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Democracy

(Views and Comments)

Dora Marsden

1914

The offending aspect of the pretensions of "democracy" is not that in the name of what the "majority" supposedly thinks we are supposed to be pleased and happy to be "ruled" by a clique "for our good." Far from it, since, in truth, but few of us are "ruled" at all. It is merely our little foible to pretend we are. We give our "rulers" to understand they "rule" us because it pleases them so greatly to think they do: and then there is the consideration that a docile demeanour serves to divert their too too kind attention; probably the most servile-seeming member of a "state" the most bent upon fulfilling the role of step-grandmother fundamentally is untouched by "rule." The obedient attitude is a very convenient garb for the perverse to wear: and if the mere doing of it does not jar the temper too much, appearing to submit will define the line of least resistance to doing what, under the circumstances is what we please. Thus under the shelter of the servile demeanour there forms a residue- of mulish waywardness, especially in those who appear to present their parts to receive the kicks which keep them going between gutter and cesspool: a waywardness which even more than temper succeeds in making them into

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Retrieved on 09/26/2021 from

<https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr520337/>

Originally published in *The Egoist* Volume I Number 8 (April 15, 1914). Title is unofficial and derived from the text.

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a kind of clay unmeet to the hand which would govern. The great unwashed will accept the infliction of the bath which cuts a slice off the space of their limited premises with resignation and reflect that it will indeed have a use as a wardrobe and coal-place. Though they are cast down by such things they are not defeated. "Rule" slides from them, as water slides from a duck. "Rule" has effect only on those who are indoctrinated with the Dogma: those who are under the spell of the "Word." Even these—these intellectuals—are not placed in bondage by the rulers: theirs is a voluntary bondage—true freedom, according to the Word—and if they act as automata it is that they subscribe to the dogma that it is their duty to be as automata. They submit themselves to the law: because they approve not always indeed of the law, but of the attitude which submits to law.

It is not therefore for its supposed prowess in the line of government that democracy's claims are obnoxious. It earns its odium through the commodity which the "rulers" offer in exchange for their investiture with authority to govern. "Rulers" appear contemptible not for what they take but what they give. That they lay hold of authority and all the ready cash which their positions render available is, if regrettable, yet tolerable: the machine will go until it breaks; the vexatious thing is that in order to become installed in their position of advantage they must needs undermine and bemuse by flattery the intelligence of those whose lack of it is sufficiently evidenced by their willingness to have truck with them.

Once upon a time, we heard—or read—about a soldier belonging to the ranks who by the workings of some chance

which we forget, found himself dining at the officers' mess. Finding himself unable to guess the use to which he might be expected to put ice which was placed before him, he hazarded putting it in the soup; whereupon the officers laughed: all, that is, save one—the highest in rank. This noble one, in order to administer the rebuke to the manners of his brother-officers, and further to cover the confusion of the guest, straightway placed ice in his soup also. This edifying story as we remember it did not stop at this point but went on to explain how true gentility and true democracy reveal themselves in so fine an essence of Christian good-breeding, but it will serve our purpose better to regard the story as here finished and use it as an analogy in a totally different sense, thus: those who use the flattery of the democratic "equality" argument in order to win the support of the mob do their uttermost to confuse the import of "gentility": how far they have succeeded the influence of the concept of "natural rights" bears witness. They encourage "claims" to be laid to things which from their nature can only be freely given. A delicacy which merely seeks not to press the confusion which error brings in misconstrued into a concession that no error exists: rather, indeed, that those who fail to perpetuate it are themselves in error.

Every new creed is ninety-nine parts rechauffe of all the creeds which by virtue of its hundredth part it is supposed to supersede: the fact that the ingredients are incongruous proving no bar to such rehashing. To mince the whole to a uniform state of non-recognition where possible, and to accept whole what resists the process according to its external merits, is the method of treatment. Naturally therefore in the cult of equality-cum-democracy it is not surprising to be met with the spirit of "Noblesse oblige," notwithstanding the fact that democracy knows no "Noblesse." How this curious combina-

tion of exclusives is worked in together is illustrated by the incident narrated above. The "noble" officer acted in the spirit which lies behind the attitude "Noblesse oblige"—the attitude that a superior can always afford to concede a point: it is the spirit of chivalry: the meaning of the handicap: it is to be found almost everywhere where the relatively strong and weak, superior and inferior meet together. It is the swagger of the superior at their subtlest and suavest, since it wins a conscious recognition of superiority by the very act which would seem to minimise it. Now the confusion which is effected by the demagogues: those would-be rulers who in order to win their way to authority must flatter the mob, lies in the implication that while still "Noblesse oblige," the tacit acknowledgment of relative merit on which it is built is there no longer. It has been submerged in democratic equality. Therefore a superior not merely may ice his soup: he ought and must; in fact, we supposedly, all prefer iced soup now: the new creed having created a new procedure. If incompetence is the equal of competence and the incompetent outnumber the competent, then by the "right" of democracy and the "will of the greatest number" the incompetent must set the procedure. There is nothing of course in the ways of procedure already existing which is not the result of "class prejudice" and autocratic naughtiness: nothing in the relative quality of men's intelligence and the nature of things otherwise to explain why the relative positions have arranged themselves as they have. All this wicked disparity is purely superficial and will be combated by a judicious mixture of scolding and pleading. Hark unto Mr. Lansbury's paper on the subject: "Every private must be as free as any dandy officer." "Must" no less! Suppose he had said "can be"! Why did he not? Presumably because "he" can't be. Then what is the route, between point and point of which, "Can't be" becomes "Must be" in a mind like Mr. Lansbury's? What magic human alchemy is worked on the way and who works it? Mr. Asquith or Mr. Macdonald or even Mr. Lansbury himself? Or does Mr.

Irving; accordingly a politician who worked indiscretion into a conscious habit, who allowed fact to make its commentary on the interpretation of facts, baiting the interpretation with the fact as the comic spirit baits the "noble" one, such a one would really enrich the community with a new kind of art. If a clever man entered political circles with the realisation that by the side of, say, the collected political utterances of a "correct" politician like Sir Edward Grey, the simple narration of a servant girl's carryings-on with the butcher's man is an artistic document of relatively high worth, dulness which is the only evil would take wings and depart. The actual doings of politicians must have some human interest: whereas those by which they choose to be known in public have none. Instantly the veil slips aside, things become luminous. Turned indiscreet side out, they lose their smug smoothness. An indiscreet politician assisted in well-doing by an indiscreet press would realise that their proper business is just with those things which at present are enabled remotely to tickle our sense in the shape of the scandalous memoirs of circles now fifty years dead. Scandal, in short, is the only news worth retailing. It represents public life in earnest whereas at present we get public life by pretence. There is scope for a "creative" genius in such a rôle.

with laughter. Consider the remark: the top-note on which he was bold enough even to pause—for applause: "The Army will hear nothing of politics from me, and in return I expect to hear nothing of politics from the Army." You bet he doesn't. The "Army will hear nothing of politics from me." Of course not, but to make a "ruler" gaily ruling hear something of politics from them is the Army's very proper business. One must confess that so finely-nerved a stroke commands one's admiration. After this master-stroke "your army" is merely the purring approval a pleased operator will show to a patient who has stood a trying operation well.

Still, Mr. Asquith must have felt he was making a desperate, neck-or-nothing experiment. It must be a wearing method of providing for a wife and family of an elderly gentleman to accept all odds offered, on the strength of one's ability to move to slow music and talk vague theory in a recitative calculated to hypnotise any intelligence which may be lurking hidden in one's audience. Melodrama is dangerous as an occupation for people past their first youth: one snigger from a devotee suddenly illumined with an intelligent gleam might destroy the career into which have been built the hopes of a lifetime. It seems inevitable politicians will be driven seriously to consider the advisability of getting a little ahead of the more lagging intelligences, by changing their role from melodrama to comedy. The change will melt away their dignity; the sense of the actual thrown on heroics is a sure solvent, but on the precipitate of comic relief which the process ultimately throws down will be laid a far surer foundation for those "careers" from which they hope so much. There is in short a far greater scope for display of talent in a character of W.S. Gilbert, than in the most heroic of Grand Opera heroes, and a Dan Leno will go far deeper into the affections of the public than can a Sir Henry

Lansbury find hope in the temper of "privates" themselves? To us they seem to be conspicuously silent. We may be sure the privates are as free as they can be, and when they can be more free, they will be. "Free" is such an odd sort of a word. It has the power of suggesting itself to be something which can be conferred, like rations and uniforms, and yet when it has been followed through a long series of disillusionings it lets one-down to the truth that it is in itself representative only; it merely marks the limit of one's individual power, like the index-needle on those machines where one hits on a sort of anvil with a hammer to test one's strength. The index will move up and down the scale in the most obliging manner within the limits of one's power to strike. And similarly with the privates' freedom: it is anything their power can make it. If their power of "freedom" were equal to that of officers: why did they not become officers and so become "free" and dandy too? They would then have avoided the grounds of suspicion that it was less. It is to be assumed they did not become privates because in comparison with being officers they preferred to. Parents' poverty? But we must accept parents. Our parents are our one not-uncertain inheritance. What they are and what they do is part of what one inevitably comes by, inevitably as we come by our features and our gifts. Unequal opportunity? But there can be no equal opportunities. Moreover Fortune keeps in stock at least ten thousand opportunities per man. It is not the opportunities that are lacking but the power to accept them. And if all, out of a man's ten thousand opportunities fail to suit, it always lies open to him to create a wholly new one unique for himself. All of which may well appear if not indeed, but doubtfully true, at least quite unhelpful as to the telling. To which the reply is that it is quite true and would be helpful to a real democrat, if only one could find such. As a matter of fact, this "democrat" is a very rare bird and not a nice one. The illusion that he exists in his hundreds of thousands is a simple fiction put into currency by journalists: "democracy" a label unmeritedly

attached to a community of self-respecting egoistic common-sense people, who only very occasionally and shamefacedly talk about their abstract rights, equality, the will of the people and the rest. There is not, for instance, one person in one hundred thousand who could recite this tirade of Mr. Lansbury's with an unembarrassed countenance.

"There seem to be two recognised and main ways of serving humanity. The exponent of one method deduces from his love of people in general a love of himself in particular. Charity, he argues, enlightenment, idealism—these must begin at home; and with a loyal and logical conscience he proceeds to bleed out of that same suffering world either fortune or social position, influence, power. And for the damnable wholeness of his flesh (if men had but the eyes to see it) the leprosy of humanity festers and reeks the more." —*Daily Herald*, Saturday, April 11.

In fact, the conclusion to which one is pressed is that we—that is the people who talk and write—take all theories, politics and propagandas too seriously: far more so than ever was intended by those who amuse themselves by such species of Sport. The permanent role of propagandists and politicians is that of public entertainer; and they stand or fall by the answer to the question, "Do they entertain?" And it must be admitted that they still exert a draw. Star turns like Sir Edward Carson or Mr. Asquith can compete without shame with a football match before the season gets exciting: with a "cinema" entertainment. It is true that they have the entire strength of the advertising power of the Press of both parties to boost them and

create a fictitious interest. The minor characters of course have a harder time of it, though for these the services of the Press are always available. The "principles," the "creeds" of politicians have nothing to do with their pull on the public attention: everything depends upon their ability to organise a good display (whether they run a one-man show or a team matters nothing) which will provide a reasonable excuse for the backers of the favourite, or the home team, shouting themselves delirious with delight. When politicians, through some defect of horse-sense, mistake their vocation, and imagine themselves to be teachers and preachers with a message and think that the message will make good their failure to entertain with the public, they are quickly put to rights. The present unpopularity of the suffragettes following so rapidly on their former popularity will illustrate the case. When their "propaganda" was worked as a smart, prompt, unfailingly successful show, it was an enthusiastic success: a sort of Vesta Tilley on the political stage. Now that it has betaken itself to seriousness, to stretchers, "tragedies" and ugly scenes, it is vaguely disliked by its former enthusiastic backers. Their "principle" is exactly what it was, but because the entertainment they put on the boards is voted a poor show, what were "heralds of the dawn" are now labelled misguided fanatics. Sir Edward Carson offers another instance. It is because he has made it clear he can put up a smart exhilarating show that the "people" are prepared to offer to the Conservative Grand Opera Company a prospect of future patronage; and Mr. Balfour showed a sure "statesmanship" in picking up the cue and appearing as stump orator in Hyde Park. Again — Mr. Asquith. He was intelligent enough to see that it was not an argument the recent "political" situation required: it was a counter-hero: and did his best. Very nicely too: his success can be gauged by what his audience was prepared to swallow whole. A more laughable speech was never uttered than the one this gentleman offered at Ladybank a week ago. Had he not been a "hero" it would have been riddled through'