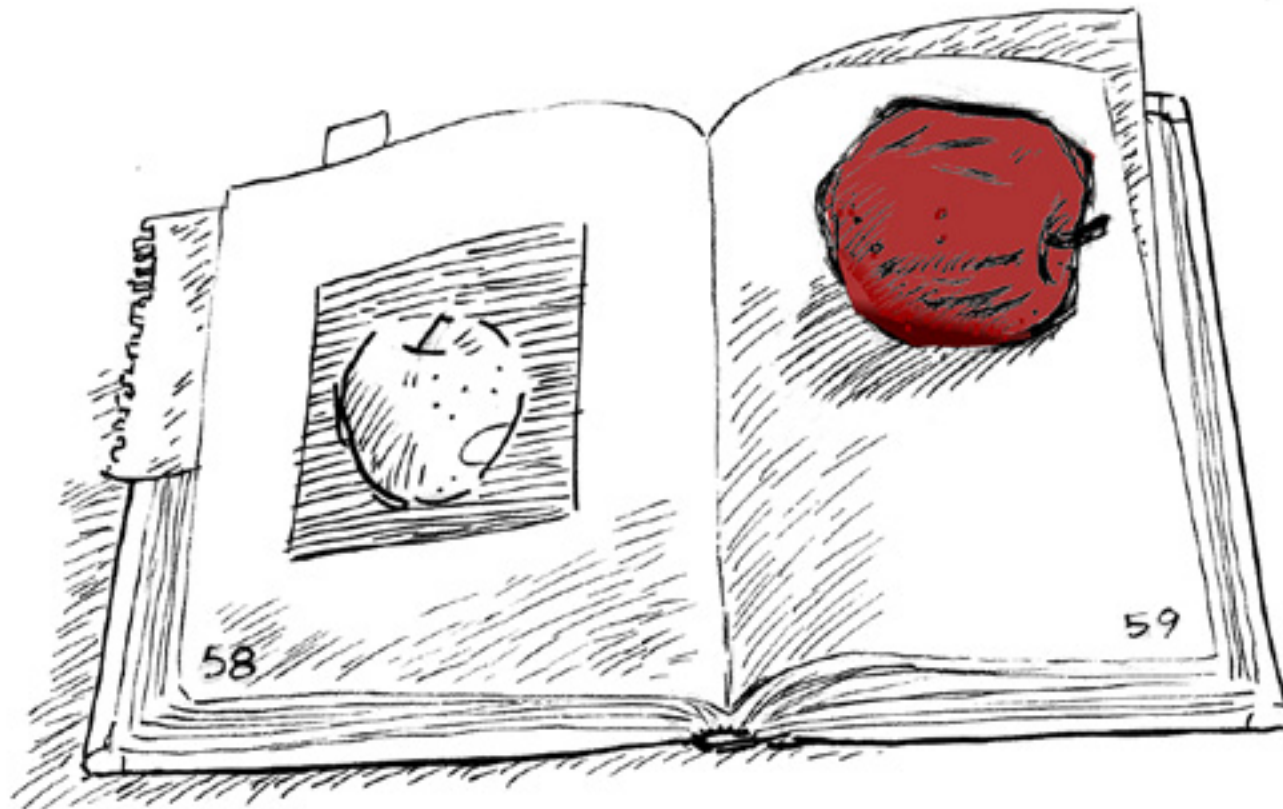


Puritan Concepts of Democracy



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The Issue of Democracy was an on-going debate during the 1630s, at a time when the Puritan landscape was regulating itself, seeking out ways to keep and maintain order in the settlements. **John Winthrop** of Massachusetts Bay Colony held a very negative opinion about this form of legislative government.

His theories are common in the early days of the colonies.

- His main defense falls on biblical scriptures: since there was no such democratic system nor such concept of government in Israel during biblical times, **mortals should not try to recreate a failed concept of the Greeks.**
- At one point he will use a pivotal word: ‘should’— in his logic, he is stating *should* we change to a mere democracy then we *would* debase ourselves under God’s laws (see slide 5).

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Likewise, he will use the Fifth Commandment, of the Ten Commandments, as a rhetorical defense:

Do not slay the innocent and the righteous/thou shall not kill.

- In his logic, democratic systems used in the history of Greece and early Rome failed due to resulting bloodshed and civil strife.
- If the colonies utilize this same structure, the colonies would end with a chaotic anarchy. Partially he is correct, if you think of the French Revolution ending in anarchy and the similar political upheavals in Haiti.
- From Winthrop's perspective, future examples of a binding Constitution seems an impossible political strategy. Such forms of government would never adequately work for *controlling* the people.

“A Negative View of Democracy”

John Winthrop and other magistrates of the General Court of Massachusetts fell into disagreement with the town representatives, also members of the Court, as to whether the magistrates as officers of the Massachusetts Bay Company had the right to veto the representatives' actions. The dispute came to a head in a 1642 case in which the town representatives sided with the plaintiff and the magistrates upheld the defendant. Winthrop thereupon wrote a tract on the negative vote that included the following discussion of democracy. The magistrates and representatives settled their dispute in 1644 by dividing themselves into two bodies, each with the power to veto the other, thereby creating a bicameral legislature in Massachusetts.

“John Winthrop: A Negative View on Democracy.” *The Annals of America: 1493-1754, Discovering a New World*. Vol. I. Mortimer Adler, Ed. London: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1976. Print.

“A Negative View of Democracy”

That which makes a specific difference between one form of government and another is essential and fundamental. But the negative vote in the magistrates does so in our government; therefore, it is essential and fundamental.

The assumption is proved by this: That if the negative vote were taken away, **our government would be a mere democracy**, whereas now it is mixed. This I prove thus: **Where the chief ordinary power and administration thereof is in the people, there is a democracy.** This I prove thus: If it be in the deputies, it is in the people, but it will be in the deputies, governor, etc., for they are but the representative body of the people, and the matter lies not in the number of the people assembled, but in their power.

Again, the people are not bound to send their deputies, but they may come themselves, if they will. And though the magistrates be joined with them in the Court, as they were in Athens and other popular states in Greece, etc., yet they

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serve but as councilors, seeing they shall have but their single votes, as every one of the people has. Lastly, the answer: himself confesses that the deputies are the democratic part of our government.

Now if we should change from a mixed aristocracy to a mere democracy, first, we should have no warrant in Scripture for it; there was no such government in Israel.

We should hereby voluntarily abase ourselves, and deprive ourselves of that dignity which the providence of God has put upon us, which is a manifest breach of the Fifth Commandment; for a democracy is, among most civil nations, accounted the meanest and worst of all forms of government; and therefore in writers it is branded with reproachful epithets as *bellua mutoru capitu*, a monster, etc., and histories do record that it has been always of least continuance and fullest of troubles. ...

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I say, we should incur scandal by under-valuing the gifts of God - as wisdom, learning, etc. - and the ordinance of magistracy, **if the judgment and authority of any one of the common rank of the people should bear equal weight with that of the wisest and chiefest magistrate. ... I acknowledge (and have always so done) that there are of the deputies men of wisdom and learning sufficient and, it may be, not inferior to some of the magistrates. But yet, if in common repute (especially in foreign parts) the magistrates be looked at as men [preeminent] in gifts and experience (for otherwise the people are misguided in their choice) then the scandal will remain, notwithstanding.**

And, besides, I speak not positively but hypothetically, so as if there be at any time one or more deputies so weak as will hold no proportion with the most able of the magistrates, then my argument will hold good, without any scandal or offense given on my part. And whereas I style such a deputy “of the common

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rank of freemen,” I hope it is no disparagement to any to be counted in that rank, which is allowed equal power with the governor and assistants in our highest Court, although a deputy in Court be of more value than any one freeman, seeing he represents many. Yet, before and after the Court, he is but as another freeman and so cannot be counted in the same rank with the magistrates.

And I should be willing to learn ... how I might have spoken more modestly in this and suchlike passages and not have lost the force of my argument, which (the Lord knows) was the only thing I intended, and not to extol the gifts, etc., of the magistrates, nor to debase those of the deputies; for I acknowledge it my duty to honor the gifts of God wherever I find them; and, I hope, my ordinary practice has not been different.

—1642

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*Political and religious pressures on the English Puritans became severe in the 1630s. As a result, certain Puritan members of Parliament, among them Lord Brooke and Lord Saye and Sele, who had helped to establish the Massachusetts Bay Company, conceived the idea of emigrating to America. They were anxious to maintain their hereditary privileges, however, including the right to a voice in governmental affairs, and when this demand was refused by the authorities in Massachusetts, the noble lords decided not to go. Formal rejection of their demands was undertaken by **John Cotton**. His reasons are set forth in the following selection, which includes a reply to “certain persons of quality” as a group and a private letter to Lord Saye. The antidemocratic sentiments of both letters were typical of the colony’s leaders.*

“John Cotton: Democracy as Detrimental to Church and State.” *The Annals of America: 1493-1754, Discovering a New World*. Vol. I. Mortimer Adler, Ed. London: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1976. Print.

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Proposals and Replies

Demand 1. That the Commonwealth should consist of two distinct ranks of men, whereof the one should be for them and their heirs, gentlemen of the country; the other for them and their heirs, freeholders.

Answer. Two distinct ranks we willingly acknowledge, from the light of nature and Scripture; the one of them called princes, or nobles, or elders (among whom gentlemen have their place); the other, the people. Hereditary dignity or honors we willingly allow to the former, unless, by the scandalous and base conversation of any of them, they become degenerate. Hereditary liberty, or estate of freemen, we willingly allow to the other, unless they also, by some unworthy and slavish carriage, do disfranchise themselves.

Dem. 2. That in these gentlemen and freeholders, assembled together, the chief power of the Commonwealth shall be placed, both for making and repealing laws.

Ans. So it is with us.

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Dem. 3. That each of these two ranks should, in all public assemblies, have a negative voice, so as, without a mutual consent, nothing should be established.

Ans. So it is agreed among us.

Dem. 4. That the first rank, consisting of gentlemen, should have power, for them and their heirs, to come to the parliaments or public assemblies and there to give their free votes personally; the second rank of freeholders should have the same power, for them and their heirs, of meeting and voting, but by their deputies.

Ans. Thus far this demand is practised among us. The freemen meet and vote by their deputies; the other rank give their votes personally, only with this difference: there be no more of the gentlemen that give their votes personally but such as are chosen to places of office, either governors, deputy governors, counselors, or assistants. All gentlemen in England have not that honor to meet and vote personally in Parliament, much less all their heirs. But of this more fully in an answer to the 9th and 10th demand[s].

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Dem. 5. That for facilitating and dispatch of business, and other reasons, the gentlemen and freeholders should sit and hold their meetings in two distinct houses.

Ans. We willingly approve the motion, only as yet it is not so practised among us, but, in time, the variety and discrepancy of sundry occurrences will put them upon a necessity of sitting apart.

Dem. 6. That there shall be set times for these meetings, annually or half-yearly, or as shall be thought fit by common consent, which meetings should have a set time for their continuance, but should be adjourned or broken off at the discretion of both houses.

Ans. Public meetings, in General Courts, are by charter appointed to be quarterly, which, in this infancy of the colony, wherein many things frequently occur which need settling, have been of good use, but, when things are more fully settled in due order, it is likely that yearly or half-yearly meetings will be sufficient. For the continuance or breaking up of these courts, nothing is done but with the joint consent of both branches.

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Dem. 7. That it shall be in the power of this parliament, thus constituted and assembled, to call the governor and all public officers to account, to create new officers, and to determine them already set up; and, the better to stop the way to insolence and ambition, it may be ordered that all offices and fees of office shall, every parliament, determine, unless they be new confirmed the last day of every session.

Ans. This power to call governors and all officers to account, and to create new and determine the old, is settled already in the General Court or parliament, only it is not put forth but once in the year, viz., at the Great and General Court in May, when the governor is chosen.

Dem. 8. That the governor shall ever be chosen out of the rank of gentlemen.

Ans. We never practise otherwise, choosing the governor either out of the assistants, which is our ordinary course, or out of approved known gentlemen, as, this year, Mr. Vane.

Dem. 9. That, for the present, the Right Honorable the Lord Viscount Saye and

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Sele, the Lord Brooke, who have already been at great disbursements for the public works in New England, and such other gentlemen of approved sincerity and worth, as they, before their personal remove, shall take into their number, should be admitted for them and their heirs, gentlemen of the country. But, for the future, none shall be admitted into this rank but by the consent of both houses.

Ans. The great disbursements of these noble personages and worthy gentlemen we thankfully acknowledge, because the safety and presence of our brethren at Connecticut is no small blessing and comfort to us. But, though that charge had never been disbursed, the worth of the honorable persons named is so well known to all, and our need of such supports and guides is so sensible to ourselves, that we do not doubt the country would thankfully accept it as a singular favor from God and from them, if He should bow their hearts to come into this wilderness and help us. As for accepting them and their heirs into the number of gentlemen of the country, the custom of this country is, and readily would be, to receive and acknowledge, not only all such eminent persons as themselves and

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the gentlemen they speak of but others of meaner estate, so be it is of some eminency, to be for them and their heirs, gentlemen of the country. Only, thus standeth our case. Though we receive them with honor and allow them preeminence and accommodations according to their condition, yet we do not, ordinarily, call them forth to the power of election or administration of magistracy until they be received as members into some of our churches, a privilege, which we doubt not religious gentlemen will willingly desire (as David did in Ps. 27:4) and Christian churches will as readily impart to such desirable persons. Hereditary honors both nature and Scripture doth acknowledge (Eccles. 29:17), but hereditary authority and power standeth only by the civil laws of some commonwealths; and, yet, even among them, the authority and power of the father is nowhere communicated, together with his honors, unto all his posterity. Where God blesseth any branch of any noble or generous family with a spirit and gifts fit for government, it would be a taking of God's name in vain to put such a talent under a bushel, and a sin against the honor of magistracy to neglect such in our public elections. But if God

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should not delight to furnish some of their posterity with gifts fit for magistracy, we should expose them rather to reproach and prejudice, and the Commonwealth with them, than exalt them to honor, if we should call them forth, when God doth not, to public authority.

Dem. 10. That the rank of freeholders shall be made up of such as shall have so much personal estate there, as shall be thought fit for men of that condition, and have contributed some fit proportion to the public charge of the country, either by their disbursements or labors.

Ans. We must confess our ordinary practice to be otherwise; for, excepting the old planters, i.e., Mr. Humfry, who himself was admitted an assistant at London, and all of them freemen before the churches here were established, none are admitted freemen of this Commonwealth but such as are first admitted members of some church or other in this country, and, of such, none are excluded from the liberty of freemen. And out of such only, I mean the more eminent sort of such it is that our magistrates are chosen. Both which points we should willingly

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persuade our people to change, if we could make it appear to them that such a change might be made according to God; for, to give you a true account of the grounds of our proceedings herein, it seemeth to them, and also to us, to be a Divine Ordinance (and moral) that none should be appointed and chosen by the people of God magistrates over them but men fearing God (Ex. 27:21), chosen out of their brethren (Deut. 17:15), saints (I Cor. 6:1). Yea, the apostle maketh it a shame to the Church, if it be not able to afford wise men from out of themselves which shall be able to judge all civil matters between their brethren (ver. 5). And Solomon maketh it the joy of a commonwealth when the righteous are in authority, and the calamity thereof when the wicked bear rule (Prov. 29:2).

Obj. If it be said, there may be many carnal men whom God hath invested with sundry eminent gifts of wisdom, courage, justice, fit for government.

Ans. Such may be fit to be consulted with and employed by governors, according to the quality and use of their gifts and parts, but yet are men not fit to be trusted with place of standing power or settled authority. Ahitophel's wisdom

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may be fit to be heard (as an oracle of God) but not fit to be trusted with power of settled magistracy, lest he at last call for 12,000 men to lead them forth against David (II Sam. 17:1-3). The best gifts and parts, under a covenant of works (under which all carnal men and hypocrites be), will at length turn aside by crooked ways to depart from God, and, finally, to fight against God, and are therefore, herein, opposed to good men and upright in heart (Ps. 125:4, 5).

Obj. If it be said again, that then the Church estate could not be compatible with any commonwealth under heaven.

Ans. It is one thing for the Church or members of the Church loyally to submit unto any form of government when it is above their calling to reform it; another thing to choose a form of government and governors discrepant from the rule. Now, if it be a divine truth that none are to be trusted with public permanent authority but godly men, who are fit materials for church fellowship, then from the same grounds it will appear that none are so fit to be trusted with the liberties of the Commonwealth as church members; for the liberties of the freemen of

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this Commonwealth are such as require men of faithful integrity to God and the state to preserve the same. Their liberties, among others, are chiefly these: (1) To choose all magistrates, and to call them to account at their General Courts. (2) To choose such burgesses, every General Court, as with the magistrates shall make or repeal all laws. Now, both these liberties are such as carry along much power with them, either to establish or subvert the Commonwealth, and therewith the Church, which power, if it be committed to men not according to their godliness, which makes them fit for church fellowship, but according to their wealth, which, as such, makes them no better than worldly men, then, in case worldly men should prove the major part, as soon they might do, they would as readily set over us magistrates like themselves, such as might hate us according to the curse (Lev. 26:17), and turn the edge of all authority and laws against the Church and the members thereof, the maintenance of whose peace is the chief end which God aimed at in the institution of magistracy (I Tim. 2:1, 2). —1636