

**THE MEANING OF  
DEMOCRACY,  
PP. 1-175**

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**IVOR J. C. BROWN**

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**THE MEANING OF DEMOCRACY**

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**"Words are wise men's counters, they do but  
reckon by them; but they are the money of fools."**

**Thomas Hobbes.**

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## INTRODUCTION

At the present moment Democracy is "booming" in the sense that everybody talks about it; but, in as far as it is associated with Parliamentary Government, it is very largely discredited. It is at once the hope of the workers, and their despair. The idea is worshipped and the fact deplored. There is a widespread feeling that everything is wrong and an equally widespread uncertainty as to why it has gone wrong. And we are faced as a result with a paradoxical situation in which the more blunders we, of the nominally democratic countries, make, the more do we call upon the name of democracy. Those who are most loud in their protests against conduct which certainly seems to have popular support are also most loud in their praises of democracy. We are all well acquainted with the individual who rises at every meeting on every subject to suggest that the proper remedy is "democracy."

One thing at least is obvious. The word has come to mean nothing; or rather it means so much that it means nothing at all. Exactly the same trouble has arisen with other political terms. We all believe in liberty, but very few of us agree as to what liberty is. The word

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Socialist is applied to thousands of people who detest each other's politics and economics as heartily as they detest capitalism. In my experience of adult education, I have seen over and over again the intellectual devastation caused by the use of undefined abstract terms. I have heard people arguing for hours about a phrase which they have never troubled to dissect. Often they would have found an agreement in five minutes if they had stopped to discover their respective interpretations of the term. But the word was a symbol like a national flag; it was the word that roused their loyalty or their animosity; it was for the word they fought and not for the thing. Just as the State, existing because of the individual and for the individual, often swallows him up and destroys him, so the word, existing because of the idea and for the idea, buries its parent beneath a mass of irrelevance. It is from such filial violence that the idea of democracy is being condemned to suffocation.

This book has been written simply as an essay in definition, an attempt to show what democracy, stripped clean of its false clothing, does imply. It is not a constructive book, if by that phrase is meant an effort to solve constitutional and social problems. Each of these problems has a considerable literature of its own and must be dealt with on its own merits. But it is, I hope,



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constructive, in so far as no building is safe, however admirably designed, unless it has firm foundations. My ambition has been to discover, or at least to discuss, the essential elements of the democratic idea, and to give a precise content to its phraseology. My readers, if any, will very probably dispute my definitions, but it is a great deal better to fight about definitions than to fight, as we usually do, about nothing at all.

The function of education, especially of adult education, is to my mind predominantly the task of seeking those general principles without which information is barren. It is the putting together of our disjointed fragments of experience and knowledge so that we may understand life more clearly, use it better, and enjoy it more. The world is full of people who, although they have accumulated a great many facts about this subject and about that, are fundamentally uneducated because all their learning is isolated; lacking all sense of proportion and balance, ignorant of the very conception of law, they must inevitably take a distorted view of life. Or, a far worse contingency, their knowledge is remote from life altogether. The naturalist that prefers the stuffed specimen to the living animal; the ornithologist with his paper army of Latin names; the classical specialist who reads the Greek drama to analyse the use of conjunctions and to supply humanity with six volumes upon syntax;

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the theologian who devotes a lifetime to the doctrinal controversies of the early Church; the historian who proves conclusively (to the chagrin of another of his kidney) that the events of 845 B.C. really happened in 846 B.C.. Such people, mere fractions of real men and women, can give year after year to the compilation of facts and yet keep those facts utterly outside their emotions. There are naturalists without wonder, scholars without awe, theologians without worship, economists without anger, historians who never laughed or hated or despaired. They may be wise, but who is jealous of their wisdom? It is possible to know everything and understand nothing.

The value of education stands or falls by its capacity to make life fuller and therefore more enjoyable. If it is to help us to a clear outlook and a grasp of principle, it must do two things: it must renounce the pedantry of fruitless specialisation, and it must get below the surface of words to the unchanging level of realities. The world is surfeited with symbols. It needs no more beautiful abstractions and inspiring names, but only the experience for which those stand. In the political sphere we have had far too much praise of democracy as an ideal and too little thought about it as a thing. There are innumerable scraps and pieces of democratic machinery and a common lip-service to the

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idea of popular control; what is lacking is the co-ordination of knowledge and the desire to discover general principles. Many people apply themselves every year to the challenge of adult education; they come to it with a passionate enthusiasm and a genuine determination to sacrifice hard-earned leisure to the cause; they want to understand the world they live and work and suffer in, and they are prepared to face real drudgery to gain that understanding. But in the majority of cases, their previous education stopped at the age of thirteen or fourteen and, of necessity, their minds are untrained. They think in terms of words not concepts. So, when they come face to face with the ordinary political thought of our day, they are at once baffled by the formidable phrases, vague and transitory meanings, and the common contempt for precision. Journalism picks up a word like Bolshevism, which ought to mean a great deal, and turns it into an empty vehicle of abuse, a cruel snare for those who are still the servants of nomenclature.

The obvious task for education at the present is to concentrate more upon improving our thinking, than upon increasing our information. Books are far more plentiful now than they were a generation ago, and the keen student, whatever his financial position, can usually get his books, if he makes use of his chances. But a plethora