

Robert A. Dahl

A Brief Memoir and Appreciation

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Robert A Dahl, Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale, was one of the greats of the profession. He directed my doctoral dissertation (Yale, 1970) and I was fortunate to have him as teacher, mentor and friend. He influenced my work profoundly and has always served me as a model of what a professor should be like.

I remember my first encounter with Dahl. After spending a year at the London School of Economics, I came to Yale in 1965 for graduate work in Political Science. During my first semester, I enrolled in his seminar on Contemporary Democratic Theory. The seminar was built around discussion of a series of books. Our task, as students was to kick off discussion with a critical presentation. My assignment turned out to be one of Dahl's early classics, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, and to my consternation, I hated the book. I thought it was too centered on the play of interests within democracy, without sufficient attention to who got into the game in the first place, who (and what) was excluded from arena of liberal politics, and what the rules and costs

of entry were in the first place. I was terrified. After all, who was I, a first year graduate student, to bring up criticisms of one of the most prominent works in democratic theory, with its author sitting right before me? But I screwed up all my courage, gave my presentation, and articulated my criticisms and the reasoning behind them. All I can say is that Dahl seemed charmed—delighted to have an occasion for debate and discussion. From that point on he was always open to me, unfailingly generous and kind.

When I try to think about what I learned from Robert Dahl, that moment stands out. He was and is my ideal of what a professor should be. Open, engaging, happy to work on an equal basis with students, not looking for disciples but for interlocutors. Clearly I was very influenced in my work, particularly my early work on democracy, by the ideas I learned from him, but beyond any specific idea, the example of his style as a mentor, and the general approach he took to social science have, I hope, remained with me.

Dahl stimulated my enduring interest in democracy and democratization. This means not only how democracies work, but also how they begin, consolidate, and sometimes how they collapse. How and why. The why is important because Dahl always insisted that the goal of any study was explanation. This is of particular significance given the penchant of much social science work for classification, creating categories, sorting phenomena into boxes, naming things. Dahl always stressed that typologies were and had to be subordinate to theory, classification to explanation. A good lesson to remember.

At the time of my encounter with him (1965) Dahl was already one of the most eminent political scientists in the country. Many graduate students at Yale were

intimidated by him. But when I asked him to work with me on my thesis, he accepted with encouragement and support. My thesis concerned the creation and consolidation of democracy in Venezuela. I am sure that Dahl knew little or nothing about Venezuela, but of course he was interested in democracy. His work had recently taken a more comparative turn, so he was open to new cases and to the possibility of new perspectives. We corresponded regularly while I was in the field. We exchanged long type written letters--this is in pre email days-- and he was always helpful and supportive.

Apart from his focus on the conditions that made democracy possible, Dahl was also a famously excellent writer of English prose. Throughout his career, in all the many books and articles he wrote, Dahl was known for the clarity and directness of his writing style. He was the exact opposite of the stereotype of the jargon laden professor. Clean and simple prose was his marker with a minimum of new words (“polyarchy” is the notable exception to this rule) When he read early drafts of my dissertation, he was encouraging and supportive but he had this to say about style. He told me that my Spanish was over Latinizing my English, and that I should strive for shorter words, shorter sentences, shorter paragraphs. It is wonderful advice and I have tried to work with it all my life. It makes for prose that is livelier, easier to read and more engaging for the reader.

My early work was focused on democracy and democratization. Later I became deeply interested in religion, culture and politics, and moved away from these issues, although they remained, at least in part, as I explored aspects of the democratization of culture. When I returned after many years, to think about political democracy again, this time in terms of the quality of democracy in Latin America. I was drawn again to

Dahl's fundamental, who as usual provided me with guidance about how to think about the issues. I was particularly inspired by his *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* which raises critical issues about the relation of democratic structures to democratic participation and practice.

Robert Dahl gave me tools and an intellectual outlook that shaped my life and career. His insights guided my research and his example shaped my own approach to teaching and mentoring. He honored me with encouragement and warm friendship. I remember him with great respect, admiration and fondness and I am grateful to have known him.

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