

# *Morbid Democracy*

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WHAT GOOD THINGS HAPPEN in the world cast only pallid reflections in Spain. But the bad reverberates in Spanish ears with astonishing force, acquiring an intensity greater than in any other land.

The whole of Europe, lately, has been suffering a serious lowering of the standards of courtesy and civility; in Spain, we have reached the ultimate in discourtesy. Whenever anyone invites us to embrace a plebeian attitude, our valetudinarian race finds itself flattered, precisely in the way that an invalid feels grateful to be allowed

to stretch out at full length. The plebeian tone, triumphant in the world, tyrannizes in Spain. Any tyranny being insufferable, we must prepare the revolution against plebeianism, the most insulting of despotisms.

For the ascendancy of this dismaying regime, we have the triumph of pure democracy to thank. Under the shadow of this noble idea, there has sprouted in the public conscience a perverse preference for everything low.

How often this happens! The worth of an idea transports men; and, once having

taken service under a favorite idea, they proceed to forget that there are other good ideas, with which their new darling must be made consonant, lest the good idea turn into a hideous and fatal error. Democracy as democracy—that is, strictly and exclusively as a standard of political equity—seems an admirable thing. But over-stimulated democracy, exasperated democracy, democracy in religion or art, for instance, democracy in thought or gesture, democracy of the heart and of custom, is the most dangerous affliction which a society can contract.

The narrower the sphere of action proper to an idea, the more disturbing will its influence be if the idea is forcibly applied to the totality of life. Fancy a frenzied vegetarian insistent upon surveying the whole world from the viewpoint of his culinary dogmas: in art, he would censure all paintings but vegetal landscapes; as for the national economy, he would be strongly agrarian; in religion, he would bow to no gods but the archaic harvest-deities; for clothing, he would tolerate only hemp, flax, or matweed; and as a philosopher, he might insist on the teaching of a transcendent botany. Yet no less absurd is the man who, like many today, stands before us proclaiming, "Above all else, I am a democrat!"

On such occasions I recollect the story of the altar-boy who, forgetting his part, answered the officiating priest, at whatever point in the liturgy they found themselves, with the phrase: "Blessed be the Holy Sacrament." At length, jaded by this persistent invocation, the priest turned round and said, "My son, that's all very well, but it's beside the point!"

A man has no right to be first and foremost a democrat. It is not just to be a democrat above all else, because the plane to which the idea of democracy is attached is not a fundamental plane. Politics is a realm of things, a category instrumental and adjectival to life, one of many matters to which we must pay heed so that our lives may steer clear of disaster and so that we may achieve the development of the com-

monwealth. At a moment of crisis, politics may open the breach before which we ought to mass our best energies, that we may master the situation. But these crisis-tactics ought not to become daily procedure.

In this, nineteenth-century thought urgently needs correction. The last century suffered a grave dislocation of the organ which regulates the sense of perspective; and this injury led nineteenth-century thinkers to exalt to the ultimate and definitive plane certain matters which, in nature, can be no more than penultimate and tentative. To make a devotion to the previous and incidental into the decisive undertaking of life, to dedicate to this cause our most loving and constant efforts, is an aberration. The perfection of technique is the perfection of the external means to secure an increase of vitality. It is well to concern ourselves with perfecting techniques. But techniques ought not to be pursued to the exclusion of ends. So it is with politics: there is a place for technique in politics, as in natural science. But that technique should be subordinate to the *end* of politics, which is to allow the individual an increasing margin of freedom for the development of personal capacity and well-being.

Democracy being simply a condition in law, incapable of furnishing us with any guidance as to those functions which are not concerned with public equity (and those latter functions constitute most of our life), the apotheosis of the concept of democracy into an integral principle of existence engenders fantastic extravagance. The initial result is the wounding of the very sentiment which gave rise to democracy: for the concept of democracy springs from the desire to save the plebs from their low condition. But the doctrinaire democrat who has converted a technique, democracy, into an end, soon finds himself sympathizing with the plebs, precisely because of their plebeianism—their customs, manners, intellectual tone. An example of this is the socialist creed (for we are dealing here with a creed, a secular religion), which has for one article of faith the dogma that only

a proletarian head is fit for true science and reformed morality. During my own lifetime, I have seen the conquest of the upper classes by low manners: mine has not been the best age in which to live. Even before surrendering themselves to the manners and argot of Lavapiés ["Footwash," a dreary proletarian district of Madrid], aristocratic Spanish circles already had embraced characteristics more profoundly plebeian. Every so-called "democratic" interpretation of a realm of being outside the domain of public equity becomes fatally plebeian.

In the progress of the triumphant march of democracy against legal privilege, against caste, and the like, the perversion of democratic techniques which I call "plebeianism" has shared the victory with political democracy. The honorable intention of ending inequality before the law, it is true, has fought the battles along this line of march. In the old regime, the laws made men unequal, predetermining status and condition. With good reason we have denied these privilege-laws the name of true right (in French, *droits*; in Spanish, *derechos*), giving them, rather, with a pejorative intention, the name of "privileges." The healthy aspiration of democracy, then, has been the leveling of privileges; but not, properly speaking, the leveling of rights. The "Rights of Man" have a negative content: they are the barbican which the new society, more rigorously juridical than any past society, has raised against any possible recrudescence of privilege. This negative, defensive, polemical character of the Rights of Man shows up especially clearly if one examines the germination of the concept in the English revolution. To the "Rights of Man" that are already known and conquered, yet others will be added, until the last remnants of political myth disappear. For those privileges which are not "rights" are rooted in the residual survival of religious inhibitions.

Yet it is not certain that these future "Rights of Man," to be devised and achieved by generations yet unborn, will so radically

alter the face of society as have those Rights already achieved or in process of achievement (as, for instance, the "economic rights of man" for which workers' parties now strive). If, then, by democracy we mean principally the leveling of privileges, the glorious hours of democracy seem to have passed.

If, in short, the organization of society called democracy should remain in this negative, polemical condition, having destroyed the prescriptive organization of society without substituting new hopes and loyalties, then the morally superior natures among a people will damn democracy. Unless democracy seems to be a first attempt at justice, allowing man to create a margin of equity within which he can build a new and more generous social structure, the more refined temperaments will turn backward toward a nobler past. For a just social structure must be not merely just, but also a structure. To live humanely is, in essence, to live within a structure. A wretched structure is better than none. The past may have been organized by superstition, but, when all is said, at least it was organized.

I said earlier that no man has a right to be a democrat "before all else." I now add that neither does one have the right to be only and exclusively a democrat. The zealot for perfect justice does not seem to be able to check his impetus when he attains the leveling of privileges, when he has assured equality of lawful right in all those matters in which men really are equal by nature. He feels a compulsion to press on, to legislate also in those great realms naturally marked by a profound inequality among men.

Now here is a standard for distinguishing the line of demarcation between just democratic opinion and plebeianism. Whoever is irritated at the sight of equal men being treated unequally, but who is not disturbed at seeing men who are unequal being treated equally—that person is no democrat, but a plebeian.

The age in which democracy was a healthy sentiment and an ascendant impulse

is now past. What today is called democracy is much more like a degeneration of the heart.

To Nietzsche we owe the discovery of the peculiar device which functions in a decayed public conscience: he called it *ressentiment*. When a man feels himself inferior because he lacks certain qualities—intelligence, or courage, or elegance—he attempts by indirection to increase his stature in his own eyes. He does this by denying the excellence of those qualities in which he is deficient. As a commentator on Nietzsche has suggested perceptively, this is not the case precisely of the fox and the sour grapes. For the fox did not deny the value of the ripe fruit—he still thought of ripeness as a desirable quality in fruit—but he simply denied that this estimable quality happened to exist in those particular grapes which hung unattainable just above his head.

The resentful man, on the other hand, goes much further: he hates ripeness, preferring the sour, the green. A total inversion of values takes place: the superior, the higher, precisely because it is such, suffers a *capitis diminutio*, and in its place the low is exalted.

The common man tends to be endowed, or used to be endowed, with a sound capacity for admiration. When he saw a duchess pass in her state coach he was enraptured, and was gratified to dig in the earth of a planet where, on occasion, such lovely and fleeting sights are to be seen. He tends to admire and enjoy luxury, elegance, and beauty as we admire the gold and rubies with which the dying sun decorates its setting. And who is capable of envying the golden luxury of the evening? The common man did not formerly despise himself: he knew himself to be different and less than the nobility; but his breast was not bitten by venomous resentment. At the beginning of the French Revolution a charcoal woman said to a marchioness: "My lady, now things are going to run the other way around: I'll travel in a sedan chair and my lady will carry the charcoal." One of those

resentful quack lawyers who goaded the people toward revolution might well have corrected the charcoal woman: "No, citizenship: now we are all going to carry charcoal."

We live surrounded by people who do not hold themselves in high esteem, perhaps with good reason. These people want the equality of all men to be immediately and forthwith proclaimed; equality before the law is not enough for them: they long for a declaration that all men are equal in talent, sensibility, refinement, and degree of feeling. Every day that goes by without the triumph of this unrealizable leveling is a cruel day for these resentful creatures, who feel themselves fatally condemned to form the moral and intellectual plebs of our species. Left to themselves, they taste gall and wormwood; it avails naught that, through minor intrigue, they succeed in playing showy roles in society; their apparent social success poisons their inner selves even more, revealing to them the unstable disequilibrium of their life, threatened at every instant by a deserved fall; in their own eyes they appear as falsifiers of their own selves, as counterfeiters of a tragic specie, where the coin defrauded is the fraudulent person himself.

This state of the spirit, sodden with corrosive acids, is made most manifest in those offices where the fiction concerning the missing qualities is least possible. Is there anything so sad as a writer, a professor, or a politician without talent, without refined sensitivity, without lofty character? How are these men, bitten by the knowledge of their intimate failure, to look upon men that cross their path breathing attainment and radiating a sound self-respect and self-esteem?

And thus it is that journalists, professors, and politicians without talent compose the High Command of envy, which, as Quevedo says, is so skinny and yellow because it goes about biting but does not eat. What today we call "public opinion" and "democracy" are little but the purulent secretion of these spiteful souls.