failure of democratic theory to acknowledge the inadequacy of self-centered opinions for securing good government. This results in a perpetual conflict between theory and practice. Lippmann's most recently presented explanation—*Essays in the Public Philosophy*, 1955—is that there has developed in the twentieth century, especially in the United States, a "functional derangement of the relationship between the mass of the people and the government. The people have acquired power which they are incapable of exercising, and the governments they elect have lost powers which they must recover if they are to govern."

The implications of Lippmann's thesis lead one to raise certain questions about democratic government and the ballot as a political instrument. Anticipating such a reaction by some of his readers, Lippmann declared that he was a "liberal democrat" and had no desire to "disenfranchise" his fellow citizens. Instead, his hope was that both liberty and democracy could be preserved without destroying each other. Directing himself to the question, "What then are the true boundaries of the people's power?" he arrived at the position that the people can elect the government and remove it; but they cannot administer it, for a mass, obviously, cannot govern, per se. It is where mass opinion dominates the government that there is a "morbid derangement" of the true functions of power. Therefore, the "malady" of democratic government has resulted from a disruption in relation between two functions—governing and representing. Unfortunately, according to Lippmann, the power of the executive has been "enfeebled" under duress from the legislative branch and mass opinions. It is this situation that has made democratic governments prone to errors at

critical times and which, if not corrected by a proper rapprochement between the governing and representing functions, will cause the demise of the Western democracies.

It was much earlier in Lippmann's writing career that he attacked majority rule. In an article—"Why Should the Majority Rule?" (*Harper's*, March 1926)—he took issue with those who viewed majority rule as being sacrosanct. Lippmann held that there was no justification for the view that the opinions of 51% were necessarily superior to those of 49%. Majority rule was the rule of force in which might makes right. In spite of his criticisms Lippmann did concede that, although the opinion of 51% was not the true opinion of the entire 100%, it might be a closer approximation than that of 49%. Also, the majority rule was the "mildest form" by which to exercise the force of numbers.

Thus it appears that Lippmann, though paying lip service to popular democracy, implies that the governing facet must be given more decisive power, which means a subtraction from the representing facet. The problems that face contemporary governments in the West and their concomitant issues upon which the public must make a decision, must be limited to the realm of broad, general alternatives within the purview of which the administrators operate by exercising their own prerogatives.

HENRY L. MENCKEN

This cynical critic of democracy, a self-educated journalist, was no contributor to American political theory. As somewhat of a muckraker gone awry, when he's compared to Lincoln Steffen, Henry L. Mencken (1880-1956) likewise impugned democracy as based upon the alleged incompetence of the average man. Like Lippman, he held that the multiplicity of issues to be decided in a democracy are too complex for the public and, because of the time factor, could not be submitted to them for an opinion. Mencken accepted the view, like Cram, of certain sociologists and biologists that the mentality of the average man was equivalent to that of a fourteen-year-old child. In *Notes on Democracy* (1926) he maintained that the common man had a "congenital incapacity for the elemental duties of citizens in a civilized state." In Nietzschean terms—he wrote a volume entitled *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1908)—Mencken believed the average man, a "natural slave himself," could not understand the desire for liberty in

his superiors, and really did not desire to be free but wanted to be "safe."

He took to task the process of education in a democracy as being completely futile. Since man was incompetent anyway—even the White race which was at the apex of the social pyramid (the Negro was at the bottom)—education could exert no beneficial or elevating influence. Man was "congenitally unteachable" and therefore education could make no inroads (with Robert Rives La Monte, *Men Versus the Man*, 1910).

Although Mencken was opposed to democracy, he did state that government in both the United States and the United Kingdom was the "best, safest, and most efficient" ever created. Their "beneficent practice" was due to the fact that democratic theory could not be achieved in actual practice. Happily, in his view, each citizen did not have an equal voice in the process of government.

CONCLUSION


As our examination of certain critics of democracy has revealed, they predicate their indictments of democracy upon the proposition that democracy as a form of government is impossible since it is based upon the common man, who is incompetent and motivated by emotion and ignorance. However, the deprecating of the average citizen's competence does not, ipso facto, refute the principle and philosophy of democratic government.

Democracy is not contingent upon the complete competence of the common man or the man-in-the-street to cope with the manifold and complex issues facing contemporary government. One of the main prerequisites of democratic government—the only system of government that maintains the procedures for its own correction—is the responsibility of the leaders to the electorate. This relationship is assured by the ballot. The people, by the franchise and public opinion, provide the general outline and frame of reference for the leaders within which the latter function and attend to the minutiae concomitant to government. It cannot be presupposed that the average man has the expertise to cope with the gamut of governing problems; but the leader he elects should and must possess this requisite knowledge. Admittedly, there are ways of demonstrating the incompetence of the average citizen in certain areas; but he is at least competent to make two types of decisions: 1) to determine the general ends to

which governmental policy is to be directed, and 2) to determine who is to compose the government (Spitz).

It is apparent also that the equation of democracy with the majority is not completely valid since 1) the majority, per se, cannot rule; 2) the difficulty in determining the majority; and 3) the majority is constantly shifting. A number of writers—John C. Calhoun, Alexis de Tocqueville, James Bryce, Walter Lippmann, inter alia—have voiced fears of the “tyranny of the majority.” Professor Dahl, in attempting to find methods for constructing a theory of democracy, concluded that the majority rarely rules on matters of specific policy. Instead, specific policies are produced by the rule of minorities. Therefore, he maintained that majority rule was mainly a “myth,” which thus relegates the tyranny of the majority also to the “myth” category: “. . . if the majority cannot rule, surely it cannot be tyrannical.” Certainly majority rule is essential but it is not the sole criterion; with it are related definite minority rights.

Otto Butz (*Of Man and Politics*) provides a direct answer to Walter Lippmann’s “malady” thesis of democratic government. He believes that the electorate can be “induced” to develop the necessary concern and knowledge for “responsible democratic political participation.” It is the task of the leadership to teach and educate the electorate about the “facts of public life and of their significance for the nation’s and the world’s future.” As Professor Hallowell has so aptly stated: “The degradation of man is amply attested to by the events of our time. . . . We know full well the depths to which men can sink. What we need to remind ourselves of are the heights to which men may climb.” (*The Moral Foundation of Democracy*).

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