Is Soviet Russia a Democracy?

By Sidney Webb

[The following is the fourth of the series of articles on Soviet Russia which Sidney Webb, British Socialist leader and former Cabinet Minister, has written for Current History. Another article will appear in the March issue.]

Underlying all criticism of the Soviet Government, indeed, fundamental to American and British understanding of its achievements, is the question whether or not it is democratic. Here, once more, we are up against the nonconformity of the U. S. S. R. to our own categories of thought. It does not help toward any accurate appreciation of this novel kind of government merely to say that it is quite different from that of the United States or that of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

Communist thinkers in the U. S. S. R. promptly disclaim any likeness between the Constitution of their own State and those of countries in which, as they put it, “formal democracy” exists. Yet they seem to have the root of the matter in them. They would agree that it is desirable to insure that the affairs of any nation should be administered in accordance with the desires of the people of that nation. They would probably go further and accept the view that both public contentment and administrative efficiency are greatly promoted if the people feel that the laws have received popular assent. And if, going beyond mere machinery, it were asserted that the most important mark of a democratic community was that it was founded on and pervaded by the principle of equality, the Communists would at once accept the proposition. What demands the serious consideration of American and British students is that the Communists of Soviet Russia unhesitatingly claim that on all or on any of these three grounds the U. S. S. R. is essentially a democratic community, and that it is, in fact, the most completely democratic of all the communities of any magnitude in the world of today.

We see, at once, that Soviet Russia has a different pattern of organization from that of the rest of the world. Instead of one representative system exercising all power, it has several parallel hierarchies having substantially a common form. Instead of the millions of citizens casting anonymous mass votes, in huge geographical constituencies, for the supreme legislature and executive, the citizens of the U. S. S. R. vote only in small groups of fellow-workers or village neighbors for one of themselves whom they know personally, and they delegate the rest of their power through indirect election. Instead of the principal positions being usually filled by rich men or by men closely allied to a wealthy class, the U. S. S. R. affords a picture of a vast community in which such personal wealth as exists plays no part either in the government or in the radio or the newspaper press, and exercises at elections no influence whatever, while every facility is provided for enabling men and women of the manual working class to take the part in government that their numerical preponderance warrants. If in Western Europe and America democracy is often hastily summed up as universal suffrage with a free press, in the U. S. S. R. it might equally be summed up as universal participation in public business in the midst of incessant oral discussion.
Let us examine from this standpoint the working constitution of the U. S. S. R. We must note, in the first place, that Soviet communism, while enormously enlarging the sphere and function of collective control, avoids the mistake of confusing the electors by mixture of issues. What exactly did the electors of the United States mean by their vote in the last Presidential election? In Soviet Russia the electors vote separately in different groups and at different dates in their fundamentally different capacities. For the election of the city council (soviet) the great mass of electors vote at their several places of work, along with their fellow-workers of all grades in the particular establishment. In the villages they vote along with their near neighbors, who have usually the same occupation. But the seventy-odd millions of registered electors for the soviets are consumers as well as active citizens; and it is in their capacity as consumers that the 72,000,000 shareholding members enrolled in the 45,764 separate cooperative societies (on Jan. 1, 1932) elect their quite distinct managing committees and exercise their control over the distribution of three-fourths of all their household supplies.

And there is yet another differentiation. These millions of citizens and consumers between the Baltic and the Pacific are, if able-bodied adults, with insignificant exceptions, also active producers, in industry or agriculture (including also administration, communication and transport, banking, social welfare institutions and all cultural activities). Such of them as are wage or salary earners are organized in forty-six huge trade unions, having a co-equal share in the government (or control of the social environment). These members vote in a separate system, which is essentially similar in pattern to that of the soviets and cooperatives. Every trade-union member votes along with his fellow-workers for the shop or factory committee of the establishment (whether factory, mine, ship, hospital, university or institute) in which he or she works. Those producers who are not paid by wage or salary and who themselves own the instruments of production are separately organized in associations of producers, either in industry (the tens of thousands of kustar artels) or in agriculture on the 230,000 collective farms (kolkos). These similarly meet in their own small groups of fellow-workers and elect their own local committees, through which they exercise their share in the collective control of their own industry throughout the U. S. S. R.

This multiplication of elections, with its separation of issues into (1) common citizenship, (2) distribution of household supplies and (3) wealth production (whether by wage or salary earners or by owner-workers), affords, it is claimed, a more genuinely effective way of enabling the millions of adults to express their desires and even exercise the control of public opinion than the general elections of the British House of Commons or the Presidential elections in the United States. It is claimed that in the U. S. S. R. a much greater number and also a larger proportion of persons actually vote and vote more frequently than in any other country.

Nor does the citizen's participation end, as it so often does in other countries, with the giving of his vote. All the elected representatives in the U. S. S. R., whether in soviet, cooperative, trade union, kustar artel or collective farm, habitually appear before their electors in open meeting every few weeks throughout their term of office to give an explanatory account of the business in which they have been occupied, to answer all questions addressed to them and to hear the complaints on all sorts of subjects that their electors freely express. Thus, in literally hundreds of thousands of small public meetings, there goes on, from the Baltic to the Pacific, an almost ceaseless discussion of public af-
fairs, to which there is in other countries no parallel. And everywhere and at all times the electors have the power summarily to recall the person whom they have elected and to substitute some one else in his place. Whether or not such an electoral system, as innocent of vote by ballot as England and America were a couple of generations ago, is admitted to be democratic, the political student must at least note the numerical extent of the participation in public business and the extraordinarily valuable political education in all branches of the control of the social environment that is thus afforded to those who are alike citizens, consumers and producers.

Based on these hundreds of thousands of separate electoral meetings, which are reported to be very numerously attended and not infrequently so full of discussion as to require adjournment to a subsequent day, all the rest of the complicated political structure of these 160,000,000 people uses the expedient of indirect election. The city and village councils, the cooperative and trade union committees and those of the industrial and agricultural associations of producers, in addition to administering their several local affairs, all have the important function of electing representatives to sit on a council for the district (which we may think of as a county). This council under various names manages the affairs of the district and also elects delegates to a provincial council or conference. And so the various hierarchies rise, parallel with and substantially similar to each other, up to a congress in each case representing its particular set of members throughout the whole U. S. S. R. That of the soviets not only elects the invariable executive committee, presidium, president and secretary, common to all Russian councils, but also appoints the People’s Commissars (Ministers of State), who form a Cabinet (Sovnarkom), in administration superior to every other authority in the land. Between the several congresses or their central executive committees or officials representing respectively the soviets, the cooperatives, the trade unions and the associations of producers, there are, it is needless to say, frequent consultations and discussions at every stage.

It must be noted that at no stage in the hierarchy and in no grade does the Soviet Constitution employ the method of popular election for the selection or appointment of any officer, whether president or secretary, magistrate or manager, clerk or manual worker. Even more universally than in Great Britain the selection and appointment of officials, high or low, in Soviet Russia is invariably left to the executive committee and usually, indeed, to the smaller presidium. In establishments of any kind, whether institutes or factories, the selection of all subordinates is usually delegated to the director or manager.

The modern liberal or radical, and usually the modern Socialist, does not like indirect election, which seems to weaken the control of the mass of the citizens. English experience of the past couple of centuries is considered to be on the whole against it. But when we come to such vast aggregates as hundreds of millions, it is hard for even the most determined democrat to resist a doubt of the genuine efficacy of direct election of any central authority. When we add the influence of millionaire employers in joint stock enterprise, a wealthy capitalist press and radio, and all the power of the political administration, democracy in the old sense is apt to become a farce. It is not easy to dispute the claim that the electoral system of Soviet Russia, however we may designate it, more accurately expresses the people’s will than those of the United States, Great Britain or the German Reich.

But, it will be said, the various hierarchies of soviets, trade unions, consumers’ cooperative societies and associations of producers, though the os-
tensible, are not the real government of the U. S. S. R., which has been assumed without popular mandate by the Communist party. This extraordinary companionship, reminiscent of the religious orders of the Roman Catholic Church or of the officer-corps of the Salvation Army, does not as an organization exercise any legal power. It does not appoint the People's Commissars or Cabinet and not even the head of the political police (Ogpu) nor yet the judges and magistrates and all the innumerable holders of salaried administrative posts. The Soviet Communists dislike the use of any terms reminiscent of theology, and they will accept, as a significant description of the Communist party, only that of Keeper of the Nation's Conscience. It is, in fact, almost exactly what Auguste Comte designated a century ago as the spiritual power in the State, pointing out always what ought to be done, in big things and small, but not itself exercising any but the authority of persuasion.

The careful student of the U. S. S. R. today will have no doubt as to the commanding position which the membership of this highly selected, strictly disciplined and very exclusive companionship, quite misleadingly described as a political party in the American or West European sense, holds in the community. But they are not a separate class or political party. A substantial majority of the 2,000,000 members and candidates are still wage-earning manual workers at the bench or in the mine, where they are almost invariably the popular leaders, who are trusted and followed by their fellow-workers. Most of the remainder fill the full-time offices of local or central administration, including those of the trade union and cooperative hierarchies. Selected as they are in the main for their personal qualities of leadership and ability, they naturally hold nearly all the key positions in administration and industry. Whenever they are they have to give implicit obedience to the directions of the Central Executive Committee and principal officers of their own organization.

Hence it is that "Comrade Stalin," who is merely the General Secretary of the Communist party, has a position and an influence which is universally regarded as that of a dictator. This, however, is true only in a modified sense. His orders are not law to the 160,000,000 of the population and are binding only on the 2,000,000 members of his own organization. They are not enforced by the police or the law courts. The Commissars (Ministers) and their principal officials (being in most cases, though not invariably members) must seek to carry them out, but they can do so only by persuading those actually concerned to put them in execution. Nor are the decisions of "Comrade Stalin" his own autocratic commands. He is not that sort of man. Confidential reports indicate that what goes on within the Kremlin is rather in the nature of a perpetual series of little committees over which Stalin does not usually preside. He is reported to be extraordinarily skillful in influencing, by deft questions and persuasive interjections, the conclusions at which the committees arrive. But he displays also an almost uncanny capacity for absorbing and assimilating what he learns from everybody's reports both as to the actual facts and as to public opinion. On this composite basis are grounded the periodical deliverances which are issued in his name, sometimes standing alone and sometimes coupled with that of the President of the U. S. S. R.

We may perhaps sum up the Constitution of the U. S. S. R. by emphasizing its reliance on the widest possible participation of the whole adult population in the public business, which includes the planned control of the whole social environment, but with direct popular election only at the bottom of each of the hierarchies. Power does actually emanate from the peo-
pie, as Lenin insisted—"All power to the soviets." But the power is transmitted up each of the hierarchies by the cable of indirect election, delivering some of its energy at each of the stages. At the top of each hierarchy the power is transformed into authority couched in specific orders determining how the collective control in all its forms shall be exercised. Emphatically, in the U. S. S. R., authority comes from above, as, in fact, it does in the government of every populous State. Perhaps we may say that the U. S. S. R. expresses more explicitly than other nations the necessarily authoritative character of the great modern State, however democratic it may think itself. The Soviet organization is certainly poles asunder, like the modern State itself, from the New England town meeting, or the old English vestry, where the taxpaying inhabitants themselves in open meeting made the laws, appointed each other to be unpaid hog-reeve or constable and even executed rough justice on any erring citizen.

But the U. S. S. R. cannot be fairly judged without taking into account the extraordinary development of an additional apparatus that Auguste Comte predicted would have to be created in every civilized State, namely, a distinct spiritual power charged with constantly pressing on the actual government, but only by way of persuasion, the fundamental purpose of the community, now picturesquely described as the dictates of its conscience. Perhaps Auguste Comte, if he had cared to use the language of democratic theory, would have said that only by means of a spiritual power, apart from but influential with the legislative and executive authorities, could the community continuously express its general will and at the same time insure this being carried into effect in the face of the inevitable personal and sectional interests.

It is useless, however, to discuss whether or not the Constitution of the U. S. S. R. is what we choose to consider and to designate democratic. It is more important to realize exactly how it works—to what extent it provides a control of the social environment according to the wishes of the people as a whole; how far the legislation and administration enjoy the advantage of a popular consciousness of consent; and how nearly the resultant State approaches to the best kind of equality for the entire population.

On this supreme judgment people in other countries will long continue to differ according to their bias and their information. All that need be said here is that great difficulty will be found in convincing any thoughtful Soviet citizen, whether or not he is a Communist party member, that the Constitutions of the United States, Great Britain, France or Germany come nearer than that of the U. S. S. R. to securing what is usually meant by democracy, whether emphasis is laid on social equality or on the fulfillment of the popular desires or even on the general consciousness of consent to the actions of government.

At this point there comes into view the full significance of the difference in the sphere of collective organization as seen in the U. S. S. R. on the one hand and in the rest of the civilized world on the other. This is not a difference in national purpose. What the fathers of the United States Constitution aimed at was also the object of Lenin's lifelong devotion—to use the American phrase—to secure the equal rights of all men to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Jefferson thought that this would be attained if we cleared away monarchy and all hampering legal restrictions on individual effort, merely maintaining courts of justice and a police force. The British Radicals of a hundred years ago (though Jeremy Bentham knew better) generally agreed with this view. Later generations on both sides of the Atlantic rationalized and moralized this minimizing of politics,
until it became an article of faith that "self-love and social are the same," that if every man was left to pursue his own interest in the way he thought best the interests of all men would be automatically secured, or, at least, that there was no known practicable alternative to the policy of letting each man do what he liked with his own.

But this was before the industrial revolution had transformed three-fourths of the people into propertyless wage earners and before it had unwittingly given to a small minority of capitalists what it is not unfair to describe as an economic dictatorship, and one that Jefferson would perhaps have been the first to resent. Today it seems only a mockery to pretend that the Constitution of the United States or that of Great Britain secures to every man equal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Soviet Russia believes that it has presented the world with a practicable alternative, which comes much nearer to the attainment of the Jeffersonian object.

We shall understand this paradoxical claim better if we recall the nature of the compulsion and coercion against which the mass of the citizens of every great industrial State are now seeking protection. What is it that condemns the great majority of all the inhabitants of great nations to grow up in penury, and many of them in chronic want; what makes the incomes of the mass of wage earners actually insufficient for completely healthy maintenance and full training of their families; what forces those who do the most laborious work to live in the most unhealthy surroundings, under the most insanitary conditions, with a death rate and a sickness rate that we now know to be relatively excessive and totally unnecessary; what deprives nearly all of them of leisure and holidays, traveling and culture; finally, what exposes most of them periodically to involuntary unemployment and famine and dooms many in old age to pauperism? Our grandfathers might have said original sin. Our fathers complacently ascribed all these ills, even when they were seen to be social diseases, to the personal shortcomings of the poor.

The conscience of the Soviet Union, in full accord with modern science, puts these social diseases down, at any rate in great measure, together with nearly all the resultant inequalities of fortune, to the nature of the economic environment into which the people are born and amid which they must inevitably grow up. It is not monarchy or a State church or chattel slavery that causes at least one-fourth of all the workers in the United States and Great Britain to obtain even in good times a wage demonstrably inadequate to full healthy maintenance. It is not lack of resources in a country abounding in every necessity of life. It is not even the cruelty or other wickedness of the dominant class which is as uneducated as the victims of the oppression that hardly any of them understand. It is the environment itself that deprives the vast majority of the people of every country deeming itself civilized of effective liberty and of anything like equal opportunity of pursuing happiness. And the sharp points and painful pressure of that environment are supplied, so it is argued, by the profit-making motive embodied in the private ownership of all the instruments of production.

Accordingly what the U. S. S. R. seeks to do—what Jefferson never thought of and what the capitalist nations have never attempted—is deliberately and continuously to shape the whole economic and social environment of the population in such a way as genuinely to secure to every person in the land, so far as may be found practicable, both equality of opportunity and the widest possible expansion of individuality. This is in Soviet Russia the object and meaning of the General Plan which forms the central core of all politics. It is significant
that its formulation starts each year with the bare statistics of the population in each locality and for the whole U. S. S. R. So many adult able-bodied workers in health to be found opportunities for production (no other State approaches its problems from this starting point); so many children and young people to be insured education and technical training; so many sick and infirm to be cured or relieved; so many aged and superannuated to be provided for. It is solely to attain the desired standard of life for all the people that the whole scheme is planned, without the least concern for anyone's private profit—all the industrialization and electrification, the extraordinary mechanization of agriculture, the insistent rationalizing of international trade, the audacious redistribution of all kinds of production according to local opportunities so as to lessen the expense of transportation; the relatively colossal expenditure on education, book publication, newspaper production, concerts and the drama, the opera and the ballet.

The question that the foreign inquirer, usually a person with an assured income from investments, is apt to ask is, "Does not such a comprehensive planning of the entire social environment involve a lessening of individual liberty?" The answer that would be given to him is, "Frankly, yes, so far as the relatively small number of actual or potential property owners are concerned." No able-bodied man or woman can live comfortably in the U. S. S. R. without doing his share of socially useful work by hand or by brain, even if he is a property owner. No one is free to engage in business for his own individual profit, if this involves the employment of wage-labor.

But, on the other hand, the whole of the people of the U. S. S. R. find, so it is claimed, that the all-pervading pressure of the social environment, which formerly deprived them of all effective liberty (or opportunity) to live a full life, is now so shaped and controlled as to afford every one of them a great deal more individual freedom of choice of occupation and residence than was ever possessed before; much more leisure, both daily and in holidays; a steadily rising share in the aggregate of consumable goods that are produced; a greatly enlarged avenue of promotion to duties of greater responsibility and emoluments; extended educational facilities for the children as well as for the man and his wife; the security afforded by the network of social insurance; and the opportunity of actively participating, according to one's abilities, in the actual government of the community.

Whether the citizen of the Western World thinks that all this does or does not amount to a positive increase of individual liberty—brought about by the deliberate control and planning of the social environment—will probably depend on whether he thinks that it is more important to the world that property owners should be free to indulge in their caprices or that the four-fifths who are not property owners should find their own individual opportunities of choice and initiative enlarged.