Democracy and Openness

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During the recent Iraq war there was a great deal of discussion of the desirability of bringing democracy to Iraq, and indeed to other countries which were suffering under ruthless and oppressive dictatorships. There was also the thought that if Iraq had a flourishing democratic system, its benefits would become evident within the Middle East, and other peoples in the area would be encouraged to press for more democracy in their own countries. And critics who expressed doubts about any of this were accused of treating the people of the Middle East in a patronising way, implying that they were not able to do what we in the West have managed for some time.

I certainly do not want to appear patronising, nor indeed do I want to reject the idea that democracy may be the best form of government for everyone, everywhere. And I think that it evinces a form of pessimistic determinism to say, as many do on both left and right, that there may be countries too poor or backward to become democracies. But I do want to raise a number of questions in order to make slightly more precise just what might be meant by democracy, or by the sort of democracy it might be advisable to spread around the world.

Consider the following cases

1. In an Islamic country, there is a bitterly fought and often violent election. The election is won by the radical or fundamentalist party, who have made it clear that they will institute Sharia law and various other practices regarded by others inside and outside the country as repressive. The army steps in and annuls the election, setting up a military dictatorship with its own different type of repression. One effect of this is that the country become a major exporter of asylum seekers, some of whom join Islamic terrorist groups outside the country around the world.
2. An African country is divided on tribal lines. People in that country vote almost entirely on tribal lines. One tribe is significantly larger than the others. There are democratic

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elections, but they are always won by one party, so democratic tribalism leads to a one party state.

3. A central European country is suffering from a continuing economic and social crisis following a disastrous war. Elections happen frequently, but tend to produce weak governments, which simply exacerbates the crisis. A new party arises, led by a strong leader, who identifies groups to blame for the continuing crisis. He promises to rid the country of instability and to curb the influence of the offending groups. The voters give him this power, and he then uses his majority in the democratically elected parliament to he set himself up as dictator.
4. Another Western country has for a number of years (with just one break) been run by a party of the social-democratic left, which has won a series of elections. This party is in fact financed by the trade unions and led by a combination of doctrinaire socialists and rabble rousing populists. The state runs pretty well everything including what their official doctrine refers to as 'the commanding heights of the economy' (i.e. decrepit, inefficient and over-manned steel, coal, aircraft, rail and motor industries, to say nothing of telecommunications and other public utilities), and controls (or attempts to control) the whole economy. Nevertheless, despite or perhaps because of all this, there are damaging strikes every year in both public and private sectors, which usually end in 'meaningful' settlements after 'contructive' negotiations (i.e. pay rises for the strikers of between 10 and 20% or more). Inflation is rampant, 20% or so per year; taxes are as high as 98% on the highest incomes; there is capital flight; in some cities the dead are unburied and rubbish is uncollected for weeks; the government has to go the IMF to get baled out and is forced to institute draconian economic measures. It loses the next election, after its leader and the country's Prime Minister has returned from a mid-winter holiday in the Caribbean uttering the immortal phrase 'Crisis? What crisis?'

A few preliminary comments on our cases

The first case is based on the current situation in Algeria, following the success of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the first round of elections in 1991, and the army's cancelling of the second round in 1992, in which the FIS was heading for a clear majority. One

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lesson which might be drawn from it is that the effects of violent political events in one country may not be confined to that country. In this sense, then, and in line with one of the themes of this meeting, we all have an interest in what happens in Algeria; we all have to consider whether democracy is or is not desirable in such a country, and whether we would support the intervention of the army in an election in circumstances like those which obtained in Algeria. (It is worth noting that free and fair elections in Egypt, Pakistan and elsewhere in the Islamic world, including possibly Saudi Arabia, would probably see victories by fundamentalists; but it is also worth noting that the allegedly 'secular' government currently ruling in Algeria is actually a brutal and ruthless dictatorship, and that in its attitude to women is currently trying hard to appear as hard-line as its fundamentalist critics.)

The second case might be Zimbabwe (or many other African states). But let us suppose it is Zimbabwe over the past twenty or so years. Actually in 2002 even some of the President's own supporters were beginning to turn against him, and he was in some danger of losing the election that year. Whether he would actually have lost it or not in a genuinely free election, we will never know, because the population was assisted in its democratic deliberations and in its vote-casting by groups of the President's supporters, armed thugs known as 'war veterans', whom the police, far from controlling, actually helped. But this was only the final stage on Zimbabwe's route from democracy to a one-party state with no respect for human rights and in effect a president for life or for as long as he feels like staying on. We need to ask whether this passage was inevitable in the circumstances, and also perhaps about the meaning of fair elections.

The third case is a somewhat simplified sketch of Germany in 1933. The National Socialists under Hitler together with the parties which supported the Nazis did win an election that year, the last election in Germany until after the war. A democratically elected leader did then annul democratic procedures (by means of the Enabling Act, which gave the Chancellor power to make laws without consulting Parliament), leading to what philosophers have dubbed 'the paradox of democracy': that is, a democratic system democratically voting away its own right to operate democratically. In this context we might also note what has happened more recently in Europe; when the European Union attempted in effect to negate the democratically decided inclusion of Jörg Haider's Freedom Party into the Austrian government, and also when, in the French Presidential election of 2002, the whole apparatus of

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government and the media abandoned all pretence at impartiality and directed itself, unfairly many thought, to defeating Le Pen. So should democratic institutions act undemocratically in attempting to defeat those they see as enemies of democracy and likely if they got power to undermine democracy?

The final example is sketch of my own country in 1979 and the atmosphere leading up to 1979; unlike the other stories, it does have a reasonably satisfactory ending. The new leader was Mrs Thatcher who, among other things, took on the trade unions and curbed their undemocratic power. She got inflation down, privatised much of the economy, including the public utilities, and she reduced taxes generally (while actually generating more revenue for the government). But perhaps we could also consider the less happy case of Chile under Allende where a democratically elected government appeared to its critics to be expropriating private property on a large scale and was plunging the country into severe social instability. But when does a democratic re-distribution of wealth become expropriation, and when does giving workers their legitimate trade union rights become syndicalist abuse of a labour monopoly (in which collectivised labour can hold a country to ransom, by means of closed shops combined with aggressive and often violent strikes in key industries)?

Aristotle and Plato

So from our examples, we have a budget of questions, too many and too complex to answer here or even discuss in any detail. But clearly they all show ways in which democracy is not just being used to further undemocratic ends—which it clearly is in the cases considered—but more precisely, democratic structures are being used to decrease openness and freedom in the society as a whole. Underlying all the questions and cases is the meaning of a distinction made first by Aristotle in his **Politics** (1279a16). In Aristotle's own words 'it is clear that those constitutions which aim at the common good are right, as being in accord with absolute justice; while those which aim only at the good of the rulers are wrong. They are all deviations from the right constitutions. They are like the rule of the master over the slave, whereas the state is an association of free men.'

While it is easy for us in the twenty first century to see in dictatorships and oligarchies the type of deviation from the good constitution of which Aristotle speaks, it is less natural to see

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democracies in those terms; less natural, perhaps, but as our examples suggest, not necessarily incorrect. For Aristotle there are two ways in which rule by the majority can turn out, the first which he calls polity and the second he calls democracy. Polity is political control exercised by the mass of the populace in the common interest, whereas democracy is when the mass uses its power to further the sectional interests of the many, or as Aristotle says, of the men without means. Democracy is when the poor and numerous hold office, and use their office for the benefit of the poor and numerous, often by punitive taxation of the better off (what might be called redistribution, but which may actually be little better than the legalised theft and the expression of the primitive resentment of the less well off against those who may well have worked hard to achieve their positional and economic superiority).

Democracy, as opposed to polity, may then lead to that characteristic vice of the many, a spirit of small-mindedness and its working up by demagogues. Here, of course, Aristotle walks in the footsteps of his teacher, Plato. In Plato's **Republic** we find an almost wholly negative characterisation of democracy. Democracy arises in the first place when the majority in an oligarchic society begin to realise that the minority of wealthy people who are ruling are in fact no better than the majority, and because of their corruption by wealth, weak too. So in a movement which anticipates the awakening of the slave class in Hegel, the poor use their numerical might to take over from their masters. A form of egalitarian diversity and liberty ensues, which is close to anarchy in that there is no real authority and no hierarchy of value. There is no real constancy, either individual or collective; the same people appear one day as sybarites, the next day as ascetics; one day they praise military virtue, the next business values, the next study, and so on; and the same goes for the fashions in society as a whole. Those rule who manage to convince the majority that they are the 'people's friends'.

Among the people themselves, in the name of liberty, lower passions begin to dominate, and there is also a cult of youth: 'the parent falls into the habit of behaving like the child, and the child like the parent; the father is afraid of his sons, and they show no fear or respect for their parents in order to assert their freedom ... the schoolmaster timidly flatters his pupils, and the pupils make light of their masters as well as of their attendants. Generally speaking, the young copy their elders, argue with them, and will not do as they are told; while the old, anxious not to be thought

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disagreeable tyrants, imitate the young and condescend to enter into their jokes and amusements.' (**Republic**, 563a-b) Eventually, in the ensuing lawlessness, democratic despots become dominant, paving the way for straightforward tyranny.

We do not need to accept everything Plato says to see that, phenomenologically speaking, he acutely captures some of democracy's inherent dangers and possible outcomes, a point to which we will return. But he is too negative, in part I conjecture because he holds a false view of political truth. It will be recalled that for Plato the ideal republic was one which would be ruled by philosopher kings, intellectuals who had devoted their lives to the study of dialectic, cut off from the rest of humanity and from ordinary human concerns. They would acquire a form of wisdom superior to the rest of humanity, and, armed with this wisdom, they would be able to rule and administer society with perfect justice. From this perspective any attempt to involve the majority of ordinary people without philosophical training in matters of government would necessarily corrupt the pure truth of the philosophers, and it would also mean that society would be dominated by factions and self-interest (much like what Plato saw in the Athenian Assembly, where those he believed signally unfitted to govern held sway, and, whose court of 501 jurors had, of course, condemned Socrates to death).

But Plato's model of ethical knowledge is fatally flawed. Morality and justice are not *a priori* concepts, discoverable by dialectic or pure reason alone. Without denying their objectivity, it is important to appreciate that what we know about these things emerges from human experience and from what we discover about human flourishing through the experience of life. They are, to that degree, empirical matters, constrained to a considerable degree by what we learn about the experiential interplay between human possibility and human limitations.

But even if this were not so, Plato's model of politics is also fatally flawed. For his rulers to be able to rule successfully, they would have to have knowledge of the whole of society, in order to see what policies were needed and how those policies turned out. It is just this knowledge which they are denying themselves by failing to involve the whole population in their decision making. For, however well intentioned and learned legislators might be, all actions and policies have unforeseeable and unintended consequences. To take a simple example, it might be felt that in a situation of housing shortage, private landlords are taking unfair advantage of their tenants by pushing rents up too high and

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threatening those who do not or cannot pay with homelessness. So the government acts to control rents and tenure to protect the security of tenants, which would in all probability be both just and popular democratically. But unfortunately the landlords respond by ceasing to let their property to secured tenants, whose situation is actually worsened as the supply of property to rent dries up.

No doubt it would be said that all this is now well known. Any future rent acts would be drafted to close off this eventuality, and that is no doubt true. But what is now well known was not well known when, in response to public pressure, British governments did first introduce rent acts in the 1960s, with the effects I have just described. And no doubt future rent acts will have other, as yet unpredictable, consequences. The general point being made here is that the successful ruling of any society will require a constant flow of information to the rulers from the ruled, both in order to decide policy, but even more important to learn the effects of policies. It is just this flow of information which Plato's rulers are denied by their situation, and it will also be denied to any self-enclosed group of rulers who are insulated from the general public by groups of flatterers, place men and intermediaries who tell them only what they want to hear (which will be the inevitable effect of any dictatorship). Effective rule requires openness in the body politic, an openness which democracy is well suited to supply.

This was well understood by Aristotle in his defence of polity. In general, according to him, when there are many people, each is likely to have some share of virtue and practical wisdom, which is why he wants matters of value generally to be decided by the consensus of the many and the wise; the wise, to be sure, but also the many because of their experience, individual and collective. And although individually each of the many may be inferior in understanding to the experts, collectively they are likely to be as good or better.

Negatively, too, if we exclude the mass of people from politics we are likely to be incubating a 'huge hostile element in the state' (1281b31). True enough, but the positive argument is stronger and more interesting. It is precisely the point we have been making, that those who best understand the effects of policies are those directly affected by them: 'there are tasks of which the actual doer will be neither the best nor the only judge ... An obvious example is house building: the builder can certainly form an opinion on a house, but the user, the household manager will be an even better judge ... and it is the diner not the cook that pronounces upon the merits of a dinner.' (1282a17–23) In our days of arrogant architects raised to

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peerages and celebrity chefs, Aristotle's common sense is salutary. And anathema as it might be to politicians and bureaucrats, in evaluating practical matters and particularly in public politics, the user or consumer should be in pole position and not the producer or planner.

Then again, while Aristotle is unillusioned about the possibilities of democratic corruption and the buying of votes, he also points out that the more power is diffused, the less the possibility of corruption; many are less easily corrupted that one or a few (and, as we have learned, corruption can take many forms and also can occur even among the most incorruptible once they have got power). But, more than that point, obvious enough to us if not to Plato, Aristotle also points out that if the people in the middle of society take a hand in politics, the results are likely to be better than if either the arrogance of the rich or the envy of the very poor are in the ascendant. 'Where the middle element' as he puts it, 'is large, there least of all arise factions and divisions among the citizens' (1296a8), and this desirable condition is more likely to obtain in large democratic states than in any other type of constitution, given the natural tendency of oligarchies, aristocracies and monarchies to concentrate wealth and honours on the few—and hence to prepare the way for factional strife.

But this middle element, if mature, numerous and powerful, will also be able to counter-balance the tendency in democracy to egalitarianism of a radical sort, which is inherent in the democratic assumption that at a certain level every man—and opinion—is equal or deserving of equal attention. What we are calling openness does indeed demand an assumption of this sort, because, for reasons already touched on, we do want every voice to have some sort of say and we do not want people to be dismissed and treated as non-persons; the difficulty is to maintain this fundamental premise without lapsing into the potentially rancorous egalitarianism which would treat all opinions as equally worthwhile or valid, and dismiss any differences of wealth and position, however obtained, as in themselves objectionable. And it is at this point that a strong and stable middle group in a society may be able to steer policy and practice in directions which are both democratic and measured in value and judgement. Of course, as Aristotle hints in his negative remarks about the bad form of democracy, a successful middle group and a successful polity will be far easier to establish in a society in which everybody has a degree of economic stake in that

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society and economic security to boot. The historic connexion between liberal democracy and the ownership of property is not coincidental.

In sum, then, Aristotle, while no uncritical admirer of democracy, actually gives us some very substantial reasons for thinking that the beneficent form of democracy—polity as he puts it, a democracy dominated by a secure and stable middle group—is likely to produce better decisions, better feedback, less corruption and more political wisdom overall than rule by one man or a few or by some faction simply pursuing its own interests unchecked or by rulers unprepared to listen to all those they rule. This point in Aristotle is so strong that given the high likelihood of corruption and stupidity in both monarchy and oligarchy, one wonders why he did not come straight out and declare polity the best form of government *simpliciter*. But it would, of course, have to be a polity in which general consensus through the middle group restrained the brute exercise of power by a bare majority acting purely in its own narrow and immediate interests.

De Tocqueville

Not even the most superficial consideration of democracy can avoid a brief reference to de Tocqueville's unparalleled analysis of democratic mores and the democratic temperament (in **Democracy in America** referred to here in the Fontana Press edition, translated by George Lawrence, 1994). De Tocqueville was, of course, talking about early nineteenth century America, a society he admired for its peacefulness, its community spirit and for its way of settling differences. Nevertheless he did have considerable reservations about some aspects of democratic America, mostly based on its tendency to a form of egalitarian culture. In this he was following in Plato's footsteps, for Plato had also criticised the egalitarian tendencies of democracy, as we have seen, but in one significant respect de Tocqueville departs from the Platonic analysis, and arguably he is more accurate at least as far as modern democracies go. For where Plato sees democracy as characterised by a scandalous diversity of taste, morality and attitude—a sort of Nietzschean pandemonium of free spirits—de Tocqueville emphasises democracy's tendency to conformism beneath any superficial diversity.

Where a society is stratified and men are unalike, the few who are really enlightened and learned may be accepted as such, and so

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become able to wield great power; whereas 'the nearer men are to a common level of uniformity, the less they are inclined to believe baldly in any man or class. But they are readier to trust the mass, and public opinion becomes more and more the mistress of the world'. (435)

In a democracy, although people hate being thought worse than their neighbour and dislike obeying superiors, because of the general egalitarian spirit each person actually has a low opinion of himself and 'thinks that he is born for nothing but the enjoyment of vulgar pleasures' (632). Democracy dislikes the idea of high ideals beyond those of material self-interest—which is why democracies tend to be unwilling to go to war—but the obverse of this good quality is that all too easily in a democracy a spirit of cultural and moral mediocrity reigns. So along with the dogma of intellectual equality goes a practice of universal weakness. In democracies individuals are weak and conformist, and expect the whole to do for them what they should be doing for themselves did they really respect themselves or their freedom.

And this paves the way for what de Tocqueville memorably referred to as democratic despotism, a society ruled over by a schoolmaster rather than a tyrant, but despotic nonetheless in its combination of centralisation and popular sovereignty. Over this society and its people

> stands an immense, protective power which is alone responsible for securing their enjoyment and watching over their fate ... It would resemble parental authority if, fatherlike, it tried to prepare its charges for a man's life, but on the contrary it only tries to keep them in perpetual childhood. It likes to see its citizens enjoy themselves, provided that they think of nothing but enjoyment. It gladly works for their happiness but wants to be the sole agent and judge of it ... Thus it daily makes the exercise of free choice less useful and rarer, restricts the activity of free will within a narrower compass, and little by little robs each citizen of the proper use of his own faculties ... It covers the whole of social life with a network of petty, complicated rules that are both minute and uniform, through which even men of the greatest originality and most vigorous temperament cannot force their heads above the crowd. It does not break men's will, but softens, bends and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much being born; it is not at all tyrannical, but it hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies so much that in the end each

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> nation is no more than a flock of timid and hardworking animals with the government as its shepherd. (691)

De Tocqueville is, of course, sketching an ideal type here, the way he thinks that a certain type of egalitarian democracy is likely to go. Much of what he says has come to pass in Western Europe, with its social chapters, its universal provision of state welfare, its incessant regulation of more and more tracts of our lives and its obsessive paternalism masquerading as health and safety. Despotism may be a strong description of our form of life, surely too strong if one thinks of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, say, and it is certainly not a tyranny. But that there is a servile spirit in our commonly held assumption that the state will look after, regulate, determine and protect our lives and behaviour in ever increasing detail is less easy to deny. We might also recall that in **On Liberty** (Ch 5), John Stuart Mill warned that a universal state education would be little more than a device for moulding all men alike, inherently mediocre, essentially conformist, and fundamentally illiberal. Yet in many of our societies and for many of our citizens, universal state education (or at least a heavy preponderance of free state provision in a mixed system) has come to seem a cornerstone of civilised existence (along with analogous state health and welfare schemes). Deaf to the warnings of nineteenth century commentators like de Tocqueville and Mill, we are then surprised when the results of state education are dire throughout Europe and the USA.

Critical as he is of some tendencies of democracy, it seems to be that in one respect de Tocqueville is not critical enough. He clearly thinks that, as part of its general softening effect, democracy will actually make people more humane and gentle, with their passions 'naturally restrained, imagination limited and pleasures simple'. (690) He may be right in his expectation that public policy in a democracy is likely to pay lip service at least to values of humanity and even gentleness, but unlike Plato he clearly did not foresee the extent to which egalitarian assumptions in the populace at large, unchecked by standards of the right way to behave might well issue in individual and group behaviour infused with anger, aggression and resentment; and he paid little attention to the role the mass media, that quintessentially democratic phenomenon, might play in undermining standards of behaviour and conduct. And neither Plato nor de Tocqueville spent much time considering the effect egalitarian assumptions about value might have in a society in which there is not just one, but many so-called cultures jostling for

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position in a confined social space – maybe because neither would have thought such a society possible, let alone actual.

Democracy, Freedom and Openness

Our initial examples suggested that democracy is not in itself sufficient for good government. Majority rule can be used to tyrannise, to quash good government, to restrict freedom and to close down openness in a society. Both Aristotle and Plato show us why this will happen when a majority uses democracy to further its own interests at the expense of the whole.

But, unlike Plato, Aristotle gives us some strong reasons to think that, generally speaking, democracy might be the best form of government, provided that there is openness within the democracy and provided that there is within that society there is a middle consensus or a consensus of the middle about what is or is not tolerable, and provided that such a consensus generally prevails.

One could argue that in our first three examples of disordered democracy (a Sharia ruled Algeria, Zimbabwe, Weimar Germany), there was or would be neither openness nor the sort of middle consensus Aristotle is seeking, and that in our fourth example there was danger of the essential consensus failing, but that Mrs Thatcher, by her apparently tough and, among substantial sections of the population, deeply unpopular measures, restored it. That may seem a surprising thing to say of a leader who publicly professed to despise consensus and who, according to opinion polls and to what one hears on television, is personally still the most hated British prime minister of recent decades; but it is worth recalling that Tony Blair, for some time the most popular of recent prime ministers and with a huge parliamentary majority to boot, has felt no impulsion whatsoever to reverse her policies on trade unions, inflation or privatisation. In other words these supposedly controversial measures, despite initial appearance, actually reflected the consensus in British society, but one which had been hidden and distorted by political activity over some two or more decades.

In fact de Tocqueville gives us a useful clue to analysing the apparent paradox of some unpopular reforms actually being more consensual than what they replaced. The democratic state, as depicted by de Tocqueville, has a tendency to take over more and more of the lives of the citizens. But the more the state grows, the more power and money it has at its disposal. This over-weighty state then becomes a prize to be fought over by any and all vested

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interest groups, by all in fact who seek power, wealth and influence in the society. So far from incarnating or mediating consensus within a society, the state and its institutions become prizes to be fought over and won. Reforms, such as Mrs Thatcher's which weaken the power of the state or the inequitable legal status of bodies such as trade unions, then remove a damaging degree of conflict from the political arena, and leave it to the citizens to fight their differences out among themselves; in these circumstances the state becomes more like a referee in the fight, rather than yet another player in the game, whose decisions will be (more or less) accepted in a consensual spirit, provided only they can be seen to embody a degree of impartiality.

This analysis, encouraging as it may seem, however does rest on one assumption: that at a deep level, at a level deeper than day to day politics, there is within a society consensus on basic values, attitudes and behaviour. To what extent does de Tocqueville's conformity of public opinion represent such a consensus? There are two reasons to be cautious here. First, for the reasons already looked at, a bloated de Tocquevillean state is likely by its very existence and nature to promote divisions within society, and so to undermine consensus, at least on the surface. But more profoundly, the public opinion which holds sway in such a state is likely to be both fickle and, ultimately at least, subversive of long-term standards of value. This is because of its egalitarian roots: any view is as good as any other, and the only way of deciding between views is majority opinion. Majority opinion is not determined by long-lasting standards and criteria, but is notoriously subject to media manipulation and distortion, as Plato recognised. And in a society which is dominated by majority public opinion, traditional values and standards are likely to come under assault, particularly if they seem to be standing in the way of instant gratification or egalitarian attitudes.

From this point of view and in an egalitarian democracy, public opinion is likely to destroy the roots of a true 'middle' consensus in a society, one which is based on long-held and settled values, which are taken within the society to have the sanction of some hierarchy of value beyond mere majority opinion as manufactured in the mass media. As Aristotle notes, 'the most extreme democracy, in which all share, is something which not every state can tolerate; and it is not likely to last unless it is well held together by its laws and customs' (**Politics**, 1319b) and, he would no doubt add, by the weight of a middle group reasonable in it attitudes and respectful of those laws and customs. I have been reluctant to speak of this

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middle group as a middle class, not only because there is no guarantee that with a certain sort of education (or mis-education) the middle classes, as defined in socio-economic terms, will not become highly subversive of law and custom; but, even more, because there can be occasions when it is precisely the working classes which have the most solid and unspoken regard for settled law and custom, as conservative politicians from Disraeli to Mrs Thatcher have recognised. But it is just this often unspoken respect for laws and customs, together with a sense of value beyond what we chose for ourselves on the basis of our own decisions which binds a society together which is going to be missing in a society run by public opinion.

This thought takes us on to a further consideration of openness. I have argued that some formally democratic societies fail through lack of openness (as do many undemocratic societies as well, of course). This might be particularly the case when a majority insist on imposing their religion or moral code on minorities and reject any criticism or feedback on the effect of their codes and policies. For all its democracy, such a society might well be as repressive and unfree as other countries which are formally dictatorships.

The question, though, is how we are to secure openness in a society. Some who have heard what I have been saying about openness and democracy will be aware that Aristotle is not its only source. In the background of my remarks about the unintended consequences of policies and about the need for openness to correct their defects is Karl Popper's **The Open Society and Its Enemies** (London, 1945, & subsequent editions). Popper was also very aware of the possibility of democracies lacking openness, but he was also sceptical of the efficacy of formal ways of securing openness. For openness is a question fundamentally of attitude within a society and among its rulers. For Popper constitutions guaranteeing fundamental freedoms, just as democracy itself, can have a role to play in a tolerant and humane society, but they are certainly not enough to guarantee it, as numerous examples from the apparently liberal Soviet constitution of 1918 to the current wrangling over the European constitution are enough to show. In Popper's own terminology, if you want openness in an institution you need a spirit of openness in those manning it – and, I would add, if you think that spirit is likely to be found among Europe's current commissioners and fonctionaires, who have for decades floated in a culture of secrecy, evasion and unaccountability, whatever the formal constraints on them, then you are likely to be disappointed.

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Multiculturalism and Democratic Consensus

It is, of course, a further question as to whether a spirit of openness on its own is enough to foster a tolerant and humane society, and one which is becoming increasingly relevant because of a further development in democracy. The development to which I refer is institutional multi-culturalism, that is the notion that one can have different groups, with very different values and world views, all accorded equal standing as groups within a single society. Multi-culturalism is usually contrasted with mono-culturalism, according to which, while individuals qua individuals have equal rights under the law, it is assumed that the public institutions and values of the society will reflect those of some dominant and homogeneous group. In a mono-cultural society, immigrants from different groups may well be admitted and even welcomed, but in the public sphere they will be expected to conform to the nation's public attitudes and values.

In practice, of course, few, if any, societies are (or have ever been) wholly mono-cultural, but it is only recently that multi-culturalism has begun to be advocated as a positive value in itself. One recent effect of democratic egalitarianism within the liberal democracies of the West has been to weaken assumptions of superiority about any values, including often the public values of one's own society, and this weakening of faith in current values may also include scepticism about liberal individualism itself (often said to be just the value of the dominant culture(s) in the West). At the same time, whether as effect or cause, there has been a growth of identity politics, the belief that individuals are constituted as individuals by the groups with which, by ethnicity or religion they do identify. Mass immigration and a realisation of the extent to which specific groups within apparently mono-cultural societies have been done down in the past have combined to produce a growing clamour in many Western societies for recognition of group rights and exceptions from national norms in fields such as employment, health, welfare and above all education. The multi-cultural position is that group rights and differences should be recognised in law and practice more generally, and, in the jargon, 'diversity celebrated', not just in peripheral and private things like restaurants and clothes shops, but in the public institutions the very heart of our democracies.

How would a multi-cultural society with differences recognised in all its institutions and welcoming even radical differences among its citizens in such things as religion actually hold together?

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According to Professor Lord Parekh, an influential proponent of such a view, commitment to the political community itself would be enough to hold a society together, where that politics is itself conceived in terms of a commitment to hold dialogue on differences between groups and positions, rather than resorting to violence or to marginalising dissenters or (if one does belong to a dissenting group) retreating into a self-imposed ghetto. This commitment does not presuppose any shared cultural, ethnic, religious or any other characteristic, nor does it 'involve sharing common substantive goals ... nor a common view of (the country's) history which they may read differently, nor a particular economic or social system about which they may entertain different views'; and it can go along with criticising 'the prevailing form of government, institutions, policies, values, ethos and dominant self-understanding in the strongest possible terms', but none of this should be regarded as disloyal 'so long as their basic commitment to dialogue is not in doubt'. (Bhikhu Parekh, **Rethinking Multiculturalism**, Houndmills, 2000, 341–2)

That a commitment to a certain form of openness alone might be sufficient to bind a community together is both radical and reductive. In response, it might be observed first that dialogue alone will not necessarily prevent either sharp divisions or feelings of being marginalized. In all sorts of areas decisions have to be made in a society, and particularly where fundamental moral differences are at issue (e.g. on abortion, women's rights, arranged marriages, euthanasia, and so on), at least some may feel unable to accept them, even after as much dialogue as anyone could want. Perhaps this might seem initially to imply a minimal state, where very few decisions have to be made, and this would certainly be in line with what I suggested earlier in discussing de Tocqueville, but before one becomes too sanguine about that remember that a minimal state would itself be morally unacceptable to those who believe in a socialistic concept of social justice.

But even leaving aside the problem of disputes irresolvable by dialogue, we need to consider whether any human group could function effectively as a society without something more held in common than a shared commitment to the political process. All the societies of which we have knowledge have, to a greater or lesser degree, had shared sentiments, shared allegiances, shared traditions and shared values. Whether a society would be possible which dispensed with all of this—as Parekh and the multiculturalists advocate—might fairly be said by its advocates to be something

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which we could not know in advance of an experiment along these lines. But that does not, I think, get to the root of the problem.

What the multiculturalists need to consider are the conditions required for the successful operation of the type of politics they advocate. The type of dialogue—and of tolerance and openness—which they see as underpinning the ideal political set-up is not something which comes from nowhere. As our earlier examples of flawed democracies indicate, much more is needed for a successful democracy than a formal commitment to majority rule. And as Aristotle and Plato and de Tocqueville show, democracy itself has certain inherent tendencies which militate against what might be called societies of free and responsible citizens, living in harmony and fruitful dialogue. In order to counter-balance these tendencies, Aristotle's insistence on a secure and stable middle group in society —no doubt appealing to some settled values and sentiments within that society—seems plausible enough.

But the existence and influence within a society of such a group within a liberal democracy itself depends on the sharing of certain values in that society. These values will typically be those of liberal democracy itself, values which will permit a society to be open, flexible, reasonable and tolerant on the one hand, but without compromising its fundamental stability and commitment to certain conceptions of human autonomy and flourishing on the other. These liberal democratic values historically are Western values, deriving from a long history, with its origins in Greece and Rome, in Christianity and in a history of religious wars and persecutions from which emerged ultimately a culture of rights and tolerance. These values are not necessarily so esteemed in other places and traditions, where our stress on autonomy, tolerance and human rights **can** seem like yet another manifestation of Western imperialism. (On this point see Samuel P. Hungtington, **The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order**, London, 198, 194.) In other words, the form of politics which the multi-culturalists see as potentially bridging the gap between Western and other world-views itself depends on acceptance of a substantive set of values, which in history have emerged most notably within the Western world, and which for that very reason may well be denied by other potential participants in the multi-cultural democracy.

I am not saying that these values cannot be accepted by others and in other traditions. As I happen to think that these values have a more than local validity, and that they are actually justifiable in terms of certain basic requirements for human flourishing in

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general, I think it patronising to say any such thing, as I said at the start. But we should not expect them, and the political institutions they have given rise to in the West, albeit intermittently and imperfectly, to take root elsewhere or even to flourish in our own societies without certain conditions being fulfilled. And chief among these conditions are a general agreement on what I have been calling liberal democratic values, such as tolerance and respect for individual freedom, together with a middle group in society both large enough and confident enough to ensure that these values persist. But it is not possible for such a middle group to flourish unless its members feel an allegiance to and a stake in their country in a more substantive way than the bare commitment to engage in a Parekhian political discussion. Being a multi-cultural 'community of communities' as Parekh advocates, or simply imposing majority rule will not be enough to get the virtues we really want when we advocate democracy as a form of government. We need a population broadly secure economically and also able to identify positively with the history and core values of their community; and, for a successful democracy not prone to the defects of our four initial examples, among those core values will have to be those of tolerance, of openness in the sense discussed earlier, and, within the limits imposed by the need to share what Aristotle calls the common view necessary to bind any community together, of liberal individualism itself.

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