

This is chapter 4 of the book *The Sin of Obedience* by Willard and Marguerite Beecher which can be ordered from Beecher Foundation Website:
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The word “democracy” turns up in the writing and speech of people throughout the world whenever present and future events are discussed. They feel either that there is too much of it or too little, but no one seems wholly indifferent to the concept.

Serious confusion exists about the meaning of this world. Crusades are organized for the preservation and extension of it although people fail to understand its provisions. No common purpose can be achieved, however, without a common understanding between those who strive. Unfortunately, there seem to be as many different interpretations attached to the word “democracy” as there are people who hear and use it.

An unfortunate defect of language is that words can often obscure situations as much as they clarify them. When we become aware that a symbolic device like “democracy” has acquired too many meanings, the best remedy is to abandon the purely verbal level of definition (i.e., explaining the meaning of words with other words) and try to approach the non-verbal situation for which the symbol stands. We must try to describe *what happens* at the non-verbal level of action itself — *in terms of Junction*.

To understand the function of Democracy, we must go back many years in the history of human relationships and view the manner in which people related to each other and how things have changed. When the curtain rose on recorded civilization, men were living in groups as they do today. All groups had patterned arrangements called social organizations. During the period of settling down, one or several men gained a position of personal power and dominance for themselves from which they could command the actions of the majority of men. These dominant figures were called masters, kings, chieftains, etc., while the subservient group was called followers, servants, slaves, fellahs, and so on. This manner of relationship is now known by us as the Master-Slave or Dominance-Submission kind of social organization.

Almost without exception, there was a great disparity between the advantages each group derived from this relationship. All advantages went to those with power, and most disadvantages to those allowed only to serve. Although the subordinates were made to believe that they enjoyed their particular “security,” there was no notion that some kind of human relationship could be formed that would tend to distribute both the advantages and the disadvantages more equitably. If a fight developed between the dominant and the submissive and the latter won, the result was merely a transfer of power from one group to the other. At no time was there the pretense of diminishing the distance between top-dog and underdog, or to give up the exploitation of the many by the few.

But as conditions for the human race changed, the power relationships were altered.

As mankind strove for more security and ability, technology, including arms, gunpowder, boats, steam, and electricity, put power into the hands of more and more people. It became more difficult for one or even a few to exercise the same degree of personal domination over the masses as in the past. History is a description of countless large and small revolutions fought to diminish the power and advantage held by any minority over the majority. As the power of one group grew less absolute, the powers of the others advanced and with them the personal advantages enjoyed by all. Accordingly, the Ruler was obliged to become more responsible for his actions since he had to share a larger portion of the disadvantages of his subjects.

In spite of these shifts in authority and power, there was no change in the opinion that there must always be some who rule and others who are ruled. It was still assumed that certain people were, *de jure* or *de facto*, destined to command others. This basic assumption about power and superiority was not challenged even as a concept until as recently as the American and French Revolutions. Only then did there begin to emerge the general opinion that government should be by agreement of the governed, i.e., that final authority should rest in the hands of the many rather than in the will of the few.

Thereafter, a few countries developed governmental forms which permitted each citizen to have a part in making the laws of the land. It was decreed that all men were "equal" before the law and at the polls, and *political* equality was almost achieved. But men had lived since the infancy of the human race with customs which permitted great disparity in social and economic privileges. They were so accustomed to these inequities that they believed them irremediable. As a result, even in the so-called "Democracies," men did not use their political equality to remove the inequalities in social and financial status which they had inherited from the past. Exploitation of the majority by a smaller minority went merrily on its way. "Equality before the law" did not mean that the laws were framed to achieve equality of privilege and a common bond of responsibility for all, for mutual good.

Ruth Benedict states in her book, *Patterns of Culture*, that "no man ever looks on the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking. Even in his philosophical probings, he cannot go behind these stereotypes; his very concepts of the true and the false will have reference to his particular customs." Thus, men have not used political equality to remedy the social and financial inequalities inherited from the past. We are blinded by custom and oblivious to the obvious. Certain religions have admonished us to bear one another's burdens, and great teachers have insisted that our common situation can only be improved as we eliminate exploitation and competition for personal superiority.

Thus, we have been consistently urged to train ourselves in a new manner of relationships. Words such as Equality, Fraternity, and Democracy were adopted to describe thoughts and strivings in this direction, but the customs of the old pattern of

Dominance and Submission still remain to be replaced, hopefully, sometime in the future. It is folly to pretend that we have come to the place where we want Fair Play, Democracy, Fraternity, or Equality if we mean by those terms that we must give up the struggle for Special Privilege and the power to exploit weaker peoples.

There is no power on earth able to keep men from having what they want — if they truly want it. Psychologically speaking, Democracy is a way of regarding the rights and privileges of the other fellow. It is a frame of mind in which a man realizes that his personal security and advantage depend on guaranteeing that all others are made secure. This is a very different mind-set from the one we habitually employ whereby each man believes his personal advancement can be accomplished only if he deprives another. Perhaps no one understood this better than Adler when he invented the concept of Social Interest. He never lost sight of the problems of Superiority/Inferiority, since Individual Psychology is a philosophy aimed at those who have made mistakes about ideas of power and dominance so that they may find the path toward mutuality.

Those inclined to exploit and exclude others tend to point out that people are not born “equal” and that democracy is therefore impossible. What they mean is that we are not alike in all respects: we have the same fundamental needs and are injured by the same poisons or guns. The fact that some are more gifted in one respect or another is an advantage to all when *share and share alike for the common good* is the social goal; the community is enriched by the differences. All contributions, different as they may be, are necessary. Insofar as each man gives his best, all make an equal contribution. When all men gain the inner consent to dedicate their best to the commonwealth, democracy will be realized.

Nonetheless, men still want personal success rather than equality and mutual gain. The prizes of civilization are still delivered to the swift and strong. Predatory power is glorified and rewarded, and envied and emulated, even by children. We cannot hope that children will train themselves for non-predatory pursuits while this situation remains. Certainly we cannot hope that democracy will grow where only the strong are rewarded.

Psychological, economic, or social or any other form of democracy cannot hope to establish themselves against the implacable force of Custom. But customs change when they can no longer function. The spread of technology has always rotted the hold of autocratic, irresponsible, specially privileged groups. Customs and mores die, to be replaced by others more in tune with transformed situations. At present, many human beings find themselves living not amid chronic scarcities and famines but potential abundance for all.

This last fact alone brings hope for the achievement of social and economic equality. When men try to distribute the abundant products of machines by devices of distribution

which evolved in an age of scarcity, they fail. Panicked, they try to create artificial scarcities by unemployment, destruction of goods, wars, and so on. But all unsocial techniques of this kind must fail. In time, necessity will require the development of new means of distribution appropriate to abundance rather than scarcity. One day, everyone will be more adequately fed, housed, clothed, and educated if for no better reason than to keep the machines running.

When this happens, the old pattern of dominance and submission, will give way. Men desire to dominate only in the hope of keeping other men hungry, while the latter are obsequious only because they desire food. As soon as the disease of physical want is relieved by abundance, the prizes will no longer fall to the swift and strong; they will be given to those who are helpful and cooperative. All will become helpful and cooperative since no one will be able to improve his lot by aggression and exploitation.

Adler concludes his book, *What Life Should Mean To You*, with the statement that the human race has not begun to show its potentialities, since they can be developed only insofar as men can learn to reinforce the skills and abilities of one another through cooperation instead of curtailing them in competition and mutual sabotage by striving for personal gain at the expense of other people. Any social arrangements which permit dominance/submission relationships to flourish retard the development of the human race. The richness of humanity blooms only when each man feels responsible for the welfare of all other men as well as for himself. Any other human relationship breeds irresponsibility and degenerates into exploitation of one by another.

We must, then, understand the word "Democracy" as referring to a form of living that we have not yet achieved on this earth, a situation which we can create as an antidote to the calamities of the present. Let it represent a scenario in which men cease seeking personal salvation and enrichment at the expense of others and discover the genuine benefits of mutual striving for mutual enrichment. Each man will give his best gift for the common good.