

On Majority Rule as Make-Shift

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Scene: THE AYRSHIRE COAST. Personae: CITIZEN and SEADORN

Sea. Come, let us sit down here, where the furthest rock of the North Spit faces the incoming Western Sea.

Cit. Good; and the strong thrice-thick walls that tower just behind us will stand for the civilization that protects us. Let us lean on this buttress here.

Sea. Yet we turn our backs on them, and they are ruins. The liveliest strongest things about them are those golden lichen-spots, for they have a free life. But the structure itself, gray and brown and grim, though it frowns defiance on waves and winds and seems immutable, is inevitably crumbling nevertheless. Go back twenty years in memory, come here again twenty years hence, and even in so short a space you will have proof. Do the same by your vaunted fortress of civil institutions. Be historical, that you may be a little more surely and truly prophetic. No; put not your trust in walls of any kind ever so cunningly built, for none are experience-proof. Rather turn your face to the rising tide. Here is hope and strength and free prospect. The sea is the true image of that sure and restful continuance which you seek. Experience, like the sea, advancing and spreading, soaks, saps, sinks, and dissolves all. All that has not life enough to float and move on. Now, to begin where we left off this morning, I say that your majority-rule and all it has built up in the past and all it ever will or can build up, are void of this buoyant, elastic, moving life. They must, therefore, sink and melt away, and are doing so now. Otherwise, put in political newspaper phrase, they are not really "practical," useful, and prudent. They do not meet even merely present and passing emergencies with adequate expediency. That is my afternoon thesis, and I nail it up. Pelt it with particulars and details, as many as you like.

Cit. I will begin to riddle it too soon for you, I fear. But, first, do you not talk a little as if Majority-rule had been on its trial for thousands of years, and had been abundantly sifted and weighed and found wanting. Now, we are only just on the edge of real valid democracy, and no more. Even in England and America, one is nearest truth in saying that popular and representative freedom and power, the democratic life, in fact-the Republic, is but beginning to feel its feet and find its tongue. It has built up next to nothing yet—nothing for your judgment to fail upon, if you would not prejudge.

Sea. I am glad you have stumbled over this offense on the threshold of our discourse, for it reminds me to clear up an obscurity that befogs and hinders our free use of history, for criticism of the present, and for forecasting. Boldly, then, and by way of joining direct issue with you, I affirm that whatever has been built up in past times, indeed the whole structure of what calls itself civilization, has been erected and upheld by the activity of the same principle as now begins to operate in your pet baby democracies. That principle is the spirit of masterfulness—of domineering and over-ruling—the will, not to be free and set free, but to coerce and enthralled other will. Majority-rule, whatever fine names it may assume, is only one among the many manifestations of this self-will, or will to deny and suppress will. But to serious contemplation, it is almost of no consequence, nay, quite a matter of indifference, whether this evil-will shows itself one way or another. All its ways and all its works are alike evil; for its vise is not a matter of degree, but of kind; that is to say, it is essential, absolute, and incorrigible. Any appearance of less or more about it is delusive. Hence, Majority-rule of ever so great a majority is not really better or hopefuller than the Minority-rules, the oligarchies, aristocracies, autocracies, benevolent dictatorships, paternal governments, and the like. They are all, together and equally, shut up in

the same condemnation of unreasonableness, inhumanness, and futility. So, when the French and English and American middle-class majority-rulers, in their revolutions, sealed the doom of Aristocracy and Monarchy, they sealed their own; and when Democracy issues the death-warrant of Middle-classdom, it will also issue its own; for each form and degree of masterhood in judging another, pronounces self-judgment. This is self-evident and inevitable, when you see that all foreign governments, whether of more or fewer masters or one only, are simply the manifold cases or variations of the one kind of vicious vain conceit, seeking to establish itself in reality, viz., rule by any number less than all; guidance, direction, management, and ordering of social life, founded upon anything short of unanimity. Therefore, I am entitled to open history almost anywhere and read the condemnation of Majority-rule in the doing and undoing of any other form of over-rule.

Cit. But why so much ado I Don't you rather labor your point? If the Genius of Anarchism thus sits in permanence on the world's judgment-seat serenely judging, and passing infallible sentence of failure and self-refutation upon every effort after social construction that founds on any phase or measure of over-rule whatever, this is a spectacle for silent admiration. Can we do anything more than sit still and look on ? It is not even talk that befits, but laughter—broad, long, hearty, and honest—if it be so, that every lordly institution has a spark of freedom, an element of self-destruction, a bit of moral dynamite in the heart of it, that will burst it up, and scatter its dust, always in the name of a new seed-time of free life and growth. Think of the powerful irony of it. It is too jolly !

Sea. Look on and laugh to your heart's content, for jolly it is, and encouraging – recreative for fresh effort. You draw the wrong lesson. There may be no folding of hands in mere onlooking, for ourselves and our wills are the vehicle and medium of that judgment and the executors of its sentences.

Cit. Well, if we must go on, let me say that I thicken our way of settling things by the most votes is a fair enough makeshift in the case of education, for instance.

Sea. Now there, I think, your shift is a poor one; for compulsion to educate and to be educated, compulsion, by law and under penalty, of grudging ratepayer and wretched parent and unwilling child, taints all your efforts. Are your three pitiful R.'s worth the mischief wrought, the heart-burnings kindled? No; let education wait upon unanimity. Have day-schools and night-schools (and play-rooms too), but let them be voluntary both ways, both in respect of support and attendance, a free gift freely accepted. Make your schools efficient and attractive, as you can never do out of enforced rates, and there will be no need of compulsion. But this cannot fully be till the commune schools its own children.

Cit. And sanitation? To leave that over for unanimity is to put off sending for the physician till after your burial !

Sea. All the same; let it, too, wait upon unanimity.

Cit. What, are we to respect the freedom of insane and fanatical minorities like the "peculiar people" and the anti-vaccinationists ?

Sea. Yes, respect their freedom, even if they become majorities. More or less, has nothing to do with it.

Cit. What! their freedom to infect and to kill us!

Sea. Yes, just as we respect the freedom of all the drunkards to sap our common life and kill us indirectly, and the freedom of all the Churches to do the same, with their distractions and diversions in favor of another world and against this one and its health and comfort.

Cit. Monster of confusion and perversity! how can you talk so, comparing a small body of Leicester fools to such respectabilities?

Sea. Listen. I would treat them all alike, great and small, respectable and otherwise. I would wait, advise, persuade, educate-always showing myself friendly. I would not fine or imprison or in any way coerce. In all such cases, the one thing to do is-in a word-to work for unanimity. In Leicester small-pox will never be so great an evil as the pox of discontent and strife and deceit that is just now spread deep and wide there. So, too, about other possible majority-rulings of the upcoming democracy. Local option to coerce strong-drinkers and enforce a sham sobriety will be and will breed a greater evil than promiscuous and licentious drinking; for it will breed hypocrisy, and will drive the drinking into dark places. So every form of majority-ruling only drives license and rebellion underground; and that is the worst place for explosives. It is also the worst place for those things that tend to corrupt. Yours, therefore, is the worst shift even in dealing with things bad; it affords no healing or conversion. But the will of a majority gives no guarantee that what it seeks to overrule, and confine or suppress, is bad at all. Take polygamy in Utah, for instance. The fact that the Christian States are going against it, proves nothing. A minority may be right: a single man may be right. But to do as the States are doing is always wrong and demoralizing for majorities as well as for their victims, even where the victim is a single man or woman, and happens to be in the wrong. The majority wills-it merely wills, always wills-it does not reason, sympathize, understand with the heart; it does not attain to concrete equitable regard; its ruling is never anything but militarism transmogrified. All majority-made law is at bottom just martial law- obey or be shot. ”

Cit. But your ”unanimity” is unattainable; there must always be some residual coercion.

Sea. How do your English juries-those crowning glories of your glorious constitution-reach the unanimity that is always set before them as their goal and purpose ?

Cit. By patience, by taking friendly counsel together, by disinterestedness, and by some amount of yielding or giving way.

Sea. Quite so; and what can be done in the dark, will it be worse and less easily done in the open? Disinterestedness will be secured when the economical conditions of social life are changed. Yielding consent and conciliatoriness there must always be, and even in a broader sense ”giving way.” But is that so difficult where men are not utterly given over to sheer ”cussedness” ?

Cit. Well, your ideals-your unanimous communes, your happy wholehearted life of combined good-will-are very fair and attractive but they are only ideal.

Sea. Unattainable, yes. Beyond reach, like the sun, moon, and stars; but you cannot sail the ship without them. True, we Anarchists are not always ready to stand and deliver, when called upon to detail ways and means and plans. That is seamanship, and the ship wants that too for safe sailing, and it will all come in good time. But navigation, which concerns and depends on those heavenly orbs and movements, is also essential. The true Anarchist is at least a navigator. His eyes are set upon the ideals that are above reach. Above reach, they yet draw us on; above reach, they guide us. So, even meantime, Anarchism is, at least, CRITICISM and RELIGION.

Cit. Enough. The sands northward, where a while ago the children were building castles, have disappeared. Their castles erased, the children are going home. Let us go.

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