

## Toward Participatory Democracy

*Published in Free Voices #2 (Summer, 2005)*

As I pursued research for my book on the 1960s-era free school movement, I came across numerous references to the notion of “participatory democracy” as an alternative to modern political ideologies and practices.<sup>1</sup> Many of the young activists who formed SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and other radical groups during that period of idealism and protest emphasized the need for individuals to become more fully engaged in the political process. They perceived government institutions—even during the relatively liberal administrations of Kennedy and Johnson—as being “technocratic” and “managerial” rather than authentically democratic. Society, they felt, was run by small elite groups through massive institutions that isolated them from the concerns of average people and local communities.

There has always been a struggle in American history between democracy and elitism, and despite the cherished memory of Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln, this nation has never fully trusted “the people” to govern themselves. Sometimes this mistrust reflects sophisticated political reasoning, in the tradition of Plato and the British conservative Edmund Burke, asserting that governance is a complex and delicate art best practiced by those who are specially educated or fit for it, or by those who claim to have a greater stake in the outcome. Other times, large numbers of people are excluded from policymaking due to outright prejudice against them—sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, or other ethnic, religious and class biases. In still other cases, democracy suffers when specific individuals or gangs simply lust for power and are able to obtain a disproportionate share of it.

Even so, the early American republic, as the astute French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the 1830s, was engaged in an ambitious, exciting experiment to see how fully democracy might be practiced. Participation in local politics (at least, by white males) was robust, and relatively little power was concentrated in distant

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institutions such as the federal government. After the Civil War, however, “the United States underwent one of the most profound economic revolutions any country has ever experienced” according to historian Eric Foner.<sup>2</sup> The rise of huge corporate entities, unprecedented concentrations of private wealth, and the rapid crowding of cities by immigrant workers changed the face of American democracy. By the early twentieth century, intellectuals were seriously debating whether the principles of Jeffersonian democracy were becoming obsolete in a society of mass production, mass media, and imperialist government. Some argued that the complexity and magnitude of industrial age society required efficient management by experts, not messy negotiation between the diverse interests of engaged citizens.

John Dewey was one leading intellectual who sought to reaffirm democratic ideals for this new age. For half a century, in numerous lectures, books and articles, he patiently argued that a democratic social organization is the best culture for ensuring the fullest development and expression of each person’s unique talents and life purposes. Even in a complex industrial society, where political and economic decisions become increasingly technical, impersonal, and far-reaching—especially in such a society—individuals need to feel that they are valuable constituents of a responsive, cohesive community. Dewey asserted that genuine democracy involves far more than periodic voting for politicians—it requires intelligent, active participation “in the formation of values that regulate the living of men [and women] together.” He insisted that “all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them.”<sup>3</sup>

One biographer, Robert Westbrook, concluded that “Among liberal intellectuals of the twentieth century, Dewey was the most important advocate of participatory democracy.”<sup>4</sup> One of the many thinkers Dewey influenced, a philosophy professor at the University of Michigan named Arnold Kaufman, was a mentor to Tom Hayden and other founders of Students for a Democratic Society in the early 1960s. Hayden recently commented that “Kaufman's case for participatory democracy flowed directly from John Dewey's writings in the 1920s and '30s.” He “used the term to signify that democracy, as defined in conventional liberal discourse, was far too limited when reduced to electoral

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choice and concepts like the free marketplace of ideas.”<sup>5</sup> In 1962, inspired by this critique of mainstream liberalism as well as by contemporary critics like radical sociologist C. Wright Mills, Hayden and his peers drafted the Port Huron Statement, the manifesto of the emerging student movement. It is an enduring statement of democratic idealism, too seldom remembered, let alone read, in the unkind years since it was written. Here is one passage that embodies its political vision:

As a social system we seek the establishment of a democracy of individual participation, governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation.

In a participatory democracy, the political life would be based in several root principles:

- that decision-making of basic social consequence be carried on by public groupings;
- that politics be seen positively, as the art of collectively creating an acceptable pattern of social relations;
- that politics has the function of bringing people out of isolation and into community, thus being a necessary, though not sufficient, means of finding meaning in personal life;
- that the political order should serve to clarify problems in a way instrumental to their solution; it should provide outlets for the expression of personal grievance and aspiration; opposing views should be organized so as to illuminate choices and facilities the attainment of goals. . .

Forty years after composing this document, Tom Hayden and another SDS activist, Dick Flacks, reflected that “we were trying to transform the mass society into a civic society, spark a social awareness in the vast world of private lives and voluntary

associations that most people inhabited far from the centers of power.” In the 1960s, like today, concerned citizens felt shut out from the making of political and social decisions. The United States was still considered a “democracy,” but the word no longer carried the promise it had in the early years of the republic, so it needed to be amplified, specifically made “participatory.” Hayden and Flacks explain,

It was no wonder, then, that the statement was inspired by participatory democracy. Participation is what we were denied, and what we hungered for. Without it, there was no dignity. Parents and professors lectured us, administrators ordered us, draft boards conscripted us, the whole system channeled us, all to please authority and take our place in line.<sup>6</sup>

The term “participatory democracy” then, has been used by people who seek to reclaim the essence of democratic idealism in a society that has grown over-organized, hierarchical and authoritarian. It is the antidote to technocracy (rule by experts, bureaucrats and administrators) and represents a renewed faith in the intelligence and moral judgment of common citizens pursuing their daily lives and interests. Because it challenges conventional political practices in modern mass society, it is a radical position. Yet as Hayden and Flacks make clear, it is not radical in the sense of being alien to, or destructive of, American ideals; rather, it is an effort to return to the root meaning of “democracy” in American ideology. They write, “Port Huron marked a milestone in the search for a genuine American radicalism based on many traditions, but most of all an egalitarian, almost anarchistic belief in democracy.” They comment that the communal decision-making that they advocated was pioneered by anarchist collectives as well as Quakers, town meetings and even “sensitivity training” groups.

The capitalist empire has grown immensely powerful and brazen in recent years, but the vision of participatory democracy did not die away with SDS. Indeed, as a counterpoint to the rise of a virtually Fascist imperialism, participatory democracy lies at the heart of some of today’s significant protest and alternative culture movements. As Hayden and Flacks put it,

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Perhaps the most important legacy of the Port Huron Statement is the fact that it introduced the concept of participatory democracy to popular discourse and practice. It made sense of the fact that ordinary people were making history, and not waiting for parties or traditional organizations. The notion was used to define modes of organization (decentralization, consensus methods of decision-making, leadership rotation and avoidance of hierarchy) that would lead to social transformation, not simply concessions from existing institutions. . . .

Participatory democracy offers a lens for looking at all hierarchies critically and not taking them as inevitable.<sup>7</sup>

It seems to me that this is one of the key tasks for us, as we struggle to move from a globalized mass society dominated by elites toward a decentralized, human-scale society rooted in community and bioregion: We need to learn how to see social hierarchy as being constructed rather than inevitable. In the waning years of the student rebellion, other social critics, such as Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire, emphasized just this message in writings that have influenced new generations of radical educators and activists. They taught us that oppressive institutions are not fixed by nature and ought not be taken for granted; by approaching them with an expectation that all human beings have inherent dignity and deserve the right to participate in social decision-making, their oppressive power begins to melt away. Through the lens of participatory democracy, for example, we see clearly that schools should *not* be organized to grade and sort young people as if they were manufactured commodities. This is radical news to those who accept the ruthless regime of standardization and “accountability” as inevitable aspects of modern education.

How can we break this news to mainstream society? How can we change the current dominant mindset? I have found one very hopeful approach in the work of feminist cultural historian Riane Eisler. She, too, has argued that societies make choices about how they distribute power, that there is nothing natural or inevitable about oppressive hierarchies. She has looked at how values and beliefs are shared across social institutions, from intimate relationships to the state, and found a clear difference between

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what she calls “dominator” cultural patterns (societies marked by violence, authoritarianism, and gender inequity) and “partnership” orientations (societies that value cooperation, nurturing, and equality).<sup>8</sup> A dominator culture seizes hold of human differences in order to *rank* people into more or less valued social positions; a partnership culture aims to *link* people into diverse communities where each contributes his or her strengths and finds aid and support as needed. In any dominator-oriented society, Eisler says, one finds “hierarchies of domination” that limit individual expression and crush resistance, while a partnership orientation supports “hierarchies of actualization”—ways of organizing institutions that maximize “the collective power to accomplish things together.” To practice participatory democracy whenever and wherever we can—in families, small organizations, schools, cooperative businesses—builds a foundation for a partnership culture because it begins to shift society’s guiding pattern of values, beliefs, and expectations.

Participatory democracy is not a utopian ideal at odds with human nature, but an expression of attainable values that a society could choose to pursue. It seems that rapid industrialization and then the sudden emergence of technologies for mass communications threw the American democratic experiment off balance for a century or more. Enormous wealth and power became tantalizingly available, and fueled “dominator” cultural patterns at the expense of the partnership vision that inspired early American democracy. But since the rebellions of the 1960s, it appears that we have begun to recognize what we have lost, and millions of citizens are working to reclaim that vision.

### Notes

1. *Free Schools, Free People: Education and Democracy After the 1960s*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2002.
2. *The Story of American Freedom*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998, p. 116.

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3. Dewey quote from a 1937 lecture, "Democracy and Educational Administration," excerpt in Joseph Ratner, ed., *Intelligence in the Modern World: John Dewey's Philosophy*. New York: Modern Library, 1939, pp. 400-401.
4. Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, pp.xiv-xv.
5. Tom Hayden and Dick Flacks, "The Port Huron Statement at 40" *The Nation*, August 5, 2002. [www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20020805&c=1&s=hayden](http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20020805&c=1&s=hayden)
6. Hayden and Flacks, "The Port Huron Statement at 40"
7. Hayden and Flacks, "The Port Huron Statement at 40"
8. Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*. New York: HarperCollins, 1987, and *Tomorrow's Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000.