

B 5. WHAT DEMOCRACY SHOULD MEAN

Democracy is an attitude, a principle, and a set of mechanisms consistent with them.

The attitude is one that recognizes the fundamental equality of everyone, thus eliminating the systems where one person is regarded as better than another by virtue of being born into, or rising into, a higher social class.

The principle is that everyone should have as much opportunity as possible to count for one, and only one, in participating in decisions that affect their own well-being or that of others and that of society in general.

The mechanisms include first the limitation of power at the national level to those delegated by a constitution, plus the separation of powers between legislative, judicial, and executive branches. (The problem with this, as we have discovered, is that an executive can ride to power democratically and then usurp dictatorial power, using private supporting groups, sometimes militarized, or the army under his command, to prevent any democratic opposition to his rule.)

In addition democratic mechanisms include those that attempt to make everyone equal before the law, and those that enable everyone to vote in the election of legislators and some other government officials and group decision-makers, and those that give them the opportunity to try to influence other people and even the decision-makers.

Unfortunately once elected democratically, many office holders use their office to appoint friends and even family members to sometimes lucrative jobs or jobs in the bureaucracy. This spoils system, so-called, has been limited by Civil Service requirements for some jobs in government.

Some non-governmental organizations may also be democratic in these several respects. They should, as much as government, have democratic mechanisms. Of course there are some organizations formed by people to advance certain ideas or policies, and they cannot allow opponents to join and defeat their purposes for being.

Democracy is evident in the economy in market mechanisms insofar as there is freedom of consumer choice and of job choice. Less attention has been paid to democratic workplace mechanisms to replace authoritarian or paternalistic structures and processes with some that enable employees to participate in some business decisions of concern to them.

A program to make the world more democratic entails promoting the attitude and the principle more widely in all countries, but especially in countries where they are explicitly denied applicability to some people, perhaps because of sex or race. There is also much room for extending democratic mechanisms and improving them everywhere.

Unfortunately, there are inherent limitations on how far individuals can effectively participate in decisions that affect their own interest or that of others, and to work for a better world. Nonetheless, there is a great need to learn how to make the democratic political process work better, both in terms of informed and effective participation, and in terms of better results.

There will be no end to discussion and writing about democracy for at least two reasons: people have different ideas about it, and people seldom if ever achieve the type or degree of democracy that some people want. This essay is another attempt to set forth some ideas and to explore some problems. It starts from a particular conception of human rights. Individuals can demand, and are entitled to demand as a right, ample and fair opportunities to develop their good potentialities.

The democratic ideal is a society in which all are accorded that right, and in which they actually have power to exercise it, and in which they fully seize such opportunities. The questions of whether means exist to achieve the ideal, and which means could approximate it more fully than others are legitimate and necessary questions.

It is not merely a matter of which voting scheme does better than others, though some schemes give better representation to minorities than do other schemes. What is ever so much more important is what precedes voting. This has to do with what determines the questions to be voted upon, the information and education problem with respect to the issues involved, & the processes for achieving what consensus is possible and for clarifying remaining real differences.

It is obvious that one can posit collections of incompatible individual preferences that cannot be democratically resolved. But the essence of a democratic society is not found in a structure or mechanism to reach decisions in such cases, but in social processes which develop a social consensus such that totally incompatible preferences do not arise, or in which they are modified so that the democratically unsolvable problem does not persist. Methods of totalitarians may aim at and sometimes achieve a substantial consensus, but a democratic consensus is very different.

Democracy is, above all, social egalitarianism in the fundamental sense, the sense that everyone is entitled to the same rights and the same respect as a human being as is anyone else. This can exist despite all functional differences that need to exist among people in any social order, and despite all the physical and other differences among people which make every individual unique. Equal opportunities to participate, to whatever degree people wish, in discussion of and voting upon joint action at all organizational levels including the governmental level is necessarily implied. This is both a legitimate end and a means to individual self fulfillment for all

who choose to use it to one extent or another. It is implied that the more democratic the voting methods the better, and although this is important it is far from the heart of democracy.

Democracy is then firstly a matter of people's philosophy (ideas, attitudes, values) and only secondarily and derivatively a matter of voting mechanisms. Democratic mechanisms operating under non-democratic philosophies will not produce democracy. But a democratic philosophy should lead to the development of relatively democratic mechanisms. The democratic idea and value is that people ought to be treated as equals in a very basic sense and in many specific respects, however unequal they obviously are in many other ways. The result is a democratic attitude toward others, consistent with that idea and value, and that grants others the above-mentioned right one claims for oneself. The democratic process would be one in which actions and policies were directed toward making more adequate and more fair the opportunities for everyone to develop further their good potentialities. It is interesting to note where, when and by whom the implied criterion for evaluation of actions and policies is now applied or not applied. The difficult question for the democratic process is where, when, how and how much to discourage or restrict the development of anti-social or un-good human potentialities.

How well is the U.S. doing in these respects lately? A careful analysis would require volumes, so only a short stab at it here. If everyone is equally entitled to fair and ample opportunities to develop their fine potentialities & everyone is entitled to count as one and only one, we might start with education. Tax supported public schools for all children was a big step in the right direction. But in practice it still involves "savage inequalities" (the title of a book by Jonathan Kozol after much research). President Bush's "No child left behind" legislation, badly underfunded, was sheer hypocrisy, as it never intended to do what was necessary to leave no child behind.

In a market economy opportunities to develop potentialities is a matter of money, and often personal "connections". In a market economy it takes money to make money so naturally income & wealth inequalities increase. Now in the U.S. about 70% of the wealth is owned by 10% of the families, leaving 30% for 90% of the families. Bush proposed to end what he calls a death tax, so there is no restriction on inheriting wealth. His big tax reductions for the rich he now wants to make permanent. We are already more of a plutocracy than a democracy in fact, and money rules elections despite a little effort to limit it and determines much legislation. Only a few of those on the bottom rungs of the ladder will be able to climb into the middle class because they are not paid a living wage for the work someone must perform. And now many middle class families are losing out to

globalization of their jobs. Bush Bush is sincere in supporting some Fundamentalist Christian proposals, but Bill Coffin (a notable retired Christian pastor) says "Never in recent history have we had so blatant a plutocracy: a government of the wealthy, by the wealthy, and for the wealthy". Present day Republicans (not admitting they have won a class war for the upper classes so far) charge anyone who wants to reverse this in the name of a more democratic society, with starting a class war. Locally, It is not called class warfare when local government cuts aid to former city and county employees on the unemployment line & cuts jobs of firemen and cops & cuts funding for health care for the poor & cuts Meals on Wheels, but removing tax cuts handed the richest & wealthiest is class warfare. Really?

Common Cause, from its beginning dedicated to making our democracy work better in the public interest, circulated a brochure "The Undermining of Democracy". With illustrative examples to show special interests superseding the public interest, it documents the thesis in connection with the Bush Medicare bill, House Majority leader Tom DeLay's charitable organization front to finance some political endeavors, and V.P. Cheney's secret energy task force. Common Cause calls for a more open, accountable democratic government, for a policy to get the mass media to serve democracy better, and for improvements in our voting system. We urge other countries to become more democratic, forgetting there is a beam in our own eye, despite the democratic mechanisms we employ.

Democracy is really a high moral ideal which all people may aspire to approximate as best they have opportunity to. It finds support in human nature as well as some opposition. We are all naturally desirous of making the best of life's opportunities as we see them. But we are all social animals depending on each other psychologically and economically. We empathize with others' (& even animals) suffering, & care about wider social selves, though often not enough to exercise what responsibility we could to improve their condition. There is proper political emphasis now on family values. To some that implies strict male discipline rather than (a supposed more female) nurturing of children, though the latter reduces child beating, wife beating and family divorce. Politically the former implies legislating a sectarian moral code on all in a now pluralistic society. Promoting family values for all in a pluralistic society would resolve many of the acute conflicts now viewed by some in their own more narrowly moralistic terms. Democracy is itself a moral concept applicable in a pluralistic as well as a homogeneous society. Any high morality accommodates pluralism. Mob rule, enforcing on everyone the personal behavior approved by some majority, subverts democracy at its heart, respecting everyone's equal human rights. Majority views would often crush minorities. True democracy protects pluralism. The problem is how to get & keep people truly democratic.