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Theodor Heuss, “Democracy and Parliamentarism: Their History, Their Enemies, and Their Future” (1928)

The interwar years saw a number of dictatorships emerge throughout Europe; the international community took great interest in developments in Italy, where a fascist government took power in October 1922, and in communist Russia (renamed the Soviet Union in December 1922). In this essay, which appears in excerpted form, the liberal politician Theodor Heuss discusses the dangerous attraction of radical ideologies on the right and the left, and he defends democracy and parliamentarism. Additionally, he criticizes estate-based ideology as an unrealistic simplification of complex modern society. According to him, a social order based on professional groups runs the risk of turning the state into a “battlefield of vested interests.” Fascism and Bolshevism, according to Heuss, have common intellectual roots in both anarchy (hence the reference to Mikhail Bakunin) and French syndicalism. He argues that anti-democratic ideologies do not have the capacity to “produce a clear concept of a legitimate state.” For Heuss, the concept of the nation-state grew out of democracy.

Democracy and parliamentarism do not represent prophecies of salvation, nor do they provide an absolute prescription against the ailments of this world. They are historical forms of state deliberation, conditioned historically essentially through the pedagogical force of the self-imposed responsibility that is specific to them. They have had to accept attacks on their theoretical and historical position. The standpoint of the attack varies. Peculiar to most fundamental discussions is that they determine democracy to be a child of “Western rationalism” whose time is past. They confront it, a time-bound intellectual form, with the claims of an absolute valuation, in the process overlooking the circumstance that every extension of their theoretical antitheses into concrete demands brings them into the realm of corporate ideologies of fascist or some other salvational form, which, in turn, leads into a labyrinth of a typically irrationalist stamp.

In this connection, Germany has become infatuated with a couple of catchwords. Democracy “atomizes” the people by turning the individual, as a fundamental elector cut off from any social estate and heritage, into a political factor. This *homo politicus*, pronounced sovereign on voting days, is regarded as a fiction; a person is not a citizen *per se*, but a member of a society of manifold stratifications, which is now being leveled by force of doctrine. And so on. Weimar, so goes the claim, merely copied foreign models; the fragmentation of the German spirit was already so severe that no reference was made to the basic constituents of corporate estates and legal forms as they existed in German history. For a time much mischief was made with this

incantation of the particular character of the German state. Estate stratification–it is necessary here to repeat a frequently rehearsed chain of thought–was never, as romantic legend would have it, specific to the German essence, but was rather an aspect of an historical epoch; it was not “leveled” by the rationalism of the democratic idea, but broken down by the absolutist territorial state equipped with a bureaucracy. Nor does the attempt to revitalize it theoretically and transpose it into the essence of a new “corporate estate system” derive from the labor of a specifically German spirit—its first classical representative was the Genevan [Jean Charles] Sismondi, who is considered part of the French world. One will recall that this idea acquired political significance when, in a strange to and fro of motives, it served to strip the council idea of political offshoots: at the time a corporatist ideology had been grafted onto it in political economic form. The gardeners and botanists are still not entirely sure whether the tree will bear nourishing fruit in the hothouse of the national economic council. But here we may let it rest at that.

The emphasis remains as always on the side of political ideas. The parties are social organs of struggle based on persuasion and publicity, with fluid boundaries, whose power is subject to changing conditions, often determined by purely tactical tendencies that do not derive from the matter at hand. Would legislation and the allocation of powers not be more stable if public affairs were based on integrated corporate groupings? Then there would be no more demagogy freed from the obligations of expert knowledge, then the professional politicians would no longer make decisions that affect them very little but to which the economy reacts very sensitively; instead of the negative votes of power politics or the search for compromise, a synthesis of objective consensus would result. And in such a political order, since all are equal in their properly designated circles true democracy would come into being. The representation of the hierarchical corporate state belongs among the stirring simplifications of speculative thinking—but is it not a misjudgment? Is there a very realistic set of economic organizations, associations, leagues, and unions not behind this idea? Is it not a simple matter of legitimizing a given situation of power and interests, that it might become the structure of the state?

Certainly the facts of power are at hand; but just because it revolves around power, the picture in which the order and the procedures are so finely drawn falls apart. There simply is no formula by which the proper ratios among economic groupings can be expressed. And today nearly everyone agrees that *expert* is in most cases merely a charming substitute for *vested interest*—by which nothing is said against the latter’s rights, but only against a misconstrual of the state that declares itself a battlefield of vested interests. One need imagine only for a moment a foreign and cultural policy meant to operate on such a basis—it would necessarily succumb to the friction. We will not even mention the complex structure of present-day society, the inescapable fact that such a system would have to produce a new, completely independent type of professional politician. The construction overlooks the circumstance that political life does not rest on a static integration of corporate identities but oscillates within the dynamic of a multiplicitous, colorful, changing, and even contradictory, set of political wills.

From a different corner came and comes the purely politically formed resistance against the world of ideas and realities contained in democracy. It objects to the “right” of the majority; historical decisions have always been—this is the ideological point of departure—the work of minorities that knew what they wanted, that did not talk, persuade, negotiate, and vote, but did that what they held to be right and necessary. In this view, democracy and parliament are either sentimentalities or falsehoods, which must allow themselves to be pronounced wrong by virtue of the success of an alternative path. What, incidentally, is the meaning of “allowed”? Moral inquiry is perhaps the concern of political journalists, reasoning historians, but not that of political actors. Even if the latter take it as a technical exigency that they hoist the flags of moral objection!

One can find the embodiment of this way of thinking both in Russian bolshevism and Italian fascism. Reference has frequently been made to their intellectual historical context: they can be traced back to Marx’s counterpart in the First International, Mikhail Bakunin, to the antiparliamentary mutation of French syndicalism, which had systematized the lessons of the *action directe*, the extraparliamentary methods of proletarian class struggle. The particular historical situation as well as the nature of those decisively involved made it possible for the inheritors to appear as exponents of opposed tendencies, one focusing on the state and the other on the economy. They did in fact become that to a certain extent, though in assessing their worth one must not neglect completely the common source of their fundamental view. Whether Lenin or Mussolini, the political accomplishment in its uniqueness is significant enough—but the theoretical music that accompanied it, which they composed themselves or had composed, is equally paltry. The Lenin legend, done up brilliantly in propagandistic terms, might do justice to the tactician, but his theoretical writings are more clever than profound. And Mussolini’s pronouncement that he embodies a new concept of the state is simply a rhetorical lantern he flashes along his path, which, however, errs in the direction of the trivial wherever it does not apply strictly to the particular situation he has created in contemporary Italy.

The dictatorship of the proletariat remains, in intellectual terms, an artificial construction laid over the domination of a party machine in order to mask it; but the construction is too transparent and soon the question assumes its proper form: Who has the dictatorship over the proletariat? Then it is no longer a theoretical affair but a personal one: To what extent can intellect, will, the power of suggestion, and disposal over a military apparatus be regarded as a substitute for the legitimacy of dynastic absolutism? To try to make of Caesar and Napoleon a systematic method of state formation and political guidance represents a supreme misunderstanding of history and politics; the failed Napoleons lurking like apparitions and slowly gathering dust on the edges of the postrevolutionary years offer distressing documentation. The state must under no circumstances fail to appreciate what dangers can arise from the romanticism of illegitimacy—we have, after all, a few experiments behind us. Nor will it be overlooked how injurious the intellectual disavowal of the inner binding force of majority-based laws and ordinances is to the necessary growth of free and secure sentiment in the nation. That is the concern of politics and education. But in principle the antithesis to its democratic existence has worn thin; it has not succeeded in expounding a clear concept of a legitimate

state. The mistakes and defects of difficult, unromantic, and unillusioned politics alone are insufficient to nurture it as a force of its own.

When democracy entered into the history of our epoch, it proclaimed, via the fiction of natural right, the right of the dominated to participate in the exercise of power and to possess it. The internal problematic of state formation seemed to be its essential focus. But the course of things soon enough shifted the emphasis. Now the securing of individual rights, which taken together would result in collective rights, no longer demanded an answer; rather, this collectivity presented itself as a greater and comprehensive individual right; in the struggles of democracy for political legitimacy the nation-state was born. It is absolutely inconceivable without democracy. There have always been peoples, but democracy opened their mouths so that they could find and form the essence of their political consciousness. The idea of the nation-state grew out of democracy—it was the great leitmotif of European history in the nineteenth century.

In recent years, the recognition of this connection has, if only hesitantly, also become established among those who reject democracy who want to represent the nation in a particularly emphatic sense. In their embarrassment they have found a way out: democracy might well conform to the closed regions of the European West, they claim, but not to the central and eastern areas. As if an intellectual idea and a moral claim, once they have taken root in the peoples, have to find out beforehand if the two conform to each other. The overthrow of the Hapsburg and Ottoman empires are the effects of this intellectual–political process. But the Paris peace accords of 1919, rather than providing a respite, have merely perpetuated the tensions by denying or destroying the preconditions of democracy, while they invoke democratic ideology propagandistically.

It is utterly trivial to dream of the Pan–European idea or to hold in reserve some other fashionable plan for the salvation of the world, through world parliaments and similar institutions, as long as this situation is overlooked. Democracy is neither pacifistic nor militaristic in its essence; it can be both, with its intellectual attitude determined by the degree of tension or consensus pertaining in popular life and state structure. Democracy has not resolved the problem of the coexistence of nations, nor rendered it harmless, nor resolved its hostility; democracy, rather, has awakened in it the evil spirit of self-assurance. That is precisely what makes politics so intricate, dangerous, and portentous on a densely populated continent marked by endless reciprocity. But this situation may only be mentioned; to pursue it further exceeds the scope of this work.

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