CARL LOTUS BECKER (1873–1945), a distinguished historian, was John Wendell Anderson Professor of History at Cornell University for most of his professional life. He was born in Iowa, in Blackhawk County, and studied at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where he worked with one of the most distinguished and influential theorists of American history, Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner's theories about the effect of the frontier on shaping the development and character of the United States became central to the way historians viewed the nation's growth. Becker took his doctorate at Columbia University, where he worked with James Harvey Robinson, one of the founders of the movement known as "the new history."

The new history movement, of which Becker was one of the most notable members, broadened the meaning of history to include more than simply the political events of the past. The scientific, sociological, cultural, and intellectual achievements of society became central to historians as a result of Robinson's and Becker's work. Robinson and Becker established the New School for Social Research in New York City and Robinson became its first president.

Becker's early work focused on the beginnings of the U.S. experiment with democracy. He saw that the American Revolution was not only about independence but also about changing the basic form of government and abandoning the age-old institution of a king and court who governed without taking into account the will of the people. An early book, The United States; an Experiment in Democracy (1920), clarified his thinking on the nature of the Revolution and its purposes. He followed that with The Declaration of Independence, a Study in the History of Political Ideas (1922) and The Struggle for Independence. Part 1: The Eve of the Revolution (1926).
The next year he published *The Spirit of '76 and Other Essays*, with J. M. Clark and William E. Dodd.

Becker was president of the American Historical Association in 1931 when he delivered “Everyman His Own Historian,” a speech that has resonated with historians ever since. In a very carefully reasoned discussion, Becker proposed a view that seemed heretical to most of his audience. What he suggested is that it is difficult to define history in a way that makes it as absolute and as specific as a fact. In his speech, he contrasts facts and interpretations of facts in such a manner so as to conclude that everyone brings personal values, opinions, commitments, and views to all history and, thus, everyone conceives of history in his or her own way. History, in other words, is not absolute, but relative. This was a revolutionary view, anticipating some of the postmodern thought of our own time.

While his scholarly work centered on the founding of the United States, especially the philosophical underpinnings of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence and their commitment to the values that are expressed in that document, Becker's best-known work is *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932).

The founders of the United States—such as Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, Hamilton, and others—were themselves eighteenth-century thinkers, so Becker's analysis of the thought, political and otherwise, of the French and English philosophers who established reason as their guide was central to his lifelong concerns for the American experiment. When he delivered the lectures at Yale University that eventually became his book on eighteenth-century philosophers, the world faced many menaces. In 1932, the Great Depression threatened the fate of all capitalist nations. Communism on one side and fascism on another had both created dictatorships that endangered liberal thinkers everywhere. Both of these forces were vying for control of the political structure of the United States at the time of its greatest economic weakness.

Becker's intent in his book was to show how the philosophical roots of the American Revolution's determination to create a democracy were not only deep but also strong. The essentially humanistic thought of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment rejected the idea of a “city of God,” as proposed in the Middle Ages, just as it rejected the idea of a golden age of Rome or Greece, as proposed in the Renaissance. The Enlightenment instead established reason as one's guide and a humanitarian principle as one's goal. *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* became widely known and is still read with considerable respect today.

"Ideal Democracy" is the first of three Page-Barbour lectures delivered at the University of Virginia in 1940 and gathered into a book simply titled *Modern Democracy* (1941). Faced with the prospect of a major European war, Becker had begun to rethink some of his positions as expressed in his speech to the American Historical Association and moved toward a less relativistic position. He felt that moral principles should be central to anyone's sense of history, just as they are central to anyone's conception of humanism. His views on ideal democracy are just that, ideal. He followed that lecture with others titled "The Reality" and "The Dilemma." He lived in difficult and threatening times, much like those of the eighteenth-century men who founded our nation.

**Becker's Rhetoric**

Becker uses a number of rhetorical approaches to clarify his views. The overarching technique is that of definition. His purpose in the entire lecture is to make evident the nature of democracy. He compares it with forms of government that depend on autocracy and the leadership of the few rather than the many. His definition of democracy concludes that “[a] democratic government has always meant one in which the citizens, or a sufficient number of them to represent more or less effectively the common will, freely act from time to time, and according to established forms, to appoint or recall the magistrates and to enact or revoke the laws by which the community is governed" (para. 5). But then, he ends Part I of the lecture with a cautionary observation about the fact that in "our time... democracy as thus defined has suffered an astounding decline in prestige" (para. 6). We suffer a rhetorical shock finding that once a definition has been produced we fear it may not define our present condition.

Among Becker's other devices is the rhetorical question. He asks at the end of Part I, "What are we to think of this sudden reversal in fortune and prestige? How explain it? What to do about it?" (para. 7). These are difficult questions and not necessarily answered by what follows. They are for us to ponder. Becker uses a form of enumeration by telling us that to survive, democracy needs certain conditions, each of which he describes for us: the need for communication (para. 11), economic security (para. 12), industrial prosperity (para. 13), ending by saying, “Democracy is in some sense an economic luxury” (para. 13). Added to these conditions, Becker reminds us that the citizens themselves must possess qualities that make democracy work: they must be “capable of managing their own affairs” (para. 14); be able to reconcile conflicts of interest; be rational; and, finally, be “men of goodwill.”
A further rhetorical device Becker uses is comparison, as when he compares a modern democracy with a Greek city-state, such as Athens, the birthplace of modern democracy (para. 17). The comparison with a private association—which Athens is more like than is our nation—is crucial because the private association usually contains people of similar status, character, and ambitions because it is self-selective. In a Greek city-state, which was small by modern standards, the citizens were linked by ethnicity, clan, and family. But in a modern democracy diversity is the norm, especially in a nation such as the United States when it was first born. Becker points out the general success of democracy in “new” countries, as opposed to countries like France, England, and Germany.

Using the topic circumstance, Becker reviews history in Part III of the lecture as a way of exploring the question of progress. He describes the inclination of people to postulate utopias, ideal worlds that contrast with the desperate reality they experience, a result, he says, of the pessimism that haunted pre-Christian Europe (para. 22). The achievement of the humanistic eighteenth century made the modern concept of progress possible. As he says, “the eighteenth-century world view, making man the measure of all things, mitigated if it did not destroy this sharp contrast between authority and obedience. God still reigned but he did not govern. He had, so to speak, granted his subjects a constitution and authorized them to interpret it as they would in the supreme court of reason” (para. 27).

Becker ends with testimonials from two authorities backing his basic views. First is a quotation from John Stuart Mill praising his own father’s faith in reason as a guide to happiness (para. 30); that is followed by a comment from historian James Bryce clarifying his ideal democracy (para. 31).

It is not surprising that the very issues Becker worries over regarding an ideal democracy in 1941 are just as much of a concern today, despite the obvious changes in our material circumstances.

**P R E R E A D I N G  Q U E S T I O N S:**

**W H A T  T O  R E A D  F O R**

The following prereading questions may help you anticipate key issues in the discussion of Carl Becker's “Ideal Democracy.” Keeping them in mind during your first reading of the selection should help focus your attention.

- What is Becker's fullest definition of democracy?
- What conditions are necessary for a democratic form of government to flourish?
- What qualities must citizens of a democracy possess if democracy is to take root and survive?
- What are the aims and goals of good government, and how do they relate to the idea of democracy?

**I D E A L  D E M O C R A C Y**

I

I often find it difficult, when invited to speak before a university audience, to hit upon a proper subject. But the invitation to deliver the Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia relieved me of that difficulty; the invitation itself, automatically so to speak, conveniently laid the proper subject in my lap. For the University of Virginia is inseparably associated with the name of its famous founder; and no subject, it seemed to me, could be more appropriate for a historian on this occasion than one which had some connection with the ideas or the activities of Thomas Jefferson.

Even so, you will rightly think, I had a sufficiently wide choice. Jefferson entertained so many ideas, was engaged in so many activities! There was, indeed, scarcely anything of human interest that was alien to his curious and far-ranging intelligence. Nevertheless, his name is always associated with a certain general idea, a certain ideal. In devising his own epitaph, Jefferson himself selected, out of all his notable achievements, only three for which he wished to be especially remembered. Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia. These were the things for which he wished to be remembered. Taken together and in their implications, they are the things for which he has been remembered: that is to say, they conveniently symbolize that way of looking at man and the life of man, that social philosophy, which we always think of when we think of him. The word which best denotes this social philosophy is democracy. I feel sure, therefore, that here, in this famous center of learning, you will not think it inappropriate for me to say something, something relevant if that be at all possible, about democracy—a subject so close to Jefferson's heart and so insistently present in all our minds today.

Democracy, like liberty or science or progress, is a word with which we are all so familiar that we rarely take the trouble to ask what we mean by it. It is a term, as the devotees of semantics say,
which has no “referent”—there is no precise or palpable thing or object which we all think of when the word is pronounced. On the contrary, it is a word which connotes different things to different people, a kind of conceptual Gladstone bag which, with a little manipulation, can be made to accommodate almost any collection of social facts we may wish to carry about in it. In it we can as easily pack a dictatorship as any other form of government. We have only to stretch the concept to include any form of government supported by a majority of the people, for whatever reasons and by whatever means of expressing assent, and before we know it the empire of Napoleon, the Soviet regime of Stalin, and the Fascist systems of Mussolini and Hitler are all safely in the bag. But if this is what we mean by democracy, then virtually all forms of government are democratic, since virtually all governments, except in times of revolution, rest upon the explicit or implicit consent of the people. In order to discuss democracy intelligently it will be necessary, therefore, to define it, to attach to the word a sufficiently precise meaning to avoid the confusion which is not infrequently the chief result of such discussions.

All human institutions, we are told, have their ideal forms laid away in heaven, and we do not need to be told that the actual institutions conform but indifferently to these ideal counterparts. It would be possible then to define democracy either in terms of the ideal or in terms of the real form—to define it as government of the people, by the people, for the people; or to define it as government of the people, by the politicians, for whatever pressure groups can get their interests taken care of. But as a historian I am naturally disposed to be satisfied with the meaning which, in the history of politics, men have commonly attributed to the word—a meaning, needless to say, which derives partly from the experience and partly from the aspirations of mankind. So regarded, the term democracy refers primarily to a form of government, and it has always meant government by the many as opposed to government by the one—government by the people as opposed to government by a tyrant, a dictator, or an absolute monarch. This is the most general meaning of the word as men have commonly understood it.

In this antithesis there are, however, certain implications, always tacitly understood, which give a more precise meaning to the term. Peisistratus,¹ for example, was supported by a majority of the people, but his government was never regarded as a democracy for all that. Caesar’s power derived from a popular mandate, conveyed through established republican forms, but that did not make his government any the less a dictatorship. Napoleon called his government a democratic empire, but no one, least of all Napoleon himself, doubted that he had destroyed the last vestiges of the democratic republic. Since the Greeks first used the term, the essential test of democratic government has always been this: the source of political authority must be and remain in the people and not in the ruler. A democratic government has always meant one in which the citizens, or a sufficient number of them to represent more or less effectively the common will, freely act from time to time, and according to established forms, to appoint or recall the magistrates and to enact or revoke the laws by which the community is governed. This I take to be the meaning which history has impressed upon the term democracy as a form of government. It is, therefore, the meaning which I attach to it in these lectures.

The most obvious political fact of our time is that democracy as thus defined has suffered an astounding decline in prestige. Fifty years ago it was not impossible to regard democratic government, and the liberties that went with it, as a permanent conquest of the human spirit. In 1886 Andrew Carnegie² published a book entitled Triumphant Democracy. Written without fear and without research, the book was not an achievement of the highest intellectual distinction perhaps; but the title at least expressed well enough the prevailing conviction—the conviction that democracy had fought the good fight, had won the decisive battles, and would inevitably, through its inherent merits, presently banish from the world the most flagrant political and social evils which from time immemorial had afflicted mankind. This conviction could no doubt be most easily entertained in the United States, where even the tradition of other forms of government was too remote and alien to color our native optimism. But even in Europe the downright skeptics, such as Lecky,³ were thought to be perverse, and so hardheaded a historian as J. B. Bury⁴ could proclaim with confidence that the long struggle for freedom of thought had finally been won.

I do not need to tell you that within a brief twenty years the prevailing optimism of that time has been quite dispelled. One European country after another has, willingly enough it seems, abandoned whatever democratic institutions it formerly enjoyed for some form of

¹Peisistratus (605–525 B.C.E.) In 560 B.C.E. made himself the tyrant of Athens.

²Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919) Scotch-born steel magnate, once the richest man in the world.

³William Edward Hartpole Lecky (1838–1903) Prominent Irish historian.

⁴J. B. Bury (1861–1927) Another prominent Irish historian.
dictatorship. The spokesmen of Fascism and Communism announce with confidence that democracy, a sentimental aberration which the world has outgrown, is done for; and even the friends of democracy support it with declining conviction. They tell us that democracy, so far from being triumphant, is "at the cross roads" or "in retreat," and that its future is by no means assured. What are we to think of this sudden reversal in fortune and prestige? How explain it? What to do about it?

II

One of the presuppositions of modern thought is that institutions, in order to be understood, must be seen in relation to the conditions of time and place in which they appear. It is a little difficult for us to look at democracy in this way. We are so immersed in its present fortunes that we commonly see it only as a "close-up," filling the screen to the exclusion of other things to which it is in fact related. In order to form an objective judgment of its nature and significance, we must therefore first of all get it in proper perspective. Let us then, in imagination, remove from the immediate present scene to some cool high place where we can survey at a glance five or six thousand years of history, and note the part which democracy has played in human civilization. The view, if we have been accustomed to take democratic institutions for granted, is a bit bleak and disheartening. For we see at once that in all this long time, over the habitable globe, the great majority of the human race has neither known nor apparently much cared for our favorite institutions.

Civilization was already old when democracy made its first notable appearance among the small city-states of ancient Greece, where it flourished brilliantly for a brief century or two and then disappeared. At about the same time something that might be called democracy appeared in Rome and other Italian cities, but even in Rome it did not survive the conquest of the world by the Roman Republic, except as a form of local administration in the cities of the empire. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries certain favorably placed medieval cities enjoyed a measure of self-government, but in most instances it was soon replaced by the dictatorship of military conquerors, the oligarchic control of a few families, or the encroaching power of autocratic kings. The oldest democracy of modern times is the Swiss Confederation, the next oldest is the Dutch Republic. Parliamentary government in England does not antedate the late seventeenth century, the great American experiment is scarcely older. Not until the nineteenth century did democratic government make its way in any considerable part of the world — in the
great states of continental Europe, in South America, in Canada and Australia, in South Africa and Japan.

From this brief survey it is obvious that, taking the experience of mankind as a test, democracy has as yet had but a limited and temporary success. There must be a reason for this significant fact. The reason is that democratic government is a species of social luxury, at best a delicate and precarious adventure which depends for success upon the validity of certain assumptions about the capacities and virtues of men, and upon the presence of certain material and intellectual conditions favorable to the exercise of these capacities and virtues. Let us take the material conditions first.

It is a striking fact that until recently democracy never flourished except in very small states — for the most part in cities. It is true that in both the Persian and the Roman empires a measure of self-government was accorded to local communities, but only in respect to purely local affairs; in no large state as a whole was democratic government found to be practicable. One essential reason is that until recently the means of communication were too slow and uncertain to create the necessary solidity of interest and similarity of information over large areas. The principle of representation was well enough known to the Greeks, but in practice it proved impracticable except in limited areas and for special occasions. As late as the eighteenth century it was still the common opinion that the republican form of government, although the best ideally, was unsuited to large countries, even to a country no larger than France. This was the view of Montesquieu, and even of Rousseau. The view persisted into the nineteenth century, and English conservatives, who were opposed to the extension of the suffrage in England, consoled themselves with the notion that the American Civil War would confirm it — would demonstrate that government by and for the people would perish, if not from off the earth at least from large countries. If their hopes were confounded the reason is that the means of communication, figuratively speaking, were making large countries small. It is not altogether fanciful to suppose that, but for the railroad and the telegraph, the United States would today be divided into many small republics maneuvering for advantage and employing war and diplomacy for maintaining an unstable balance of power.

If one of the conditions essential to the success of democratic government is mobility, ease of communication, another is a certain

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5Montesquieu (1689–1755) Important French thinker of the Enlightenment.
measure of economic security. Democracy does not flourish in communities on the verge of destitution. In ancient and medieval times democratic government appeared for the most part in cities, the centers of prosperity. Farmers in the early Roman Republic and in the Swiss Cantons were not wealthy to be sure, but equality of possessions and of opportunity gave them a certain economic security. In medieval cities political privilege was confined to the prosperous merchants and craftsmen, and in Athens and the later Roman Republic democratic government was found to be workable only on condition that the poor citizens were subsidized by the government or paid for attending the assemblies and the law courts.

In modern times democratic institutions have, generally speaking, been most successful in new countries, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, where the conditions of life have been easy for the people; and in European countries more or less in proportion to their industrial prosperity. In European countries, indeed, there has been a close correlation between the development of the industrial revolution and the emergence of democratic institutions. Holland and England, the first countries to experience the industrial revolution, were the first also (apart from Switzerland, where certain peculiar conditions obtained) to adopt democratic institutions; and as the industrial revolution spread to France, Belgium, Germany, and Italy, these countries in turn adopted at least a measure of democratic government. Democracy is in some sense an economic luxury, and it may be said that in modern times it has been a function of the development of new and potentially rich countries, or of the industrial revolution which suddenly dowered Europe with unaccustomed wealth. Now that prosperity is disappearing round every corner, democracy works less well than it did.

So much for the material conditions essential for the success of democratic government. Supposing these conditions to exist, democratic government implies in addition the presence of certain capacities and virtues in its citizens. These capacities and virtues are bound up with the assumptions on which democracy rests, and are available only insofar as the assumptions are valid. The primary assumption of democratic government is that its citizens are capable of managing their own affairs. But life in any community involves a conflict of individual and class interests, and a corresponding divergence of opinion as to the measures to be adopted for the common good. The divergent opinions must be somehow reconciled, the conflict of interests somehow compromised. It must then be an assumption of democratic government that its citizens are rational creatures, sufficiently so at least to understand the interests in conflict; and it must be an assumption that they are men of goodwill, sufficiently so toward each other at least to make those concessions of individual and class interest required for effecting workable compromises. The citizens of a democracy should be, as Pericles said the citizens of Athens were, if not all originators at least all sound judges of good policy.

These are what may be called the minimum assumptions and the necessary conditions of democratic government anywhere and at any time. They may be noted to best advantage, not in any state but in small groups within the state—in clubs and similar private associations of congenial and like-minded people united for a specific purpose. In such associations the membership is limited and select. The members are, or may easily become, all acquainted with each other. Everyone knows, or may easily find out, what is being done and who is doing it. There will of course be differences of opinion, and there may be disintegrating squabbles and intrigues. But on the whole, ends and means being specific and well understood, the problems of government are few and superficial; there is plenty of time for discussion; and since intelligence and goodwill can generally be taken for granted there is the disposition to make reasonable concessions and compromises. The analogy must be taken for what it is worth. States may not be the mystical blind Molochs of German philosophy, but any state is far more complex and intangible than a private association, and there is little resemblance between such associations and the democracies of modern times. Other things equal, the resemblance is closest in very small states, and it is in connection with the small city-states of ancient Greece that the resemblance can best be noted.

The Greek states were limited in size, not as is often thought solely or even chiefly by the physiography of the country, but by some instinctive feeling of the Greek mind that a state is necessarily a natural association of people bound together by ties of kinship and a common tradition of rights and obligations. There must then, as Aristotle said, be a limit.

For if the citizens of a state are to judge and distribute offices according to merit, they must know each other's characters; where they do not possess this knowledge, both the elections to offices and the decisions in the law courts will go wrong. Where the population is very large they are manifestly settled by haphazard, which clearly ought not to be. Besides, in overpopulous states foreigners and metics will readily acquire citizenship, for who will find them out?

7 Pericles (c. 495-429 B.C.E.) Athenian hero of the Peloponnesian War and builder of the Acropolis.
8 Molochs The forces of evil that demand obedience.
9 metics Resident aliens.
It obviously did not occur to Aristotle that metics and foreigners should be free to acquire citizenship. It did not occur to him, or to any Greek of his time, or to the merchant of the self-governing medieval city, that a state should be composed of all the people inhabiting a given territory. A state was rather an incorporated body of people within, but distinct from, the population of the community.

Ancient and medieval democracies had thus something of the character of a private association. They were, so to speak, purely pragmatic phenomena, arising under very special conditions, and regarded as the most convenient way of managing the affairs of people bound together by community of interest and for the achievement of specific ends. There is no suggestion in Aristotle that democracy (polity) is intrinsically a superior form of government, no suggestion that it derives from a special ideology of its own. If it rests upon any superiority other than convenience, it is the superiority which it shares with any Greek state, that is, the superiority of Greek over barbarian civilization. In Aristotle’s philosophy it is indeed difficult to find any clear-cut distinction between the democratic form of government and the state itself, the state, if it be worthy of the name, is always, whatever the form of government, “the government of freemen and equals,” and in any state it is always necessary that “the freemen who compose the bulk of the people should have absolute power in some things.” In Aristotle’s philosophy the distinction between good and bad in politics is not between good and bad types of government, but between the good and bad form of each type. Any type of government—monarchy, aristocracy, polity—is good provided the rulers aim at the good of all rather than at the good of the class to which they belong. From Aristotle’s point of view neither democracy nor dictatorship is good or bad in itself, but only in the measure that it achieves, or fails to achieve, the aim of every good state, which is that “the inhabitants of it should be happy.” It did not occur to Aristotle that democracy (polity), being in some special sense in harmony with the nature of man, was everywhere applicable, and therefore destined by fate or the gods to carry throughout the world a superior form of civilization.

It is in this respect chiefly that modern democracy differs from earlier forms. It rests upon something more than the minimum assumptions. It is reinforced by a full-blown ideology which, by endowing the individual with natural and imprescriptible rights, sets the democratic form of government off from all others as the one which alone can achieve the good life. What then are the essential tenets of the modern democratic faith?

III

The liberal democratic faith, as expressed in the works of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writers, is one of the formulations of the modern doctrine of progress. It will be well, therefore, to note briefly the historical antecedents of that doctrine.

In the long history of man on earth there comes a time when he remembers something of what has been, anticipates something that will be, knows the country he has traversed, wonders what lies beyond—the moment when he becomes aware of himself as a lonely, differentiated item in the world. Sooner or later there emerges for him the most devastating of all facts, namely, that in an indifferent universe which alone endures, he alone aspires, endeavors to attain, and attains only to be defeated in the end. From that moment his immediate experience ceases to be adequate, and he endeavors to project himself beyond it by creating ideal worlds of semblance. Utopias of other time or place in which all has been, may be, or will be well.

In ancient times Utopia was most easily projected into the unknown past, pushed back to the beginning of things—to the time of Pan Ku and the celestial emperors, to the Garden of Eden, or the reign of King Chronos when men lived like gods free from toil and grief. From this happy state of first created things there had obviously been a decline and fall, occasioned by disobedience and human frailty, and decreed as punishment by fate or the angry gods. The mind of man was therefore afflicted with pessimism, a sense of guilt for having betrayed the divine purpose, a feeling of inadequacy for bringing the world back to its original state of innocence and purity. To men who felt insecure in a changing world, and helpless in a world always changing for the worse, the future had little to offer. It could be regarded for the most part only with resignation, mitigated by individual penance or well doing, or the hope of some miraculous intervention by the gods, or the return of the godlike kings, to set things right again, yet with little hope that from this setting right there would not be another falling away.

This pervasive pessimism was gradually dispelled in the Western world, partly by the Christian religion, chiefly by the secular intellectual revolution occurring roughly between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries. The Christian religion gave assurance that the lost golden age of the past would be restored for the virtuous in

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10 Pan Ku The first man in Chinese Taoist creation myths.
11 King Chronos King of the lost island of Atlantis, according to Greek legend.
the future, and by proclaiming the supreme worth of the individual in the eyes of God enabled men to look forward with hope to the good life after death in the Heavenly City. Meantime, the secular intellectual revolution, centering in the matter-of-fact study of history and science, gradually emancipated the minds of men from resignation to fate and the angry gods. Accumulated knowledge of history, filling in time past with a continuous succession of credible events, banished all lost golden ages to the realm of myth, and enabled men to live without distress in a changing world since it could be regarded as not necessarily changing for the worse. At the same time, a more competent observation and measurement of the action of material things disclosed an outer world of nature, indifferent to man indeed, yet behaving, not as the unpredictable sport of the gods, but in ways understandable to human reason and therefore ultimately subject to man's control.

Thus the conditions were fulfilled which made it possible for men to conceive of Utopia, neither as a lost golden age of the past nor as a Heavenly City after death prepared by the gods for the virtuous, but as a future state on earth of man's own devising. In a world of nature that could be regarded as amenable to man's control, and in a world of changing social relations that need not be regarded as an inevitable decline and fall from original perfection, it was possible to formulate the modern doctrine of progress: the idea that, by deliberate intention and rational direction, men can set the terms and indefinitely improve the conditions of their mundane existence.

The eighteenth century was the moment in history when man first fully realized the engaging implications of this resplendent idea, the moment when, not yet having been brought to the harsh appraisal of experience, it could be accepted with unclouded optimism. Never had the universe seemed less mysterious, more open and visible, more eager to yield its secrets to human question. Never had the nature of man seemed less perverse, or the mind of man more pliable to the pressure of rational persuasion. The essential reason for this confident optimism is that the marvels of scientific discovery disclosed to the men of that time a God who still functioned but was no longer angry. God the Father could be conceived as a beneficent First Cause who, having performed his essential task of creation, had withdrawn from the affairs of men, leaving them competently prepared and fully instructed for the task of achieving their own salvation. In one tremendous sentence Rousseau expressed the eighteenth-century worldview of the universe and man's place in it. "Is it simple," he exclaimed, "is it natural that God should have gone in search of Moses in order to speak to Jean-Jacques Rousseau?"

26 God had indeed spoken to Rousseau, he had spoken to all men, but his revelation was contained, not in Holy Writ interpreted by Holy Church, but in the great Book of Nature which was open for all men to read. To this open book of nature men would go when they wanted to know what God had said to them. Here they would find recorded the laws of nature and of nature's God, disclosing a universe constructed according to a rational plan; and that men might read these laws aright they had been endowed with reason, a bit of the universal intelligence placed within the individual to make manifest to him the universal reason implicit in things and events. "Natural law," as Volney12 so clearly and confidently put it, "is the regular and constant order of facts by which God rules the universe; the order which his wisdom presents to the sense and reason of men, to serve them as an equal and common rule of conduct, and to guide them, without distinction of race or sect, toward perfection and happiness." Thus God had devised a planned economy, and had endowed men with the capacity for managing it: to bring his ideas, his conduct, and his institutions into harmony with the universal laws of nature was man's simple allotted task.

At all times political theory must accommodate itself in some fashion to the prevailing worldview, and liberal-democratic political theory was no exception to this rule. From time immemorial authority and obedience had been the cardinal concepts both of the prevailing worldview and of political and social theory. From time immemorial men had been regarded as subject to overruling authority—the authority of the gods, and the authority of kings who were themselves gods, or descended from gods, or endowed with divine authority to rule in place of gods; and from time immemorial obedience to such divine authority was thought to be the primary obligation of men. Even the Greeks, who were so little afraid of their gods that they could hobnob with them in the most friendly and engaging way, regarded mortals as subject to them; and when they lost faith in the gods they defied the state as the highest good and subordinated the individual to it. But the eighteenth-century worldview, making man the measure of all things, mitigated if it did not destroy this sharp contrast between authority and obedience, God still reigns but he did not govern. He had, so

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12 Constantin-François de Chassebœuf, comte de Volney (1757–1820)
French philosopher and historian.
to speak, granted his subjects a constitution and authorized them to interpret it as they would in the supreme court of reason. Men were still subject to an overruling authority, but the subject line could be regarded as voluntary because self-imposed, and self-imposed because obedience was exacted by nothing more oppressive than their own rational intelligence.

Liberal-democratic political theory readily accommodated itself to this change in the worldview. The voice of the people was now identified with the voice of God, and all authority was derived from it. The individual instead of the state or the prince was now defined and endowed with imprescriptible rights; and since ignorance or neglect of the rights of man was the chief cause of social evils, the first task of political science was to define these rights, the second to devise a form of government suited to guarantee them. The imprescriptible rights of man were easily defined, since they were self-evident: "All men are created equal, [and] are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." From this it followed that all just governments would remove those artificial restraints which impaired these rights, thereby liberating those natural impulses with which God had endowed the individual as a guide to thought and conduct. In the intellectual realm, freedom of thought and the competition of diverse opinion would disclose the truth, which all men, being rational creatures, would progressively recognize and willingly follow. In the economic realm, freedom of enterprise would disclose the natural aptitudes of each individual, and the ensuing competition of interests would stimulate effort, and thereby result in the maximum of material advantage for all. Liberty of the individual from social constraint thus turned out to be not only an inherent natural right but also a preordained natural mechanism for bringing about the material and moral progress of mankind. Men had only to follow reason and self-interest: something not themselves, God and Nature, would do whatever else was necessary for righteousness.

Thus modern liberal-democracy is associated with an ideology which rests upon something more than the minimum assumptions essential to any democratic government. It rests upon a philosophy of universally valid ends and means. Its fundamental assumption is the worth and dignity and creative capacity of the individual, so that the chief aim of government is the maximum of individual self-direction, the chief means to that end the minimum of compulsion by the state. Ideally considered, means and ends are conjoined in the concept of freedom: freedom of thought, so that the truth may prevail; freedom of occupation, so that careers may be open to talent; freedom of self-government, so that no one may be compelled against his will.

In the possibility of realizing this ideal the prophets and protagonists of democracy exhibited an unquestioned faith. If their faith seems to us somewhat naive, the reason is that they placed a far greater reliance upon the immediate influence of goodwill and rational discussion in shaping the conduct of men than is possible for us to do. This difference can be conveniently noted in a passage from the Autobiography of John Stuart Mill,\(^\text{13}\) in which he describes his father's extraordinary faith in two things—representative government and complete freedom of discussion.

So complete was my father's reliance on the influence of reason over the minds of mankind, whenever it was allowed to reach them, that he felt as if all would be gained if the whole population were taught to read, if all sorts of opinions were allowed to be addressed to them by word and writing, and if by means of the suffrage they could nominate a legislature to give effect to the opinions they adopted. He thought that when the legislature no longer represented a class interest, it would act at the general interest, honestly and with adequate wisdom; since the people would be sufficiently under the guidance of educated intelligence, to make in general good choice of persons to represent them, and having done so to leave to those whom they had chosen a liberal discretion. Accordingly, aristocratic rule, the government of the few in any of its shapes, being in his eyes the only thing that stood between mankind and the administration of its affairs by the best wisdom to be found amongst them, was the object of his sternest disapprobation, and a democratic suffrage the principle article of his political creed.\(^\text{14}\)

The beliefs of James Mill were shared by the little group of Philosophical Radicals who gathered about him. They were, indeed, the beliefs of all those who in the great crusading days placed their hopes in democratic government as a panacea for injustice and oppression. The actual working of democratic government, as these devoted enthusiasts foresaw it, the motives that would inspire men and the objects they would pursue in that ideal democracy which so many honest men have cherished and fought for, have never been better

\(^{13}\)John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) English philosopher and champion of utilitarianism, which aims to provide the greatest good to the greatest number.

\(^{14}\)Autobiography (Columbia Press, 1924), p. 74. [Becker's note]
described than by James Bryce in his Modern Democracies. In this ideal democracy, says Bryce, the average citizen will give close and constant attention to public affairs, recognizing that this is his interest as well as his duty. He will try to comprehend the main issues of policy, bringing to them an independent and impartial mind, which thinks first not of its own but of the general interest. If, owing to inevitable differences of opinion as to what are the measures needed for the general welfare, parties become inevitable, he will join one, and attend its meetings, but will repress the impulses of party spirit. Never failing to come to the polls, he will vote for his party candidate only if satisfied by his capacity and honesty. He will be ready to... be put forward as a candidate for the legislature (if satisfied of his own competence), because public service is recognized as a duty. With such citizens as electors, the legislature will be composed of upright and capable men, single-minded in their wish to serve the nation. Bribery in constituencies, corruption among public servants, will have disappeared. Leaders may not always be single-minded, nor assemblies always wise, nor administrators efficient, but all will be at any rate honest and zealous, so that an atmosphere of confidence and good will will prevail. Most of the causes that make for strife will be absent, for there will be no privileges, no advantages to excite jealousy. Office will be sought only because it gives opportunity for useful public service. Power will be shared by all, and a career open to all alike. Even if the law does not—perhaps it cannot—prevent the accumulation of fortunes, these will be few and not inordinate, for public vigilance will close the illegitimate paths to wealth. All but the most depraved persons will obey and support the law, feeling it to be their own. There will be no excuse for violence, because the constitution will provide a remedy for every grievance. Equality will produce a sense of human solidarity, will refine manners, and increase brotherly kindness.

Such is the ideal form of modern democracy laid away in 32 heaven. I do not need to tell you that its earthly counterpart resembles it but slightly. In the next lecture I shall discuss some of the circumstances that brought about so flagrant a discord between democracy as it was ideally projected and democracy as it actually functions today.

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15 James Bryce (1838-1922) Irish historian who was a trustee for the Carnegie trust in Scotland.
161, 48. [Becker's note]

QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL READING

1. Becker says freedom of thought and the competition of diverse opinions will reveal the truth. How important is such freedom of thought and diversity for the survival of a democracy?

2. If a primary assumption in a democracy is that people should be capable of managing their own affairs, what is a government's responsibility to those citizens who cannot do so?

3. From what you can tell of contemporary history, how important is "industrial prosperity" to the flourishing of democracy?

4. Most humans never experienced democracy and many today do not aspire to democracy. To what extent does that bring the concept of democracy into question?

5. In paragraph 3, Becker talks about "varieties" of democracies, including fascist Germany and the Soviet "regime of Stalin." These governments seem to have been supported by a majority of their citizens. Were they then true democracies?

6. How true is it that "virtually all forms of government are democratic, since virtually all governments, except in times of revolution, rest upon the explicit or implicit consent of the people" (para. 3)?

7. Does the concept of an ideal democracy need to be viewed in relation to a specific time and place, such as our own time and place? If so, what contemporary issues help us define democracy differently from, say, Becker's definition?

8. Becker says that, given the circumstances of history, democracy "has as yet had but a limited and temporary success" (para. 10). What do you feel he means by this statement?

SUGGESTIONS FOR CRITICAL WRITING

1. Becker talks about the problems of the limitations of communication as having inhibited early democracies and having limited them to small self-contained city-states. How has the vast improvement in communications—by means of radio, television, cell phones, instant video, and print media—helped expand the concept of democracy and make it possible on a global scale? Consider the effect of the Internet and the blogosphere on spreading or maintaining democracy in movements such as the Arab Spring. Will modern communications systems make democracy more widespread? Why?

2. Becker says, "Democracy does not flourish in communities on the verge of destruction" (para. 12). Examine the reports in a major newspaper or newsmagazine and see to what extent your research validates
or invalidates this view. Decide whether or not Becker’s judgment is accurate or merely prejudiced against desperately poor communities.

3. The question of whether or not democracy has suffered a decline in prestige is still relevant, even though the times in which Becker wrote were quite different from ours. If you think that democracy has suffered a further decline in prestige, write a brief essay that sets out your views on why it has done so. If possible, suggest some ways in which democracy could restore its prestige in the world. If you feel Becker is too pessimistic and that democracy is more prestigious now than when he wrote, defend that position. Try using some of Becker’s rhetorical devices: comparison, testimony, and definition.

4. Carefully examine Becker’s lecture and consider each effort he makes to come to a satisfactory definition of democracy. How many separate definitions do you find, and how do they differ from one another? Using Becker’s lecture as a starting point, and taking into account that more than sixty years have elapsed since he gave it, offer your own definition of democracy. Use examples from the way you see democracy working today in different countries and different situations. Do you find democracy at work in the institutions you have a daily experience with, such as church, school, businesses, corporations, and clubs?

5. In paragraphs 8, 9, and 10, Becker reviews the historical record concerning the existence and success of democracy over a considerable sweep of history. He concludes that democracy has had a “limited and temporary success.” After considering his ideas, do you feel that democracy may in fact become unsuccessful again, as it did in Athens? Why should you or any citizen fear that democracy might fail? What might be done to help prevent such a failure?

6. CONNECTIONS Andrew Carnegie in “The Gospel of Wealth” (p. 481) would praise Becker’s view that suggests democracy would not work in a destitute society. To what extent would Carnegie agree with Becker about the virtue and character of democracy? How might Carnegie wish to amend any of Becker’s definitions? Becker was a noted liberal and Carnegie a noted conservative. How do their views affect their respective attitudes toward the ideal of democracy? Carnegie is mentioned specifically by Becker in paragraph 6, so it is clear that Becker took Carnegie’s views into consideration.

7. CONNECTIONS How would Stephen Carter (bedfordstmartins.com/worldofideaspages) have regarded the concept of separation of church and state in Becker’s concept of an ideal democracy? Like Aristotle, Becker says little about religion. Why would these thinkers omit such a serious subject? In what ways might an ideal democracy be threatened by powerful religious interests? Or, in what ways might powerful religious interests make an ideal democracy more secure? If Carter were to write a critique of Becker’s position, how might he have encouraged Becker to include religion in an ideal democracy?

8. SEEING CONNECTIONS Given that the fact that Becker was a very careful student of the American Revolution and the subsequent signing of the Constitution, how do you think he might have reacted to Howard Chandler Christy’s Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States (p. 57)? Write a brief essay that reassures Becker that the groundwork laid by the signers of the Constitution and the document itself will help democracy survive, even through dark hours, such as those that marked the time during which Becker was writing. What, in the visual organization of the painting, would have given him reason to be optimistic about democracy and its future? Is there anything in the painting that would have made him pessimistic about the future of democracy?