

CHAPTER VI

DEMOCRACIES OF THE PAST

"We are going to climb the slow road until it reaches some upland where the air is fresher, where the whole talk of mere politicians is stilled, where men can look in each other's faces and see that there is nothing to conceal, that all they have to talk about they are willing to talk about in the open and talk about with each other; and whence, looking back over the road, we shall see at last that we have fulfilled our promise to mankind. We had said to all the world, 'America was created to break every kind of monopoly, and to set men free, upon a footing of equality, upon a footing of opportunity, to match their brains and their energies. . . .'"—WOODROW WILSON, *The New Freedom*, Chap II, p. 54.

THE story is told of an old Tory squire whose vicar, during an election in England, urged him not to let the church school-room be used by a certain socialist candidate. The vicar said that he was very much afraid that the villagers would hear what might not be good for them. The squire's reply was, "Please yourself about letting the room, but I don't give a damn what they say so long as they don't know what they want." Not all Tory squires are, however, so wise; indeed a great many imagine political agitators as a rule really know what they want. Still it does seem that the old squire hit the nail on the head, and when we read manifestoes such

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as that of the subcommittee of the British Labour party, we are inclined to think that there is too much demanded where far less would be quite enough. Now the reason why Mr. Schwab has set me thinking about the future of the commonwealth is because he has gone straight to the root of our industrial troubles. Economic principles first of all, he demands. This is sufficient, and labour and capital need look no further. But the ground must be cleared if we are to take steps in that direction. Let us see where we are.

In this war which has been fought to save democracy we have been too busy or too timid to ask which brand of democracy it is that is to be saved. I may mention four that are alike in some particulars, but totally dissimilar in others, and the four are: British democracy, Swiss democracy, French democracy, and American democracy. Of these the purist would say that the Swiss is the best brand, and that the others fall by a great way short of any of the well known definitions of the term. But it may be as well to count Switzerland out in a consideration of this question; for her democracy didn't need saving, and it is most unlikely that those who were so deeply concerned about the fate of democracy would ever dream of imposing the Swiss brand upon any of the first class Powers. To be quite frank the term democracy, as it has been used during the war, may mean anything but democracy. Still the term must have had at one time a precise definition, because it has been used by writers who have given the subject very serious consideration. It is really worth while our going back to the days when in the experimental stages of government many different forms were tested. We now know something

about the democracies of early Greece. The Greeks began with a system that did not permit the land to be held by individuals; indeed it could not be alienated. There is abundant evidence of this, and in this respect the primitive Greeks differ not from all other Aryan communities. It is, however, difficult to say just when private ownership began and the primitive system was broken up. Anyway, it is pretty clear that the land question in Greece and Rome, after private ownership destroyed the communal system, became a burning question with the people, one which even the glamour of successful war could not entirely extinguish. There is a vivid picture, drawn by Romaine Patterson, in his work *The Nemesis of Nations*, of Greece in the intermediate stage, between that of the passing of the communal land system and the advent of Solon. Mr. Patterson says:

“A social system probably in some of its phases as rigid and as sterile as the Brahmanism of Hindustan had produced in Attica the same results. The land was overwhelmed by debt, and a mortgage pillar stood upon every freehold. Moreover, by the law of Dracon, every debtor was the slave of his creditor until the debt was paid. Many freemen had thus lost their liberty, and the entire community was in danger of becoming the prey of a despot. For wealth was the only guarantee of liberty and the source of political power. It was precisely in such a condition of things that the tyrant's best chance lay. Thus the history of Athens opens with a picture of economic misery which is in the strangest contrast with the splendour which she afterwards attained. Aristotle informs us that before Solon's day the State was governed by a few powerful families, and that the poorer class were in absolute slavery to the rich. We shall notice later the curious contradiction in the writings of some Greek philosophers, who, although they condemned the enslavement of freemen, re-

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garded with indifference the forced labour of those whom they declared were not by nature free. Meantime, we are to understand that Aristotle is drawing a picture of the gradual subjection of Attic freemen. He lays his finger upon that cause of social trouble which is still active in modern States, for he ascribes the misery of the people to the fact that the whole land was in the hands of a few persons. He then gives a vivid description of the eviction and the enslavement of tenants unable to pay their rents. Their bodies were mortgaged for the liquidation of debt, and sometimes the tenant was compelled to sell not merely himself but his wife and children as slaves to his landlord. It was amidst this scene of universal squalor that Solon, a member of the aristocracy, appeared as the champion of the people."

The reforms of Solon were short lived, and Greece before the coming of Pericles passed through a period of serious crises. It was Pericles who defined democracy as a government of the whole people, as opposed to oligarchy, the government of only a part of the people. Now this is a period when, if we take the trouble to look closely at the reforms of Pericles, we can see how historians have misunderstood the meaning of the term democracy. The Athenian constitution has been described as a democracy, but the truth is it was in practice as near state socialism as can be. Patterson says it was self-government gone mad. It was indeed the beginning of the end. Her days were numbered, her zenith reached, and though, as Pericles said, "we throw open our city to the world, and never by alien acts exclude foreigners," still the "living implements," as Aristotle calls slaves, brought the fabric of her greatness down to crumble in the dust. If ever a people learned the lesson that political liberty will not save a state, it was surely the people of Athens. But at best her political liberty was en-

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joyed by scarcely half of her people. It must be remembered that the industries were chiefly in the hands of slaves, and that the Athenian fleet was manned by slaves, and slaves were liable to military service. The idle rich in those days were idle.

To quote Patterson again:

“The Athenians were familiar with every form of government, and were restless under all of them. After the early mobile had transformed itself into an immobile community, it was destined to know every phase of a political problem which is not yet solved. When shepherds had become husbandmen, and husbandmen had become traders, the tribal communism had long given way to an individualism which became symbolized in a monarchy tending to become absolute. But the monarchy was checked, and at length destroyed, by an aristocracy which in turn suffered numerous transformations, and at last gave way before a democracy. But the democracy was no more stable than its predecessors, and then came socialism and disintegration and the return to a tyranny. In the extreme democratic state of her political evolution Athens had thus almost reached the point whence she and other Greek communities had started. But the difference between the earlier and the later communism consisted, first, in the social fact that in the primitive period there were no slaves, and, second, in the political fact that a system which was adapted to a small clan became impracticable when applied to an artificial society. . . . The ethics of Athenian history are strangely confused, for the moral ideas expressed in the theories of her thinkers are in violent contradiction with the theory and practice of the State. The Athenians possess words for Liberty, Equality, and even for Fraternity, but all those great doctrines were evolved at the expense of slaves. The political struggle was, therefore, artificial and insincere. It has been said by a great scholar that many writers foolishly write of Athens as if it were a Lost Paradise. The truth is that behind her façade we discover an industrial tyranny and workshops full of slaves. When it is remembered that without their labour the leisure which went to create Athenian art, literature, and philosophy would not have been possible, we can-

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not resist the conclusion that the culture of Athens was bought at too high a price."

The philosophers of the nineteenth century frequently pointed out to us the sameness they found in the study of wars. Will historians of the future be occupied with the task of discovering for us the sameness in the history of nations? When they go to work with a knowledge of economic fundamentals, historians will find the history of any people a simple matter to interpret. I have quoted Mr. Patterson's essay on Greece. In now quoting from his essay on Rome the sameness I referred to above will be noticed:

"An aristocracy sleeps in every democracy. And it is one of the ironies of history that the people begin to look with suspicion on the men whom they have uplifted, because in a servant they begin to find a ruler. Thus the acts of one prominent character who owes his position to election may alter the whole destiny of a people and set the collective will at naught. . . . As a disintegrating influence we should observe the tendency of property, and especially of property in land, to become vested in a few families; and here we may repeat the bold generalization of Pliny that the great estates (*latifundia*) were the cause of the ruin of Italy and the provinces. In contrast with all other things, wealth gravitates upwards. We can hardly measure the amount of suffering endured by the ancient free poor, but it must have been great before it drove them into the ranks of the slaves. In a financial situation which was always precarious and confused even the rich incurred risks, for we hear that during the Empire taxation was enforced by torture. Again, as a sign of the national stagnation we may note that there was a return to the Asiatic system of hereditary trade and professions. A man's son was compelled to follow his father's profession, and he was forbidden to marry outside of his guild, so that we find in Rome a survival of part of the social scheme portrayed in the Laws of Manu. Amid such sterilizing tendencies Italy ceased to be pro-

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ductive, and depended for her food supply on the labour of thousands of slaves in the harvest fields of Africa and Sicily. And in the city a worthless population waited like beggars on the imperial alms in the form of wheat, pork, oil, and wine. Like Athens, Rome had become the parasite of her subject peoples. Like Athens, too, she suffered from a deficit in men. The birth-rate steadily declined both during the Republic and the Empire. Lastly, and worst of all, she lost the art in which she had excelled — the great art of government. A strange decay of the faculty of administration had occurred since Virgil wrote that it was Rome's mission to spare the vanquished and to humble the proud. The vanquished had not been spared. The provinces were milked to death. Rome had accepted the fascinating and perilous gift of imperialism, but she had not fulfilled all its obligations. She built roads, bridges, and aqueducts throughout her provinces, but it was by the unpaid labour of provincial slaves. Each city and each village mimicked her, and reproduced even her amphitheatres, so that she extended the good and the evil of her system throughout the world. The exactions of the provincial tax-gatherers grew more intolerable. Although it is true that, long dazzled by her prestige, the provinces clung to her till she fell, and even attacked her enemies, it is also true that they had ceased to trust her. In the fifth century they expected and they received from Goths and Huns more justice than Rome could give them. Roman citizenship, which used to be so great a prize, began to be repudiated; men feared to come under the tyranny of Roman governors, and no longer desired to be called by the Roman name. A Roman subject in the camp of Attila told a Roman envoy that he would not now exchange the government of the Huns for the government of the Romans."

It is always the same ulcer that undermines the strength of the body politic. Every state passes from its primitive state of freedom and democracy by the same methods — those of private ownership being made easy by restrictive laws, thence on to the complex life of a military state which must subsist on conquest. The basis of the great complex civil-

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ization was slavery, and in the ancient empires no matter how politicians juggled with political labels, whatever reforms were carried out by the opportunists, these states passed through the same struggles, and came to the same end:

“When we remember that in every State the conditions were the same, and that wars were waged for the purpose of maintaining those conditions, the history of antiquity appears to be the history of centuries of stagnation and waste. Behind the glittering front of ancient civilization we discover a dark organization of social life, in which duties were unaccompanied by rights. Babylon, Egypt, Phoenicia, Greece, and Rome grew great by means of industrial systems which created wealth but involved the ruin of the workmen. What is the use of knowing that the Athenian fleet defeated the Persians if we do not know that without the incessant labour of the slaves in the Athenian silver mines there would have been no Athenian fleet at all? Accurate lists of kings, archons, and strategoi, consuls, proconsuls, and tribunes, will never enable us to see the unrest of those vanished States. Even their art, their literature, and their religion are lame guides, because modes of thought and of expression change and beliefs die. But labour lives. The politics of one era are scarcely intelligible to the next, but it is the continuity of human work which binds ages together. That, at least, is hereditary where all else fluctuates. When we remember that the economic systems of all ancient States were organized upon the same basis, and that in the hope of making that basis permanent ceaseless activity was kept up in the gold mines of Egypt, in the copper mines of Cyprus and Sinai, in the iron, salt, and sulphur mines of Persia, in European and Asiatic tin, lead, and silver mines, in Caucasian naphtha pits and ruby mines of Bactria, in the quarries of Numidia and Greece, and in the vast brickfields of Rome and Babylon, we are almost able to descry the dim masses of chained men whose labour was the creative force of antiquity. Those States appear to have been incapable of profiting by each other's social and economic errors. Each of them reproduced, even in detail, the same scheme, and they all died bankrupt.”

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Whenever I look back to the systems of government of ancient times and note how similar have been the methods of governing, how like the underlying motives of the powerful in all ages, I cannot help being impressed with the singular lack of use that has been made by moderns of the political experiences of empires that have passed away. Let me here emphasize the fact that there is nothing new in the problems we have to solve. I assert the past contains the tests and trials of every form and phase of government the world is concerned with today. As an instance of how little the lesson of history is appreciated we might refer to the work of a historian of great repute. W. E. H. Lecky in *Democracy and Liberty* says:

“One of the great divisions of politics in our day is coming to be whether, at the last resort, the world should be governed by its ignorance or by its intelligence. According to the one party, the preponderating power should be with education and property. According to the other, the ultimate source of power, the supreme right of appeal and of control, belongs legitimately to the majority of the nation told by the head — or, in other words, to the poorest, the most ignorant, the most incapable, who are necessarily the most numerous. . . . It is a theory which assuredly reverses all the past experiences of mankind.”

Here is a man who knows so little of the history of his own country that he thinks it begins at the time when those who desired to profit by the political means gained the ascendancy over the organization of the economic means. And this is the work which is chiefly responsible for the political and historical education of the British ruling class. Lecky does not see the glaring injustice of the political means being used to reduce a people to poverty. He does

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not see the injustice of denying them the advantages of education, and then condemning them for lack of culture and knowledge. It is just here where it should be pointed out that it seems as necessary to educate most of our historians as it is to educate the masses. Anyway Lecky is undeniably wrong, for in no state that I know of, at any time during the nineteenth century, have the masses successfully supplanted the classes. Even in France it cannot be said that the masses, save for some spasmodic moments, gained political ascendancy, and there the political means are used in the interests of those who have, quite as much as they are in Britain. Lecky himself, writing in the '90s, was conscious of this, though he did not know he was referring merely to political democracy. He says:

“ We may judge French democracy by other tests. Has it raised France to a higher plane of liberty than in the past? The latitude of speaking and writing and dramatic representation is, no doubt, extremely great, but few modern French Governments, in their religious policy and in their educational policy, have made more determined efforts to force upon great masses of the population a system of education they detested, or to deprive them of the religious consolation they most dearly prized. It is very doubtful whether the religious policy of Jules Ferry and the educational policy of Paul Bert were approved of by the majority of Frenchmen. They are, probably, among the many instances in which a resolute and well-organized minority have forced their policy on a majority who were for the most part languid, divided, or unorganized. If the opinions of women as well as of men be taken into account, as they surely should be in questions of religion and education, there can be little doubt that the Government policy was that of a not very considerable minority. The essential characteristics of true liberty is, that under its shelter many different types of life and character, and opinion and belief can develop unmolested and unobstructed. Can it be said that the

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French Republic represents this liberty in a higher degree than other Governments? It has been called a Government of the working-classes, but has it in this respect any extraordinary claim to our respect? On nearly all working-class questions, it will be found that France has been preceded on the path of progress by British legislation. At the present day, the hours of work of the French labourer are in general much longer than those of the Englishman; and I believe the English workmen, who have of late years so carefully examined continental legislations, have very generally concluded that they have nothing to envy in the industrial habits or legislation of the Republic."

But no form of democratic government meets with Lecky's unqualified approval. His criticism is not likely to elate the ordinary American who has been led to imagine that our political institutions were given birth by thorough-going democrats. He says:

"The American Constitution, indeed, was framed by men who had for the most part the strongest sense of the dangers of democracy. The school of American thought which was represented in a great degree by Washington and John Adams, and still more emphatically by Gouverneur Morris and Alexander Hamilton; which inspired the Federalist and was embodied in the Federalist party, was utterly opposed to the schools of Rousseau, of Paine, and even of Jefferson, and it has largely guided American policy to the present hour. It did not prevent America from becoming a democracy, but it framed a form of government under which the power of the democracy was broken and divided, restricted to a much smaller sphere, and attended with far less disastrous results than in most European countries. Hamilton, who was probably the greatest political thinker America has produced, was, in the essentials of his political thought, quite as conservative as Burke, and he never concealed his preference for monarchical institutions. Democratic government, he believed, must end in despotism, and be in the meantime destructive to public morality and to the security of private property."

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Hamilton might have been the greatest political thinker America has produced, but no Lecky of the future will say that he was much of a prophet. This is a blow to our eminently respectable Fourth of July orators who speak of the Declaration of Independence as a complete statement of democratic ideals. Still, Lecky was shrewd enough to see that a deep fundamental difference lay between Paine and Adams, between Jefferson and Hamilton. It takes a Tory to recognize a Tory when he dons the garb of a democrat. We must however realize when we are studying the strictures of critics like Lecky that they cannot be wholly wrong. To use the old phrase, "there must be fire where there is so much smoke," and therefore it behooves us to know as clearly as possible what we are all driving at. It must be obvious to any student of this time that Lecky and his fellows were dealing with mere political democracy, and that they did not know that liberty and political democracy are not synonymous terms. The following passage proves how absurdly superficial is the view of Lecky:

"Equality is the idol of democracy, but, with the infinitely various capacities and energies of men, this can only be attained by a constant, systematic, stringent repression of their natural development. Whenever natural forces have unrestricted play, inequality is certain to ensue. Democracy destroys the balance of opinions, interests, and classes, on which constitutional liberty mainly depends, and its constant tendency is to impair the efficiency and authority of parliaments, which have hitherto proved the chief organs of political liberty."

It is perfectly amazing how such historical balderdash could have been tolerated at a time when the works of Stubbs and Freeman, to say nothing of

Green's *Short History of The English People*, were open to any one, even Lecky himself.

Let us now pass to another instance of confusion in the mind of a great personage — Sir Thomas Erskine May — as to the meaning of the term democracy. May was Clerk of the House of Commons, one of the best known English jurists, and a writer of constitutional history. Yet, with all his parliamentary experience and his study of constitutional law, he said, "But it is characteristic of the British constitution, and a proof of its freedom from the spirit of democracy, that the more dominant the power of the House of Commons,— the greater has been its respect for the law, and the more carefully have its acts been restrained within the proper limits of its own jurisdiction." It is singular how such a man could have been so closely in touch with Parliament and remain ignorant of the laws and customs on which Parliament was based. To read such a sentence makes one wonder if May really knew the history of the English people up to the time of the Norman conquest, if he knew the work of Stephen Langton, the struggles of Sir Thomas More, and the true meaning of the conflict which raged during the first half of the seventeenth century. Edward Freeman, referring to May's statement, says, "Has Mr. Grote lived and written so utterly in vain that a writer widely indeed removed from the vulgar herd of oligarchic babblers looks on 'the spirit of democracy' as something inconsistent with 'respect for the law'?" The question is pertinent. It might be well for many writers of this day to turn back to Grote's *History of Greece* and learn from his analysis of the reforms of Solon and Kleisthenes what democracy was five hundred years before

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Christ. For there is very little now suggested in the way of reform by many socialists and sociologists that was not tried some time or another in the old days in Greece. But this we must keep in mind when we note the difference in opinion of writers like Lecky and May, that they are not clear as to the fundamentals of democracy, and the reason for this is that they have missed the great economic principle which made the old democracies possible. When that principle was lost sight of in the mazes of civilization growing more and more complex, it did not cease to exist. The great constitutional writers of England readily enough recognize in the early stages the full value of the land-free man, and they do not hesitate to place him at the centre, as a pivot, from whom all good things in government radiate. Is it any wonder when we think of the free past and understand how the machinery of government fell into the hands of the few, henceforth to be used to exploit the economic means, is it any wonder that some deep thinkers have imagined that government is the mother of all evil?

It is so strange to find in the nineteenth century, writers whose views of democracy are so limited, as these we have noted. But what is to be said of Sir Henry Maine? No one can look deeply into Maine's works without seeing how limited his view of democracy was. Let us take a sentence like the following from his work on *Popular Government*. He says:

“Let any competently instructed person turn over in his mind the great epochs of scientific invention and social change during the last two centuries, and consider what would have occurred if universal suffrage had been established at any one of them. Universal suffrage, which to-

day excludes free trade from the United States, would certainly have prohibited the spinning-jenny and the power-loom. It would certainly have forbidden the threshing-machine. It would have prevented the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar; and it would have restored the Stuarts. It would have proscribed the Roman Catholics, with the mob which burned Lord Mansfield's house and library in 1780; and it would have proscribed the Dissenters, with the mob which burned Dr. Priestley's house and library in 1791."

This seems like sheer prejudice. Anyway it is most unfair criticism so far as Britain is concerned. Maine utterly disregards the economic condition of the people and how that condition was brought about. Who can blame the people for their poverty and lack of education? Why, it was the few, in whose interest he writes, that reduced the people to destitution and withheld education from them. Still, it is only fair to say that somehow there were two Maines; the one who wrote, *Ancient Law, Village Communities*, and *Early History of Institutions*, invaluable works, scarcely seems to be the same man who wrote *Popular Government*.

Lawyers in general, since the time of the Conquest, have made a sad mess of our economic and constitutional history. The great conspiracy that has been referred to by so many English writers, Langton, Latimer, Gilpin, More, Cobbett, Freeman, Cobden, Thorold Rogers, etc., etc., was no figment of the imagination; it was very real. It therefore does not matter much what kind of a political democracy is the fashion, and all fashions have been tried and failed. Yet, if we had the courage to learn just what it was that stamped the democracy of England in the early days with the mark which no other democracy has borne, if we could grasp the fundamental that has been missing in almost all

other democracies, we should then have taken a step vigorous and firm on the high road to liberty. Is not this the point in history which we should apprehend, that a political democracy based on the widest suffrage, enjoying the fullest parliamentary powers, can only endure for the benefit of the people so long as they have the fundamental right to equal economic opportunity? It is this fundamental right that has been taken from the people, and the taking of this right away from them has been the cause of poverty, pestilence, and war. Let us make no mistake about this.

Is it too late to define the term democracy anew? Can a definition be found which will be comprehensive? What did the framers of the Declaration have in mind when they said:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”?

Did they really mean that all men are created equal, and that all men have certain unalienable rights? Or did they mean that the body concerned with the signing of the Declaration were to be considered all the men to whom these rights belonged? It is an important point, one the students of Thomas Paine have had some doubt about.¹ Anyway, taken in its broadest and biggest sense, this

¹Lincoln thought the Declaration did include all men. He said: “I think the authors of that noble instrument intended to include all men; but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral development or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal with certain inalienable rights among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This they said and this they meant.”

statement is comprehensive enough to include the essentials of an economic and political democracy. But there are those, and they are not a few, whose political and social activities are an outrageous denial of the principle set forth in that statement; and, as we have seen, alas, only too often of late, many of these people are those who have proclaimed themselves the most zealous of patriots and the best friends of democracy. It has been a bitter experience for Americans who remember our beginnings and the ideals of the stock from which we come. Nevertheless it may not be too late to amplify the truth which was self-evident. Strange as it may seem to many, all men are created equal: all have equal rights. There is now a world of literature compiled from data collected by investigators in all parts of the world which points conclusively to this great fact. And the fathers of the Declaration of Independence were perfectly right when they decided that all men being created equal have certain inalienable rights, and that among them are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness can only be enjoyed in the declaration itself, if the people are denied equal opportunity to use the earth. And this truth is self-evident. Now let us see if we cannot find a definition of democracy which will bear the severest scrutiny. First, let me draw the reader's attention to an epoch-making work. It was published at the beginning of this century, but it did not receive the notice it deserved because it was the boldest challenge to those who used the political means to exploit natural resources that has been delivered in a generation. The work is called *Democracy versus Socialism*. Its author, Max Hirsch.

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Now if we take his statement of individualism and call it a statement of democracy we shall find a clear interpretation of the ideal expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Hirsch says:

“Individualism, affirming the existence of equal, natural, individual rights, seeks the further evolution of society in the direction of its past evolution until society shall have become fully subservient to the welfare of the individuals composing it; seeking to attain such general welfare through the removal of the remaining infractions of the natural and equal rights of all individuals — ‘the freedom of each to exercise all his faculties as he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other’; the right of each to the fullest opportunities for the exercise of his faculties, limited only by the equal right of all others; and the unlimited right of each to benefit by his own beneficial acts, reward being proportioned to service rendered.”

Here we have an economic definition which makes the phraseology of the Declaration of Independence as clear as noonday. This means democracy for all the people, and in such an economic democracy, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness may be enjoyed by all, for such a democracy would be based broad upon economic justice.