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Reflections of a Neo-Conservative (1983

Though the phrase”the quality-of-life" trips easily from so many lips these days, it tends to be one of the clichés with many trivial meetings and no large, serious one. Sometimes it merely refers to such externals as the enjoyment of cleaner air, cleaner water, cleaner streets. At other times it refers to the merely private enjoyment of music, painting, or literature. Rarely does it have anything to do with the way the citizen in a democracy views himself – his obligations, his intentions, his ultimate self – definition.

Instead, what I would call the “managerial" conception of democracy is the predominant opinion among political scientists, sociologists, and economist, and has, through the entire and efforts of these scholars, become the journalistic opinion as well. The root idea behind this managerial conception is that democracy is a “political system” (as they say) which can be adequately defined in terms of – can be fully reduced to – it's mechanical arrangements. Democracy is then seen as a set of rules and procedures, *and nothing but* a set of rules and procedures. If everyone follows these rules and procedures, then a democracy is in working order. I think this is a fair description of the Democratic idea that currently prevails in academia. One can also fairly say that is now the liberal idea of democracy par excellence.

I cannot help but feel that there is something ridiculous about being this kind of a Democrat, and I must further confess to having a sneaking sympathy for those of our young radicals who also find it ridiculous. The absurdity is the absurdity of idolatry – of taking the symbolic for the real, the means for the end. The purpose of democracy cannot possibly be the endless functioning of its own political machinery. The purpose of any political regime is to achieve some version of the good life in the good society. It is not at all difficult to imagine a perfectly functioning democracy which answers all questions except one – namely, why should anyone of intelligence and spirit care a fig for it?.

There is, however, an older idea of democracy – one which is fairly common till about the beginning of this century – for which the conception of the quality of public life is absolutely crucial. This starts with the proposition that democracy is a form of self – government, and that if you wanted to be a meritorious polity, you have to care about what kind of people govern it. Indeed, it puts the matter more strongly and declares that if you want self – government, you are only entitled to it if that “self" is worthy of governing. There is no inherent right to self – government if it means that such government is vicious, mean, squalid, and debased. Only a dogmatist and a fanatic, an idolater of democratic machinery could approve of self-government under such conditions.

Because of the desirability of self-government depends on the character of the people who govern, the older idea democracy was very solicitous of the condition of this character. It was solicitous of the individual self, and felt an obligation to educate it into what it used to be called quote “republican virtue". And it was solicitous of that collective self which we call public opinion, and which, in a democracy, governs us collectively. Perhaps in some respects it was nervously oversolicitous--that would not be surprising. But the main thing is that it cared, cared not merely for about the machinery of democracy but about the quality of life that this machinery might generate.

Query? This course was about the set of rules and procedures , the mechanical arrangements that govern a democracy. Are you and I, teacher and student, by doing this course, “a dogmatist and a fanatic, an idolator of democratic machinery.”