

OUR DEMOCRACY ?

By Cliff DuRand

Howard Zinn speaks:

"The Constitution gave no rights to working people: no right to work less than twelve hours a day, no right to a living wage, no right to safe working conditions. Workers had to organize, go on strike, defy the law, the courts, the police, create a great movement which won the eight-hour day, and caused such commotion that Congress was forced to pass a minimum wage law, and Social Security, and unemployment insurance."

"It would be naive to depend on the Supreme Court to defend the rights of poor people, women, people of color, dissenters of all kinds. Those rights only come alive when citizens organize, protest, demonstrate, strike, boycott, rebel, and violate the law in order to uphold justice."

." The legal system cannot determine our country's trajectory, and we have more power than either we realize or acknowledge.... fundamental change will depend, the experience of the past suggests, on the actions of an aroused citizenry, demanding that the promise of the Declaration of Independence—an equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—be fulfilled."

Today we hear frequent mention of "our democracy" as being under threat. It is as if there is a common understanding of what that democracy is. Russian meddling is said to threaten "our democracy". The sharp polarization of opinion is also said to threaten "our democracy." Likewise, populism is often pointed to as threatening "our democracy", as if an aroused citizenry could be a threat to democracy. After all, isn't democracy supposed to mean rule of, by and for the people?

I want to ask some skeptical questions. I want us to think about what is this democracy of which we speak? And in what sense is it ours? So the question mark in my title applies to both words. What is this democracy? And is it ours?

The conventional concept is that the essence of democracy lies in fair multiparty contested elections by which it is decided who will rule us. That is the official doctrine. That is the version the US government promotes in other countries and celebrates at home. Is it government of, by and for the people? Clearly it is not government by the people. The people are removed from government by representatives who act in our name. Indeed it is this removal of the people from government that James Madison, chief architect of the Constitution, boasted was one of his singular accomplishments. Government is of the people in as much as it is the people who by their votes legitimate those who will rule us. It is also claimed it is for the people, in the sense that the rulers are our representatives who decide, guided by the popular will.

Unfortunately, this notion of representative democracy is largely a myth. A telling recent study by political scientists Benjamin I. Page and Martin Gilens has shown decisively that political decision makers follow the wishes of economic elites and organized business groups rather than those of average citizens. They looked at over 1700 national policy issues on which there was polling data between 1981 and 2002 to compare popular opinion with the actual decisions our "representatives" made. It turned out that the correlation was basically zero! It is economic elites, not ordinary citizens who political elites represent. (1) Our voices are heeded only when we mobilize massively both inside and outside the electoral process. What we have is government for the economic elites. Any serious look at the political system has to look at its connection to the economic system.

Consider the recent debacle in Seattle where the city council approved a head tax on Amazon to be paid by the corporation so as to help fund housing for the homeless and low income housing. But then they cowardly repealed the tax in the face of pressure from not just Amazon but Starbucks as well. This deference to the economically powerful is further illustrated by the fact that the Federal Communications Commission recently decided to end net neutrality on the internet, even though 99.7% of the public comment to the FCC favored keeping it.

Why is it that political elites that are supposed to represent the people usually end up favoring those with economic clout? There is lobbying, of course, and large campaign contributions from the wealthy. But there is a deeper reason. It's been called "the economic dependence trap of capitalism" by philosopher Cynthia Kaufman. (2) In an economic system where we are all dependent on those who own the economic levers, politicians feel it necessary to favor their interests since that is what rules in the economy. That's what it means to be a ruling class.

To think of democracy as consisting of multiparty contested elections that are free and fair by which it is decided who will rule us amounts to an elitist idea of democracy. We get to decide who among the elites will be given the power to govern. Political scientists call it polyarchy. (3) It is a kind of low intensity democracy at best, an electoral system carefully managed by political elites. (4) Elections are the means by which it is decided who among the political elite will rule us until the next election. It is the means by which their rule is legitimated. The citizens are an active element in the political system only on election day. After that they are to return to their private lives, leaving governing to those better suited for it.

But sometimes the people do not obey. We do not go home, we go into the streets. We protest, we lobby, we organize, we refuse, we are civilly disobedient, and we sometimes take advantage of the electoral process to try to wrest it from the elite as we are seeing currently. Along with Howard Zinn, (5) I would argue that the genuinely democratic moments in our history have come from social movements like the civil rights movement, the labor movement, the anti-war movement, the suffragist movement and more recently the multi-faceted women's movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, the anti-globalization movement. These are outside the political structure that define democracy as officially conceived. It is in such popular social movements that we create our democracy – popular democracy based on the sovereignty of We the People. And it is from them that our major advances toward social justice have come.

Our Democracy and Their Democracy

So when I hear talk today about threats to "our democracy", I can't help thinking they are talking about "their democracy". They are talking about polyarchy – elitist rule. It is their rule that is now under threat. In 2016 the Republican elite lost their control in the polyarchy and their presidential nomination went to an anti-Establishment politician, who turned out to be even more business friendly than the party Establishment. The Democratic elite was able to retain their control by shutting out a popular candidate, although it cost them the election. What came into full view in 2016 was the crisis of their democracy at the hand of an angry electorate rebelling against the political Establishments of both political parties. The elite was no longer able to manage the electoral process.

Where did this anger come from? It was not created by the Russians. It had been festering for many years as more and more of the electorate abandoned the political duopoly. This is reflected in the

growing numbers of independent voters as well as those who just didn't vote at all. There has been a loss of legitimacy by the political elite, if not the political process of their democracy as a whole.

That loss of legitimacy has been due to the misrule by the elite. They have been more dedicated to serving the interests of the wealthy and corporations. Their policies have led to deindustrialization, they have promoted capital flight as jobs were moved off shore to the low wage global South, they have weakened the organizations that gave voice to the interests of working people, and they have imposed economic stagnation and austerity on them. The erosion of the American Dream as they abandoned working families in favor of Wall Street has led to despair, anxiety and anger at the political elite, resulting in a loss of legitimacy. Their democracy is in crisis.

There have been two diametrically opposite responses to this crisis. On the Right there are those who are attracted to authoritarian demagogues who offer scapegoats. On the Left there are the burgeoning movements struggling to gain a foothold in the established political system. The massive demonstrations we have seen since 2016 and the 2018 mid-term elections were the first battles to win our democracy, the people's democracy. There will have to be many more.

Many of those attracted to the Right seem to be driven by status anxiety about loss of what they feel entitled to by virtue of their own efforts and by racist resentment of "undeserving Others." Imbued with a highly individualistic culture, they see society as a zero-sum competitive game in which success is seen as one's own doing. Government is seen as an impingement on individual liberty. Because of their powerlessness, they are attracted to politicians who claim to be their voice and who are not restrained by conventional morality from striking out against the threatening Others. Such leaders (or misleaders) gain power by dividing people and promoting fear.

In reaction to the inhumanity of such politicians, there are many whose conscience is awakened. They see society as an inescapable web of mutuality (as we Unitarian Universalists like to put it) in which we have responsibilities to one another. We value a society that recognizes the inherent worth and dignity of every person and where social policy and institutions foster the full development of human abilities. Government is seen as a democratic instrument to promote that common good.

It is this vision of a more humane, caring society that is now threatened. Our democracy is threatened. That threat comes not from foreign meddling, but from our own political elite who find their democracy in crisis. They seek to suppress dissenting ideas which they see as divisive by censoring alternative media on the internet and social media. At the same time there is greater freedom for corporate speech and the corporate media. They seek to curtail protest by calling it mob action or terrorism. There is increasing surveillance by government and by corporations.

The ability of elites to manage normal electoral processes is weakened as people lose faith in them. They seek to maintain control by authoritarian means. Voter suppression is one of the more desperate measures utilized, even though it further undermines the legitimacy of their rule. Given the crisis of their democracy, there are many who are giving up on any kind of democracy. They look to authoritarian leaders who will bring order into the present disarray. Polls over recent years show an increasing number who prefer a government of technocrats or even a military government over the actually existing democracy that has failed them. (6) In this era of globalization we see this disturbing trend in many countries around the world.

It is now up to us to rescue the idea of democracy by asserting our democracy. That means struggling against political and economic elites both within and outside existing political processes. We must wrestle for control of political space from elites, understanding that the obscene concentration of wealth in the hands of the few is the basic threat to popular sovereignty. Its future lies in our hands.

This talk was presented at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on November 18, 2018.

1. Martin Gilens and Benjamin I Page “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups and Average Citizens” American Political Science Association, 2014
https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens_and_page_2014_testing_theories_of_american_politics.doc.pdf
2. Cynthia Kaufman, Getting Past Capitalism: History, Vision, Hope (Lexington Books, 2012)
3. Peter Bachrach, The Theory of Democratic Elitism (Little, Brown, 1967) and William I. Robinson, Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony (Cambridge University Press, 1996)
4. Sheldon Wolin, Democracy Incorporated (Princeton University Press, 2008)
5. Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States
6. Authoritarianism & waning trust in institutions

Gallup polling shows a very low level of public confidence or trust in the major institutions of society. In 2016 only 32% expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence. In 2017 it rose slightly to 36% because Republicans were buoyed by Trump’s victory. The military regularly tops the list of institutions with 73% favoring it. The police are second with 56%. All other institutions are well below that, with the Presidency and Supreme Court at 36%, banks at 27%, organized labor and the criminal justice system at 23%, the media at 20% and big business at 18%. Congress is at the bottom of the list with only 9% saying they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in their elected representatives. 44% have very little confidence in Congress. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/192581/americans-confidence-institutions-stays-low.aspx> The 2017 Gallup results are at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/212840/americans-confidence-institutions-edges.aspx>

The political implications of this are suggested in a 2017 worldwide survey Pew Research Center did on support for democracy. It found that “one-in-five of those ages 50 and older in the U.S. support military rule,” and overall 10% of USians support military rule. In addition, “in the U.S., a third of Republicans say a strong leader who can govern without interference from other branches of government is a good thing, compared with 20% of independents and 17% of Democrats.”
<http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/10/16/globally-broad-support-for-representative-and-direct-democracy/>

Undemocratic sentiments have been on the rise as citizens feel “less hope of affecting public policy through active participation in the political process.” The share of US citizens who think it would be a “good” or “very good” thing for the “army to rule” has risen from one in sixteen in 1995 to one in six today. There has also been an increase in those who favor a “strong leader who doesn’t have to bother with parliament and elections” (32%) and those who want experts to run the government (49%) ! “The Democratic Disconnect” Journal of Democracy July 2016.
<http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Foa%26Mounk-27-3.pdf> pp. 13-14.