Chapter four

Ostrogorski and Bryce

Law, politics, and democracy

Large-scale industrial capitalism and mass party organisation were both relatively new phenomena in late nineteenth-century America and Britain. Not surprisingly, the points where they intersected were of special interest to analysts of the developing forms of capitalist democracy in the two societies. This chapter focuses upon the work of Moisei Ostrogorski and James Bryce, both of whom considered the implications of the transformation of democratic forms under the influence of industrial capitalism.

Not very much is known about Moisei Ostrogorski, despite the substantial monument he left behind in the shape of his two-volume work entitled *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* (1902). We do know he was born in 1854 at Grodno in Russia, studied law at St Petersburg, and took a job at the ministry of justice. Later on, he studied in Paris and also spent a great deal of time in Britain and America researching his major work. By 1906 he was back in Russia where he served as a representative of the Constitutional Democratic party in the Duma of 1906, elected following the Revolution which had occurred the preceding year. As far as we know, Ostrogorski died in 1919.

Ostrogorski's major work, an examination of British and American political organisation, contained a preface by James Bryce. At the end of his 'Author's preface' Ostrogorski thanked Bryce who 'initiated me into several points of English political life and gave me valuable introductions' (1902a: *lvii*). Bryce was an appropriate contact. He had published *The American Commonwealth* in 1888. Many years later he produced a comparative study of six societies, entitled *Modern Democracies* (1921).

James Bryce (or Lord Bryce of Dechmont as he eventually became) is less elusive than Ostrogorski. Born in 1838 of sternly Presbyterian parents, he migrated at an early age from Belfast to Scotland, his family's ancestral home. His father was a schoolmaster and a distinguished

geologist. Bryce was educated at Glasgow University and subsequently at Oxford, where he successfully resisted swearing allegiance to the Thirty-Nine Articles, the usual test of Anglican orthodoxy. His obvious academic brilliance helped him over this hurdle.

Within a short time, bolstered by a first class degree and a clutch of academic prizes, Bryce became recognised as a leading light. His first career was made in the Law. However, he abandoned the Bar in 1882 after being elected to the House of Commons. Before this date he had served as Regius professor of civil law at Oxford. He later became a member of Gladstone's cabinet. Between 1907 and 1913 Bryce was British ambassador to the United States. He was very familiar with that society, having made extensive visits in 1870, 1881 and 1883.

Bryce was a busy man all his long life. His interests included mountaineering (he once nearly fell into a volcano), extensive travelling (he was an expert on the Near East), the classics, botany, geology, history and political science. He inspired mixed feelings among those who encountered him. To university teachers who caught the lash of his Presbyterian rectitude, Bryce was 'that awful Scotch fellow' (quoted in Fisher 1927: 43). By contrast, according to Albert Dicey, one of his student companions, Bryce's

> most valuable quality is his childlike 'life' and go. His kindness and friendship is beyond praise. He stirs us up, rushes about like a shepherd's dog, collects his friends, makes us meet, leads us into plans and adventures, and keeps everything going.
>
> (Fisher 1927: 59–60)

In later years, however, Members of Parliament looking for lively debate or an early division often found speeches from the red-bearded member for Tower Hamlets rather unwelcome. His 'little blemishes of manner and method' included

> A certain lack of pliability, an insistent voice, a temperament somewhat deficient in . . . good-humoured composure . . ., a turn of phrase incisive rather than humorous, a prevailingly serious outlook coupled with . . . excessive indulgence in historical disquisitions and analogies.
>
> (Ibid.: 176)

Nevertheless, if you could stand his pace and match his range of interests – or if you excited his curiosity – Bryce was evidently charming.

Getting the facts

As an undergraduate at Oxford, and later as a don, Bryce belonged to an extensive network which included A.V. Dicey (political theorist),

T.H. Green and Edward Caird (philosophers), J.R. Green and E.A. Freeman (historians) and, from an older generation, Matthew Arnold. By the 1850s, John Stuart Mill was the single greatest intellectual influence upon university men such as these.

Mill was 'regarded . . . as the ultimate court of appeal for all moral, political or philosophic questions'. Mill's Oxford admirers had not been soaked in Benthamism the way Mill was, 'but the dislocation he suffered after his breakdown resembled as well as anticipated their own situation a decade or so later, with one significant difference: Mill's own prescription for recovery was available to them' (Harvie 1976: 38–9).

Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle and radical politics were part of the cure. So was a concern with well-grounded generalisations about society and culture. The implications of systematic and objective empirical research for ethical beliefs, and vice versa, remained a troublesome area. At this point Mill was not very helpful. However, in the meantime, Bryce and his friends were quite ready to follow Mill to Tocqueville where they found a practical guide to scholarly research.

Ostrogorski had little time for Mill, but a great deal for Tocqueville. He opened his book with a quotation from *Democracy in America*: 'A new political science is wanted for an entirely new world' (*li*). Ostrogorski may have developed his admiration for Tocqueville – some of whose passages 'can never be forgotten' (Ostrogorski 1902b: 633) – while working in Paris during his late twenties at the École Libre des Sciences Politiques. Ostrogorski studied under Emile Boutmy, a disciple of Hippolyte Taine. The writings of the latter on French history were, according to A.V. Dicey, 'nothing but studies in the school of Tocqueville (Dicey 1893: 772; quoted in Mayer 1968: *xxxi*).

Tocqueville's message was this: gather facts, collate them, experiment with them, and extract the general truths they contain. As Christopher Harvie comments, such an approach was typical of 'Bryce, Dicey, J R Green, George Otto Trevelyan and John Morley in their scholarly work, and of British historians of the late nineteenth century in general' (Harvie 1976: 44).

It was also Ostrogorski's approach. He spent fifteen years researching *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*. Much of his material, neglected by historians and political thinkers, 'had to be gathered from real life and not libraries' so that it could be brought 'for the first time within the purview of science' (*liv*). Several towns were visited in 'a long and minute enquiry' conducted with 'absolute independence of mind and perfect sincerity in the statement of its results' (*lv–lvi*). Subsequently,

> The facts and the impressions as well as the few documents which I obtained led me to generalizations which I constantly verified by

> putting myself in touch with men and things. I broke up my generalizations into concrete and often very matter-of-fact questions which I put to my interlocutors, whom I treated not only as witnesses, but also as subjects of direct observation . . . . Then I recast my generalizations by adding to them or pruning them in accordance with my new impressions. After operating in this way for years in various parts of the country, without neglecting the literary research required for the historical part of the subject, I seemed to have arrived at conclusions worthy of being presented to the public.
>
> (Ostrogorski 1902b: *lv*)

This is similar to the strategy adopted by Tocqueville as shown by the notebooks from his American and British trips. In Ostrogorski's case, the result was a closely-argued treatise drawing upon historical, philosophical and comparative analysis.

Emancipation of the individual

Ostrogorski believed that when a gentlemanly ruling class based upon land had governed England, society had been homogeneous and stable. However, the masses and the middle class rose up to destroy the old unified hierarchical society. They replaced it with a new regime, radically individualistic and egalitarian. These same forces were also very powerful in the United States, a society which provided Britain with a model of its future. There is evidently a broad similarity with Tocqueville's approach to the transition from aristocracy to democracy.

In Ostrogorski's opinion, this transition had disrupted the unity between society and state which existed when nobles and gentlemen dominated all major institutions. The 'time-honoured social ties that bound the individual to the community were severed' (3). Methodical organisation of the modern electorate was being carried out by 'disciplined and permanent parties'. He was not sure whether they would be able to reunite the individual with society, producing 'a new synthesis' (4).

England had been 'aristocratic and feudal' two generations before; 'at the present moment . . . [it was] completely drawn into the democratic current' (4). This particular example therefore allowed the transition process to be observed 'working out its logical development . . . and presenting an orderly sequel of premise and conclusion' (4). The American part of his study gave Ostrogorski a means 'to see a little more clearly and a little farther . . . . What appeared to us in England as a germ, blossoms in the United States, thanks to conditions which are unfortunately too favourable, into a luxuriant plant' (1902b: 603).

Ostrogorski did not approve of the effects of modern political parties.

They were the product of individualism, industrialisation and the growth of large cities. These trends, which made Carnegie proud of his 'triumphant democracy', were, in Ostrogorski's opinion, crushing underfoot individual conscience and responsibility. They had produced not triumph but disaster.

Carnegie's idol, Herbert Spencer, was also dismissed: 'It is absolutely false that there is any analogy between social phenomena, in which free will plays such an important part, and biological phenomena' (Ostorgorski 1902b: 697).

The emancipation of the individual from the repressive bonds of the old society was due to a number of factors. Methodism and the Evangelical movement stirred the individual conscience into action on behalf of prisoners, slaves, oppressed peoples and other 'fellow-creatures' (Ostorgorski 1902a: 29). Adam Smith asserted the individual's right to pursue his own interests. Tom Paine insisted upon the rights of man. So did revolutionaries in France and America.

The utilitarians denied the existence of natural rights but fortified the sense of individuality. Bentham regarded every citizen as his own legislator guided by his sovereign conscience. Philosophical Radicals campaigned against the corrupt old regime. The romantic movement pitched the individual soul against the world's dull routine. A new 'social cosmogony' emerged 'in which the starting point as well as the goal is the individual and not society' (38).

Technological progress, industrial advance and a new spirit of individual enterprise complemented these philosophical developments. The middle class became more powerful and self-aware. Marching behind the banner of the Birmingham Political Union it claimed the franchise, which it finally won in 1832. Municipal reform, religious toleration, the new Poor Law, the coming of the railways and the repeal of the Corn Laws, all undermined the special position of the landed ruling class.

As the individual was set free and society was levelled down, relationships became more abstract, organised into formal categories imposing distance: workmen/capitalists, tradesmen/customers, and so on. The particular gave way to the general. Public opinion became a mighty force. The individual became isolated. Interest in local affairs diminished. Personal loyalty ceased to be a strong motive for action in politics as elsewhere.

Attempts at reaction – the Oxford movement, Disraeli's Young England, the protests of Thomas Carlyle and the propaganda of the Christian Socialists – all failed. They could not re-establish authority, duty or a sense of community as social principles. However, John Stuart Mill caught some of the spirit of these movements:

> The feelings awakened by Carlyle, Dickens, and others were led by Mill into the channels of logic and science. This was his great

> achievement, and this was what gave him his power over opinion, and in particular his influence with the rising generation, which combines the enthusiasm of the intellect and the heart, or, to put it another way, thinks it is following reason when it is really only obeying its emotional impulses.
>
> (Ostrogorski 1902a: 74)

Mill emphasised quality of experience, as opposed to mere quantity, and postponed the utilitarian millenium until everyone had been properly educated. However, according to Ostrogorski, his 'doctrine was in substance the same as Bentham's' (Ostrogorski 1902a: 74): the same emphasis on utility, observation and experience, the same individualism.

Mill's works appealed to emotion as much as to reason. His treatise on utilitarianism (Mill 1964c) was 'the philosophic hymn of a mystery' (80), the essay on liberty 'another hymn, . . . an anthem of love' (81). Mill supplied a gospel for the new intelligentsia and political class. His peculiar power to charm derived from his readiness to yield considerable ground to the enemies of utilitarianism while retaining its basic individualism:

> In every department, in politics, in morals, in political economy, Mill makes very extensive concessions to his adversaries, and by these very inconsistencies in his doctrine he accentuates its success; he not only conveys to the public the seductive impression of impartiality and sincerity, of boldness and openness of mind, but he allays discontent and silences the misgivings aroused by the uncompromising character of Bentham's doctrines, and wins the sympathy which was being attracted towards his opponents.
>
> (Ostorgorski 1902a: 79)

In 1867, when there was considerable pressure for a further extension of the franchise, Mill argued in Parliament for a system of proportional representation along the lines described in his *Representative Government*. Mill's object was to guard the rights of minorities. His particular proposal was not accepted but another amendment protecting minorities was successful.

This amendment decreed that in the large urban constituencies where three Members of Parliament were to be elected under the expanded franchise, each elector should only be able to vote for two candidates. Under this arrangement, one of the three seats in such constituencies was likely to be won by a minority interest – as long as that minority amounted to at least one third of the local voters. To a substantial degree Mill's specific objective was achieved. Ironically, however, the minority clause in the 1867 Reform Act gave a substantial boost to an organisation which, in Ostrogorski's view, became a profound threat to liberty.

The caucus in England

Like Tocqueville and Carnegie, Ostrogorski found Birmingham in the vanguard of political innovation. The minority clause was nullified by disciplined strategic voting directed by Liberal political managers: '"Vote as you are told" was the password' (Ostorgorski 1902a: 162). Coordination was organised through the Birmingham Liberal Association. In the early 1870s this body was run by men 'little inclined to philosophic doubt' who 'did not understand the scruples of a John Stuart Mill' (164). At the head of these men, Joseph Chamberlain became the Baron Haussman of Birmingham.

The 'sectarian . . . and . . . intolerant' spirit (194) of the 'Birmingham plan' (172) spread through the national Liberal party. So did its organisational techniques. Following the Liberal general election victory of 1880, the National Liberal Federation attempted to manipulate both public opinion and the political behaviour of Liberal MPs. The Conservative party copied this approach. Both parties built upon their substantial experience of local canvassing and close monitoring of local electoral registers.

The caucus as developed in Birmingham had a pyramidal organisation of elected and co-opted committees. It represented Liberals from all parts of the city. The one shilling fee was waived if necessary. In the early days, Chamberlain successfully persuaded 'the best men' to join the 'Six Hundred', as the total committee membership (of 594) were known. In this way 'They maintained uninterrupted relations with the masses by means of public assemblies, informal meetings, and personal communications on questions of general interest, and thus kept up a current of public spirit' (167).

In the longer term, the caucus nationally became a means by which the middle class could retain the position it had won in 1832 in spite of the further extension of the franchise in 1867:

> pretending to bow down before the masses, [the middle class] let them say what they liked, allowed them the satisfaction of holding forth and of voting extravagant resolutions in the caucuses, provided that it [i.e. the middle class] was allowed to manage everything; and to cover its designs it developed the practice of wire-pulling.
>
> (Ostrogorski 1902a: 581)

The middle class worked its will through the ward leaders – 'shopkeepers, clerks and superior artisans' (346) – who devoted themselves to the organisation. These small fry seized the chance to raise themselves socially through the caucus. Some even became town councillors or local magistrates. Bill Smith might become 'William Wellworth Smith, Esq.' (356). Ostrogorski balanced these comments by noting that English municipal administration was generally efficient and uncorrupt.

Ostrogorski emphasised the theatricality of political meetings. Just as churches lead their congregations in ritual observances, so 'the Caucus inculcates their duty on its members by, to use a more profane term, regular performances' ranging from extraordinary meetings on specific issues to 'fêtes and entertainments'. On all such occasions the main object for participants was not intellectual debate but 'to feel that they are a crowd, to lead each other on, to rouse and excite each other' (Ostorgorski 1902a: 354).

In the 1820s, Tocqueville had seen Birmingham as an English outpost of democracy based upon equality and liberty. Seven decades later, Ostrogorski identified this city as the immediate source of a corrupt democratic regime combining social snobbery and the cynical manipulation of public opinion. It was going the way of America.

The caucus in America

By the mid-1820s, Aaron Burr, Martin Van Buren and Andrew Jackson had emerged as leading figures in a local and national 'spoils' system. The strategy of the successful politician was to reward his friends and punish his enemies. By the 1840s the system of party conventions dominated by professional politicians was well established.

Most citizens neglected politics and concentrated upon their private concerns. Full-time mercenaries held the field. Lincoln himself became caught up in the spoils system. Following the civil war, political and economic life became more centralised. As has been seen, business empires such as Carnegie Steel were one outcome. Ostrogorski stressed another, the development of city political machines giving the professional politicians even tighter control. Presidents were weak. Some, like Ulysses S. Grant, headed scandalous administrations. Even Grover Cleveland could do little to stop the widespread corruption.

Machine politicians in the cities fought to get their hands on the public purse. They used patriotic rhetoric, fraud, ethnic appeals and respectable front men as means to win votes at election time. Politics was regarded by most citizens as a disreputable money-making exercise. Ostrogorski gave details of machines and 'rings' in many cities. He reported, for example, the comment of a Midwestern reformer in 1895:

> the city hall of Chicago [was] an asylum of party retainers, who live on the public revenues, control party management, and stand between the people and their government. It culminated in . . . a common council which was literally a den of thieves. Some three fourths of the members banded themselves together to plunder the public and blackmail corporations.
>
> (Smith 1896: 7; Ostrogorski 1902b: 175)

At the centre of the machine was the boss. Typically, he was self-

made, usually Irish, perhaps an ex-waiter or one-time newspaper boy who had graduated to 'repeater' (fraudulent voter) and then precinct captain-cum-saloon keeper. He would have built up his own local machine and got himself elected to the city council, that 'promised land' of contracts, franchises and monopolies. Avoiding gaol (perhaps for homicide), such a man would strive to become 'the Caesar of the Machine and of the city' (Ostrogorski 1902b: 402).

The supreme talent of the boss was 'skill in the management of men. . . . To some he offers the solid food of places, of money and of pulls; to others the unsubstantial diet of promises' (403). Cool, calculating and taciturn in his political dealings, the boss would be full of homespun oratory on the public platform. However, his object was not to shape but to monitor public opinion as part of his pursuit of money and power. He was like a feudal lord managing a crowd of vassals. The crowd 'recognise in him a master spirit. . . . One would almost think that they are proud of their bosses' (407).

Private affluence, public apathy

Behind the American political machine were to be found the moneyed men. The machine 'smoothed the way for what is called plutocracy' (572). Machine politics permitted the trusts and corporations to win franchises and protective tarrifs from the public authorities. In fact, 'the Organization has served as a lever to all the great private interests in their designs on the public weal' (574).

This was done with impunity. The regime of the caucus in both England and America depended upon the withdrawal of much of the middle class from active and direct involvement in public affairs. Machine politics extinguished the spirit of the New England town meeting. Ostrogorski argued that in the United States the most common form of idealism was patriotism, a poor substitute for civic conscience. The closing of the frontier, the impact of immigration, materialism, the growing complexity of society and government, and increases in regulation: all added, directly or indirectly, to the power of the machine.

The growth of large towns in America, as in England, separated the masses from the influence of well-intentioned opponents of the machine, now dispersed to the suburbs. In England, the increase in socialist agitation towards the end of the century made it uncomfortable for better-off people to take an active part in politics. The agitation was not strong enough to make them feel they had to be involved directly in order to protect their interests. In the case of America, Ostrogorski confirmed Carnegie's view that most people thought that the pursuit of private material advancement was the best expression of true freedom under a perfect constitution.

A possible cure

Political parties filled a gap in modern democracies by taking over the task of organising the electorate. In doing so they undermined the individual citizen's independence, energy and autonomy in public life. The parties perverted the operation of public opinion. Instead of being a legitimate mode of 'social intimidation' (Ostorgorski 1902b: 626) exercised by citizens against each other and their government, public opinion was taken over and processed by party bosses for their own purposes.

Ostrogorski deplored the 'fatalism of the multitude' (631) – a concept borrowed from Bryce (1894b: 344) – by which he meant an extreme aversion to being out of line with the majority. In Ostrogorski's view, Tocqueville failed to grasp the full significance of the omnipotence of the majority; in particular, 'the consequences which it may entail for the working of the political order' (Ostrogorski 1902b: 634). Specifically, the dominance of permanent political parties encouraged 'cowardice' (635) among rulers and ruled.

For example, 'It keeps the force of public opinion in the condition of brute force' and prevents the expression 'of manifold and divers opinions which can hold one another in check and evolve a moral force capable of quelling or intimidating brute force' (636). The 'political formalism' of party organisation also prevented the free emergence of an elite based upon 'the natural inequality of brains and character'. Democracy needed such 'guides' (640), prepared to show their fellows how to exercise moral liberty and decide each public issue for him or herself without fear of majority opinion.

Ostrogorski recommended two remedies for the degrading influence of party government, especially in the more desperate case of America. One was 'the improvement of . . . general culture'. In other words, education. At this point, his views are broadly similar to those of his contemporary, John Dewey. Ostrogorski insisted that the task of the universities in a democracy was 'not so much to reproduce their own species, as to make men and citizens' (601).

His other remedy was 'the improvement of . . . political methods' (601). Ostrogorski favoured 'decentralization of the power of opinion' (663), partly by an autonomous provincial press, partly by a multitude of political organisations with overlapping memberships focused upon several specific issues. Ostrogorski called this a 'league system' (689). Citizens would not have to be on the same side on every question, following a party line. This would mean the end of 'permanent parties with power as their end' (658). A better model for public life was provided by the reform leagues, civic federations and committees of one hundred springing up to campaign for specific reforms in American cities.

Ostrogorski argued that this form of political organisation should be supplemented by proportional representation and 'preliminary pollings' (Ostorgorski 1902b: 709), by which he meant initial tests of electoral preference which would guide citizens when casting their votes. Finally, the existing party system should be abolished inside the national legislature, allowing members genuine independence. Above all, the civic mind of the individual should be given free expression.

Strikingly absent is any real consideration of the need for a complex democracy to have a thoroughly competent bureaucracy. The preparation of legislation was to be the task of standing committees chosen from the legislature. They would include 'champions of every different view' (723). These champions would have the backing of the campaign organisations within the league system. One can imagine the comments of an old India hand like Mill on this proposal.

In view of his sharp words upon the part played by Mill's writings in legitimising the corrosive force of individualism, Ostrogorski was sensitive to the suggestion that he was reproducing utilitarian ideas. In an appendix on 'the power of social intimidation as a principle of social life' he insisted that resemblances to 'the doctrines of the English utilitarians . . . are superficial and illusory' (752).

The utilitarians believed in 'the identification of private interest with public interest'. By contrast, he wished 'to subordinate the former to the latter' through the use of a variety of social sanctions. Ostrogorski did not rely like Mill on 'the association of ideas in the human mind. As a practical moralist, I know no human mind in the abstract. I know only human minds, some base, others mediocre, others noble' (753). Mill and he had both found a way from selfishness to disinterestedness. However, he twitted Mill for being 'obliged to make dialectical, not to say sophistical jumps, whereas I proceed from one stage to another, slowly but surely' (754).

In the case of Tocqueville, Ostrogorski's sympathy was overt, as already seen. However, despite carefully distancing himself from Mill, Ostrogorski incorporated a number of ideas which demonstrate an acute sensitivity to the problems which haunted the latter. Four ideas in particular from Ostrogorski's work come into this category. First, the need to have a variety of opinions in vigorous contention within a democracy. Second, the insistence upon raising the level of political culture through education. Third, the view that brains and character should form the basis of social inequality. And fourth, support for proportional representation as a means of guaranteeing the representation of minorities.

The professional optimist

In his preface to *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*,

James Bryce felt 'bound to utter a note of mild dissent' from Ostrogorski's thesis. Bryce did not question the facts as presented, but he did not agree with the conclusions. In particular, Ostrogorski had exaggerated the part played by the caucus in England and failed to allow for 'healthy influences' correcting any ill effects it might have. More specifically, party organisation in England was in the hands of 'a different class of men' from the American wire-pullers. It was 'almost wholly free from the more sordid elements' (Bryce 1902: *xliii*).

Ostrogorski had made a valuable contribution. However, it was to 'the *pathology* of party government' (*xliv*; my italics). The forms of party organisation he examined were far removed from 'the democratic ideal of the intelligent independence of the individual voter' (*xliv–xlv*). England was nearer than America to this ideal. This was because the one legitimate form of party influence – 'an appeal to the intellect and conscience of the voters through speeches and literature' – was more common in the former society than the latter. It would become even more common with the support of party chiefs guided by a 'sense of public honour and duty' (*xlvi*).

Above all, however, 'it is public opinion which must keep the party organizations in check'. Ostrogorski had feared the parties were corrupting public opinion. Bryce argued that public opinion could cleanse the parties. These were the words of 'an optimist, almost a professional optimist', criticising a work which was, perhaps, 'overcharged with gloom' (*xlii–xliii*).

Ostrogorski thought party organisation was preventing the emergence of a natural elite who would guide their fellow citizens. Bryce believed such 'independent citizens' – truth-loving, moral, public-spirited – were already available: 'It is they who keep the parties in order by casting their weight, now on the side of one party, now on the other, according to their judgement of the merits of each.' Such people were present in force in England. In the United States, also, 'independent citizens' were 'more active and more sensible of their duty at this moment than they were thirty years ago' (*xlvii*). The clear implication was that Ostrogorski had got it wrong. England was not becoming more like America. In fact, the reverse was more likely to be true.

Bryce was a copper-bottomed Liberal, not given to intellectualising his doubts and fears. He was no armchair philosopher but a Victorian man of action. Education was important in his scheme of things – so he headed a royal commission on secondary education. Politics mattered – so he made his way into Gladstone's cabinet. Volcanoes were fascinating – so he spent a night or two on the edge of the great crater of Kilauea in Hawaii. America was interesting – so he became British Amabassador in Washington.

His response to moral and political puzzles was twofold. First, he

collected information. As he wrote in *Modern Democracies*, 'It is Facts that are needed: Facts, Facts, Facts. When facts have been supplied, each of us can try to reason from them' (Bryce 1921a: 13). Second, he relied upon the love of truth supposedly inculcated by free institutions. This would yield the closest possible approximation to a good and workable solution for the relevant problem.

National character was a major determinant of this process. Bryce argued that 'A people through which good sense and self-control are widely diffused is itself the best legislator, as is seen in the history of Rome and in that of England'. National character and national institutions act upon each other. The best institutions are those which help 'men to goodwill, self-restraint, intelligent cooperation [and] form what we call a solid political character, temperate and law-abiding, preferring peaceful to violent means for the settlement of controversies' (11). In Bryce's hands the concept of 'people' does not mean 'all humankind' but a 'national population'.

Englishness was, in Bryce's view, the best guarantee of freedom. He wrote that

> The traditional love of liberty, the traditional sense of duty to the community, be it great or small, the traditional respect for law and wish for serious reforms by constitutional rather than violent means – these were the habits ingrained in the mind and will of Englishmen. (Bryce 1921a: 160; D. Smith 1986: 254–5)

When he wanted to compliment the Americans, he called them 'the English of America' (Bryce 1894a: 358).

Bryce was not very sympathetic to Tocqueville's treatment of democracy in America: 'Democratic government seems to me, with all deference to his high authority, a cause not so potent in the moral and social sphere as he deemed it' (4). In fact, Bryce thought the term 'democracy' had in recent years 'been loosely used to denote sometimes a state of society, sometimes a state of mind, sometimes a quality of manners'. Cutting through all these associations, variously 'attractive or repulsive, ethical or poetical or even religious', Bryce argued that 'Democracy really means nothing more or less than the rule of the whole people expressing their sovereign will by their votes' (1921a: *viii*). The practice of democracy in this sense would produce few benefits if the population lacked education and political maturity. He thought, for example, that the history of Latin America during the nineteenth century abundantly proved this point: 'Why confer free self-governing institutions on a people unfit to comprehend or use them?' (328).

The American commonwealth

Bryce's *The American Commonwealth* (1894a; 1894b) has become an

institution rather like the Washington Monument: much admired, but rarely examined in detail. There are good reasons for this. Much of it is boring. With stupendous bad judgement, Bryce placed the most tedious subject matter – four hundred pages on the federal constitution – right at the beginning and left the most interesting – on the party system and public opinion – until the second volume. Bryce was evidently reluctant to compress his material. In fact, it grew, haphazardly, from one edition to the next. Just as states were added to the Union, so chapters were added to *The American Commonwealth*. Between 1888 and 1910 the length of the work increased from 1,400 to 1,700 pages.

The book presents a panoramic photograph, with the political system looming very large in the foreground. Bryce guides you amiably and sometimes tediously around the landscape, demonstrating vast knowledge about the things that come into view. There are frequent historical and comparative illusions, especially to England, France and the classical world, but the book does not present a systematic historical or comparative argument.

Bryce did not so much argue a thesis, as convey a mood. The very depth of his knowledge transmitted a feeling of great affection for America. He obviously loved it, warts and all. Furthermore, he believed that having gone through a bad patch, the country was on the way up in terms of its public life: 'the downward tendency observable since the end of the Civil War seems to have been arrested . . . . Good citizens are beginning to put their hands to the machinery of government' (Bryce 1894b: 75).

It would be impossible to reproduce the observations and arguments in their entirety. Bryce's treatment of party organisation broadly agreed with Ostrogorski's. Three other points relevant to the interplay between capitalism and democracy are also worth mentioning. First, Bryce had a relatively high opinion of the political judgement of ordinary working-class people: 'they have often been proved by the event to have been right and their so-called betters wrong' (251). English working-class support for the North in the American Civil War was one example mentioned. Bryce was sympathetic to experiments in direct legislation, especially in the United States, since 'The legislator can be ''got at'' . . . [but] the people cannot' (472). In his view, the late nineteenth century had been a period of 'immensely extended and popularized culture and enlightenment' (342). As a result, 'the tyranny of the majority is no longer a blemish on the American system' (343). It was important that Negroes and central European immigrants also be educated to a similar level of political sophistication.

Second, Bryce argued that the range of political skills required differed between England and America. Only two types of statesmen were needed in America. One was 'the parliamentary tactician' (229)

who could handle his fellows in cabinet and in the representative chamber. The other was 'the leader of the masses' (Bryce 1894b: 230) who could arouse crowds with eloquence. Although these were needed in Europe, three other types were found there also. They were: first, the 'diplomatist with a wide outlook over the world's horizons'; second, the statesman with 'an aptitude for constructive legislation'; and third, 'the administrator who can manage a department with diligence and skill and economy'. These last three types were not required in America, since that society had very little foreign policy, no 'mistakes of the past to undo' and no large permanent civil service (229).

Third, Bryce betrayed a fascinating ambivalence when dealing with the large capitalists in America. They displayed no special political insight or moral elevation. Indeed, they were 'uninteresting . . . [and] intellectually barren outside the sphere of their business knowledge' (301). More candid than Carnegie, Bryce recognised that they used politics to defend their own interests. The heads of the railroad corporations impressed him: 'These railroad kings are . . . the greatest men . . . in America' (653). In fact, they illustrated a conspicuous tendency in American life whereby 'the principle of monarchy, banished from the field of government, creeps back again and asserts its strength in the scarcely less momentous contests of industry and finance' (654).

This obviously recalls Tocqueville's warning several decades before. However, Bryce was remarkably sanguine about this danger. There was little possibility of 'a new aristocracy of rich families, and therefore a new structure of society'. There was no sharp division between rich and poor. Average living standards were high. And 'the faith in equality and love of equality are too deeply implanted in every American breast to be rooted out by any economic changes' (865). It is during passages like this that the astringency of Ostrogorski's analysis is most missed.

Modern democracies

Bryce was, indeed, a professional optimist. His confidence in the virtue of Englishness and the good sense of Americans – 'no nation better understands its own business' (Bryce 1894a: 34) – was quite relentless. This confidence had to overcome some mighty onslaughts. For example, in 1893 his old Oxford friend Charles Pearson published *National Life and Character: A Forecast*. In this book Pearson argued that the progress of the white race was reaching its climax. Europeans could not easily spread beyond the temperate zones. The balance of power between white and non-white was likely to turn against the former. Once the physical expansion of the white race was stopped, their whole civilisation would be under threat.

A stationary society would develop bringing with it lower ideals,

apathy, weakened character and acquiescence in a state-run society providing order and modest comfort. A further consequence would be that the 'inferior' non-white races would assert their independence, adopt European material civilisation and use its techniques unscrupulously and effectively against the whites. European labour markets would be flooded with non-white immigrants.

The argument of this fascinating book, a sort of modified 'frontier thesis', was apparently supported by the spread of socialist ideas within the labour movements of both Britain and the United States. Like many of his circle, Bryce was deeply impressed by the case made out in the book. He wrote to Pearson, 'Gloomy your forecast certainly is: but I know of nothing in Europe and not very much in America to make me think it too despondent' (quoted in Harvie 1976: 234). During the next quarter of a century a great deal happened to stir up these anxieties, including the collapse of the Chinese Empire, demands for self-government in India, the industrialisation of Japan, the First World War and, not least, the Russian Revolution.

It was against this background that Bryce, at the age of eighty-three, published the two hefty volumes of *Modern Democracies* (1921). New thoughts were perhaps not to be expected in such a work. In fact, parts of it are much more interesting than *The American Commonwealth*. Bryce's last book is an intriguing study of liberalism at the end of its tether.

Modern Democracies was based upon notes made by Bryce during travels in France, Switzerland, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand before the First World War. These six cases were examined in some depth in the book. The case studies form a lengthy middle section of the work, preceded by some abstract observations on the nature of democracy and followed by some empirical generalisations about the present and future of this form of government. This third part is the most worthy of study, seven decades later.

Bryce found that with respect to domestic administration 'democracies have nothing to be ashamed of' (Bryce 1921b: 401). Furthermore, the goals of foreign policy were determined by democracies 'at least as wisely as [by] monarchies or oligarchies' (419). Study of their judiciaries yielded 'nothing to discredit democratic governments' (426). He favoured the extension of direct legislation (e.g. referenda) since it was 'unequalled as an instrument of practical instruction in politics' (477). Unfortunately, opportunities for direct participation in the preferred setting of small self-governing communities were greatly reduced because of the 'industrial and commercial forces which draw men together into larger aggregations' (489).

On the other side of the matter, legislatures were losing their 'sense of social responsibility' (371). They were plagued by filibustering, the

splitting and multiplication of parties, the determined schemes of 'small sections which exercise a power disproportionate to their numbers' (Bryce 1921b: 383), and the tendency for members to act as mandated delegates rather than responsible representatives. All modern democracies faced the danger of allowing 'self-interest to grasp the machinery of government' and use it for 'ignoble ends'.

Propaganda was another threat, a result of 'the irresponsible power wielded by those who supply the people with the materials they need for judging men and measures' (505). These were serious concerns since they marked the point where 'the spirit of Faith in the people and the spirit of Liberty part company' (436). A majority might be subverted. Law and opinion were 'The two safeguards on which democracy must rely' (534). Their strength depended upon 'the character of each people' (435). Equally needed were 'more insight . . . sympathy . . . energy [and] patriotism' from 'the so-called upper and educated classes' (505).

Capitalist pressures made themselves felt strongly. 'Democracy has no more persistent or insidious foe than the money power.' Its corrupting influence was greater 'where authority is vested in the multitude' than in 'a well-organized bureaucracy' (533). Equally disturbing was 'Class War' (638) which fed on the feeling that democracy should be valued not for the opportunities it gave for uplifting participation in public business, but for the material benefits it provided. The outcome might be revolution:

> Strange and unexpected evolution! Democracy overthrows the despotism of one man or the few who ruled by force, in order to transfer power to the People who are to rule by reason and the sense of their common interest in one another's welfare; and after two or three generations there arises from the bosom of democracy an effort to overthrow it in turn by violence because it has failed to confer the expected benefits. The wheel has gone its full round; and the physical Force which was needed to establish democracy is now employed to destroy it.
>
> (Bryce 1921b: 639)

Communism would probably be run by 'an industrial bureaucratic oligarchy' (664). Under such a system the nation would be regarded as 'an economic whole, existing for the purposes of production and distribution'. By contrast, democracy regarded the nation as 'a Moral and Intellectual whole, created for the sake of what the ancient philosophers used to call the Good Life' (654). This latter concept was becoming less appealing as ordinary people felt increasingly secure in the economic fruits they had won by using their civil rights. Why keep up public meetings, elections and debates just for their educative value? Such a way of thinking did not necessarily lead to communism. But there were

other undesirable fates on offer.

For example, popular apathy might deliver political power to 'an intelligent bureaucracy capable of giving business men the sort of administration and legislation they desire, and keeping the multitude in good humour by providing comfort and amusements' (Bryce 1921b: 663). The bureaucrats would not, 'if wise', change the constitution but free self-government would be nevertheless lost.

The 'physiological factor which we call Heredity' had to be considered also. The numerical superiority of the 'Backward races' need not be discouraging. Some of them, argued Bryce, were intellectually equal to the Europeans and might renew the energies of 'the advanced races whom luxury has enervated'. In any event, the fate of democracy depended upon the 'moral and intellectual progress of mankind as a whole' (665–6).

Conclusion

James Bryce and Moisei Ostrogorski both clearly saw historical tendencies at work which they did not like. These tendencies offended the liberal values they shared. Ostrogorski responded by offering an unrealistic prescription for producing a better future. It envisaged a system of multiple political groupings without taking into account the practicalities of *realpolitik*. Bryce viewed such a prospect with considerable disapproval. One of his complaints against modern democracy was its tendency to generate a multitude of minor parties any one of which might acquire an influence far beyond its numbers.

Ostrogorski's prescription, ironically enough in view of his overall pessimism, expected far too much of human nature. By contrast, Bryce, the 'professional optimist', offered not a prescription but a prognosis. This prognosis was, with equal irony, a generally gloomy one.

Democracy was under threat. Its essence, as far as Bryce was concerned, was the active participation of citizens in their government. This emphasis distinguished him from Tocqueville and Carnegie. Both the latter had used the word 'democracy' to mean social equality in terms of the market and legal rank. In contrast, Bryce meant by 'democracy', first and foremost, political liberty.

Historically, political liberty had been fought for as part of a battle against political and economic oppression. Unfortunately, the economic benefits of equality undermined the very basis of political liberty. This was because the foundation of a democracy was located, in Bryce's view, in the national character of the people concerned. Prosperity weakened character and hence undermined democracy itself.

The Nonconformist conscience of Bryce the Presbyterian brought him to the same conclusion as Tocqueville, though by a different route. Both

believed that equality was liable to undermine liberty. As has been seen, Ostrogorski's argument led him down similar paths to Mill, though he perhaps wished to disguise the fact.

Chapter five

Veblen and Hobson

Two economic heretics

The rise of the large-scale industrialist within capitalist democracies was closely related to the emergence of more powerful central government bureaucracies. Thorstein Veblen and John Hobson both agreed that the key relationships were those between big business, the state and the people. Hobson argued that with support from the state, democratic forms could be strengthened in a way which would humanise capitalism. Veblen had a different view. In his opinion, the only hope was that capitalism would destroy itself and at the same time make the existing state redundant. Democracy would arise from the ashes.

John Dos Passos was an admirer of Veblen:

> At Carleton College young Veblen was considered a brilliant unsound eccentric; nobody could understand why a boy of such attainments wouldn't settle down to the business of the day, which was to buttress property and profits with anything usable in the debris of Christian ethics and eighteenth century economics that cluttered the minds of college professors, and to reinforce the sacred, already shaky edifice with the new strong girderwork of science Herbert Spencer was throwing up for the benefit of the bosses.
>
> People complained they never knew whether Veblen was joking or serious . . . .
>
> Even in Chicago as the brilliant young economist he lived pioneer fashion. [The valley farmers had always been scornful of outlanders' ways.] He kept his books in packing cases laid on their sides along the walls. His only extravagances were the Russian cigarettes he smoked and the red sash he sometimes sported. He was a man without small talk. When he lectured he put his cheek on his hand and mumbled out his long spiral sentences, reiterative like the eddas. His language was a mixture of mechanics' terms, scientific latinity, slang and Roget's Thesaurus. The other profs couldn't