

# Is Democratic Theory for Export?

Jacques Barzun



Sixth Morgenthau Memorial Lecture  
on Ethics & Foreign Policy

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**Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs**  
**Merrill House**  
**170 East 64th Street, New York, NY 10021**

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**Printed in the United States of America.**  
**ISBN 0-87641-227-4**

**\$4.00**

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*Morgenthau Memorial Endowment Fund, 1986*

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## Introduction

The Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs presents the annual Morgenthau Memorial Lecture as a tribute to the memory of Professor Hans J. Morgenthau, author of *Politics Among Nations* and other books on the subject of international affairs. Professor Morgenthau was a trustee of the Carnegie Council for more than twenty years until his death in 1980. The Carnegie Council, formerly the Council on Religion and International Affairs, initiated an annual lecture series in 1979, and Professor Morgenthau delivered this first Distinguished Lecture on Ethics and Foreign Policy. In 1981 the lecture series was renamed to commemorate the contribution Professor Morgenthau made not only to the Carnegie Council but also to the study of ethical problems of international affairs.

Professor Morgenthau's first book, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, appeared in 1946. There were two main points: first, politics cannot be reduced to scientific calculations, and second, man not being perfectible, political progress will remain problematic. This was not in keeping with the dominant trends of the day in political science nor with the heady expectations of the postwar world for the realization of Immanuel Kant's perpetual peace through the mechanism of the United Nations.

Professor Morgenthau eventually reduced his philosophy to six principles in order to distinguish what he called "practical realism" from competing formulas of international relations. The first principle is that "politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature." Two, the "main signpost" is the "concept of interest defined in terms of power." Three, "interest defined as power" is "an objective category which is universally valid although the meaning is not fixed once and for all." Four, political action has great moral significance. Five, the moral aspirations of a particular nation are not identical with the moral laws that govern the universe. Sixth and finally, these principles together make a unique

theory, however much political realism may have been misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Certainly the criticism of the "practical realist" vision of international politics continues unabated. It is a growth industry in academe. Competing ideas or additions are said to be of growing significance in guiding international relations. At the moment, one such competing vision is that of international regimes, or principles, structures, and mechanisms for dealing with special categories of international activities such as international trade (which is dealt with through, for example, the GATT), fishing, wheat, monetary affairs, and so on. Whatever the criticism, however, it begins with Morgenthau. Everyone else is now a "neo-realist." I believe Professor Morgenthau would have enjoyed that. However, we can consider his six principles on another occasion.

Last year, the Fifth Annual Morgenthau Memorial Lecture was presented by Professor Kenneth W. Thompson, who edited the sixth edition of *Politics Among Nations*. Among others who have been with us are Abba Eban, Donald McHenry, and Admiral Hyman Rickover. The sixth Morgenthau Memorial Lecturer adds luster to this event. Professor Jacques Barzun has had a most distinguished career at Columbia University as professor of history, dean of faculties and provost, University Professor, and special adviser on the arts to the president. His writings and lectures are models in the fields of history, cultural history, and criticism. One of his most recent books is *A Stroll with William James*, published in 1983, eight years after his retirement from Columbia. It is a graceful, witty, and profound book, and I recommend it to all as a companion. I'll mention only one quote:

In society, to be sure, an unchecked pluralism can be disastrous. When everybody has to be lectured to, or has a veto, or usurps one through solitary or group obstruction, the quasi chaos returns. Time passes, anger mounts, nothing gets done, and with each bout of paralysis the necessary faith in private and public institutions is breached. That is how, by a progressive failure of nerve, civilizations come to an end. Once again, the refusal to limit and qualify truths, because so doing would tarnish "principle," incurs its own punishment.\*

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\* Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 123.

From some of his thoughts expressed in that volume, as well as from his life's work and reflections, comes this Morgenthau Memorial Lecture, "Is Democratic Theory for Export?" In addition to thanking Professor Barzun, I would like to take this occasion to thank all those who made contributions to the Morgenthau Memorial Endowment Fund to assure that this annual lecture will remain a permanent part of the Carnegie Council's institutional program.

*Robert J. Myers*  
President  
Carnegie Council



*I sent two of our men. They traveled for  
three days and found people and houses  
without number, but they were small and  
without government; therefore they returned.*

*Christopher Columbus  
First letter from the New World  
March 14, 1493*

# Is Democratic Theory for Export?

by Jacques Barzun

A permanent feature of American opinion and action in foreign policy is the wish, the hope, that other nations might turn from the error of their ways and become democracies: "They are a great people,\* why can't they manage their affairs like us?" A corollary has been, let us help those governments that are democratic, make them our allies, and let us oppose the others—indeed, if necessary, take action to coerce them. A current example is the agitation about South Africa, which rages from the campus to Capitol Hill and from the board room to the living room. In these rooms, anyone not in favor of "doing something" against South Africa is deemed a traitor to the very spirit of this country, these democratic United States.

But, there remains a question on this subject that has long bothered the thoughtful. What is it exactly that we want others to copy? What is the theory of democracy that we mean to export? Not all democracies are alike. Whose constitution is the best? On what theory is it based? The demand for a theory has been especially urgent during the last 40 years because of the striking success of the opposite theory, Marxist-Leninist communism. In one region after another it has conquered what often looked like rising democracies. The rival theory was apparently more attractive, more convincing. We attribute these results to eloquent agents who had an easy time because "we" weren't there with a theory of our own. Who such missionaries for our side might be, given the democratic idea of the self-determination of peoples, is something of a puzzle, but it is secondary to yet another, greater one: What are these missionaries to preach? Where do we find

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\* Or, "a great little people."

the parallel to the writings of Marx and Lenin, and what do those writings tell?

Different persons would give different answers, which is a weakness to begin with. Some would point to the Declaration of Independence and the federal Constitution; others to Rousseau, Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine. Then there is Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* in two volumes and a wonderful little book by Walter Bagehot on the English Constitution, not to mention *The Federalist* papers and many eloquent pages from John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. Taken loosely together, those writings would be regarded by many as making up the theory of democracy.

Of course, they don't all agree; they don't form a system. *The Federalist* writers are afraid of democracy;\* John Adams disputes Tom Paine and goes only part way with Jefferson.† Burke and Rousseau sound like direct contraries. Tocqueville calls for so many of the special conditions he found here that his conclusions are not transferable. And Bagehot does the same thing for Great Britain: you have to be Englishmen to make the English Constitution work.

All these ifs and ans make a poor prospect for unified theory, but there is worse. When we actually read these documents we find that each theorized about a few subjects among many which very properly go by different names. We have: democracy, republic, free government, representative government, constitutional monarchy. These are beside: natural rights, civil rights, equality before the law, equal opportunity. Then there are also: universal suffrage, majority rule, separation of powers, and the two-party system. Nor should we forget another half dozen other topics that are found associated in modern times with the so-called democratic process—primary elections, the referendum, proportional representation, and so on.

That array of ideas and devices cannot but be daunting to the propagandist for democracy. Which are essential? How should they

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\* Madison repeats in *The Federalist* (nos. 10, 14, 48, 58, and 63) that full or pure democracy is a menace to freedom, and he praises the constitution being proposed to the American people for its "total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity" (no. 63).

† See *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2 volumes, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1959), pp. 199, 236, 248, 279, 351–52, 456, 519, 550, 598, and passim.

combine? The very need to explain what the terms mean bars the way to easy acceptance and enthusiasm. In addition, the key words do not mean the same thing to all the theorists. To cap these troubles, nowhere in the West has there been a central authority to define an orthodoxy, even a shifting one, such as there has been on the communist side.

On that side, there is the advantage not only of unity but of broad abstraction: the class struggle, history as dialectical materialism, surplus value, society shaped by the forms of economic production, the contradictions in capitalism preparing its decline and fall, the aim and training of the revolutionist, and the dictatorship of the proletariat leading to the withering away of the state. These eight "big ideas," energized by resentment and utopian hope, make up a scheme that has the ring of high intellectuality. The scheme is readily teachable as a series of catchwords which, as experience shows, can appeal to every level of intelligence. It offers not only a promise of material advantage, but also a drama—a struggle toward a glorious end, unfolding according to necessity.

Compared with a scripture and prophecy, which amount not to theory but to ideology, the concrete plans and the varied means of the writers on democracy present a spectacle of pettifoggery and confusion. Common opinion reinforces this lack of order and unity. The democratic peoples suppose that free governments did not exist before the population at large got the vote, which is not true, or that democracy is incompatible with a king and an aristocracy, though England is there to show that a monarchy with a House of Lords can be democratic. Was the United States a democracy when senators were not elected directly by the people? Were we a free government when we held millions in slavery or segregation? Finally, it takes no research to find out that the democracies of France, Italy, and Sweden, those of Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines, and of Thailand, India, and the United States are far from giving people the same freedoms by the same means.

Take two recent illustrations. In France, the last elections brought to power in the National Assembly, and hence in the office of the prime minister, a party opposed to that of the president, whose term was to continue for another two years. This vote caused immediate and prolonged consternation. Would there be a violent clash or would government stop dead in a stalemate between the president and his prime minister backed by the Assembly? A few daring souls said that

“cohabitation” (which in French has no sexual overtones) might be possible. But debate raged on. It so happened that a young musicologist from Smith College was in Paris when the dismay was at its height. Being fluent in French, he wrote a letter to *Le Monde*, which published it as remarkable. It said in effect: “Good people, don’t be upset. What bothers you has happened in the United States quite often. Democracy won’t come to an end because two branches of government are in the hands of different parties.”\*

He was right. Cohabitation has begun, but it is working in ways that surprise American friends of democracy—for instance, by the use of ministerial decrees that become law or of the closure called guillotine by which debate is cut off in the Assembly. The point of the example is clear: one Western democracy is nearly stymied by a lawful result of its own system, and gets over the trouble by means that would be unthinkable—anti-democratic—in another democracy where that same trouble of divided authority seems no trouble at all. What unified theory could cover both versions of the democratic process?

The second example comes from the Philippines, where a national election was held in circumstances of violence and coercion and yielded an outcome that could therefore be questioned. A delegation from the United States Congress had to go and inquire into the events surrounding the vote before this country could assume that the democratic process had in fact been carried out, for as we saw, common opinion holds that the vote of the people is the diagnostic test of democracy.<sup>†</sup> But what if the voting itself is not free, as in parts of the Philippines and in many other countries where the doubt and confusion are never settled by inquiry? Are those democracies? Or must they be considered half-way cases in order to fit under the grand theory?

The truth is, the real subject for discussion is not “Is democratic

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\* Peter Anthony Bloom, “La Leçon des Etats-Unis,” *Le Monde* (Paris), February 28, 1986.

<sup>†</sup> “... the right to vote is surely the linchpin of peaceful change...,” says Lloyd N. Cutler, former counsel to President Carter, and he recommends it for South Africa (“Using Morals, Not Money, on Pretoria,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1986, sec. 4, p. 23). But change to peace is far from assured. Hitler’s example has been imitated again and again by well-led groups aiming at one-party rule.

theory for export?" but "Is there a theory of democracy?" We expect to find one not solely because a large part of the world boasts a rival theory, but also because in our admiration for science, we like to have a theory for every human activity. My conviction is that democracy has no *theory*. It has only a *theorem*, that is, a proposition which is generally accepted and which can be stated in a single sentence. Here is the theorem of democracy: For a free mankind, it is best that the people should be sovereign, and this popular sovereignty implies political and social equality.

When I say the theorem of democracy has been accepted, I am not overlooking the anti-democratic opposition. For in one sense there is none. Look over the world of the twentieth century and you find at every turn the claim that the government of this nation and that nation is a popular government—the People's Republic of China, the German Democratic Republic, the Democratic Republic of Yemen and that of Kampuchea all say so in their titles. Other nations profess the same creed and point to their constitutions. The Soviet Union has one that provides for elections and delegates at various levels. Parties and voting and assemblies are found all up and down the five continents. The split comes over who "the people" are, what is meant by "party," and how the agents of government act for (or against) the people. Historically, the people has always been recognized in some fashion. Athens was a democracy—with slaves; the Roman emperor spoke in the name of "the Senate and the Roman people"; the Germanic tribes and the American Indians had chiefs and also general councils; kings were the "fathers" of their people—and their servants too. And the old adage *Vox populi, vox Dei*—the voice of the people is the voice of God—has always meant that rulers cannot and should not withstand the people's will.

The theorem, then, is not disputed even when tyranny flourishes under it, for it has two parts and the tyrant can boast that the blessings of the second part, equality, are due to him. We are thus brought to the great question of the machinery of government, because it is how the wheels turn, and not a theory, that makes a government free or not free. The dictatorship of the proletariat may be the theory of communism, but in fact neither the proletariat nor its single party rules. Voting and debating is make-believe set over a tight oligarchy led by one man. There is no machinery to carry out the promise that in time the proletariat will disappear and the state will wither away, and most

often, there is not even a device for ensuring the public succession from one top leader to the next.

The conclusion established so far would seem to be this: Democracy has no theory to cover the working of its many brands of machinery, whereas its antagonists use a single, well-publicized theory to cover in another sense, namely to conceal, the workings of one rather uniform machine, the police state.

A further conclusion is that the demand for a theory of democracy shows the regrettable tendency to think entirely in abstractions, never bringing general statements side by side with the facts of experience, or even noticing important differences between abstractions if they happen to be linked together by custom or usage. Democracy, for example, is thought of as synonymous with free government; "the sovereign people" is thought of as meaning all or most or some of the residents within the boundaries of a state. What kinds of freedom a government guarantees, how they are secured, and which groups and individuals actually obtain them and which do not are complicated questions that theorists and journalists alike prefer to ignore. They know that such details are of no use in stirring up either protests at home or virtuous indignation about others abroad. The public at large takes government itself abstractly, as a kind of single-minded entity, an engine that works only in one direction and always expresses the same attitude toward human desires. The democratic, modern style of government is the good kind, and the rest, past and present, are the bad.

For this childlike view, there is only one remedy and that is a little history. I include under this term contemporary history, for after having excluded the possibility of a theory of democracy I am concerned to offer instead a survey, or rather a sketchy panorama, of its manifestations. I do this with a practical purpose in view: I think it is important to know how the so-called free world came into being, what ideas and conditions would be required for its extension, and most immediate and important, what changes are occurring in our own democracy that threaten its peculiar advantages and make its export impossible.

Let us return to our theorem. It calls for three difficult things: expressing the popular will, ensuring equality, and by means of both, distributing a variety of freedoms. These purposes imply machinery. How, for example, is the popular will ascertained? The devices we are familiar with in the Anglo-American tradition have come from two

sources. One is the long, slow, haphazard growth of the English Constitution from the Parliament of Simon de Montfort in 1265 through innumerable struggles for rights won (and listed) a few at a time—Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, and so on.\* From this history, Montesquieu, Locke, and others variously derived the precepts and precedents that influenced the making of the United States Constitution.

The other source is antiquity—Greece and Rome—whose practices and writings on government inspired thinkers to design plans or issue warnings appropriate to their own time. The most famous scheme is that of Rousseau. His is also the most instructive, for although he is crystal clear, his interpreters divide on the tendency of his great book, *The Social Contract*. Some say it promotes freedom, others say it leads to totalitarianism. This shows how double-edged propositions can be. But let us see what Rousseau himself says. He takes democracy literally: all the people, equal in rank, come together and decide policy and choose leaders. This is the old Athenian democracy, except that there are no slaves. Rousseau goes on to point out that only a small city-state can manage that sort of government. Knowing his ancient history, he adds that such pure democracy is too good for men as they are. He agrees with the great minds of ancient Greece—Aristotle, Plato, Xenophon, Thucydides—all were against democracy; they saw dozens of democratic cities perish from inefficiency, stupidity, and corruption.†

Rousseau therefore falls back on representative government, which

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\* Simon de Montfort anticipated “the English Constitution” by 600 years. The Parliament of 1265 included two delegates from every shire and two burgesses from every town. The aim was that acting as Great Council to the king, they should advise him, supervise the several divisions of government, afford redress, and approve taxes. The king’s ministers should be responsible to it. In short, Montfort wanted in 1265 what slowly and painfully became general in Western Europe by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1265 the barons quarreled, resented middle-class participation in government, and resumed a war in which Montfort was conveniently stabbed in the back. But the people of England continued to worship him as a martyr, patriot, and saint.

† Aristotle’s treatise on ancient governments influenced such eighteenth-century proponents of free government as Madison in their fear of “democracy,” for Aristotle says it is the corruption of free government, just as tyranny is the corruption of monarchy (*Politics*, bk. IV, chap. 2).



he calls, correctly, "elective aristocracy": the people elect those they think the best (*aristoi*) to run their affairs for them. He also requires a lawgiver to describe the structure of the government. For "lawgiver" substitute "constitution," a set of rules for day-to-day operations.

Why should anybody think that such a system must end in tyranny? One answer can be given through a quick reminder: Hitler did not seize power, he was voted in as head of a plurality party by a people living under a democratic government and with a constitution that combined the best features of all constitutions on record. If you add to the strength of Hitler's party that of the German Communists, you have a large democratic majority voting for totalitarian rule. To generalize from this example, if the people is sovereign, it can do anything it wants, including turn its constitution upside down. It can lose its freedom by choosing leaders who promise more equality, more prosperity, more national power through dictatorship. The theorem of popular sovereignty is honored in the breach. The dictator says, "I represent the will of the people. I know what it wants."

On the other hand, a new nation can ask: "Popular sovereignty, the vote for everybody, then what?" That question was precisely the one put to Rousseau by envoys from two nations, Poland and Corsica. He wrote for each of them a small book that shows how he would go about being a lawgiver, a constitution-maker. These notable supplements to the abstract outline of *The Social Contract* are conveniently forgotten by Rousseau's critics. For in prescribing for Poland and for Corsica, Rousseau makes the all-important point that the history, character, habits, religion, economic base, and education of each people must be taken into account before setting up any machinery. No rules or means apply universally. What works in England will fail in Poland; what the French prefer, the Corsicans will reject.

Political equality can be decreed, but freedom cannot—it is a most elusive good. Rousseau warns the Poles that they should go slowly in freeing their serfs, for fear that in their economic ignorance the serfs will fall into worse misery than before. This was Burke's great point about the solidity of English freedom, which is freedom under a monarchy and what we would surely call a non-representative Parliament: based as it was on gradual change through history, freedom had taken root inside every Englishman. Burke criticized the French revolutionists because they did not revive the old assemblies and thereby give the French some training in the use of freedom. Instead, they wrote principles on a piece of paper and expected them to

produce the right behavior overnight. On this central issue, Burke and Rousseau are at one, as a fine scholar long ago demonstrated to a non-listening world in her book *Rousseau and Burke*.\*

This element of Time, of the slow training of individuals by history, carries with it a predicament and a paradox. The predicament is: How can the peoples that want to spread freedom to the world propose their institutions as models if those institutions depend on habits long ingrained? It is easy enough to copy a piece of actual machinery, such as a computer or even a nuclear weapon. It takes only a few bright, well-trained people with the model in front of them. But to copy a government is not something that a whole population can achieve by merely deciding to do it.

One may note in passing the double error of the former colonial powers: They did not teach the ways of freedom soon enough to their colonial subjects, and they let go of their colonies too quickly when the urge to independence swept the globe. The bloodshed was immediate and extensive, and it is not over. Some of the nations that emerged tried what they thought was democracy, only to succumb to military or one-party rule—always in the name of popular sovereignty, indeed of liberation. The word is not always a mere pretense, for it is liberation to be rid of a government that cannot govern. The ancient maxim is true, *mundus vult gubernari*—the world insists on being governed.

As for the paradox, it is this: How can a people learn the ways of free government until it is free? And how can it stay free if it cannot run the type of machinery associated with self-government? On this score, the spectacle of Latin America is baffling. The several states gained their independence from Spain not long after the thirteen North American colonies gained theirs from England, during the period 1783–1823. Yet repeated efforts by able, selfless leaders have left South and Central America prey to repeated dictatorships with the usual accompaniment of wars, massacres, oppression, assassinations, and that great diagnostic fact, uncertainty about the succession of legitimate governors.

To contrast the history of the North American colonies with the history of those of the South is not to disparage Latin America, but to remind ourselves of the bases of free government. We make a great

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\* A.M. Osborne, *Rousseau and Burke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940).

mistake in calling the American War of Independence "the American Revolution" and in bragging about the fact that it did not wind up in dictatorship like the English Revolution under Cromwell or the French under Robespierre. In 1776 the Americans rebelled against very recent rules and impositions. What they wanted was not a new type of government, but the old type they had always enjoyed. They were used to many freedoms which they claimed as the immemorial rights of Englishmen. Once they had defeated the English armies and expelled the Loyalists, they went back to their former ways, which they modestly enlarged and codified in the Bill of Rights. Needless to say, when the people of South America threw off Spanish and Portuguese rule they had no such tradition or experience to help them.

The evidence is overwhelming that it is not enough to be left alone by a royal or imperial power in order to establish some degree of freedom and to keep it safe, to say nothing of achieving egalitarian democracy. One should remember the travails of Spain itself throughout the nineteenth century and down to a few years ago. One should think of France, eager for freedom in 1789 but hardly settled in it during its five republics, two empires, one partial dictatorship, and twelve constitutions. For 200 years in Central Europe, various peoples, unhappily intermingled by centuries of war and oppression, have been longing to form nations and nations to form free states. Even under the iron heel of local communism and Russian hegemony, a working system seems beyond reach. A recent headline read: "Ethnic Mini-states Paralyze Yugoslavia."\* The lesson here is that *the people* must first define itself through a common language and common traditions before it can hope to be *the sovereign people*.

Nor are grass-roots aspirations alone enough to ensure either nationhood or liberal rule. We should recall the forgotten example of Russia. At the turn of the nineteenth century there had developed there a widespread, home-grown movement toward constitutional government. In 1905 several well-organized parties ranging from conservative and liberal to socialist and revolutionary had obtained from the tsar a representative two-chamber assembly based on nearly universal suffrage. Important civil rights and religious toleration were granted and able leaders arose from the middle class and professional groups, but the parties and leaders were unable to keep united behind

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\* *Washington Post*, June 28, 1986.

their gains and the whole house of cards soon collapsed. Politics were, so to speak, immature and the popular will confused. A symbol of that confusion was the crowd's cheering for the Archduke Constantine to replace the tsar: "Constantine and Constitution" was the shout, and it turned out that many thought that Constitution was Constantine's wife.

That first experience was not forgotten. Ten years later, in March 1917, a second democratic revolution occurred, backed at first by everybody—not just do-or-die liberals and revolutionaries, but business and professional men, trade unionists and conservative landholders, urban workers and army officers. The force behind the call for reform was the desire to win the war, and the institutions set up to carry out the one and carry on the other were perfectly adequate. Again, those in charge were unable to make the new institutions work, and in eight months they perished under the onslaught of a new autocracy led by Lenin and Trotsky. In less than ten years, then, two intelligent attempts to modernize government in Russia had failed—and Russia was a country where Western ideas had long since penetrated, a country whose educated class was at home in all the democratic capitals of Europe.

Our second large conclusion must therefore be that a democracy cannot be fashioned out of whatever people happen to be around in a given region; it cannot be promoted from outside by strangers; and it may still be impossible when attempted from inside by determined natives. Just as life on the earth depended on a particular coming together of unrelated factors, so a cluster of disparate elements and conditions is needed for a democracy to be born viable. Among these conditions one can name tradition, literacy, and a certain kind of training in give-and-take, as well as the sobering effect of national disaster—France in 1870 and Germany in 1945. The most adaptable of peoples, the Japanese, took a century to approximate Western democracy, aided no doubt by the harsh tutelage which followed a grievous defeat. And another people might have taken these same experiences the other way, as spurs to resist change.

The absence of theory and the rare occurrence at one time and place of the right pieces to assemble might seem enough to rule out the export of democracy from nation to nation, but there is today a third and last obstacle: the present character of free governments in the West. This difficulty may be made clear by comparing our times with the heyday of enthusiasm for democratic freedom, 1918–20. The First World War had been fought against monarchies and empires, and

this country joined in to "make the world safe for democracy." There is nothing foolish in that motto of Woodrow Wilson's. Victory seemed to give the Allied powers a chance to replace two conglomerate empires with a galaxy of new, true, and free nations.\* Russia itself seemed to have jumped the gun in March 1917.

What was not foreseen was the backlash of the war. Emotionally, it was a revulsion against four years of carnage. In practical effect, it was nothing less than a social revolution. The war itself was revolutionary, having moved the masses out of their routines—the men into the trenches, the women into the factories. What happened under Lenin in Russia, and for a time among her neighbors, advertised this social upheaval. The masses were now sovereign in their outlook and behavior. Henceforth, whatever was done must be done for their good and in their name. Their needs and wants, their habits and tastes, marked the high tide of democracy as Tocqueville had foreseen it in this country. The message was clear to all, because it had been preached with growing intensity for 100 years. Universal suffrage; the end of poverty; identical rights for everybody; social, economic, even sexual emancipation; popular culture, not elite esthetics—these demands went with a distrust and hatred of all the old orders, old leaders, and old modes of life that had brought on the four years of homicidal horror and destruction. The new modes were to be anti-capitalist (obviously); anti-Victorian in morals, and anti-parliamentarian as well, for many thought representative government a corrupt and contemptible fraud. Democracy needed better machinery. In that mood it is no wonder that fascism and the corporate state triumphed so rapidly.† If England and France hung on to their constitutional freedoms amid this turmoil, it was due largely to historical momentum, the same force that threw Russia back into its old groove.

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\* It is worth noting that tsarist Russia and the Communist Soviet Union joined the Western powers in the last two world wars without preventing those powers from proclaiming that they were fighting to put down autocracy and advance the cause of freedom. Theories, theories!

† The theory of the corporate state, or socialism in the guise of state capitalism, was expounded in France and Germany and promulgated in Italy. It had intellectual adherents for a time; Winston Churchill praised Mussolini, and David Lloyd George, Hitler. The defeat of the Axis powers silenced such advocates, which shows again how dependent on current events theorists are.

After all this, it would be a mistake to think that what is now called the free world is just the continuation of the liberal regimes which existed before 1914. The social revolution has changed them all into welfare states, and this transformation, which is one expression of the socialist ideal, has so altered the machinery of free government that it no longer resembles the model one could previously define by a few plain devices, such as voting, the party system, and majority rule.

Although the changes of the last 60 years in democratic nations have been similar, they have been uneven. In different countries the notions of freedom and equality have taken varying and sometimes contradictory meanings. Does a national health service increase freedom or reduce it? Does workers' compensation give equal treatment to workers and employers when it disregards contributory negligence in causing accidents? Are the rules for zoning and landmark preservation a protection of property rights or an infringement of them? More generally, can the enormous increase in the bureaucracy needed to enforce endless regulations and the high taxes levied for all the new services be called an extension of freedom or a limitation? Where it is clearly a limitation, the argument advanced is that it is imposed for the sake of equality, thus fulfilling the prediction of the earliest critics of democracy—that it begins by talking the language of liberty but ends in promoting an equality that destroys one freedom after another.

One can readily understand how the modern constraints to ensure rights came into being. The old inequalities were so flagrant, so irrational, and so undeserved, the exclusions and prejudices were so heartless and often so contrary to the laws even then on the books, that only concerted action by the government could bring the conditions of life for the masses into conformity with the democratic theorem—the popular will absolute implies equality also absolute.

But the steady drive toward social and economic parity for all has brought about a great shift in the source of day-to-day authority over individuals. The guarantor of rights and freedoms is no longer political; the government we live under is administrative and judiciary. Hence the diminished interest in political life and political rights: the poor turnout at most elections, the increase in single-issue partisanship, the rare occurrence of clear majorities, and the widespread feeling that individual action is futile. To exercise his or her freedom, the free citizen must work through channels long and intricate and rarely political.

To see this situation in perspective, open your Tocqueville and see what he saw as the essence of the American democracy. For him, the federal government is of small importance compared to the government of each state—and so it was in 1835 for every American citizen. “The government” meant the legislature at the state capitol. What is more, in all the small things that affect individual life, from roads and police to schools and taxes, Tocqueville tells us that it is the township or county that is paramount. He gives New England as proof: the town meeting determines the will of the people and the selectmen carry it out. That is democracy at work. Everybody has a voice in decisions, everybody has a chance to serve in office, everybody understands the common needs, as well as the degree to which anybody’s opinion or proposal is worth following.\* The democracy is that of Athens in its best days, the one Rousseau said was too perfect for human use.

Today, the government machine is more like the circuitry of a mainframe computer, too complex for anybody but students of the science. And this elaboration of devices for equality can only be endless. The lure of further rights is ever-present, because among men and women in society “equal” is a figurative term, not a mathematical one. For example, the justice of rewarding talent with higher pay has been gravely debated; the word meritocracy has been invented to suggest that merit violates democratic equality, because merit is not earned, it is as it were unmerited. Other attempts are being made, under the name of comparable worth, to legislate the equality of very diverse occupations. Equality of opportunity has come to seem too indefinite and uncertain.

Please note that I am describing, not judging. The point here is not the contents or wisdom of these new rights conferred in batches on the minorities—ethnic and sexual, on the employed and the unemployed, the disabled, the pregnant, the nonsmokers, the criminal, the moribund, and the insane, to say nothing of the fanciers of old buildings, the champions of certain animals and plants, and that great silent minority, the consumers. What is in question is the effect of ever-extended rights on the conception or definition of free government. One such effect is a conflict of claims, a division in the body politic. Many complain that others have become not equal but

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\* Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I, pt. I, ch. 5.

superequal, that reverse discrimination has set in. The rights of women and those of the unborn are clearly opposite. Perhaps the smoker and the nonsmoker form the emblematic pair whose freedoms are incompatible.

The upshot is that the idea of the citizen, a person with the same few clear rights as everybody else, no longer holds. In his place is a person with a set of special characteristics matched by a set of privileges. These group privileges must be kept in balance by continual addition if overall equality is to survive.\* This progression has a visible side effect: it tends to nullify majority rule, for in seeing to it that nobody loses through any decision, it makes majority and minority equal. Finally, progressive equality and bureaucratic delay encourage the thing known as “participatory democracy,” which is in fact direct minority rule, a kind of reverse democracy for coercing authority by protests, demonstrations, sit-ins, and job actions in order to obtain the rapid satisfaction of new demands.† Regardless of one’s like or dislike for the great complication that the original ideal of government by the people and for the people has undergone, one must admit once more that devising a theory for its actual working is impossible. To say, “Here it is, come and observe, and then copy it” would be a cruel joke. For one thing, the Western world still believes, rightly, that it is free. But though at one in the resolve to establish equality, its institutions remain wide apart in their allotment of freedoms. For example, an American citizen would find the extent of regulation in Switzerland or

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\* State constitutions are continually being amended. In 1984–85, the last year for which figures are available, 158 of the 338 proposed changes in state constitutions were approved. Many of these proposals dealt with rights and of these, 77.7 percent were approved (Council of State Governments, *The Book of the States: 1986–87*, Lexington, KY, 1986), p. 4.

† For example, when budget cuts forced the Library of Congress to reduce its hours of service, readers staged protests by various forms of obstruction. Arrests were made, and so were concessions. Again, acting in behalf of eleven monkeys, a group of simophiles camped outside the National Institutes of Health and commanded attention. Such sequences have come to be called civil disobedience, but they are not always civil and they bypass the traditional procedures guaranteed by the Bill of Rights—peaceful assembly and petition. It is felt, no doubt justly, that the old devices presuppose a different society, less hurried, better integrated, and used to articulate communication.



Sweden oppressive. He would call Switzerland's indirect elections at every level a backward, undemocratic system of representation. A Swiss (or an Australian) would retort, "You haven't advanced as far as the initiative and referendum for important national issues. You don't know what freedom is."\*

In France, that same American would be shocked at the practices by which the police regularly gather and use information about every citizen and would not be pacified by the reply that it is an old custom quite harmless to freedom. Elsewhere, the drag on democracy would seem to be the inability to act within a reasonable time, the result of government by coalition. In Holland, for example, because of the system of "pillarization"—the forming of groups according to religious, occupational, and ideological preference—there are over twenty parties competing at the polls and there is no majority.<sup>†</sup> It is precluded by proportional representation, which many regard as essential to democracy. As for Germany and Italy, the same need for coalition works in the usual way to give extremists leverage against the wishes of the actual but disunified majority.

Which of these complexities would one recommend to a new nation eager for free government? If a detached observer turned to the American scene, he would note still other obstacles to the straightforward democratic process: gerrymandering, the filibuster, the distorting effect of opinion polls, the lobbying system, the maze of regulations governing registration for voting and nominating, the perversities of the primaries, and worst of all, the enormous expense of getting elected, which entails a scramble for money and the desperate shifts for abating its influence, including financial disclosure, codes of ethics, and the like. Nobody wants to play according to the

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\* The latest "initiative" in Switzerland proposes to abolish the Swiss army. So radical a change will doubtless elicit a large turnout at the polls, but usually no more than a quarter of the electorate votes on the initiatives, of which there is usually a large backlog.

<sup>†</sup> "Pillarization" was made official in 1917 to satisfy the demands of the Catholic, Protestant, and "Humanist" factions that divided the Dutch professions, trade unions, sexes, and ideological groups. Each permutation of these combining allegiances was recognized as a pillar of the state and given a place on the ballot. In the last ten years, a demand has grown for more comprehensive parties, but it has not yet made headway.

rules.\* Add the use of television to make quick bids for popularity through inane, fictional dialogue, and the employment of public relations gurus to guide the choice of ideas to propose to the electorate, and you can gauge the decay of political campaigning. A symbol of the loss is the four-yearly spectacle called a debate between presidential candidates—no debate but an amateurish quiz program.<sup>†</sup>

A last feature of modern democracy which should baffle would-be imitators is the contempt in which politicians are held. Here is a system that requires their existence, endows them with power, and throws a searchlight on all their acts, and yet the same people who choose them perpetually deride and denounce them. The educated no less than the populace resent the politician's prominence but would not trade places with him. Writers multiply more or less witty epigrams about the breed and defamatory little essays against them.\*\* The title "honorable," used to address them, is obviously a bitter irony. How to explain all this to a visitor from Mars? For politicians not only represent us, they represent the scheme by which our changeable will is expressed. They are, as a group, the hardest working professionals; they must continually learn new masses of facts, make

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\* In addition to the deliberate evasion or twisting of the rules, their administration is inevitably slow and poor. This evil is only partly the fault of the bureaucrats who are so readily blamed. The art of administration has not been brought up to date; no one has thought about it since Frederick the Great and Napoleon, or, it often seems, since Charlemagne. Although courses and certificates are offered on every conceivable activity of the modern world, administration is ignored. There are courses in management, but they take it for granted that psychologizing and manipulating people is the sole avenue to efficiency.

<sup>†</sup> As one listens to any current campaign or "debate," one cannot help comparing its quality and methods with those of Lincoln and Douglas in 1858, or even of later presidential aspirants, such as Woodrow Wilson, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, or John F. Kennedy. One difference is in the span of attention required. Its dwindling is suitably met by the use of "30-second spots" on the air.

\*\* See, for example: two sections in *A Casual Commentary* by Rose Macaulay (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1925)—"Problems for the Citizen" and "General Elections." In the second, the author suggests a nationwide refusal to vote, which would result in "a ridiculous little parliament that could be ignored," to everybody's advantage.

judgments, give help, and continue to please. It is this obligation, of course, that makes them look unprincipled. To please and do another's will is prostitution, but it remains the nub of the representative system.

With these many complex deeds and chaotic demands, American democracy would have little to show the world with pride if it were not for another aspect of our life that Tocqueville observed and admired, that is, our habit of setting up free, spontaneous associations for every conceivable purpose.\* To this day, anybody with a typewriter and a copying machine can start a league, a club, a think tank, a library, a museum, a hospital, a college, or a center for this or that, and can proceed to raise money, publish a newsletter, and carry on propaganda—all tax exempt, without government permission or interference, and free of the slightest ridicule from the surrounding society. Here is where the habits of American democracy survive in full force. Robert's Rules of Order are sacred scripture and the treasurer's report is scanned like a love letter. Committees work with high seriousness, volunteers abound, and the democratic process reaches new heights of refinement.†

This admirable tradition enables us to accomplish by and for ourselves many things that in other democracies require government action. But this very habit of self help, contrasting with the huge helpless bulk of government, has lately bred the conviction that popular sovereignty, like equality, should be unlimited. More and more often it is taken for granted that every organization, from businesses and churches to magazines and universities, should become a little democracy, with everyone voting, regardless of his position or knowledge. The former governing bodies—board of directors or elected vestry—should no longer act for their constituency because their decisions “affect everybody.” In some instances, indeed, the geographical neighbors of an institution have claimed a voice, on the irrefutable ground that they too are affected by what it does.

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\* *Democracy in America*, vol. II, pt. II, ch. 5.

† It is not uncommon, for example, that after a strenuous debate in committee, a vote of seven to five will prompt a chairman to say, “This business needs further thought; we shouldn't go ahead divided as we are.”

It is plausible to regard this tendency as a result of the feeling that government at the top is unresponsive and in some ways unrepresentative, even though it is busy enacting privileges and protections. The bureaucracy then tries to homogenize the fates of citizens; they, in turn, appeal to the courts, which establish and often widen the rule; and thus a hopefully contentious atmosphere keeps everyone's attention on his or her rights. These are the occasion of a continual free-for-all.\* There is undoubted freedom of a kind in a free-for-all. In how many countries, for example, would it be possible for a visiting head of state to make half a dozen speeches in New York attacking the President for his foreign policy? Where else would avowed partisans of subversion be allowed to teach in state universities? Such things are commonplace with us, but, again, they betoken group rights. Dissenters nowadays are tolerated only when their views are already group views. On our campuses, where academic freedom is claimed by the faculty, it is not extended to unpopular lecturers from outside. Their invitations are cancelled under pressure and their talks disrupted. The notion of a "free market for ideas," the belief that truth comes out of unrestricted debate, are vindicated only when a vocal group favors the freedom.†

That, unfortunately, is an old story in this country. Tocqueville observed in 1835 that "he knew of no nation in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion."<‡ He attributed this lack to the weight of majority sentiment. Now the majority is that

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\* The latest of these to arouse angry debate is "language rights," aimed at making the United States officially multilingual. It is not said how many languages other than English would be included under these rights; at the moment Spanish is the one contender. See the arguments on each side in Gerola Bikales's "Comment," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 60 (1986), 77–85.

† The disruption of others' speech, coupled with the claim to free expression for oneself, seems to be triggered by something besides unpopular views, namely holding office. Members of the cabinet or of the diplomatic corps have been assailed at colleges (and at a writers' conference) even before they spoke, and university officials have apologized for issuing the invitations. Faculty members doing "government research" or aiding intelligence agencies are suspect. These symptoms of disaffection may not be grave, but they indicate something less than support for the American form of government.

‡ *Democracy in America*, vol. I, pt. II, ch. 7.

of the group to which one belongs by profession, status, or region. But if in those early days of democracy free discussion thrived better elsewhere, it was not solely because free speech was a legal right, it was also because of property rights. Their sanctity was something all the early proponents of constitutional government insisted on. They knew that liberties must have a material base—independence of mind is wonderfully spurred by an independent income. And this underpinning has been progressively weakened, by industrial civilization as much as by public law. Even in public opinion, property has become an unsavory word.

These various developments of democratic life help to account for the generalized feeling of oppression that pervades the free world. It manifests itself in common talk, in novels and plays, in the medical concern with stress, in the rise of cults, and in the recourse to drugs.\* Such feelings of oppression are now so pervasive that optimism and the love of life are felt to be almost indecent. Consider in this light the universal demand for liberation, or emancipation, which has come not from the former colonies, but from long-united parts of great nations. The Scots, the Welsh, the Basques, the Bretons want to be free, just like the smallest islands of the Pacific or Caribbean, and indeed of our own waters. Only a couple of years ago, Martha's Vineyard was clamoring to be free of Massachusetts. It sounded like a joke, but it expressed the widespread illusion that if only we could be "by ourselves" all our frustrations would end. It is an individual desire before it becomes a group demand, a demand generally called nationalism. But that is the wrong word. It is separatism, the very reverse of wanting to form or belong to a larger group. Hence the call for decentralization and what has been termed in this country the

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\* Tocqueville again has something to say on the subject: "If social conditions, circumstances, and laws did not confine the American mind so closely to the search for comfort, it might be that when the Americans came to deal with immaterial things, they would act with more maturity and prudence and would keep themselves more readily in hand. But they feel themselves to be imprisoned within bounds that they are seemingly not allowed to escape, so that once they have broken through these barriers their minds do not know where to settle down and they often rush heedlessly far beyond the limits of common sense." (vol. II, pt. II, chap. 12)

New Federalism, each a type of separation from the great machine built on the plan of popular sovereignty and absolute equality.\*

Being at the end of this rapid survey, I must repeat the caution I urged before: do not take description as disparagement. We do live under a free government, and it has enormous advantages over any that is not free or only part free. We could all name these advantages and show their rational and emotional value, but that would not help our present inquiry, which is to find out what foreign nations could use to model themselves on our polity, could adopt from our complicated practices. The answer, I think, is: Nothing. The parts of the machine are not detachable; the organism is in fact indescribable, and what keeps it going, the “habits of the heart,” as Tocqueville called them, are unique and undefinable. In short, we cannot by any conceivable means “show them how to do it.”

This must be our third and last conclusion. What is more, if Rousseau were approached today by some liberal-minded South African and asked for advice of the kind he gave to Poland and Corsica, he would be at a loss where to begin, for he would not be facing one nation trying to modify its institutions, but several peoples, with diverse traditions, each trying to keep or gain its freedom by power. In the democratic theorem, the sovereignty of the people implies the practical unity of that people. How to create it when it does not exist is a different task from that of developing free institutions and is probably incompatible with it.

In answer to the question posed in the title of this discussion, I have attempted to make three points:

First, democracy has no theory to export, because it is not an ideology but a wayward historical development.

Second, the historical development of democracy has taken many forms and used many devices to reach the elusive goal called human freedom.

Third, the forms of democracy in existence are today in a state of flux. The strong current toward greater equality and the strong desire

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\* Students of government in the United States report that it is in the counties that flexible adaptation to modern circumstances is most visible and innovative. See Howard L. Griffin, “Stasis and American County Governments—Myth or Reality?” (Address to the American Studies Association of Texas, Huntsville, TX, November 15–17, 1984).

for greater freedom are more than ever in conflict. Freedom calls for a government that governs least; equality for a government that governs most. No wonder the institutions of the free world are under strain and its citizens under stress. The theorem of democracy still holds, but all of its terms have changed in nature, especially the phrase "the people," which has been changed beyond recognition by the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and the social revolution of the twentieth.

## Discussion

**QUESTION:** You have been talking about whether we have the ability to export democracy. Have you any thoughts on whether we as Americans have a responsibility to defend democracy overseas?

**PROFESSOR BARZUN:** That is a question that cannot be answered in absolute terms. The presumption is that we would want to defend any democracy that is attacked, provided we can do so without damaging any other democracy, which would include our own. In other words, foreign policy has a component of national interest which I do not think can be eliminated.

**QUESTION:** To follow up on that question, do you feel it is in the interest of the United States—both its real political interest and its moral interest—to further the growth of democracy when it emerges around the world? Is it just for the United States to support what appears to be a bona fide democracy?

**PROFESSOR BARZUN:** Yes, provided that we are sure—as far as anyone can be sure—that we are supporting a genuine democracy, that it has sustained itself for a long enough time not to be an easy prey to anti-democratic forces within that same country. We have seen that happen again and again: an attempt is made to establish a representative assembly or parliament; elections are held; a large group of ideological dissenters are elected to the parliament. Once they are inside the government (since there must be a couple of ministers to represent the party's strength), subversion takes over. So we may have aided, prematurely, a movement that is not likely to remain democratic.

**QUESTION:** You are then applying some sort of ethical standard, are you not, because one could then say, for example, that the Weimar



democracy should have been nurtured, but Adolf Hitler should have been cut off?

**PROFESSOR BARZUN:** Certainly the Weimar democracy should have been nurtured—and it could have been, because Hitler's great appeal was the promised destruction of the Versailles treaty. We didn't help destroy the Versailles treaty, we tried to bolster it up, with the result that Hitler was left with a wonderful hold on national support.

**QUESTION:** Apropos of what you said earlier, would not one of the reasons that the Weimar Republic did not survive be because there was no tradition of democracy prior to that period?

**PROFESSOR BARZUN:** It seems to me that the Weimar Republic would have had a good chance of survival if the economic conditions of the people, if the political leadership, and if the Versailles treaty had been dealt with differently from the way they were dealt with.

The Germans did not have a tradition of perfect and complete democracy, but from before the establishment of the German empire in 1871, they had assemblies, elections, and prime ministers in each of their provinces. They had the practical sense of democracy—not to mention the fact that the large Socialist party was a reformist, nonrevolutionary, thoroughly parliamentary party. The Socialists had a large following ready to play according to the rules of the game. So it would have been possible to save the Weimar Republic. But to write out the description of what should have been done, that's impossible. In the end, historical forces prevented it: the Western powers wanted reparations and a disarmed Germany, and the American efforts to modify those demands were ineffectual. The West kept reproaching the Germans with the guilt of having started the war, which was a highly questionable reproach. The Western powers did everything wrong if they wanted to sustain democracy there.

**QUESTION:** I understood you to say that it is necessary for us to defend other democracies insofar as we can do so without hurting those democracies, neighboring democracies, or our own democracy. My question has to do with deterrence. Sticks are expensive these days, big sticks are even more expensive. At what point does the expense of the technology necessary to defend democracy outweigh

the need to defend either our own country or neighboring or friendly nation-states?

**PROFESSOR BARZUN:** That question would be taken care of under my general caveat that, first, we do not underwrite the kind of promissary note that says we will defend all democracies everywhere; second, that we should be sure those we do defend are living, actual, genuine, free democracies before we undertake that expense. We are now giving money as aid to any number of nations, or peoples, without knowing what we are going to get back on the moral or material plane of promoting democracy. As I said before, foreign policy implies a large component of national interest; just as much care must go into defining the moral component of the policy; and finally, action must be adroit and economical about the means. For example, in Vietnam we were presumably trying to support and sustain a government that was *moving toward* democracy, and we spent a great deal of money and many lives but didn't manage things well. That lesson should be in the back of everybody's mind when advocating the defense of democracy in any part of the globe.

**QUESTION:** You have traced the rise of a mentality of anti-capitalism in the Western countries after the First World War—what is sometimes called middle class self-hatred, although you didn't use that term. Back in 1941, when you reviewed Peter Viereck's *Metapolitics*, you were very confident that this could not be laid at the door of romanticism. Are you as confident today, given the rise of the Green party in West Germany and the triumph of a bohemian mentality in high culture?

**PROFESSOR BARZUN:** If possible, I am now *more* confident that romanticism as an intellectual and artistic movement had little or nothing to do with what occurred in Italy and Germany or anywhere else where proletarian enthusiasm was aroused by the glorification of heroes. After all, heroes have existed in all times and places, long before fascism was thought of. In the West today, literature is anti-heroic and anti-romanticist; nevertheless, the human enthusiasm and response to political genius and power continue—remember Winston Churchill. To be sure, the forms, the vocabulary, the coloring of the romanticist outlook vary, and they can also be exploited

variously. But absolutism in government can use classicism just as well—remember Louis XIV.

**QUESTION:** Professor Barzun, you began and ended your lecture with mention of South Africa. Quite clearly, a very strong point you made was the difficulty of exporting democracy to South Africa. You also pointed out the possible conflict between many theoretically based and ethically based, broad, rather utopian policies and the national interest. Well, from any point of view—that of national interest, of what is possible, or of what is ethical—what would you advocate for United States policy toward South Africa?

**PROFESSOR BARZUN:** I don't know whether I shouldn't ask to be named secretary of state before answering that question, because I believe that foreign policy is, in addition to all else, a highly technical art. One must be on the inside and able to know a great deal more than the public can be told, even by a very expert press, before one can say what can and should be done.

I will answer your question so far as to say that it seems to me that sanctions and a hasty economic exit from South Africa are not in any way going to help. Such action will only exacerbate the situation there and give the anti-democratic forces tremendous leverage. I think, for example, that IBM in South Africa, with the programs it now has in force, can do more for the black population that is oppressed than any political party advocating abstract "liberation" in the name of that black population. Historically, industry has always been liberating. The great emancipation of the masses throughout the nineteenth century came from their going into cities and factories, getting away from the poverty and ignorance of life on the land. Industry gave them new hope, and it gave them the means, of course, to develop the new ideas and habits that make a democracy work. So the more American and other Western concerns are down in South Africa opposing apartheid quietly through their own operations, their own attitudes, and through allowing workers and employees of all races and tribes to mingle in the factory and the office—all these new, decent ways bring on democracy much faster than speeches from soap boxes or pulpits or lecterns.

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