

The Choice We Must Face
**Democracy and Imperialism,
 Or Democracy and Standards?**

Irving Babbitt

IN OUR RECENT CRUSADE to make the world safe for democracy [World War I] it was currently assumed that democracy is the same as liberty and the opposite of imperialism. The teachings of history are strangely different. Democracy in the sense of direct and unlimited democracy is, as was pointed out long ago by Aristotle, the death of liberty; in virtue of its tyrannical temper, it is likewise, in the broad sense in which I have been using the term, closely akin to imperialism.* Now the distinction of Rousseau is, as we have seen, to have been the most uncompromising of all modern theorists of direct democracy. How far have the actual results of Rousseauism justified Aristotle rather than those who have anticipated from the diffusion of the Rousseauistic evangel, a paradise of liberty, equality, and fraternity? The commanding position of Rousseau in the democratic movement is at all events beyond question, though even here it is possible to exaggerate. "Democracy," says M. de Vogüé, "has only one father—Rousseau. . . . The great muddy stream which is submerging us flows from the writings and the life of Rousseau like the Rhine and the Po from the Alpine reservoirs which feed them perpetually."¹ It is interesting to place alongside of this and similar passages which might be multiplied indefinitely, passages² from German authorities, likewise very numerous, to the effect that Rousseau is more than any other person the father of their *Kultur*. Here, too, one must

*By "imperialism" Babbitt refers to arbitrary assertiveness not only among nations but also among individuals and groups.

Irving Babbitt, who taught French and comparative literature at Harvard from 1894 to 1933, was one of the leading social and cultural thinkers of his time. This article is adapted from the chapters entitled "Democracy and Imperialism" and "Democracy and Standards" in Babbitt's 1924 classic, Democracy and Leadership.

allow for an element of exaggeration. Much in Germany that is often ascribed to Rousseau may be traced to English influences, the same influences that acted on Rousseau himself.

Passages of the kind I have just cited seem to establish a first connection between *Kultur*, which has come to be regarded as in its essence imperialistic, and Rousseauistic democracy. *Kultur*, when closely scrutinized, breaks up into two main elements—on the one hand, scientific efficiency, and on the other, a nationalistic enthusiasm to which this efficiency is made to minister. The relationship to Rousseauism must evidently be looked for first of all in the second of these elements, that of nationalistic enthusiasm. . . . According to the new ethics, virtue is not restrictive but expansive, a sentiment and even an intoxication. In its unmodified natural form, it has its basis in pity which may finally develop into the virtue of

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the great cosmopolitan souls of whom he speaks in the *Second Discourse*, who transcend national frontiers and embrace the whole of the human race in their benevolence. We are here at the headwaters of the sentimental internationalism of the past century. But Rousseau, as I have already said, distinguishes sharply between the virtue of man simply as man and the virtue of the citizen. When man is "denatured" by entering the state, his virtue is still a sentiment and even an intoxication, but is very far from being cosmopolitan. Rousseau oscillates between the two types of virtue, that of the man and that of the citizen, and can scarcely be said to have attempted