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The Illusion of Universal Suffrage

Mikhail Bakunin

1870

Men once believed that the establishment of universal suffrage would guarantee the freedom of the peoples. That, alas, was a great illusion, and the realization of that illusion has led in many places to the downfall and demoralization of the radical party. The radicals did not wish to deceive the people—or so the liberal papers assure us—but in that case they were certainly themselves deceived. They were genuinely convinced when they promised the people freedom through universal suffrage, and inspired by that conviction they were able to arouse the masses and overthrow the established aristocratic governments. Today, having learnt from experience and power politics, they have lost faith in themselves and in their own principles and in that way they have sunk into defeat and corruption. Yet the whole thing seemed so natural and so simple; once legislative and executive power emanated directly from a popular election, must it not become the pure expression of the people's will, and could that will produce anything other than freedom and well-being among the populace?

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The whole deception of the representative system lies in the fiction that a government and a legislature emerging out of a popular election must or even can represent the real will of the people. Instinctively and inevitably the people expect two things: the greatest possible material prosperity combined with the greatest freedom of movement and action: that means the best organization of popular economic interests, and the complete absence of any kind of power or political organization—since all political organization is destined to end in the negation of freedom. Such are the basic longings of the people.

The instincts of the rulers, whether they legislate or execute the laws, are—by the very fact of their exceptional position—diametrically opposite. However democratic may be their feelings and their intentions, 'once they achieve the elevation of office they can only view society in the same way as a schoolmaster views his pupils, and between pupils and masters equality cannot exist. On one side there is the feeling of superiority that is inevitably provoked by a position of superiority; on the other side, there is the sense of inferiority which follows from the superiority of the teacher, whether he is exercising an executive or a legislative power. Who-ever talks of political power talks of domination; but where domination exists there is inevitably a somewhat large section of society that is dominated, and those who are dominated quite naturally detest their dominators, while the dominators have no choice but to subdue and oppress those they dominate. This is the eternal history of political power, ever since that power has appeared in the world. This is what also explains why and how the most extreme of democrats, the most raging rebels, become the most cautious of conservatives as soon as they attain to power. Such recantations are usually regarded as acts of treason, but that is an error; their main cause is simply the change of position and hence of perspective...

In Switzerland, as elsewhere, the ruling class is completely different and separate from the mass of the governed. Here, as everywhere, no matter how egalitarian our political constitution may be, it is the bourgeoisie who rule, and it is the people—workers and peasants—who obey their laws. The people have neither the leisure nor the necessary education to occupy themselves with government. Since the bourgeoisie have both, they have, in fact if not by right, exclusive privilege. Thus, in Switzerland as elsewhere, political equality is merely a puerile fiction, a lie. But how, separated as they are from the people by all the economic and social circumstances of their existence, can the bourgeoisie express, in laws and in government, the feelings, ideas and wishes of the people? It is impossible, and daily experience in fact proves that, in legislation as well as government, the bourgeoisie is mainly directed by its own interests and prejudices, without any great concern for those of the people. It is true that all our legislators, as well as all the members of cantonal governments, are elected, directly or indirectly, by the people. It is true that on election day even the proudest of bourgeoisie, if they have any political ambitions, are obliged to pay court to Her Majesty, the Sovereign People ... But once the elections are over, the people return to their work and the bourgeoisie to their profitable businesses and political intrigues. They neither meet nor recognize each other again. And how can one expect the people, burdened by their work and ignorant for the most part of current problems, to supervise the political actions of their representatives? In reality, the control exercised by voters on their elected representatives is a pure fiction. But since, in the representative system, popular control is the only guarantee of the people's freedom, it is quite evident that such freedom in its turn is no more than a fiction.