

# Polyarchy & Participation: The Changing Democratic Theory of Robert Dahl \*

---

Richard W. Krouse  
Williams College

*This essay offers an interpretation of the evolution of Robert Dahl's influential theory of polyarchal democracy. Both Dahl and his critics have in different ways and for different reasons emphasized the essential continuity of his theory. This essay advances the thesis that Dahl's recent emphasis upon the feasibility and desirability of fuller democratization of existing polyarchies marks a far sharper break with his earlier revisionist phase than Dahl has been willing to concede or his critics to identify.*

*Richard Krouse is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Williams College. He has published articles on liberalism, democratic theory, the family, and the history of political thought in *Journal of Politics*, *Dissent* and in several edited volumes. He is presently working on a study of radical-left critiques of liberalism.*

For more than a quarter century, Robert Dahl's theory of polyarchal democracy, in its various formulations, has ranked among the most formidable, influential, and enlightening versions of contemporary "revisionist" democratic theory. Both Dahl and his critics have, though for different reasons and in different ways, stressed the essential continuity of his changing theory. In this essay, by contrast, I will interpret the recent evolution of Dahl's theory of polyarchal democracy as marking a far sharper break with his earlier phase than Dahl has been willing to concede, or his critics to identify.<sup>1</sup> *Either* the greater favor Dahl now

\* I would like to thank Professor Dennis F. Thompson of Princeton University, members of the Williams College Department of Political Science, the anonymous referees of *Polity*, and Robert H. Harris, for helpful comments upon earlier versions of this essay.

1. For more comprehensive review of Dahl's work, see George Van Der Muhll, "Robert A. Dahl and the Study of Contemporary Democracy: A Review Essay," *American Political Science Review* 71 (September 1977): 1070-1096.

bestows upon participatory democracy betokens a basic but as yet unarticulated shift in his normative view of social and political life, I argue, *or* recent revisions in his concept of polyarchy are theoretically incoherent.

The argument proceeds in three steps. First, Dahl's most influential earlier writings (especially *A Preface to Democratic Theory* and *Who Governs?*)<sup>2</sup> and critical efforts to identify those writings with an "elite theory of democracy" are reconsidered. Second, Dahl's *After the Revolution?*<sup>3</sup> and its reception by these same critics is likewise reconsidered. Finally, the most recent development in Dahl's theory of polyarchal democracy, his theory of "procedural democracy," is examined critically.

### I. Polyarchy Versus Participation—*A Preface to Democratic Theory* and Other Early Writings

Dahl's *A Preface to Democratic Theory* is an effort to identify the central deficiencies of what he takes to be the two major traditions of "classical" democratic theory, the "Madisonian" and the "Populist," and to substitute his more coherent and realistic theory of polyarchal democracy. It stands as a classical expression of contemporary "democratic revisionism."

In the *Preface*, Dahl identifies two major ways of theorizing about politics, his "method of maximization" and his "descriptive method." The method of maximization prescribes a goal to be maximized—democracy for example—and the political and socioeconomic institutions and practices necessary and sufficient to maximize attainment of that goal. The descriptive method considers as a single class of phenomena all those political systems and social organizations called (for example) democratic in everyday language and then discovers, first, their common distinguishing characteristics and, second, the necessary and sufficient conditions for politics and social organizations possessing those characteristics.

Dahl begins by employing his method of maximization. He extracts from "populist" theory three characteristics of democracy that might be made operationally meaningful: (1) popular sovereignty, (2) political equality, and (3) majority rule.<sup>4</sup> He then specifies eight stringent

2. *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

3. *After the Revolution? Authority in a Good Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

4. *Preface*, p. 64.

conditions that would be necessary and sufficient to maximize attainment of these objectives in the real world.<sup>5</sup> Together, these eight observable conditions provide an operational definition of democracy.

Dahl is quick to add that maximum realization of these eight conditions is a utopian objective—"unattained" and "quite probably unattainable" in the real world.<sup>6</sup> But this is not, for Dahl, cause for following Mosca and other elite theorists in denying the possibility of democratic rule.<sup>7</sup> What is required instead is a shift from the maximizing to the descriptive mode, reinterpreting these eight conditions as ends of continua against which real-world achievement can be measured. We may then establish some minimum threshold of meaningful democratic achievement. Politics and social organizations at or above this threshold Dahl labels "polyarchies." The question then becomes: "What are the necessary and sufficient conditions in the real world for the existence of these eight conditions, to at least the minimum degree we have agreed to call 'polyarchy'?"<sup>8</sup>

In his discussion of the "American hybrid" system of government, Dahl argues that elections combined with continuous political competition between individuals or parties or both are the two critical methods of social control distinguishing polyarchal democracy from dictatorship. Neither leads to the majority rule demanded by maximizing modes of democratic theory, but taken together they do nevertheless promote popular sovereignty and political equality by increasing the "size, number, and variety of minorities whose preferences must be taken into account by leaders." It is here, Dahl argues, that we find the key contrast between polyarchal democracy and dictatorship, which "is not discoverable in the clear-cut distinction between government by a majority and government by a minority [but] between government by a minority and government by *minorities*." Polyarchy is neither pure majority rule nor unified minority rule. It is an open, competitive, and pluralistic system of "minorities rule."<sup>9</sup>

Popular participation plays only a peripheral role in Dahl's early democratic theory. "Classical" theories, he argues, were "demonstrably invalid" in their emphasis on "total" citizen participation: "What we call 'democracy'—that is, a system of decision-making in which leaders are more or less responsive to the preferences of nonleaders—does seem to

5. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

7. Cf., classically, Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, trans. Arthur F. Livingstone (New York: McGraw Hill, 1939).

8. *Preface*, p. 75.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 128–132.

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."<sup>10</sup> Polyarchy ("what we call 'democracy'") insures this responsiveness less by extensive mass participation than by ceaseless bargaining and negotiation between organized minorities "operating within the context of an apathetic majority."<sup>11</sup> It is, in other words, the competitive and electoral variant of Mosca's elite principle.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Dahl's theory of polyarchy has been persistently criticized as an "elite theory of democracy." Critics charge that Dahl has covertly transferred to existing "polyarchies," despite their patently oligarchical elements, the full commendatory force hitherto attaching to the phrase "democracy"—thereby supplanting the stronger sense of the latter as a constructive or reconstructive political ideal. The result is a thinly veiled apology for the elite domination and mass apathy that suffuse the politics of Western liberal democracies.<sup>12</sup>

Dahl has strenuously resisted these criticisms, and at a minimum we should proceed with caution here. Dahl's concept of polyarchy seems less vulnerable to criticism than, for example, Schumpeter's version of democratic revisionism in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. Schumpeter radically transfigures the meaning of democracy by the *tout court* substitution of one definition ("that institutional arrangement . . . which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will") for another ("that institutional arrangement . . . in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote").<sup>13</sup> That is, "democracy" simply be-

10. "Hierarchy, Democracy and Bargaining in Politics and Economics," in Heinz Eulau, Samuel Eldersveld, and Morris Janowitz, eds., *Political Behavior* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1958), p. 87.

11. *Ibid.*

12. For general statements of this position see, for example: Graeme Duncan and Steven Lukes, "The New Democracy," *Political Studies* 11 (June 1963): 156-177; Lane Davis, "The Cost of Realism: Contemporary Restatements of Democracy," *Western Political Quarterly* 17 (March 1964): 37-86; Jack L. Walker, "A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 60 (June 1966): 285-295; Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967); and Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1970). The most sophisticated criticism aimed specifically at Dahl, however, is Quentin Skinner, "The Empirical Theorists of a Democracy and Their Critics: A Plague on Both Their Houses," *Political Theory* 1 (August 1973): 287-306.

13. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1942), pp. 250, 269.

comes “polyarchy” in Dahl’s sense—thus at best depriving the concept of much of its force as a political ideal, and at worst transforming it (as redefined) into a deeply conservative political creed.

On the surface, Dahl’s approach is considerably more sophisticated and defensible. Dahl continues to insist that “rule by the people” (popular sovereignty and political equality) is essential for democracy. He merely argues that we must extend the nature and range of circumstances said to constitute a genuine, if minimal, case of political equality and popular sovereignty by dropping such traditional requirements as majority rule or extensive citizen participation as necessary conditions. It is now a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of its being labelled a polyarchal democracy that a regime or social organization possess simply the attribute of elite competition for the support of an otherwise apathetic mass at periodic free elections. And, clearly, to relax in this way the minimum conditions for the predication of the term does not necessarily preclude the definition of democracy in its stronger sense as a political ideal.

Dahl believes that he has maintained this distinction, insisting that the *Preface* contains both (a) an empirical theory which establishes democracy—now polyarchy—as an actual class of real world political and social systems (following his descriptive method), and (b) a normative theory which preserves democracy in its stronger sense as a political ideal (following his method of maximization). He has complained that his critics have ignored the explicitly normative component of the theory, which prescribes fuller realization of his eight conditions, while at the same time treating the empirical component as if it were normative and prescriptive.<sup>14</sup>

Here, however, the critics are substantially correct, though not always for the right reasons. Despite its pretensions to value-neutrality, Dahl’s concept of polyarchy, especially as applied to the “American hybrid” in the concluding chapter of the *Preface*, contains an obvious (and well-known) note of approval. Dahl insists there that he has not “attempted to determine in these pages whether it is a desirable system of government nor shall I try to so do now.” But he then repeats for the third time that the American polity provides a “high probability that any active and legitimate group will make itself heard effectively at some stage in the process of decision,” which is “no mean thing” in a political system, and that it is a “relatively efficient system for reinforcing agreement, encouraging moderation, and maintaining social peace,” which is

14. “Further Reflections on the Elitist Theory of Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* 60 (June 1966): 296–303.

“no negligible contribution” to the art of democratic government.<sup>15</sup> Dahl’s litotes here indicate rather clearly that except for those who favor dissensus, fanaticism, and civil war, this is the language of commendation.

Several lines of response are, however, still open to the defender of Dahl. Among these, the most compelling would be the disarming disclaimer that though in this one instance Dahl has admittedly failed to respect the logical distinction between fact and value, an isolated and adventitious act of apology is no reason for treating an essentially descriptive and explanatory theory as if it were evaluative and prescriptive. Nor, moreover, is this commendation of the “American hybrid” incompatible with the simultaneous development of a more stringent normative theory—one calling for the fuller democratization of existing polyarchies, the American included.

The difficulty, unfortunately, runs deeper. A careful reading of the *Preface* suggests, despite Dahl’s protestations, that the explicitly normative component to which he has referred (allegedly prescribing fuller political equality and popular sovereignty) is largely nonexistent; and that the descriptive and explanatory component is normative and prescriptive in the sense that it contains a built-in value slope.<sup>16</sup> Simply put, Dahl’s empirical theory of polyarchy has become his normative theory of democracy.

In an instructive parallel, Dahl in another essay likens polyarchy to *politeia* in the Aristotelian sense.<sup>17</sup> Both are mixtures of democracy and oligarchy, and both are second-best alternatives to the ideal political system. For Aristotle, of course, the ideal political system is not democracy but some form of natural monarchy or aristocracy—rule by one or a few of surpassing wisdom and virtue. But Aristotle (seconded by Dahl) argues that rule by a meritocratic elite is not normally an available alternative—that rule by one or a few will instead normally assume the corrupt form(s) of tyranny or oligarchy. (In the case of Dahl, however, the theoretically intriguing question of whether, if it were available, a natural aristocracy or meritocracy would be ideal is left unresolved. That this theoretical ambiguity complicates Dahl’s recent efforts to for-

15. *Preface*, pp. 149–151.

16. For a fuller explication of this notion, see esp. Charles Taylor, “Neutrality in Political Science” in Peter Laslett and W.G. Runciman, eds., *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 3rd ser. (London: Basil Blackwell, 1967), pp. 25–57.

17. “Equality and Power in American Society,” in William V. D’Antonio and Howard J. Ehrlich, eds., *Power and Democracy in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), pp. 73–89.

multate a stronger, more participatory theory of polyarchal democracy will be argued more fully below.)

Dahl departs from Aristotle in presenting his version of *politeia* as second-best relative not to natural monarchy or aristocracy, but to the democratic ideals of political equality and popular sovereignty. Thus the following dilemma:

For those who do not want to yield up the marvelous Utopian objective that animated the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg address, Aristotle's words will scarcely give complete comfort. Unless we abandon the ideal of political equality, and with it the American Dream, I do not see how we can live comfortably with the inequalities of power and political resources that we find around us. Can anyone who holds democratic beliefs remain satisfied with the American political system *simply because it is not an oligarchy?*<sup>18</sup>

Yet, against these democratic sentiments, Dahl's *Preface* does in the end imply that we should, indeed, refrain from calling for substantially fuller democratization of polyarchy because it is already—not unlike Aristotle's *politeia*—the best available alternative.

The truly salient choice, we have already seen Dahl imply, is between dictatorship and polyarchal democracy, between monolithic and pluralistic forms of elite rule, between minority and minorities rule. A third conceivable alternative—significantly fuller democratization of existing polyarchies—is thus by this presentation of the available alternatives implicitly ruled out as a feasible and/or desirable alternative.

To understand why this is the case, we must consider two of the social preconditions of polyarchal rule. Among other things, polyarchy requires (a) consensus on the eight conditions, reformulated as norms or rules of the game, and (b) political activity.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, above a certain threshold these two goals may be in tension. A minimum level of political activity or citizen participation is one necessary condition of polyarchy. But we must, Dahl argues, face the disconcerting possibility that increases in mass participation above and beyond this level will have the effect of eroding consensus on the norms, thereby counterproductively undermining the stability of polyarchy and threatening its replacement with totalitarian dictatorship. If true, this effectively reduces the available alternatives from three—dictatorship, polyarchy, and stronger democracy—to two—dictatorship and polyarchy.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 86. Emphasis added.

19. *Preface*, pp. 75–81.

But why would increased participation destabilize polyarchy in this way? Here Dahl strikes a familiar chord: because of the illiberal and antidemocratic attitudes of the ordinary citizen. "Current evidence suggests that in the United States the lower one's socioeconomic class, the more authoritarian one's predispositions and the less active one is likely to be. Thus if an increase in political activity brings the authoritarian-minded into the political arena," we must expect that, "after some lag, polyarchy . . . would decline."<sup>20</sup> The implication is clear: we must somehow protect polyarchy from the demos.

This protection is to be found in the theory and practice of elite consensus. Empirical evidence, Dahl argues, suggests that support for the norms of polyarchy is strongest among the minority of political activists in society, just as it is weakest among the ignorant and inactive majority. Democratic values survive because their outnumbered supporters are actively united in intense opposition to the authoritarian impulses, fortunately less intense, of the inert and inarticulate many, who in turn normally defer to this elite in the exercise of political judgment. Because they are politically apathetic, the authoritarian-minded accept rules and procedures that they do not (except perhaps in the abstract) support.<sup>21</sup> Thus, to put the matter bluntly, consensus is best preserved by holding mass political activity to a minimum.

But why rely upon elite consensus combined with mass passivity to preserve the stability of polyarchy? Why not instead seek increased mass political activity coupled with enhanced political education, flowing in part from the experience of this activity—especially since "social training in the norms" is already one of the conditions of polyarchy?

If Dahl in his early writings clearly rejects this approach for fear of its potentially authoritarian consequences, there is a second and equally important factor at work. Dahl attaches little or no positive value to participation above and beyond the minimum level necessary to sustain polyarchy not merely because he sees it as dangerous, but also because his earlier work rests upon a moral psychology that conceives of human beings as essentially apolitical creatures.

Dahl is admirably explicit. The "ancient myth about the concern of citizens with the life of the polis" notwithstanding, most individuals most of the time find it natural to seek their primary gratifications in the activities of private life.<sup>22</sup> Political activity occupies only a peripheral status in the life of civic man (*homo civicus*), and it becomes salient only

20. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

21. *Who Governs?*, pp. 311–325.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

when the actions or inactions of government impinge upon his private goals. He may then involve himself on a temporary basis, but when the danger has receded, he will revert to his apolitical state. Of course, some individuals (*homo politicus*) do come to find in political activity a powerful source of primary gratification. But they form the elite exceptions, not the majority rule.

Thus for Dahl, in explicit opposition to the classic Aristotelian formulation, man (*homo civicus*) is simply “not by nature a political animal”<sup>23</sup>—either actually or, more fundamentally, *in potentia*. For Dahl, there resides beneath the actual (empirically-observed), apolitical inclinations of human nature no potential for the fulfillment of essentially human wants, needs, or purposes in and through the life of the political community; and hence we find little or no recognition of any possibility, for more than an elite few, of rational and moral self-development or growth through that life. (Nor do we find at this point any truly systematic discussion of what is clearly suggested by Dahl’s own empirical evidence—that *homo civicus* differs from *homo politicus* not “by nature,” but largely by brute force of socioeconomic circumstance.)

This theory of human nature in politics clearly influences Dahl’s statement of the democratic ideal. Democracy and polyarchy are now both purely instrumental devices for maximizing the satisfaction of prior, private wants—nothing more. Even at their utopian outer reaches, pure and perfect political equality and popular sovereignty are seen exclusively as instrumental means for insuring the responsiveness of government to the policy preferences of individuals.<sup>24</sup> Democratic participation is, likewise, purely an instrument for enforcing this accountability. The Aristotelian vision of participation in a common life as a civilizing process of moral and rational education—implicit or explicit in many earlier versions of “classical” democratic theory—is simply read off the theoretical map.

The consequence is clear: participation is to be evaluated according to criteria of economic rationality. In principle, the minimal participatory time and effort sufficient to secure optimal policy results is ideal. In practice, polyarchy is already a reasonably stable and efficient want-satisfaction device. Therefore the marginal utility of increments in participation above and beyond the minimum threshold distinguishing polyarchy from oligarchy drop rapidly, for they must be traded-off against the privatistic values of *homo civicus*: “Political equality and popular

23. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

24. See also the definition of democracy offered in Dahl’s later work, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 1–3.

sovereignty are not absolute goals; we must ask ourselves how much *leisure, privacy, consensus, stability, income, security, progress, [and] status . . .* we are prepared to forego for an additional increment of political equality.”<sup>25</sup>

Dahl’s *Preface to Democratic Theory* thus rests upon a political sociology and moral psychology that tacitly commends polyarchy as the best available alternative. Despite Dahl’s subsequent insistence that his eight conditions can and should be read as a call for fuller democratization of existing polyarchies, the *Preface* and his other earlier writings assign no urgency to this goal, and in fact strongly imply the opposite conclusion. Efforts to overcome the elite domination and mass apathy that pervade polyarchy are shown to be at worst dangerous and potentially counterproductive, and at best a pointless drain on time and energy better spent, for the vast majority of individuals, in the pursuit of other values. The pursuit of political equality and popular sovereignty above and beyond that necessary but also sufficient level already embodied in polyarchy would very quickly threaten the stability of the system and invade the sanctity of those private values that constitute the primary goals of human nature. Significantly fuller actualization of these democratic objectives thus stands exposed as unattainable, or attainable only at the unacceptable cost of frustrating essential human wants, needs, and purposes. The normative theory of democracy thus merges with the empirical theory of polyarchy. And polyarchy, which is at least “not an oligarchy,” is thereby indicated as the optimal—and by default ideal—political system.

## II. Polyarchy and Participation—*After the Revolution?*

The subsequent evolution of Dahl’s democratic theory—beginning in the late 1960’s and continuing into his own most recent work—appears to break in several important respects with the less-than-fully-democratic emphasis of the earlier theory of polyarchy. Yet just as Dahl has sought to de-emphasize this apparent discontinuity by reading some of his present concerns back into the *Preface* and his other earlier works, so conversely have many of his critics affirmed the essential continuity of Dahl’s vision of polyarchal democracy by insisting that the fundamental philosophical perspective of the earlier theory has been preserved intact in these later writings. This point can best be illustrated by an examination of *After the Revolution?* and its reception by the critics.

Dahl’s *After the Revolution?* in a sense takes up where *A Preface to*

25. *Preface*, p. 51. Emphasis added.

*Democratic Theory* leaves off. It consistently distinguishes between democratic ideals and polyarchal achievements in a way that the earlier writings sometimes do not, and emphasizes more critically than before the gap between the two. Existing polyarchies, he stresses, are incompletely democratic, and most of their social (especially economic) institutions are even less so. *After the Revolution?* seeks to examine the possibility and desirability of reducing this continuing gap between promise and performance in the polyarchal regimes—most especially the United States.

Dahl begins by postulating three basic criteria for assessing the legitimacy or rightfulness of a decision-making process. First, a process is valid to the extent that its decisions correspond to my personal choices (the Criterion of Personal Choice). Second, it is valid to the extent that it insures decisions informed by a special competence (the Criterion of Competence). Third, it is valid to the extent that it economizes upon the amount of time and effort that must be expended upon it (the Criterion of Economy).<sup>26</sup>

The Criterion of Personal Choice entails democratic conclusions by way of a Hobbesian principle of rational self-interest. Rational egoists who wish to gain their own ends must permit others to pursue theirs on an equal basis. Hence with respect to key political decisions, each must concede equal weight to the choices of all via a process of popular sovereignty. The Criterion of Personal Choice may therefore be recast politically as the Principle of Affected Interests, which asserts that everyone who is affected by the decisions of a government has a *prima facie* right to equal participation in those decisions.<sup>27</sup>

But this equal participation principle must be balanced against the Criteria of Competence and Economy. The competence criterion permits us to accommodate a leadership principle. The principle of competence is not *ipso facto* undemocratic (since democracy is predicated upon the assumption of roughly equal competence to determine the basic ends of political life), but the satisfaction of wants and the protection of interests may themselves require that in specific instances we sacrifice the participation of citizens to the need for expert authority—as, for example, in representative democracy. Likewise, the principle of participation must be weighed against the Criterion of Economy. Since participation requires the expenditure of time and effort, it is not a costless activity. A rational individual will participate only when the benefits outweigh the opportunity costs. Hence a rational system of au-

26. *After the Revolution?*, pp. 3–58.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 64–67.

thority will seek optimum policy results (measured against the Criteria of Personal Choice and Competence) at the expense of minimal participatory time and effort.

Employing these three basic criteria for authority, Dahl evaluates alternative forms of democracy. There is, he argues, no "One Best Form." Taking into account costs and benefits, we find that one form (say, primary democracy) is optimum according to the three criteria under some circumstances, whereas another (representative democracy) is clearly preferable under others. Nonetheless, in sharp contrast to his earlier work, Dahl evinces a consistent *prima facie* preference for smaller, more participatory democratic forms. He is now concerned with a loss in human *control* over an increasingly leviathan-like political and social universe, and a loss of human *scale* in political and social life. Finding in "Rousseau's vision of the small democracy a conception of human dimensions that we should not lose sight of," Dahl now prescribes a program for participatory democracy in economic and political life designed to reappropriate a reified social and political universe grown "like Kafka's Castle—vast, remote, inaccessible."<sup>28</sup>

Dahl focuses first upon the socioeconomic institutions of modern corporate capitalism—the "Corporate Leviathan." He now explicitly concedes a point stressed by several of his critics, namely, the applicability of his own broad, behavioral definition of the political ("any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves, to a significant extent, power, rule, or authority") not merely to the state but also to the modern corporation.<sup>29</sup> The appropriation of public authority by private rulers, Dahl argues, exposes those rulers to the logic of democratic accountability via the Principle of Affected Interest. And he suggests that this accountability should be enforced not merely through *external* economic and political controls, but also through efforts to democratize the firm *internally*—that is, through some form of industrial democracy.

Industrial democracy can in turn take one of at least two possible forms. The first is "interest group management," which involves the representation of various affected interests upon boards of directors—in essence, polyarchy transposed to the industrial sphere. Dahl rejects this solution in favor of the second—full "social self-management" (in

28. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

29. *Modern Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 32. For criticisms of Dahl and others for inconsistency on this issue—defining "political" broadly for behavioral purposes yet contextually restricting its meaning to the state or governmental institutions when questions of *democracy* arise—see especially, Bachrach, *Democratic Elitism*, pp. 93–106; and Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, pp. 35, 43–44, 83–84, 106.

something like the Yugoslavian sense), or industrial democracy in a participatory rather than purely polyarchal mode. Like bureaucratic socialism, "interest group management does very little to democratize the internal environment of an enterprise. Instead it would convert the firm into a system of rather remote delegated authority." "Social self-management," by contrast, would go much further in the direction of reducing the worker's sense of individual powerlessness, and is for that reason preferable to both interest group management and bureaucratic socialism.<sup>30</sup>

Dahl applies much the same logic to the democratization of public authority. Democratic citizenship, he argues, would be thoroughly debased by restricting it to purely industrial citizenship, because

the work-place is not as important as the state and with increasing leisure it may grow less so. To accept as a focus for self-government a type of unit that is and must be concerned with only a small part of the range of collective concerns would be to trivialize the democratic idea. I find it hard to believe that man's aspiration toward rational control over his environment by joint action with his fellow man will ever be satisfied by democratizing the production of aspirin, cars, and television sets.<sup>31</sup>

30. *After the Revolution?*, pp. 130–140. For further extensions of some of these arguments, see Dahl, "Pluralism Revisited," *Comparative Politics* 6 (January 1978): 191–203; and "On Removing Certain Impediments to Democracy in the United States," *Political Science Quarterly* 92 (Spring 1977): 1–20. I have argued elsewhere that Dahl's program for the democratization of the "Corporate Leviathan" has socialist implications which are as yet not fully recognized by Dahl himself. For a discussion of this issue, and of the relationship between economics and politics more generally in Dahl's recent democratic theory, see my "Capitalism, Socialism, and Political Inequality," *Dissent* (Fall, 1980): 453–456; and Dahl, "A Reply to Richard Krouse," *ibid.*: 456–458.

31. "The City in the Future of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 61 (December 1967): 962. In both Dahl's earlier and later political science, he normally implies that there are no qualitative discontinuities between the state, on one side, and socioeconomic institutions on the other—both embodying, in varying degrees, "political" relations of power, rule, and authority. The difference between the two are seen exclusively as quantitative questions of degree—with the state in particular, given its monopoly of the use of legitimate force in a territorial area, being particularly crucial, from the perspective of democratic accountability, only because it is crucially consequential. In the above passage, however, he implies that there are some qualitative discontinuities, distinctions of kind as well as degree, between the state and other socioeconomic institutions—the former being concerned with society-wide questions of the common good or public interest, the latter with particular concerns. Now it seems perfectly consistent to maintain that such qualitative differences *do* exist, but that nevertheless *both* kinds of institu-

But the “Democratic Leviathan,” as Dahl now labels polyarchy, is increasingly unable to satisfy this human aspiration. It is afflicted by an “irreparable flaw”—the remoteness of the national government from the everyday life of the citizen, limiting its ability to engage his or her energy and attention. Hence the need to construct units and forms of public citizenship which mitigate this flaw. Dahl focuses his attention upon three possibilities: participation by lot, neighborhood government, and the city of intermediate size. In each instance the purpose is to enhance the quantity and quality of direct citizen participation in political life by democratizing more fully the remote, representative forms of polyarchy.<sup>32</sup>

*After the Revolution?* thus emphasizes much more strongly than the *Preface* and Dahl’s earlier writings the feasibility and desirability of greater political equality and popular sovereignty within polyarchy.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, polyarchy itself is no longer conceived purely in terms of citizen control over accountable institutions of representative government (that is, the responsiveness of the latter to the preference of the former). There is now in Dahl’s account a much stronger emphasis upon the value of direct citizen participation *in* political and economic life. He is offering a theory which in its specific policy prescriptions is closer to the vision of participatory democracy articulated by several of his critics than it is to his own earlier vision of polyarchal democracy.<sup>34</sup>

This revised theory embodies formidable strengths. Critics have often, and correctly, charged that in focusing exclusively upon the purely instrumental or protective purposes of social and political institutions, “elite” or “revisionist” democrats such as Schumpeter and (early) Dahl overlook the developmental and educative purposes of participation

---

tions should be more fully democratized; this appears to be Dahl’s position. The point is that Dahl should confront such issues more reflectively: a theoretically self-conscious confrontation of his views with those of Aristotle, or of such contemporary theorists as Sheldon Wolin (especially, *Politics and Vision* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1960]) and Hannah Arendt (especially, *The Human Condition* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958]; and *On Revolution* [New York: Viking Press, 1963]), on the relationship between “political” and “social” would be enormously fruitful.

32. *After the Revolution?*, pp. 140–166. See also: “The City in the Future of Democracy,” *passim*.; *Polyarchy*, pp. 226–227; and Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte, *Size and Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973).

33. As well as a stronger emphasis upon the *socioeconomic* prerequisites of political equality and popular sovereignty. See, in addition to above-cited sections relevant to this issue, *After the Revolution?*, pp. 105–115.

34. I have in mind here particularly Bachrach, *Democratic Elitism*; and Pate-man, *Participation and Democratic Theory*.

urged by such diverse “classical” theorists as Rousseau and J. S. Mill.<sup>35</sup> But if elite democratic theory almost wholly sacrifices participation to leadership, many of these critics seem to have simply inverted the imbalance—sacrificing the values of elite competence to those of mass participation, or at the very least paying inadequate attention to the role of democratic leadership in a participatory society.<sup>36</sup> Dahl’s three criteria for authority seem to hold forth the promise of a more balanced approach, combining a principle of participation (derived from personal choice and equal competence) on one side with a principle of leadership (derived from unequal competence and economy) on the other. *After the Revolution?*—again, like the Aristotelian vision of *politeia*—in effect offers us a “mixed” theory of democratic polyarchy.<sup>37</sup>

Yet it is not clear that Dahl can straightforwardly derive the strong principle of equal participation that he now purports to favor from his own three criteria for authority. Many of Dahl’s critics have held that while his recent work assigns a higher value to participation, he still sees that participation solely as an instrumental device or economic cost incurred for the satisfaction of antecedently-given wants and the protection of subjectively-determined interests, neglecting its effects on the moral and intellectual development of citizens as social and political agents. As Bachrach writes, “Dahl fails to conceive of political participation two-dimensionally: as an instrumentality to gain end results *and* as a process that affords the opportunity to gain a greater sense of purpose and pride and a greater awareness of community.”<sup>38</sup> In short, it is charged, Dahl remains wedded to an impoverished theoretical perspective—one that depicts human nature (*homo civicus*) as essentially egoistic and privatistic, and that perceives democratic politics and participation as likewise essentially instrumental.

These criticisms are accurate—at least on their face. But it is not altogether certain that Dahl has succeeded fully in saying what he means.

35. See the works cited in note 12 above.

36. This criticism applies to some degree even to Bachrach and Pateman, who alone among the above-cited critics of “revisionist” or “elite” democratic theory have sought to formulate a viable constructive contemporary theory of participatory democracy. For two impressive recent efforts to formulate balanced theories of democracy combining participation with leadership, see James McGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) and J. Roland Pennock, *Democratic Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

37. Cf. Dennis F. Thompson, *John Stuart Mill and Representative Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 196–197.

38. “Interest, Participation, and Democratic Theory,” in J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman, eds., *Nomos XVI: Participation in Politics* (New York: Lieber-Atherton, 1975), p. 80. Cf. also Thompson, *John Stuart Mill*.

For there is some reason to believe that Dahl's prescriptions for increased participation are not fully compatible with his own criteria for authority. And the latent contradiction is an instructive one.

According to Dahl's Criterion of Personal Choice, participation is a means of satisfying antecedently-given wants and protecting subjectively-determined interests. Yet Dahl seeks to increase participation even where there is, on his own account, little or no overt demand for it. He recognizes this inconsistency in his discussion of industrial democracy, conceding that "problems may arise because of the possibility that many workers do not wish to participate in the government of the firm."<sup>39</sup> The affluent worker, he argues, tends to be consumption-oriented, acquisitive, and privatistic, with little or no aspiration to participation in the government of the enterprise (or the state). The impetus for industrial democracy may in fact come from white-collar employees, technicians, and executives. But Dahl anticipates that the extension of opportunities for participation will gradually stimulate a recognition of its value on the part of those originally indifferent to it, altering the content of manifest wants by revealing hitherto latent interests: "If a significant number of employees . . . were to discover that participation in the affairs of the enterprise contributed to their own sense of competence and helped them to control an important part of their daily lives, then lassitude and indifference toward participation might change into interest and concern."<sup>40</sup>

Now this argument, to be sure, is in itself still compatible with Dahl's essentially instrumental view of participation: the experience of participation is educative, it might be said, but only in the sense that it teaches individuals to value it as a device for satisfying more fully the purely private, apolitical wants of *homo civicus*. To this degree, Dahl's arguments can be seen as entirely consistent. However, other aspects of his argument suggest that Dahl, imprisoned by his own earlier categories, is nevertheless attempting to articulate a view of participation that is "two-dimensional" in precisely Bachrach's sense, and to that degree his new view is in some tension with those categories .

We have seen that Dahl's criteria for authority suggest, first, that participation must defer to competence wherever the latter will enhance the efficiency with which wants are satisfied, and, second, that we should economize upon time and effort wherever possible. But Dahl's program for industrial democracy seems to fly in the face of these injunctions. He explicitly argues that in trading off competence against participation,

39. *After the Revolution?*, p. 134.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

we should be willing to accept a (modest) decline in productivity as the price of increased participation.<sup>41</sup> If, however, participation is purely an instrument of personal choice (understood as efficient and economical policy), then a trade-off of this nature would be doubly irrational, since it would *increase* time and effort in order to *detract* from the efficiency with which wants could be satisfied.

Now it could, of course, be argued that such a trade-off is necessary to insure that policy, however technically competent and economical, in fact conforms to the personal choices of affected interests. But the point is that Dahl now seems willing to increase participation at the expense of competence and economy even above this want-satisfaction, interest-protection threshold. This can be seen most clearly in his preference for self-management over interest-group management (and, *a fortiori*, bureaucratic socialism). For by transposing the principles of polyarchy to the government of the firm, interest-group management would, by comparison with self-management, appear to offer large gains in competence and economy in return for (at worst) a marginal loss in the satisfaction of personal choice. The same can be said of Dahl's *prima facie* preference for direct over representative forms in the politics of the state. In both instances, competence and economy would seem to demand not the *extension* of direct participation but rather its *reduction* through the use, wherever possible, of representative forms, which could (optimally at least) protect personal choice while at the same time maximizing the efficiency and minimizing the effort with which affected interests are protected.

Again, it might be argued that Dahl's newly revised preference for participatory forms is still formally compatible with a personal choice criterion which straightforwardly satisfies wants—such a criterion now understood, however, not simply as just and efficient policy, but also as the reduction of a felt sense of individual powerlessness. But it is far from clear that Dahl would automatically withdraw his proposals for a participatory economy and polity if it could be demonstrated that the costs to personal choice in this second (and secondary) sense would be outweighed by the benefits to personal choice in the first (and primary) sense of more competent and economical policy alone. Indeed, the markedly participatory tone and tenor of *After the Revolution?* suggest strongly that he would not. Unfortunately, the issue is never raised.

This *prima facie* tension between a strong principle of equal participation (explicitly derived from personal choice) and the potentially anti-

41. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

participatory imperatives of competence and economy can be resolved only if Dahl does now have a second “dimension” in his justification for participation, one having to do with the process of political education and personal self-development by which *homo politicus* is born. And, indeed, Dahl does now speak (though only occasionally) of “the moral and psychological validity” of the Rousseauian vision,<sup>42</sup> at one point justifying some sacrifice of competence and economy to participation solely for the value we “attach to democratic participation and control, as good *both intrinsically and in their consequences for human self-development and human satisfaction, quite independently of other outputs.*”<sup>43</sup>

In the end, it is hard to see how Dahl’s new program can be *fully* justified except in terms which are at odds with the theoretical language that he more usually employs in its justification. *Either* Dahl’s revisions in his concept of polyarchy do rest upon a fundamental but as yet unacknowledged shift in his underlying normative vision of how human beings can and should order their lives as social and political agents, *or* the prescriptions in *After the Revolution?* for maximum feasible participatory democracy in economics and polity are at best theoretically unstable and at worst incoherent. The issue, again, has not been addressed.

### III. “Procedural Democracy”—or “Meritocracy”?

The tensions that afflict *After the Revolution?* have continued to plague Dahl’s most recent essays upon the idea of “procedural democracy,” which is properly understood as the latest version of his evolving theory of polyarchal democracy. Most importantly, for our purposes, they render ambiguous his now explicit attempt to incorporate a requirement of “enlightened understanding” into his democratic theory.

A polity (or social organization), Dahl now argues, is “procedurally democratic” in a weak or minimal sense—that is, in relation to its own demos and the agenda that it controls—if, and only if, it satisfies three criteria. The first two are familiar extensions of the earlier theory of polyarchy: first, “*political equality*” (including its socioeconomic prerequisites), and, second, “*effective participation*” (or, roughly, popular sovereignty). But Dahl now explicitly incorporates a third requirement: “*the criterion of enlightened understanding.*” (“In order to express his or her preferences accurately, each citizen ought to have adequate and

42. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 132. *Emphasis added.*

equal opportunities for discovering and validating, in the time permitted by the need for a decision, what his or her preferences are on the matter to be decided.”)<sup>44</sup>

Why is this additional criterion necessary? The classic antidemocratic argument, Dahl suggests, is that one or a few of wisdom and virtue are more competent to determine the ends and means of political life than the many or demos. Some minimal assumption of roughly equal competence (of a given demos) to determine the basic ends and means of political life must hold for democracy to be a desirable form of rule; thus this many or demos must be enlightened, “at least to some degree.” And, hence, alternative procedures for making decisions “ought to be evaluated according to the opportunities they furnish citizens for acquiring an understanding of means and ends, and of oneself and other relevant selves.”<sup>45</sup>

What Dahl has still failed to supply, however, is an adequate account of the underlying point or purpose of *becoming politically enlightened* in this way. Is “enlightened understanding” still purely a means for more fully satisfying the private preferences of *homo civicus*? Or is it desirable, “both intrinsically and in [its] consequences for human development, quite independently of other outputs”—that is, as an integral ingredient of a fully human life, the life of *homo politicus*? Dahl does not say.

If the former is the case, however, Dahl’s criterion of enlightened understanding, like the principle of participation to which it is linked, is theoretically unstable—constantly in danger of eclipse by the potentially contradictory imperatives of competence and economy. As between two alternative decision-making procedures, the gains in “enlightened understanding” (and hence relatively more equal competence) offered by one, more participatory alternative could in principle easily be outweighed by the greater absolute competence and/or economy of time and effort offered by another, less participatory alternative.

The issue can be put more easily, perhaps, by confronting more directly, as Dahl does, the issue of inclusiveness. Even if a polity or social organization is “procedurally democratic” in relation to its own demos, it is still necessary to determine how inclusively membership in the demos should be distributed (as well as the related issue of the appropriate scope of the agenda). Ultimately, Dahl argues, this issue cannot be approached “without meeting directly the question of competence and

44. “Procedural Democracy,” in Peter Laslett and James Fishkin, eds., *Philosophy, Politics, and Society*, 5th ser. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 101–105.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

openly confronting the view that a meritorious elite of exceptional knowledge and virtue ought to govern. This rival idea, which the Greeks called aristocracy and I shall call meritocracy, seems to me to constitute the greatest challenge to democracy, both historically and in the present world.”<sup>46</sup>

Dahl rejects the possibility and desirability of citizenship as a categorical right to all persons subject to a government—the example of children being alone sufficient to disqualify this absolutist position—in favor of the view that citizenship must unavoidably, to some degree, be contingent upon considerations of competence. But if citizenship is indeed a contingent right, resting upon contestable judgments of competence, then “the boundaries between democracy on one side and meritocracy on the other become fuzzy and indeterminate.”<sup>47</sup>

Dahl seeks to minimize this indeterminacy by formulating the strongest (most democratic) criterion of inclusiveness, compatible with competence, for use in such conditional judgments. This criterion should (a) insure equal consideration of the interest of all members (including those excluded from citizenship in the demos) and should (b) assume the burden of proof in demonstrating that a given individual or group (for example, children) is not as qualified as other members of the association to judge their own best interests.<sup>48</sup> Applying these principles, we arrive at the following extremely strong “*criterion of inclusiveness*”: “the demos must include all adult members of the association except transients.”<sup>49</sup>

In offering this strong criterion of inclusiveness, Dahl explicitly, and appropriately, invokes John Stuart Mill’s protective rationale for democratic representation: “in the absence of its natural defenders, the interest of the excluded is always in danger of being overlooked.”<sup>50</sup> However, in appealing to Mill, Dahl unwittingly reopens an issue (alluded to in Section I above) left unresolved in his earlier democratic theory. We have seen Dahl compare his vision of polyarchy to the Aristotelian vision

46. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 124–128.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 109. “In general . . . every member ought to be considered an adult who does not suffer from a severe mental disability or whose punishment for disobeying the rules is not reduced because he or she is younger than a given age.”

50. John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vols. 18 and 19, *Essays on Politics and Society*, ed. John A. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 19: 404. Dahl criticizes Mill—legitimately—for having failed to derive a sufficiently strong criterion of inclusiveness from his own protective principle (“Procedural Democracy,” pp. 126–127, 116–118).

of *politeia*: both are mixtures of democracy and oligarchy; and both are, by implication, in some sense second-best ideals. But for Aristotle the ideal regime, if feasible, is not democracy but what Dahl labels “meritocracy”—rule by one or a few of surpassing wisdom and virtue. Aristotle and Dahl concur in dismissing the availability of this alternative on the plausible, but contingent, grounds that (as Dahl puts it) “philosopher-kings are hard to come by.”<sup>51</sup>

But assume for the moment, hypothetically, that Aristotelian aristocracy, or “meritocracy” in Dahl’s sense, were an available alternative. What then? For John Stuart Mill, a perfectly benevolent and enlightened despotism would (assuming the availability of a competent demos) be a profoundly undesirable form of rule. For Mill, pure “meritocracy,” however perfectly it might protect the interests (“personal choice”) of its subjects, would nevertheless leave out of the idea of good government the “most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess,” namely, promoting “the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves.”<sup>52</sup> Even assuming a perfectly virtuous despot, endowed with full “enlightened understanding,” we would have—what?

One man of superhuman energy managing the entire affairs of a mentally passive people. Their passivity is implied in the very idea of absolute power. The nation as a whole, and every individual composing it are without any voices in their own destiny. They exercise no will in respect to their collective interests. All is decided for them by a will not their own. . . . What sort of human beings can be formed under such a regime? What development can their thinking or their active faculties attain under it?<sup>53</sup>

Enlightened despotism, or “meritocracy,” might in principle perform the protective or instrumental purposes of participation more competently and economically than democracy itself. But it would still remain an intrinsically defective theoretical ideal; for it crucially overlooks the “enlightened understanding,” the rational and moral self-development, that flows from the democratic participation of *homo politicus*.

Dahl’s own explicitly formulated criteria for authority would, by contrast to Mill’s, seem clearly to suggest an unambiguous endorsement, in

51. *Preface*, p. 50.

52. *Considerations on Representative Government*, p. 390.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 400–403. For two particularly valuable contemporary criticisms of the ideal of “meritocracy,” see: Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1961); and John H. Schaar, “Equality of Opportunity, and Beyond,” in J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman, eds., *Nomos IX: Equality* (New York: Lieber-Atherton, 1967), pp. 228–249.

principle and if available, of the “meritocratic” ideal—on grounds both of competence and economy. And yet other passages suggest implicitly that Dahl is, to the contrary, now in clear agreement with Mill.

[concerning] the possibilities of collective moral responsibility and growth in good political order. If a good political order requires that the demos must in no circumstance have the opportunity to do wrong . . . then the demos and its representatives would have to be restrained by guardians of superior knowledge and virtue. *If the best political order is one in which the members individually and collectively gain maturity and responsibility by confronting moral choice, then they must have the opportunity to act autonomously.* Persons under guardianship who are deprived of all opportunity for autonomous action cannot be responsible for their conduct; nor can they be expected to develop a sense of moral responsibility. But individual autonomy necessarily includes the opportunity to err as well as to act rightly. So with people. To the extent that a people is deprived of the opportunity to act autonomously and is governed by guardians, it is less likely to develop a sense of responsibility for its collective actions.<sup>54</sup>

Mill could not have said it better. Nor, indeed, would Mill—or even Marx—have disavowed Dahl’s almost utopian belief that, with the possible future extension of such opportunities for autonomy and responsible choice, “we cannot say what vast transformations human consciousness may undergo.”<sup>55</sup> Further clarification of both the underlying point or purpose of these expanded participatory opportunities and the precise character of this envisaged transformation of consciousness will, we hope, be Dahl’s first order of business as his thought develops.

#### IV. Conclusion

Dahl’s theory of polyarchal (now procedural) democracy in important respects remains to be completed. On at least one crucial point—the underlying justification for expanded participatory democracy, and with it enhanced “enlightened understanding,” in economic and political life—there persist theoretically important tensions and ambiguities that re-

54. “The Moscow Discourse: Fundamental Rights in a Democratic Order,” *Government and Opposition* 15 (Winter 1980): 30. Emphasis added.

55. “On Removing Certain Impediments,” p. 20.

main unresolved.<sup>56</sup> At a minimum, the theory does appear to mark a far sharper break with the earlier theory of polyarchy than either Dahl or his critics have thus far recognized. Either that, or Dahl's recent participatory turn is in important respects theoretically incoherent. We eagerly await Professor Dahl's next contribution to a viable contemporary theory of democracy.

56. My criticism of Dahl is in some respects similar to the argument of James Fishkin in *Tyranny and Legitimacy: A Critique of Political Theories* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). Just as Fishkin argues that all major forms of social and political theory—whether based on “procedural” principles, “absolute rights” principles, or “structural” principles—could in principle permit (malevolent) forms of “simple tyranny,” so do I claim that Dahl's criteria for authority could in principle legitimate paternalistic forms of benevolent and enlightened despotism. This is obviously a far less crippling criticism; however, Dahl should clarify his position.