

Berelson, probably the most influential of these writers, has sought explicitly to confront normative theory with empirical research, to their mutual advantage. He suggests in particular that political theorists

might explore the relevance, the implications, and the meaning of such empirical facts as are contained in this and similar studies. Political theory written with reference to practice has the advantage that its categories are the categories in which political life really occurs . . . empirical research can help to clarify the standards and correct the empirical presuppositions of normative theory.³

Such an aim sounds unexceptionable and, if fulfilled, might be expected to increase men's understanding of society. It is not our intention to deny that voting-behaviour research can be useful in this respect, although its results do seem to have been disappointingly meagre. But we do wish to argue that the actual revision of democratic theory that has been attempted has considerably less justification than Berelson's general statement might suggest. In the first place, the writers with whom we are concerned misunderstand the nature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century democratic theories,⁴ which were not, nor did they purport to be, descriptions of the way in which people actually behaved. Moreover, the older theories are not usually considered in sufficient detail to show which theorists are being subjected to criticism. In the second place, the new theory of democracy, which seems to be founded upon facts, has serious though hidden shortcomings. It is, as we hope to show in the second part, loosely formulated and sometimes superficial, and it rests upon a vague notion of equilibrium and *a priori* assumptions about the self-adjusting powers of the 'system'. In the face of the failure of men to meet the classical norms, it provides a new set of norms, the chief among them apathy, which are much closer to realisation in present-day America and Britain. Those whom we describe as theorists of the new democracy are not all equally inadequate and complacent, but they use similar arguments and the general direction of their thought is towards an easy acceptance of the existing order. This, as we will suggest in the final section, is partly due to their fear of ideology and resulting preoccupation with the supposed conditions of a stable and non-totalitarian political system, which leads them to reject outright the old democratic vision of a community of participating members, in its various forms. Not only are the stated reasons for such a rejection inadequate; it can still reasonably be argued that the realisation of this vision, in one form or another, remains a desirable goal of social and political activity.

Chapter 2

The New Democracy

One of the most salutary results of this vast accumulation of data on politics has been to discredit the older speculative theorists and utopia-makers (Charles Beard, 1908).

The fact that traditional political theory has been held recently in low esteem can be traced in part to the extension of scientific methods to the study of society. At times this has led to a wholesale rejection of the older subject as value-laden and unscientific.¹ But a number of more sophisticated political scientists have seen some value in the work of speculative political theorists and have condemned, not political theory as such, but a philosophical approach to questions which they thought could best be answered in a more scientific manner. After paying some homage to the older theory, they have argued that its abstract notions and principles misdescribe the ways in which men behave and societies function. As a result, attempts have been made to confront certain traditional theories with the facts of political life, and to carry through a substantial revision of these theories. Nowhere has this confrontation and revision advanced further than in the field of democratic theory, which has been examined from the new perspective afforded by research into voting behaviour. Armed with material from the voting studies, Bernard Berelson and others have hastened to declare that past democratic theory is in many respects an inadequate theory of democracy.²

There are a number of different strands in classical democratic theory and it cannot therefore be characterised simply. Its major exponents differ over both the institutional requirements for democracy and the arguments which can best be urged in its favour. It is true to say, however, that in general a democratic society is treated as one in which all the citizens (the people) continuously and actively participate in the various community affairs, and above all in political affairs.⁵ A democratic society, whether conceived on the Greek model, as by Rousseau, or on a national basis, as by John Stuart Mill, is pre-eminently a society marked by wide discussion and consultation, so that the whole people know the reasons for political decisions through taking part directly or indirectly in their formulation. J. S. Mill, whom we choose as the central democratic theorist because of his concern with representative government, as well as for his clarity, put the argument for widespread participation clearly. He wrote that

the only government which can fully satisfy all the exigencies of the social state is one in which the whole people participate; that any participation, even in the smallest public function, is useful; that the participation should everywhere be as great as the general degree of improvement of the community will allow, and that nothing less can be ultimately desirable than the admission of all to a share in the sovereign power of the state.⁶

Mill proclaimed the need for general participation in a wide variety of affairs, not all of which were specifically political, and related this to his ideal of self-development.

The extension of the franchise and frequent elections, which have been central demands at least in English and American democratic theory, were supported for a number of reasons: that only the vote can reveal the general interest of the community; that it is a natural right, or a right deriving from the rendering of services; that powerful groups or interests must be absorbed into society rather than driven into violent action against established institutions; that the vote is necessary for self-protection; and that it, along with other forms of participation in the life of the nation, elevates those who possess it.⁷ The most important for the purposes of our analysis are the last two, which are also those least objectionable to modern democratic thinkers.⁸

The utilitarians, disturbed at the ease with which governments became the property of 'sinister interests', developed one of the characteristic democratic arguments. The most difficult problem for

government (which arises naturally from their psychological premises) is that of 'restraining those in whose hands are lodged the powers necessary for the protection of all, from making a bad use of it'.⁹ Assuming that self-preference is unrestrained by social feelings, the only means of bringing about a rough identity between the interests of community and ruler are 'artificial' – widening the electorate and limiting the duration of governmental power by frequent elections. J. S. Mill, who believed like his father in the natural tendency of rulers to misuse their power, traced this tendency to a deficiency of understanding rather than to mere ill-will and selfishness. Rulers are less ill-disposed than ignorant. Only the man himself can adequately judge and safeguard his own interests – 'in the absence of its natural defenders, the interest of the excluded is always in danger of being overlooked'.¹⁰ Constant vigilance and general participation ensure that all interests will be considered and thus that greater justice will prevail in the settlement of claims.

For the younger Mill, however, the franchise was more than a weapon against arbitrary power and a means whereby each group could ensure that its claims were adequately considered. Although he feared that an enfranchised working class would misuse its powers and suggested certain safeguards to secure the authority of the enlightened, he had great faith in the civilising effects of political participation itself. He described the franchise as 'a potent instrument of mental improvement' and followed Tocqueville in explaining the conscientious citizenship of the Americans by their democratic institutions. Self-government is in this sense self-sustaining: through the possession of legal rights men become capable of properly exercising them and thus they approach that moral autonomy which is the true end of life.

Those who have, like Mill and Rousseau, gone beyond self-protection and the possibility of peaceful change as the chief advantages of the democratic form of government, have tended to speak in terms of man's realisation of some characteristic excellence. The democratic society is the good society, bringing out the best in men; democracy, as Lindsay said, is a theory of society as well as a theory of government. Rousseau, who idealises only direct or 'populistic' democracy, eliminates conflict, since when men rationally seek the common good, which is ascertainable, there are no possible grounds for disagreement between them; whereas Mill pictures a community of critical, restless, dissatisfied individuals, constantly questioning one another's principles

in the pursuit of truth and the general happiness. They evaluate differently 'long debates, discussion and tumult'.

Voting, as the chief institutional means of participation, becomes of crucial importance. It is conceived, not as a spasmodic or casual act, but as one in which rationality and disinterestedness are manifest. Rousseau wrote that when the people are called to vote upon a law, what 'it' is asked 'is not exactly whether it approves or rejects the proposal, but whether it is in conformity with the general will, which is their will. Each man in giving his vote states his opinion on that point, and the general will is found by counting the votes.'¹¹ Mill had a similarly high conception of the act of voting, though it is not linked so strongly with the notion of an ascertainable common good. In his words, 'the voter is under an absolute moral obligation to consider the interests of the public, not his private, advantage and to give his vote, to the best of his judgment, exactly as he would be bound to do if he were the sole voter and the election depended upon him alone'.¹²

To the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century democratic theorists, voting was perhaps the citizen's most important act, in which the people as a whole were to reveal their political energy and virtue. It was to be the culmination of long, thoughtful, and fair consideration of the relevant issues. But these writers never claimed to be simply describing existing reality, for they were elaborating, at least in part, a set of ideals for a democratic society, which were also meant to be operative ideals for their own times. They have been taken to task, however, for 'utopianism' and for making demands on the ordinary man that are impossible and indeed undesirable. Research into voting behaviour – who votes, how and why? who does not vote and why not? – would seem to have confirmed abundantly the old impressionistic conservative arguments about the 'bovine stupidity' and the 'heavy, lumpish acquiescence' of the mass electorate and to have shown the democratic hope to be a mere delusion, based on false intellectualist assumptions about human nature.

The voting studies¹³ generally agree in showing that the voters fail to satisfy most of the traditional requirements of democracy. This is, perhaps, not too surprising, but detailed documentation of voting behaviour by panel study is certainly of value in confirming suspicions. Berelson gives a composite list of the qualities demanded by the older democratic theorists and confronts them with the actual qualities as revealed in the opinion surveys. Involvement, participation, and the sharing of responsibility were held to be virtues; disinterest and apathy

were not approved. In fact, the evidence, says Berelson, shows that less than one-third of the electorate is really interested in politics, many vote without real involvement, open discussion and motives for participation are almost non-existent. Secondly, knowledge and information are inadequate. 'One persistent conclusion is that the public is not particularly well-informed about the specific issues of the day.'¹⁴ Even when voters are well-informed, their knowledge reinforces inclinations more than it contributes to a 'free' decision. Nor do voters seem to vote on principles, of whatever kind, which they have considered carefully, and the standards which they do use are often irrelevant to 'the major problems of the age'. Finally, voters do not seem to decide rationally, in any of the traditional senses of that porous term. The studies have noted the prevalence of selective perception and the way in which the campaign reinforces the influence of a whole set of environmental factors, so that in the end its function seems to be largely that of 'activating latent predispositions'. Furthermore, the voters showing the 'greatest degree of "open-mindedness", that is, the changers or floaters, are, in some of the studies at least, shown to be the most cross-pressed, the least interested and the least politically capable.'¹⁵ In brief, the voter is shown to be deficient in most of the ideal qualities of traditional democratic theory.

Before detailed research into voting behaviour had ever taken place, several writers (for instance, Lord Bryce and Graham Wallas) had rejected much of the old and largely *a priori* account of the rational democratic citizen as a description applicable to the bulk of their fellow-citizens, yet they did not feel it necessary on this account to undertake a complete revision of democratic theory, as is now demanded.¹⁶ Some more recent writers have, on the other hand, held on to the notion of the rational citizen as applicable, despite the evidence of the voting surveys. The impact of these has been lessened by the claim that the short-term questionnaire method is too clumsy to elicit the important truths about the voter.¹⁷ Schumpeter suggests a distinction between rationality in thought and rationality in action. The latter 'may be present without any conscious deliberation and irrespective of any ability to formulate the rationale of one's action correctly. The observer, particularly the observer who uses interview and questionnaire methods, often overlooks this and hence acquires an exaggerated idea of the importance of irrationality in behaviour.'¹⁸ Plamenatz draws a similar distinction between what men do and their awareness of the significance of their actions.¹⁹ He suggests that voters may be condemned by

inarticulateness or private language to seem less reasonable than they in fact are, at least in the present state of interview techniques. It is true that men's ability to put thoughts into words and describe actions differs, and that there may be good reasons, of which the agent is unaware, for his doing what he does (for instance, many traditional forms of behaviour). It is almost certain that the survey methods used do give a distorted picture of the complex reality that they seek to describe. But, as so far stated, these objections can serve only as a general warning and, if pressed, may easily develop into a mystical faith in the good sense of the common man. This criticism of the panel surveys is not, in any case, central to our purposes. The authors with whom we are mainly concerned accept the soundness of the survey findings and demand in consequence a substantial revision of classical democratic theory.

Berelson writes: 'Perhaps the main impact of realistic research on contemporary politics has been to temper some of the requirements set by our traditional normative theory for the typical citizen.'²⁰ The clearest statement of the nature of the revision comes, however, from Robert Dahl. He writes that

we must conclude that the classic assumptions about the need for citizen participation in democracy were, at the very least, inadequate. If one regards political equality in the making of decisions as a kind of limit to be achieved, then it is axiomatic that this limit could only be arrived at with the complete participation of every adult citizen. Nevertheless, *what we call 'democracy'* – that is, a system of decision-making in which the leaders are more or less responsive to the preferences of non-leaders – does seem to operate with a relatively low level of citizen participation. Hence it is inaccurate to say that one of the necessary conditions for 'democracy' is extensive citizen participation.²¹

Not only is Dahl's definition of democracy extremely loose (in what political system are leaders not more or less responsive to non-leaders?) but the rejection of the classical requirement of participation rests upon an obvious redefinition of democracy, in which what are taken for present-day facts supplant the ideal. Dahl's conclusion is an obvious *non sequitur*, involving a slide from 'what we call "democracy"' to 'democracy'. He suspects that it may have represented a 'kind of ideal limit', but in restating the requirements of the system he ignores this central element of the old democracy, which was defined and justified as

a system in which all participate. Without further argument it is misleading to claim that facts can simply refute ideals and demand changes in the essential requirements of a normative theory, or to reject (for example) Mill's democracy by means of a tacit redefinition of the notion. It needs, moreover, to be established that the new democracy, 'what we call "democracy"', is democratic in a sense acceptable to traditional theory.

This brings us to the central point in the first part of our analysis: that although what may now be called 'democracies' may function with little rationality, interest or participation on the part of the majority of citizens, this cannot count simply as a refutation of largely normative theories, which were centrally concerned with the quality of men's social life and not only with the functioning of a 'political system'. Dahl again provides the most explicit statement:

One of the most interesting developments of the past century is the full-blown contrast that has arisen between the assumptions of many of the older democratic theorists and what now appear to be the actual facts of political life. *Yet if classical theory is demonstrably invalid in some crucial respects*, it is not so clear how we are to go about constructing theoretical models to replace the older ones.²²

To claim that sociological findings can show these older political theories to be demonstrably invalid is seriously to misunderstand the most basic features of much political theory, which often touches reality only at the edges, and is only at that point open to empirical refutation. 'Political theory' is a general term which covers different types of statements and theories which yield conclusions of different sorts in different ways, and are therefore open to objection in different ways.²³

In this connection, a familiar distinction can be made at the most general level between 'normative' theories, which present and elaborate goals and ideals, and 'empirical' theories, which describe and explain political reality. A theory of the first kind involves some vision of the Good Life and the Good Society, resting ultimately on a view of human nature and on assumptions about human needs and potentialities: two obvious examples are Plato's republic and Rousseau's ideal community. These ideals almost always conflict with existing realities, though they need not do so (cf. the later Hegel). Empirical theories, however, start from a set of explanatory concepts and classifications, which are then employed, in a number of markedly different ways, in

describing and explaining political reality. They are descriptions, concerned with given societies, and they are not *primarily* moral critiques of them.

This general distinction is, of course, a formal one: these kinds of theory are often intimately connected, with each closely dependent on the other. Few empirical theories avoid value-judgements, whether or not they are explicit, and the vision of a normative theory generally rests upon a particular assessment of the present and past. The ideal may involve a moral estimate of the explanatory concepts, particularly if the ideal is of a kind that is supposedly being progressively realised in history, while empirical study may put ideals in a new light, as when the discovery of trends or movements in existing societies curbs the utopian fancy.

Most of the traditional theories of democracy were largely, if not primarily, normative, and critical of the societies in which they were conceived. They were essentially concerned with the achievement in society of what were regarded as various desirable human ends – liberty, good government, responsibility, moral autonomy, self-realisation, and so on – and with the means, including the franchise and general participation in politics, but also education and wise leadership, which could best contribute to these ends. Rousseau and J. S. Mill had serious doubts about the feasibility of their ideals, because of the corruptibility of the multitude, or the power of vested interests, or the sheer extent of societies. Mill had some sympathy with those reformers who favoured despotism because of 'the impediments imposed to the most salutary public improvements by the ignorance, the indifference, the intractableness, the perverse obstinacy of a people, and the corrupt combinations of selfish private interests armed with the powerful weapons afforded by free institutions'.²⁴ He feared that the extension of democracy would endanger good government and relied upon a variety of institutional devices to secure a privileged position for the educated, hoping, like his father, that the influence of the wise would spread to the community as a whole. Rousseau, similarly, has a long list of the conditions for the realisation of his ideal community, and he was very pessimistic about most of the societies of his time. In choosing democracy the classical theorists were in general aware of the ease with which it could be forestalled and perverted, though they were not without illusions; and they were aware, too, of the capacity of undemocratic societies to survive. Their theories are a critique of reality in terms of a vision of human nature and possibilities, and for this

reason cannot simply be refuted on the grounds that people do not satisfy the required standards and that *soi-disant* 'democracies' none the less survive. Their ideals can logically contrast with the facts without being invalidated by empirical research, which does not in any *obvious* way call for their general revision. The term 'democracy' may perhaps legitimately be used to describe political systems like that of the contemporary United States, but it is wrong to assume that the validity of that theory of democracy in which general participation is central to the very notion itself is thereby destroyed.

All this is not, however, to say that evidence can never force changes or modifications in theories which are largely normative.²⁵ If such a theory seems intolerably remote from reality, it may be charged with utopianism. It is an endemic danger of normative political theory that it will maintain what Dewey called 'an immune and monastic impeccability'. A particular ideal or set of ideals may, in the Marxist sense, be condemned by historical forces to sterility; it might be shown that it is realisable, but only at the cost of further consequences which violate it; it might itself be shown to be incompatible with other important values; it might be shown that the conditions of realisation of an ideal are too vast or unexpected for men to endure; or else it may be shown to be literally impossible to effect the changes demanded. All these means of casting doubt on the feasibility of ideals are legitimate weapons to be used by sceptics: the effectiveness of each is clearly open to dispute, particularly in the case of the last two. For men may disagree about the degree to which social circumstances affect attitudes and behaviour and thus about the extent to which any given traits are alterable. (To what extent, for example, is the lack of a sense of responsibility a function of a social situation?) Nevertheless, the use of any of these forms of objection needs to be fully and extensively pursued, and it needs to be shown exactly how and why the ideal is rendered improbable or impossible to attain. This has nowhere been done. Thus, when it is stated baldly that the old theory made impossible demands, this is more like the recognition of a complacent or despairing abandonment of an ideal than the proof that that ideal must needs be abandoned. And it should be realised that, unless one takes a crude historicist position, this proof could only be really convincing if one could show that traditional democratic theory made demands which men are by nature unable to satisfy. Only then would the ideal be literally *invalidated*, for it would have been shown that the obstacles to its realisation are irremovable. Such a demonstration would

presumably come from social psychology, but it has certainly not been achieved, nor is it likely to be even possible until that study is very much further advanced. Only then could the facts (about human nature) even in principle serve to invalidate the old theories of democracy. Otherwise, one can certainly argue over its *feasibility* in the light of case studies – from Michels onwards. Even so, it seems that very little has been done to show that the classical democratic ideals are manifestly utopian. It is not, to repeat, our point that normative political theory is simply independent of sociological evidence: obviously, any theory of democracy must take into account the main features of actual societies. It is simply that empirical study and analysis can only in certain specified cases actually compel us to abandon the ideal or transform it out of all recognition.

Finally, it ought to be added that research into voting behaviour has performed the valuable service of destroying some popular myths about the actual functioning of elections – myths which exist at the level of public rhetoric rather than that of political theory. The 'mandate' theory, for example, has been damaged beyond repair by the voting studies (though by much else besides): as the authors of *The American Voter* put it, 'The thinness of the electorate's understanding of concrete policy alternatives – its inability to respond to government and politics at this level – helps explain why it is that efforts to interpret a national election in terms of a policy mandate are speculative, contradictory and inconclusive.'²⁶ Similarly, many of the studies have thrown into question the notion of the independent or 'floating' voter, a kind of rational jellyfish, preferably of the middle class, floating one way or the other to decide the issue. At these and probably other points the election studies have refuted or at least modified some simple and widely believed theories about what happens in elections; the 'business vocabulary' for describing actual elections has at least been purged. But these low-level and non-critical theories are open to support and objection in this simple way, whereas the old ideal of democratic man is not.

It has been generally agreed that the theory of the whole electorate as politically competent and interested, expressing these qualities in democratic elections, has not proved suitable as a basis for empirical analysis. The lack of realism in many of the older descriptive accounts of elections has led a number of political scientists to work with the so-called 'competitive theory of democracy'. Joseph Schumpeter, one of

the leading exponents of this theory, has defined the 'democratic method' as 'that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote'.²⁷ Voting, which provides the electors with the opportunity to change their leaders, and competition between candidates for office, are here the key institutional devices of democracy. If 'democracy' is taken to be a political system defined institutionally in this way, empirical analysis then concentrates on the conditions for its successful operation, while the chief problem of policy becomes that of ensuring that these conditions in fact exist. The main requirement seems to be effective competition between leaders: this, in Plamenatz's view, ensures that the electorate is not 'manipulated' by the active ruling elite. (This view that freedom is guaranteed by free competition between elites derives ultimately from Mosca.) When there is no effective competition, the system ceases to be one in which the leaders are responsive to the independent wishes of non-leaders. Thus Dahl, for example, sees the main problem of democracy as that of regulating the 'great political oligopolies' – which is much as it seemed to the early utilitarians.

This 'competitive model' is adopted with variations by the writers with whom we are concerned. It is a general model useful as a point of departure in the description of existing democracies. The general picture is one of energetic and competing minorities at the top and a relatively apathetic majority, whose role is essentially that of exercising a very generalised control during the election, which is seen as a process of selecting and rejecting candidates in competition for public office. It should be seen clearly that such a model is not necessarily inconsistent with most traditional theories of democracy (except Rousseau's), for it clearly recognises that an election in a large society can only produce clear-cut and satisfactory results in this sort of way. As Schumpeter writes:

even if the opinions and desires of individual citizens were perfectly definite and independent data for the democratic process to work with, and even if everyone acted on them with rationality and promptitude, it would not necessarily follow that the political decisions produced by that process from the raw material of those individual volitions would represent anything that could in any convincing sense be called the will of the people.²⁸

The competitive model need not be incompatible with traditional

notions of democracy, and it is just because classical democracy was not defined institutionally as a 'system of decision-making' that this is so. For, as we have seen, democracy in the traditional sense involves a great deal more than the correspondence of individual wills and collective decisions; it involves, for example, political equality, active consent about the form of government and the 'rules of the game', widespread discussion and participation, political and otherwise, through all kinds of activities and channels. To take a particular and relevant example, a study by Janowitz and Marwick,²⁹ which explicitly uses this competitive model, attempts to distinguish between a process of genuine consent and manipulation. The authors emphasise the importance of the quality of the voting decision, pointing out that high turnout does not necessarily reflect the process of consent. They write in words of which John Stuart Mill would have approved:

The underlying belief in a democracy that everyone ought to vote is indeed such a deep-seated belief that it must be regarded as a utopian goal. Reforms have been suggested above that are designed to enhance the quality of the vote by modification of the social structure. Yet in terms of practical political reform, the crucial problem is to improve the quality of competing political leaders and to increase voter competence.³⁰

The theorists of the new democracy, however, are less concerned to make the competitive 'democratic system' more democratic in the traditional sense than to justify it as an efficient and stable system, depending on compromise, 'pluralism' and a general background of apathy and political incompetence. In fact, their theory, which is intended to explain the 'democratic system', becomes in the end the new normative theory of democracy. We are driven to this conclusion by the form of their argument. The question arises: What implications have election studies for democratic theory? The conclusion is that that theory must be made more 'realistic'. The confrontation of classical democratic ideals with actual 'democratic systems' (what we call 'democracy') has no other result than the acceptance of the actual systems and their assumed conditions as entirely desirable. Electoral apathy, incompetence, and so on, which exist in most stable 'modern democracies' are now considered to be conditions of their successful functioning and are therefore taken to be the new democratic norms.

There are of course differences between the writers under consideration. The social scientists, for example Dahl and Parsons, are

more concerned to produce a scientific theory of the system, whereas others, for example Plamenatz and Schumpeter, are much less ambitious, which is not to say that their caution is misplaced. The system is justified on a number of different grounds, and doubtless there are a number of important internal disagreements between these different writers. We can only examine a number of the most common arguments and assumptions, which may not be shared in detail by all of them.

The most notable feature of this recent democratic theory is the shift in emphasis from the needs and potentialities of the individual citizen to the requirements of the system. Despite inadequacies in individuals, the system works. In Berelson's vague words, 'The *system of democracy* does meet certain requirements of a going political organization. The individuals may not meet all the standards, but the whole nevertheless survives and grows. This suggests that where the classical theory is defective is in its concentration on the *individual* citizen.'³¹ And again, in more exalted vein, 'Where the rational citizen seems to abdicate, nevertheless angels seem to tread.'³²

It may be useful to look in some detail at Berelson's own account of the democratic system. He sees it pre-eminently as a system in equilibrium and he is followed in this by Talcott Parsons in an essay entitled '*Voting and the Equilibrium of the American Political System*'. (Parsons in fact attempts to integrate Berelson's picture into his own 'general theory of social systems'.) Berelson describes the system mainly in terms of 'balances' and the distribution of qualities in various dimensions. For political democracy to survive, the elements of the system must be distributed and related in a certain way. 'What seems to be required of the electorate as a whole is a distribution of qualities along important dimensions. We need some people who are active in a certain respect, others in the middle and still others passive.'³³ And, 'happily for the system', the voters are distributed along a smooth continuum. There must be a 'balance' between 'involvement and indifference', 'stability and flexibility', 'progress and conservatism', 'consensus and cleavage' and, finally, 'individualism and collectivism'. Low interest provides 'maneuvering room' ('only the doctrinaire would deprecate the moderate indifference that facilitates compromise') and heterogeneity produces a balance between strongly and weakly motivated actions. Also, apart from the many factors making for social stability, 'voters carry over to each new election remnants of issues raised in previous elections — and so there is always an overlapping of old

and new decisions that gives a cohesion in time to the political system'. On the other hand, the least partisan are also functional to the system, making for 'flexibility' – 'for those who change political preferences most readily are those who are least interested, who are subject to conflicting social pressures, who have inconsistent beliefs and erratic voting histories. Without them . . . the system might prove too rigid to adapt to changing domestic and international conditions.'³⁴ There is, says Berelson, 'stability on both sides and flexibility in the middle' and once again 'an individual "inadequacy" provides a positive service for the society'. Finally, there is the essential requirement of 'pluralism', which 'makes for enough consensus to hold the system together and enough cleavage to make it move'. This social heterogeneity produces a 'cross-cutting and harmonious community interest' with a 'balance between total political war between segments of the society and total political indifference to group interests of that society'.³⁵

There are a number of important objections to Berelson's account. To begin with, the description of the conditions claimed to be necessary and functional to the system all embody the basic assumption of a system in equilibrium. The use, explicit or otherwise, of equilibrium concepts in the social sciences is often open to serious methodological criticisms³⁶ and leaves its practitioners subject to the suspicion of having based conservatism upon a pseudo-scientific foundation. More specifically, the application of an equilibrium model to actual social situations does require either careful quantification of the relevant variables (ordinally or cardinally) or else a situation in which an equilibrium situation is directly visible (although, of course, the use of such a model may always lead to fruitful questions). Otherwise little specific sense can be made of the idea of 'balance' between elements. Yet Berelson speaks quite glibly of the balance between his various 'qualities', where neither of these conditions is fulfilled. Parsons, following Berelson, seems to accept these 'balances', translating them into his own terms as 'functional requirements'. He writes that, within a broad framework, 'if the political system is, in the relation between leadership and support, to be a relatively stable one that can integrate multifarious pluralistic interests and yet adapt to changing conditions, it must, *within broadly specifiable limits*, have certain characteristics'.³⁷ What we dispute is that any precise characterisation has been given of these 'broadly specifiable limits' (by Berelson or by Parsons) such that we must accept their account of an equilibrium system with 'checks and balances' and the capacity for self-adjustment afforded by hetero-

generity and apathy within the electorate. There is, in other words, no reason to agree that the 'democratic system' is in smoothly functioning equilibrium; and if we look hard at the assumptions behind this theory, we tend to be left with vague and questionable assertions about social harmony.

In the second place, the supposed requirements of the system are presented in an obviously value-laden and tendentious way. Berelson claims, in a rather obscure passage, that 'it turns out that this distribution itself, with its internal checks and balances, can perform the functions and incorporate the same values ascribed by some theorists to each individual in the system, as well as to the constitutive political institutions'.³⁸ Berelson here seems to be trying to have the best of both worlds. Not only is his theory of democracy realistic, describing actual societies, but the old individual values are somehow incorporated in it. Apart from the verbal peculiarity (how can a distribution of qualities incorporate the values ascribed to individuals?) the claim seems hardly to have been sustained in any detail. Both he and Parsons try to show that the *system* is rational – that is, its parts are co-ordinated and it develops smoothly – but this is not rationality in any of the senses normally ascribed to individuals. Some people are active, interested and competent; others are not. Does the distribution itself, rather than any individual, incorporate these values? If this is what Berelson means, it is a roundabout and deceptive way of putting the view that, though Americans as a whole are not ideal democratic citizens, a few people do possess the required qualities and, moreover, the political system does not disintegrate.

Thirdly, the system's supposed requirements are stated very loosely – often too loosely for the validity of the account to be assessed – and sometimes tautologically, with little descriptive content. What, for example, does the requirement that there should be a 'nice balance' between consensus and cleavage, reflecting the 'health of a democratic order', really amount to? It is true but uninformative to say that if there is *too much* cleavage a democratic system – or any other system – will disintegrate; one can scarcely disagree with Berelson when he writes, 'Political parties in a democracy should disagree – but not too much, too sharply, nor too fundamentally.' Yet how can one measure these qualities to find out whether they are in balance (and what is so sacrosanct about this notional equilibrium point in any case?). This is not to say that the ideas of consensus and conflict are analytically useless; it is simply that here they are being misused, for, given that

there is a measure of basic or 'higher-order' consensus, there is room for wide dispute over the nature and degree of cleavage that is tolerable or desirable (and, as Lipset shows, cleavage may itself be a factor making for consensus). And it does not help to speak of 'pluralism' as a 'kind of glue' which holds the system together when threatened by cleavage. Does this mean anything precise? What, for instance, is one to make of the following obscure passage from Berelson? 'The multiplicity and heterogeneity of identifications and associations in the great society develop an overlapping, pluralistic social organization which both sharpens and softens the impact and the consequences of political activity.'³⁹

Finally, there is no warrant for saying that the features isolated are requirements of the system – unless, of course, they are included definitionally as parts of it. The clearest and most important instance is that of apathy. Apathy serves, says Berelson, as a "cushion" to absorb the intense action of highly-motivated partisans'. Apathy, it is claimed, helps the democratic system to function smoothly by facilitating change and reducing the impact of fanaticism, thus guarding against the danger of 'total politics'. Also, in Parsons's words, there is the 'indifference reaction', among the apathetic and incompetent floaters, which is the 'element of flexibility necessary to allow sufficient shift of votes to permit a two-party system to function effectively without introducing unduly disruptive elements into the system'.⁴⁰ Yet what is the basis for this claim that apathy must exist to hold the system together and give it flexibility, while cushioning the shock of disagreement and change? The theoretical framework seems hardly adequate to allow the role of apathy as an element of the system to be described in this way. That is to say, arguments about the necessity of apathy may always be confronted with the suggestion that any given society with democratic institutions or a democratic temper can in certain conditions tolerate an appreciably higher degree of participation than these theorists allow. The evidence, such as it is, does not in any way prove or even confirm the theory of the necessity of apathy to the survival of democracy.

Yet many of the writers under discussion support this theory, either on the basis of the equilibrium model criticised above or more generally on the basis of the evidence of scattered historical cases of differing degrees of participation. For example, Tingsten makes the point, on the basis of interwar election figures in Austria and Germany, that 'an exceptionally high voting frequency may indicate an intensification of political controversy which may involve a danger to the democratic

system'.⁴¹ His conclusion is that high political participation *may* not be a sign of the health of a democracy, but he also points out that it is misleading to speak of participation as though it were one thing whatever the community or circumstances: in other countries 'a high degree of participation cannot be judged in the same manner'.⁴² Moreover, in the cases mentioned, high participation seems less a cause than a consequence of deeper-rooted social conflicts – high participation may mark some periods of crisis but it does not explain their origins. All that the evidence shows is that a high degree of electoral participation has sometimes been a symptom of crises in democracy and not even, as Lipset says, misinterpreting Tingsten's point, that 'political apathy may reflect the health of a democracy'.⁴³ The historical examples need careful handling – one might well argue, for instance, that the Weimar Republic fell chiefly because of apathy about the regime. In any case, neither apathy nor participation can profitably be considered in abstraction from historical contexts: apathy in the Weimar Republic can scarcely be identified with that of the affluent society of contemporary America, while increased participation, if it means a sudden 'intrusion of the masses into politics' in an artificial way, is hardly equivalent to the classical prescriptions for heightened general participation in the political and other activities in the life of the community. In brief, it has nowhere been shown that apathy is either necessary or functional to democracy.

To sum up, our conclusion is that no adequate empirical theory, still less a 'scientific' theory, of institutional 'democracy' has been provided. Apart from incidental insights, the notion of a stable equilibrium system is misleading as an account of 'what we call democracy' and is deceptively presented as a development of traditional theories of democracy. Furthermore, the 'requirements' of the 'democratic system' – in particular, apathy – have certainly not been proved to be necessary to the survival of a democratic society.

It is evident that the theorists of the new democracy share a number of contemporary preoccupations which have blinded them both to the possible development and to the possible diversity of democratic societies and have led them to describe apathy as a central requirement of the functioning of such societies. Essentially, these preoccupations centre on a basic distinction between totalitarianism and liberal democracy, which underlies a great deal of recent sociological and political writing. This dichotomy, historically explicable though it is,

has in our view distorted much recent thinking about politics among Western intellectuals. It has led to an exaggerated fear of 'ideology' and the celebration of its supposed end in the modern affluent Western society, and, in addition, the familiar 'argument from the concentration camp' has often been used to condemn traditionally democratic and radical ideas which really have no necessary connection with totalitarianism. In general, this argument takes the form of isolating a particular idea or policy from its context, either theoretical or historical, and then indicating its putative affinity with totalitarian ideas and practices. One may well question not only the specific interpretations, but also the belief that political ideas can, in any case, be more or less clearly divided into the liberal-democratic and totalitarian categories. In times of great uncertainty conservatism has a natural appeal and the advantages of stable societies are apt to be greatly exaggerated. The political system is seen as an exquisitely fragile mechanism and all possible dangers to its stability are jealously guarded against. Hence the general contemporary concern with the conditions of a stable, non-totalitarian political system and the resulting desire to avoid anything which might lead to a dangerous involvement of the masses in politics. Such a development, it is claimed, would threaten both the smooth functioning of the system and the freedom and privacy of the individual.

This background helps to explain the new directions of democratic theory. The early democratic theorists, hating the tyranny of the old regime of monarchs and aristocrats, stressed the role of vigilance and participation in protecting hard-won rights against predatory 'sinister interests'. Political participation especially was to safeguard society, protect individuals and groups and develop individual qualities as well as men's control over their social lives. The theorists of the new democracy tend to see widespread participation, interest and conflict as substantial dangers to democracy and like to refer to the fraudulent claims of those totalitarians who see themselves as the real practitioners of democracy and the true representatives of the people. There are thus these twin dangers of 'total politics', which may disrupt the system, and totalitarian politics, which may eliminate freedom and privacy. This explains their eagerness to define the new political role of democratic man very narrowly. Meanwhile all the more radical features of the democratic tradition are abandoned in favour of a timid conservatism.

A characteristic piece of writing in this connection is W. H. Morris-Jones's article, 'In Defence of Apathy',⁴⁴ which is often referred to in the

literature and has had some measure of influence. The explicit purpose of this article is 'to suggest that many of the ideas connected with the general theme of a duty to vote belong properly to the totalitarian camp and are out of place in the vocabulary of liberal democracy'.⁴⁵ But the discussion proceeds less by detailed argument than by a process of contamination; from ideas which are part of the liberal-democratic tradition the slide is made to allegedly connected notions which are clearly totalitarian. 'Political interestedness', says Morris-Jones, is the 'mark of the elect' and the obligation to vote is a dangerous idea, for 'it needs no demonstration that a totalitarian view of life easily involves an obligation not only to vote, but to do much more – and to do it, moreover, in the right direction'.⁴⁶ The trick is transparent. There is really no connection between the obligation to vote and the obligation to act in the right direction; any idea can be simply contaminated in this way by detaching it from the theory within which it was advanced and then showing that some people have held it alongside genuinely nasty views. Apart from this, Morris-Jones advances the positive argument that parliamentary democracy should be seen less as a 'system of government resting primarily on participation and consent' but rather as 'a manner of dealing with business, a way of going about things'. In this case, the presence of the apathetic is a 'sign of understanding and tolerance of human variety' and has a 'beneficial effect on the tone of political life . . . [being] a more or less effective counterforce to those fanatics who constitute the real danger to political democracy'.⁴⁷ The implication is obvious: to advocate widespread and general political participation is to advocate the development of intolerance and doctrinaire fanaticism.

This inference is frequently drawn in contemporary political theory and it is usually carried further, to the totalitarian conclusion that men are to be made purely political, privacy and liberty is to be invaded, and all the good things of civilised life destroyed. Examples of this kind of argument are to be found in Morris-Jones's article, in Hogan's book on *Election and Representation*,⁴⁸ in Talmon's critique of Rousseau⁴⁹ and in Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty*.⁵⁰ On the one hand, the connection is claimed to be established between the desire to participate and the totalitarian result. Berlin, for example, writes:

The desire to be governed by myself, or at any rate to participate in the process by which my life is to be controlled, may be as deep a wish as that for a free area for action, and perhaps historically older. But it

is not a desire for the same thing. So different is it, indeed, as to have led in the end to the great clash of ideologies that dominates our world.⁵¹

On the other hand, apathy is held to be valuable because it shows the 'limitations of politics', that men are more than political creatures and can if they wish ignore politics entirely. In Hogan's words, 'Viewed in this light, the apathy and caprice for which political democracy has been blamed is seen to be rather to its credit than otherwise. It means at any rate that people are free to interest themselves or to disinterest themselves as they please in political affairs.'⁵² This argument in terms of an ideal of freedom is deeply misleading. What is in question is not the right of men to be apathetic (and thus the enforcement of a duty to vote) but whether a society in which men concern themselves with political matters, as well as with many other matters, is likely to be more desirable than one marked by widespread apathy. If the vast majority of men were quite uninterested in politics and full general participation were demanded of everybody immediately, it is perhaps natural to infer that only constant coercion could achieve the desired result – and even more so if the desired result were unanimity. But it should hardly need saying that the ideal of general political participation is quite compatible with liberal safeguards and the rejection of coercion for partisan political goals, for instance, 'voting in the right direction'. It may be urged, with no totalitarian overtones whatsoever, that men ought to play some part in politics for their own good and for the good of society. The old democratic ideal sees apathy as dangerous because men cannot rely on others to protect their own interests and because the holders of power are likely to exercise it with too little concern for the general body of the people and for minority interests. It also considers politics to be a proper concern of the citizen and one of the fields of human excellence. In doing this, the classical theorists were very far indeed from urging constant and active participation at the behest of totalitarian masters, Stalinist Russia is as far removed from their ideals as it is from those of these modern anti-totalitarians.

As for coercion, this was the very thing that the classical theorists of democracy were concerned at all costs to avoid. The new theorists may argue that the old ideals must lead to this result, but we see no compelling reason to believe them. The now familiar dichotomies between totalitarianism and liberal democracy, between positive and negative liberty, between 'utopianism' and piecemeal pragmatism, have

achieved something like a stranglehold over political theorising. No middle way is conceded between the concentration camp and a cautious conservatism. Talmon remarks characteristically of the 'early totalitarians' that they refused 'to take the people as it was for granted; the people, that is to say the sum total of the given generation, the good and the bad, the advanced and the backward, with their wishes, enlightened or otherwise.'⁵³ The implicit bias of this kind of view is obvious: we must accept the existing situation in its entirety, so that the only political issue left is that of making the 'system' work more efficiently. Yet the refusal simply to accept the existing situation by no means implies the acceptance of coercion and minority domination, shaping the fabric of an existing society in the image of a utopia.

The voices of sanity and reason sound above all in times of crisis and rapid change, and their conservative tone is familiar. Edmund Burke similarly appealed to the proved virtues of stable societies against the widespread criticism of established institutions at the time of the French Revolution. The arguments of the writers we have discussed bear witness to a worthy concern with avoiding the real dangers of totalitarian politics, dangers which no one should minimise; but they have gone too far in the opposite direction. Preoccupied with stability and protecting the system against too much participation, they have in reality abandoned, without realising it, a whole tradition of political thinking – a tradition which they claim to be developing and revising. Their arguments are, in any case, too loose to convince and too complacent to excite. This is not to say that the older democratic theories are not in need of any revision. But they have survived these particular attacks and retain their central interest and value. In particular, general political participation has not been destroyed as a desirable goal for democratic societies, nor are the new ideals that have been offered to us imposed upon us by the facts of contemporary political life.