

# Theories of Americanization

## A Critical Study

*With Special Reference to the Jewish Group*

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ISAAC B. BERKSON

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## INTRODUCTORY

The problem of proper adjustment of the foreign ethnic groups in our midst to the life of America—popularly termed “Americanization”—was a subject of great interest even before the War. Now, in the aftermath, a heightened national consciousness has made of this question one of those burning issues which it is difficult, nay impossible, to discuss without stirring deep prejudices. Patriotism intensified by the experience of war immediately conjures up the spectre of foreign intrigue whenever the subject of the unassimilated immigrant is broached. In addition, the problem has become associated in men’s minds with the whole discussion of internal political and industrial reorganization which seems to many to threaten the stability of present forms of government. Closely linked with the fear of foreign enemies and with the apprehension of “Bolshevistic” revolution, it is small wonder that much of what is said nowadays concerning “Americanization” savors of hysteria.

It may be urged that in such critical times as these only drastic measures are expedient. Our own recent experiences in the war, however, have sufficiently demonstrated that even in those moments when the need for action seems most urgent a decision which reckons with the fundamental principles involved serves not only justice and the right, but also in the end the practical. The war was won only because men had come to believe that they were fighting for a basic principle—for democracy.<sup>1</sup> A careful analysis with reference to fundamental principles becomes all the more necessary because our problem is a pressing one. What are the implications of democracy for the relations of foreign ethnic groups to the state? This question requires clear thinking, because we should seek to be true to the fundamental concept of American thought; the correct answer will avert failure in the practical task confronting us.

This book attempts a critical study of our question with special reference to the problem of the Jewish group. *What place has the*

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<sup>1</sup>Likewise, if in the end the hope for a lasting peace shall prove to have been empty, it will be because the fundamental principles, the proclamation of which had won the war, were forgotten in the final settlement.

*Jewish group in our democracy? May it retain its identity or must it fuse entirely with the total group? Second, if it may retain its identity, under what limitations and through what agencies may it do so?* These are the questions which must concern us in any consideration of the problem of the relationship of ethnic groups to the state. While, therefore, our specific interest is the Jewish group, the whole discussion is in the main applicable—with the proper qualifications—to other ethnic groups. Especially will this be true because the discussion here deals mainly with the general principles which should govern the relationship, not with the description of the actual processes of assimilation taking place in this particular group. The fact that the Jews are not only an ethnic group, but also a cultural and religious community, enhances the appropriateness of using it in our discussion to elucidate the general problem. For this very reason the Jews, as the following pages will make clear, present a crucial case where the significant elements are thrown into distinct relief.

Perhaps it is not superfluous to state plainly that the conclusions offered in reference to the Jewish group are in the main precedent to the argument presented here. No pretense is made that they are the result of theoretical analysis alone. This discussion is a rationalization of a point of view derived from the writer's personal history and experiences and confirmed by subsequent study and speculation. It represents an attempt to clarify, to make explicit, and to introduce the balance of reason into a conviction which has been many years in the forming, rather than an effort to contrive a conclusion out of the objective study of abstract premises.

The whole argument rests upon the assumption that the United States aims to be a democracy. The discussion may be conceived as an explication of the significances inherent in that term for the relations of ethnic groups to the state in the conditions prevailing in the United States. Since the word 'democracy' has come to be used as a general term of approval and each man tends to see in it his own ideal, it will be necessary first to give some notion of what the writer implies in the assumption. The first chapter, then, will deal with an analysis of the basic concept, democracy. After this

orientation the following chapters will consider the various types of ethnic relationship possible, reviewing them with the fundamental notion in mind and developing finally that plan which seems to harmonize best with the basic concept. The concluding chapters will deal with the implications of the proposed method of adjustment for the educational situation. There is added a chapter on the Central Jewish Institute, an institution which will serve as a basis of discussion for the type of educational agency conceived as adequate and proper in a democracy for the solution of our problem. The description of this institution will furnish a concrete illustration of the implication of the theory projected and will serve as a check upon the meaning of the more abstract discussion.

The discussion, then, while setting out to consider the question before us from the point of view of principles involved rather than from the point of view of expediency or the seeming immediate need, nevertheless at no point leaves out of consideration the actual situation and offers an opportunity for comparison of the moral conclusion with the practical feasibility.





## **PART I**

**I THE DOCTRINES OF DEMOCRACY**

**II THEORIES OF ETHNIC ADJUSTMENT**

**III THE 'COMMUNITY' THEORY**

**IV THE VALUE OF ETHNIC GROUPS**



## **THE DOCTRINES OF DEMOCRACY**

*I refer to a Democracy that is yet unborn.*

—WALT WHITMAN.

# CHAPTER I

## THE DOCTRINES OF DEMOCRACY

### I

#### THE SCOPE OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy has become much like an established religion; everyone avows it and untold sacrifices are brought in its name, yet few seem to have any clear idea of its profound meaning. Such is the complaint that is frequently met nowadays in the numerous articles which attempt to present to us a more adequate conception of the fundamental principle assumed to underlie our civilization. In one form or another we find reiterated, "We have repeatedly professed this creed on many solemn and public occasions. Do we *really* mean it? And if so, *what* do we mean by it?"<sup>1</sup>

To most minds the term still brings primarily political connotations, and such a limitation of usage is supported by much more than mere philological derivation. The tendency to identify democracy with a method of political organization has its justification in the prime importance that government has for life.<sup>2</sup> Where one may dwell, how one is to earn a living, what a person can know and believe—all of these practical questions are affected by the systems which the state permits and supports. Political organization rather than prayer, we might even say, determines our salvation in any real sense of the word. Undoubtedly it is the recognition of the controlling importance of politics that has led in modern times to the ascendancy of the State above the Church.

The history of the United States as an experiment in democracy adds much force to this emphasis on the political aspect of our life. Undoubtedly the democratic ideal has indirectly been a factor in the shaping of many phases of our social life, in the development of

<sup>1</sup>Ralph Barton Perry, "What Do We Mean by Democracy?" *International Journal of Ethics*, July, 1918.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Ogg and Beard, *National Government and the World War*, preface.

education, in the adjustment of racial and class differences, and even to some extent in the reorganization of industry. The main and direct applications, however, have so far been governmental, and this tendency in the course of our history has stamped itself upon the meaning that the word 'democracy' carries to the average American.

The emphasis upon the political connotation is well brought out if we compare the Declaration of Independence with the subsequent great documents of American history. From the Constitution on, so a leading American thinker<sup>1</sup> points out, the epoch making documents of American life reveal a constantly widening application of the concept of democracy. The preamble is inspired with the desire *of securing the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity*. In the Monroe Doctrine the boundaries of our homeland have been surpassed and the European countries are warned *that these hemispheres must remain inviolate*. The Civil War extended the idea of freedom racially, proclaiming *that the nation cannot remain half slave and half free*. Our entrance into the European War was justified by an international aim *that the world be made safe for Democracy*. As Alexander says, "*The World*: Here, indeed is expansion; our globe has shrunk too small for democratic and autocratic states to subsist together, nor can Ocean herself constrain them in separation. Democracy has issued her final defiance to all the citadels of absolutism, proclaiming no longer her right to independences, nor merely her right to her own free field, but now her purposed supremacy in all fields and over all polities. Here is arrogance of pretension out-matching Monroe's, whose broad-limned compromise breaks futile, like the old compromises of North and South. Democracy claims for itself no less thing than the world."

The full significance of the new epoch, however, resides not alone in the expansion of the concept to an international application. If we examine the Declaration of Independence we find there the idea of democracy already expressed in universal terms: "All men are born free and equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." Indeed, the thought transcends even international implication and rises to cosmic and religious terminology.

<sup>1</sup>Hartley B. Alexander, essay "Americanism" in *Liberty and Democracy*, p. 131.

The aspiration for humanity's welfare is not new; it was the subject of the burning message of the Prophets of ancient Israel and the inspiration of the cosmopolitans of the eighteenth century. All great religions have expressed the longing for a universal good. The present epoch is particularly important not because for the first time we meet an aspiration in international terms, but because a tremendous effort is being made to create the *political institution* which will make possible a *realization* of the age-long dream. American history is to be seen not as a struggle for the development of the idea of freedom but as an experiment with the political institutions that shall guarantee freedom. The entire significance of the recent struggle is lost if the emphasis is placed anywhere else than on the international governmental institution which must be created in order to convert the desire into a reality. The important distinction between a longing and a political guarantee is clearly felt and finds expression in the explanatory phrase following President Wilson's famous pronouncement: "The World must be made safe for democracy: *its peace must be planted upon tested foundations of political liberty.*"

Democracy must be embodied in political institutions; that is the conviction that has animated American history. Many recent writers,<sup>1</sup> however, while agreeing heartily with the importance of the political phase tend to feel that it is a grave error to identify democracy with principles of government exclusively. It is pointed out that political democracy cannot be an end in itself; it is a means of gaining human freedom. There are instances where the end can be reached more directly through reform in the industrial or educational field than through the agency of the ballot and political methods. Furthermore, conditions of education, of economic organization, of social prejudice, so affect politics that even political democracy becomes unattainable, if political democracy alone engages our attention. To limit the definition to political reform without realizing the in-

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<sup>1</sup>Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, see especially Chaps. II, VIII, IX; Herbert Croly, *Progressive Democracy*; Walter Weyl, *The New Democracy*; Alfred Zimmern, *The War and Democracy*, Chap. I; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*; Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics*; Giddings, *Democracy and Empire*; MacVannel, *Outlines of Philosophy of Education*, Chap. IX.

fluence of other phases of life is often to block the development of democracy.

Not alone theories, events, too, urge upon us new implications beyond the political. With the Russian attempt at control of industry by the workers already in the process of experimentation and with an industrial unrest of unprecedented extent and turbulence threatening the present capitalistic order it seems necessary certainly to consider immediately the extension of our concept to the field of industry. Beyond this, still in the realm of the vague unconscious begins to loom the problem of the reorganization of our educational system, implying radical changes in fundamental conceptions, philosophy, aims, methods and agencies far surpassing mere pedagogical improvements. Still there are some who maintain that we cannot speak of Industrial or Social Democracy, or of Democracy in the abstract, because we do not yet have actual examples of what these signify, and it is therefore impossible to know them. Such 'practical' minds refuse to recognize anything as existing unless a precedent can be found in application. It must be remembered, however, that the accomplishments of democracy in the political field did not wait for precedents. Must not the application to other phases of life be made with the same bold hazard (in thought and act) that carried through the experiment in the political field? We have certainly gone far beyond the primary meaning of the word 'democracy' and conceive its political implications as manifestations of an underlying and far-reaching principle full of significance for industry, education and the many other phases of social life.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, democracy is so touched with deep emotion that even this broad definition in terms of a general principle applicable to all social institutions seems inadequate to express the fulness of its meaning. We feel somehow that our ideal cannot be attained by reorganization of institutions alone,—our most hidden and intimate conversations and our casual actions and relationships must be pervaded by a democratic spirit. It is the creation of a type of personality that the democratic ideal envisages. Democracy is not

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<sup>1</sup>Charles A. Elwood, "Democracy and Social Conditions in the United States," *International Journal of Ethics*, July, 1918.



only something political and institutional; its real essence is spiritual. Definitions in terms of a rule, of a principle, or even of a philosophy are too pale, too platonic, too formal, too balanced, too finite in meaning and in application, too static. The forces of democracy seem to rest in the unfathomed depths of human and world nature; there is something elemental in the term. It reaches upward, too, towards unattained heights of the spirit; it is essentially an urge—a dynamic force in life.<sup>1</sup>

Democracy is a religious aspiration as well as a form of social organization. Only by realizing what is implied in its final goal can we judge whether any particular embodiment leads in the right direction. However efficient our organization may seem to the mind that loves perfected form and judges by accepted standards, any activity must prove meaningless unless it serves the ultimate ideal. "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me? Who hath required this at your hand, to trample My courts? Incense is an abomination unto Me; new moon and Sabbath, the calling of assemblies. . . . Cease to do evil: learn to do well." Thus cries the prophet divining that there is no service of God in the performance without the spirit, in the activity unrelated to the abiding aim. What is the essence of the striving we call democratic and what are the conditions *sine qua non* of its fulfillment? The answers to this catechism will yield us what may be called the Doctrines of Democracy, the inviolable assumptions which must guide us in any subsequent discussion.

Often the attempt is made to define Democracy in terms of older ideals, such as equality, liberty or justice, etc., leaving the impression that the new term is little more than a new name for old aspirations. Such a procedure misses the point entirely. Undoubtedly old ideas and aspirations as well as older religions have contributed to the idea of Democracy. But the essential point to emphasize is that Democracy is a *new* synthesis, a *new* outlook and evaluation. To translate it into the older terminology robs the new concept of its unique character, of its specific connotations and associations, of its own

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<sup>1</sup>Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*; Edward Carpenter, *Towards Democracy*; Oscar L. Triggs, *Browning and Whitman, A Study in Democracy*; A. G. Flack, *Democracy*.