

Education and Democracy

Michael Barratt Brown

This summer, Michael Barratt Brown has been browsing the library collected by his brother, Hilary, in Mallorca.

Having read Robert Kennedy's diatribe on George W. Bush's 'Highjacking of our Democracy' in his *Crimes against Nature*, I decided to examine the Quaker roots of my own democratic faith and the strengthening of them that came from two great United States democrats of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries who were Quakers – William Penn and John Woolman. Where better to look than in my father's books which I found on the bookshelves in my brother's farm – the essays on 'Democratic Leadership' and 'The Quaker Faith', and on 'The Machine and the Worker', to supplement my own Memoir with the Quaker's title of 'Seekers'? My father's lecture on 'Democratic Leadership' was one of the annual Quaker Swarthmore Lectures. Swarthmore was the home in Cumbria of Thomas and Margaret Fell, who were converted to the Quaker faith in the 1650s by George Fox following his epiphany on Pendle Hill. The name was adopted, not only for the Quaker retreat at the Hall and for the London lectures, but also for the first co-educational college, founded in Pennsylvania by Quakers who had been active in the US anti-slavery campaign. Even before the days of William Penn in the 1680s, one can recognise Quaker influence in the Pilgrim Fathers of the 1620s. And after Penn in the founding fathers of the United States in the 1760s we can see the Quaker emphasis on the equal humanity of all men, not yet women – the Quakers were pioneers of such equality.

I need to make it clear that I am not any longer a Quaker. I do not believe in any God, I do not go to meetings for worship, but I am a pacifist and I believe profoundly

with the Quakers in the equal humanity of all human beings – of every sex, race, age or culture. I have worked all my long life to support movements for improving opportunities for all to have good health, care in illness and old age and disability, a full education, a warm home, clean air and water, enough food for themselves and their children, and a world without wars and violence. All these aims in my life harmonize with the practice of Quakers, with whom I have often worked closely. The Society of Friends, as they like to be called, has done much over the years to support, often to initiate, these movements. And these movements provide a basic foundation for building a democratic society. Replacing them with a consumer-oriented, money-profit-driven, market-organised society is bound not only to degrade the lives of billions of people, but also to endanger the very survival of the planet earth.

So what can be done, to learn from and build on the democratic traditions which we have inherited and can just still be revived? We should start by looking at the hundreds, even thousands, of protest groups, often linked by Twitter, Facebook and other Internet electronic international communications. When my father wrote, nearly eighty years ago in 1938, about ‘Democratic Leadership’, he had to rely on national parliaments, local government authorities, some trade unions, and a very weak League of Nations to carry the message. Today we have some devolved powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, much stronger trade unions with international affiliations, a European Union, and a United Nations with its Security Council and General Assembly. Economic organisations have been founded for Africa, Asia, Latin America, and many specialist UN organisations – for Health, Food and Agriculture, Human Rights, and beyond this there are the military alliances, NATO and the now defunct Warsaw Pact. My father was a keen internationalist and strongly supported the League of Nations, but I think that he would have found all this organisation today a bit much without a binding common purpose, like saving peace was in the 1930s; and today, of course, this should now be saving the planet. Without its protection, we are all finished.

So, the big question of our time is protecting the environment, and time is short. Here there are key lessons to be learnt from our democratic history. We have had several major revolutions, which have made our world more habitable for more people – the American, the French, the Russian, the Chinese. Sudden, complete social change is not beyond human capacity. All of these changes have been made in the attempt to create a better world. Some have been reversed, but no one can doubt that we have a society with more equality of race, of sex, of culture, and of

income today (currently increasing income inequality notwithstanding), and a more peaceful world than we had 100 years ago, on the outbreak of the First World War. There is a strange apparent contradiction in the shock of the two world wars. The result of both wars was a great reduction in the power and wealth of the rich and an increase in the earnings of the poor, changes since then being reversed. In Britain the women won the vote after the First World War, and the colonies won their freedom after the Second. These were revolutionary changes, which can't be reversed.

Reversing the current trends towards destruction of the planet Earth requires two major changes in our current way of life. The first of these could, and should, be exposure of the corruption and misinformation spread by the venal controllers of our press and media. This requires more books like *Crimes Against Nature* by Robert Kennedy, the immense popularity of whose lecture tours in the US proves that there is a mass of opinion out there waiting to be activated for making major change. The second change must be reversal of the current cuts in the scale and depth of education everywhere. My father, in his lecture on 'Democratic Leadership' in 1938, made the point that 'the spread of education, both in quantity and quality had been co-incident with the spread of the democratic idea'. Anybody who wants assurance about this should read the three volume study by Asa Briggs, leading English historian and educationist, which I shall review later. A beginning in this project could be made, if we could persuade the Labour leadership today to drop its business-sensitive caution and embrace a revolutionary programme on education, the media and climate change. To do this, it would be necessary to involve the trade unions in renewing their commitment to industrial as well as political democracy, the case so firmly argued by my father in his book, *The Machine and the Worker*, first published in 1934 and which we are proposing to reissue. I can only add that the whole purpose in publishing my memoir, *Seekers*, in 2013 was to remind readers about my life in adult education of that link, which my father emphasized, between education for all people and democracy – people power.

If education is the first requirement of democracy, information is the second. Information, especially now all that is available from the Internet, provides our chief defence against the abuse of information by the media and by so many experts and so-called 'experts' – lawyers, doctors, scientists and, not least, economists, as I found from the last book I picked on from my brother's shelves. It was called *Freakonomics*, written by Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner, and gives a series of examples of 'the hidden side' of everything economic and political. They describe

information as the ‘currency of the Internet’, and see it as their resource against information abuse that goes on all the time. One telling example they give is of the exposure of the secret passwords of the Ku Klux Klan, which virtually destroyed its power. More generally they show how information can dispel the fear that advertisers use to persuade you that you will really suffer if you do not take their product at their price. Shocking examples of estate agents’ practices are given. Most of their stories are about the contradictions in the information we get – on the causes of the falling crime rates in the US in the 1980s, on the influence of sex and colour of skin in educational achievement, on the importance of the parents’ class in a child’s development. The book is a rich source for exploration of our democratic heritage, its successes and its failures.

A Barratt Brown, *The Machine and the Worker*, Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1934 (Spokesman will publish a new edition, introduced by Mike Cooley, later in 2014); *Democratic Leadership*, Allen and Unwin, 1938; *The Universal Light; a Statement of the Quaker Faith*, Friends Book Centre, 1944; M Barratt Brown, *Seekers*, Spokesman, 2013; Robert H Kennedy, *Crimes against Nature*, Harper, 2005; Steven D Levitt & Stephen J Lubner, *Freakonomics*, Penguin 2006

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‘ON EARTH AS IT IS –’

In Heaven will there be escape
 from creeping apathy, sly greed or rape?
 None can explain *here* how it is
 our God’s called Property and *Hers* means *His*.

Alexis Lykiard