

DEFINITIONS OF DEMOCRACY AND PLUTOCRACY

ALL the words in -ocracy properly describe political forms according to the chief spring of political power in them: an autocracy is a political form in which the predominant force is the will of the monarch himself; an aristocracy is a form in which the predominant and controlling force is the will of a limited body, having the possession of the qualities which are most esteemed and envied in that society; a theocracy is a form in which the predominant force is some conception of God and his will, and, inasmuch as the will of God can come to men only through some finite channel, a theocracy easily passes into a hierocracy, in which the predominant force is possessed and wielded by a priesthood; a bureaucracy is a form in which the ultimate control of things political lies in the hands of a body of office-holders. In each case the name designates that organ which, upon ultimate analysis, is found to have the power to say what shall be and what shall not be.

A democracy, then, is a political form in which the ultimate power lies with the *demos*, the people. This mass, however, while unorganized, could not express its will or administer the affairs of the state; there has never been any state organized on such a plan. The *demos*, for political purposes, has always excluded women, minors, resident aliens, slaves, paupers, felons, etc., according to the constitution in each case; the "people," therefore, has always meant some defined section of the

population, not the whole of it. Furthermore, in any modern state, even a superficial study of the current phrases and accepted formulae will show that the word "people" is used in a technical sense to mean, not even the whole body of legal voters, but a limited number of them. A writer who rages at the idea that there are any "classes" will, in the next paragraph, reiterate all the current formulae about the "people," and reveal by the context that he means to distinguish the people as peasants, artisans, and uneducated persons, from the rich, the educated, and the banking, mercantile, and professional classes.

Yet the current dogmas about the rights and wisdom of the people have no truth whatever, and no moral beauty, except when they are affirmed of the whole population, without any exception whatever. The dogmas in question are not really maxims or principles of actual political life and administration; they are sublime conceptions of the undeveloped power of growth and civilization in human society. As inspiring ideals, as educational motives, as moral incentives, they have incalculable value; but then they are philosophical and academical generalities, not every-day rules of action for specific exigencies. When they are once dragged down into the mud of practical politics, and are cut to the measure of party tactics, they are most pernicious falsehoods.

For instance, the notion that a human society, acting as a whole, bringing its reason and conscience to bear on its problems, traditions, and institutions, constantly reviewing its inherited faiths, examining its experiments, profiting by its own blunders, reaching out after better judgment and correcting its prejudices, can, in the sweep of time, arrive at the best conclusions as to what is socially true and wise and just, that man can get on

292 EARTH HUNGER AND OTHER ESSAYS

earth, is a grand conception, and it is true. If the doctrine that the people ought to rule, and that the people know what is wise and right means this, it is true and fruitful. It will be noticed, however, that this doctrine implies that the people are to embrace every element in the society, including all the women and children, for in no sense could this grand consensus be true unless it was universal. It is of its very essence that the whole voice should be in it; it is its catholicity which constitutes its guarantee. If the feminine element is left out of it, its guarantee is gone; it is one-sided and imperfect; it is no longer human and social; it has sunk from the grade of a grand and inspiring conception to that of the party cry of a dominant interest. Neither is it true if the children are left out of it, for it is only in the sweep of time, after long and patient revision, that the judgments have authority. It must therefore be the work of generations to make those judgments; it is only the undying society, in its continuity and undistinguished generations, which can make them, and if they are to be true, the fire and hope of youth are as essential components as the inertness and conservatism of age.

Now, however, turn this same dogma into a maxim that peasants and artisans are the "people," that they are the depositaries of social and political wisdom, as distinguished from the sages and philosophers. Tell the young man not to worry about learning, to sneer at culture, to spend his nights on the street and his Sundays reading dime novels and the *Police Gazette*, and, when election day comes, to throw his vote so as to make a political job for himself or his friend; tell him that this is what is meant by the doctrine that the people ought to rule, and that in doing all this he will be uttering the oracles of political wisdom — then the great doctrine

has turned into one of the most grotesque and mischievous falsehoods ever imagined.

In practise, therefore, democracy means that all those who are once admitted to political power are equal and that the power lies with the numerical majority of these equal units. If then the political divisions form themselves class-wise, then the most numerous class becomes the *demos* and is the depository of political power. For this reason if we establish a democracy and then set the classes and the masses against each other, it is the utmost treason against democracy, because it ingrafts upon it from the start the worst vices of social discord and social greed which have disgraced the older political forms.

A plutocracy is a political form in which the real controlling force is wealth. This is the thing which seems to me to be really new and really threatening; there have been states in which there have been large plutocratic elements, but none in which wealth seemed to have such absorbing and controlling power as it threatens us. The most recent history of the civilized states of Western Europe has shown constant and rapid advance of plutocracy. The popular doctrines of the last hundred years have spread the notion that everybody ought to enjoy comfort and luxury — that luxury is a sort of right. Therefore if anybody has luxury while others have it not, this is held to prove that men have not equally shared in the fruits of civilization, and that the state in which such a condition of things exists has failed to perform its function; the next thing to do is to get hold of the state and make it perform its function of guaranteeing comfort and physical well-being to all. In the mean time, with the increasing thirst for luxury and the habit of thinking of it as within the scope of every man's rights, the temptations of dishonest gain increase, and

294 EARTH HUNGER AND OTHER ESSAYS

especially are all those forms of gain which come, not from defalcation and theft, but from the ingenious use of political opportunities, put under a special code by themselves. A man who is "on the make," to use a slang phrase produced from the very phenomena to which I refer, does not think of himself as dishonest, but only as a man of the world. He is only utilizing the chances which he can get or make to win gain from the conjuncture of political and social circumstances, without intentional crime such as the statute has forbidden. This runs all the way from the man who sells his vote to the statesman who abuses official power, and it produces a class of men who have their price.

The principle of plutocracy is that money buys whatever the owner of money wants, and the class just described are made to be its instruments. At the same time the entire industrial development of the modern world has been such as to connect industry with political power in the matter of joint-stock companies, corporations, franchises, concessions, public contracts, and so on, in new ways and in great magnitude. It is also to be noted that the impersonal and automatic methods of modern industry, and the fact that the actual superintendent is often a representative and quasi-trustee for others, has created the corporate conscience. An ambitious Roman used to buy and bribe his way through all the inferior magistracies up to the consulship, counting upon getting a province at last out of which he could extort enough to recoup himself, pay all his debts, and have a fortune besides. Modern plutocrats buy their way through elections and legislatures, in the confidence of being able to get powers which will recoup them for all the outlay and yield an ample surplus besides.

What I have said here about the venality of the

humbler sets of people, and about the greed and arrogance of plutocrats, must not be taken to apply any further than it does apply, and the facts are to be taken only as one's knowledge will warrant. I am discussing forces and tendencies, and the magnitude attained as yet by those forces and tendencies ought not to be exaggerated. I regard plutocracy, however, as the most sordid and debasing form of political energy known to us. In its motive, its processes, its code, and its sanctions it is infinitely corrupting to all the institutions which ought to preserve and protect society. The time to recognize it for what it is, in its spirit and tendency, is when it is in its germ, not when it is full green.

Here, then, in order to analyze plutocracy further, we must make some important distinctions. Plutocracy ought to be carefully distinguished from "the power of capital." The effect of the uncritical denunciations of capital, and monopoly, and trust, of which we hear so much, is, as I shall try to show further on, to help forward plutocracy.