

DEMOCRACY MATTERS

“Tribute to Howard Zinn” Panel presentation by Cliff DuRand, February 24, 2010
Center for Global Justice, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

Howard Zinn celebrated the struggles for justice of common men and women, their protests against injustice, our social movements for change. He understood that these struggles outside the established political institutions are the lifeblood of democracy. Democracy is in the streets, not in the halls of Congress where the powerful operate. It is the counter power of the People that makes our country sometimes democratic.

He saw the history of the U.S. as a people’s history and in that pointed to a very different concept of democracy from the one promoted by the powerful. In their narrative the essence of democracy is found in contested elections and in the deliberations among the representatives chosen thereby. The role of the people is to choose from among a political elite who is to rule them; the role of elections is simply to produce a government. Once this is done, we have discharged our civic responsibility as citizens and we are expected to return to the affairs of our private lives. Political scientists call this representationism by the term polyarchy. It is essentially an elitist theory of democracy, a kind of low intensity democracy at best. As Joseph Schumpeter put it, democracy simply means that “the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them.” [Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Harper and Row, 1975, p. 285]

Against this, Zinn advocated a participatory democracy in keeping with the original meaning of the Greek word -- the rule or power, *cratos*, of the people, *demos*. Democracy means people’s power. Throughout our history there have been periodic democratic moments when the power of the people has found voice. The labor movement of the 1930s and the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s come to mind as high points of democracy in our lifetime. Those decades of heightened political participation, social protest and citizen engagement in public affairs were among the democratic moments in our history. Social movements made demands on the ruling elites, demands for economic empowerment, for racial equality, for peace, for social justice, demands that the institutions of government address pressing social problems. The spirit of citizen engagement was articulated in the call for a more participatory democracy by the Students for a Democratic Society,

“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.” [SDS, The Port Huron Statement, 1964]

This is a fundamentally different concept of democracy, one that resonates from deeply held American values. Rather than seeing citizens as passive subjects to be ruled by elites, it advocates active participation in all those decisions that affect one’s life. This extends not just to government, but also education, the workplace, the family, neighborhoods – all of those spheres, both public and private, in which we live our daily lives. It is a call for all the institutions of society to become more democratically participatory.

Now it is instructive to observe the response of the political elite to this upsurge of popular democracy in the 1960s. Did they welcome the citizenry’s eagerness to take responsibility for their lives? No, they feared it. They called it “a crisis of democracy”, “an excess of democracy”, that was making society “ungovernable” --i.e., no longer under their control.

I kid you not. These were the very words of an influential 1975 report by a blue ribbon group of social scientists to the Trilateral Commission. It took a hard look at what it considered a growing problem of

governability in the major countries of North America, Europe and Japan – the Triad of advanced capitalism. Titled “The Crisis of Democracy” the US was analyzed by Samuel P. Huntington, dean of American political science and frequent consultant to federal government departments. What Huntington saw was a kind of “democratic distemper” as people demanded more of government while at the same time challenged established authority. “People no longer felt the same compulsion to obey those whom they had previously considered superior to themselves in age, rank, status, expertise, character, or talents.” [Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*, New York University Press, 1975, p. 75.] Government was “overloaded” by the popular demands placed on it. In a moment of unusual candor, Huntington says, “the effective operation of a democratic political system usually requires some measure of apathy and noninvolvement on the part of some individuals and groups.” [*ibid.*, p. 114.] When too many people participate too much, there is a “breakdown of democracy.”

Huntington recognizes that a little democracy can be a dangerous thing. With polyarchy the elite grants the people the right to vote. The danger is that that might lead them to think they also should be making the decisions. Huntington attributes the “distemper of democracy” to the periodic “creedal passion” that afflicts the electorate. That occurs when the people get carried away by their democratic values to the extent where they want to actually participate in decision making. Of course, that is a danger only to the elites who have reserved that role to themselves.

What the “breakdown of democracy” actually amounts to is a loss of social control by an elite no longer able to contain popular participation within the safe, controlled limits of electoral politics. The “crisis of democracy” is actually the crisis of polyarchy. As one critical Canadian commentator put it, “the whole discussion of governability... was of concern only to an elite uneasy about its declining position in society!” [*ibid.*, p. 206.]

What Huntington and other defenders of polyarchy worried about as a “breakdown of democracy” was really the breakdown of elite social control. Polyarchy values stability as a fundamental social value, that is, as long as it is stable rule by an elite. As Huntington has put it elsewhere, “The maintenance of democratic politics [i.e. polyarchy] and the reconstruction of the social order [i.e. popular social change] are fundamentally incompatible.” [“The Modest Meaning of Democracy,” in Robert A. Pastor, *Democracy in the Americas: Stopping the Pendulum*, Holmes and Meier, 1989, p. 24.] In other words, democracy is not about a popular will directing the course of their common affairs, it is about containing that will under elite control.

This concern with elite control in American political life goes back to its beginning. It can be seen in James Madison’s fear of a democracy of the common man. Living in a society already divided into propertied classes and those with little or no property, the chief architect of our constitution sought to fashion political institutions 1) through which the interests of the ruling class could be protected and 2) that would not allow the multitude to prevail where that might injure the rights of others, particularly the property rights of the wealthy. Let me quote from his Federalist Paper #10:

“Democracies have ever been...incompatible with...rights of property.... The interest in a majority... must be *prevented*...[because it would threaten] the unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society...and divide them into different *classes*.” [emphasis added]

The Founding Fathers who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 were moved by what one delegate called “the excess of democracy” represented in the demands of indebted and heavily taxed yeoman farmers and mechanics. Another complained that things had become “too democratic.” And so this gathering of merchants, slave owners and manufacturers resolved “to create a more perfect union.” Indeed, the

Constitutional Convention amounted to a conspiracy of the propertied classes to create a system of federal government strong enough to protect them from those in the popular classes, and yet weak enough not to itself be a danger to their interests. The Constitution was the founding document of our polyarchy. It framed, not a democracy but a removal of a supposedly sovereign people from government. Madison congratulated himself and his co-conspirators for their success in removing the people from the councils of government, ensuring that it would remain in the hands of those who are better qualified.

From its inception the United States was a divided society, divided by class, divided by race, divided by gender, divided by culture. As philosopher Milton Fish has pointed out, in such divided societies the function of government is to maintain “domestic peace and tranquility.” That is, it is to ensure social stability, which, in a class divided society inevitably means preserving existing class relations of inequality. As the contemporary philosopher Milton Fisk points out, “preeminent among the goals ruling is to promote is that of reproducing the economy ...[so] that the socially dominant class retains its dominance.” [Milton Fisk, *The State and Justice: An Essay in Political Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.12.]

At the same time, the state must concede to popular demands to some degree in order to win the consent of the governed. The alternative would be to rule by sheer coercion. As long ago as Aristotle it was recognized that ruling had to be linked to justice. This is a condition of governability. Ruling must thus adopt the form of justice. But popular demands for justice may well exceed what the rulers find consistent with the basic function of government to reproduce the economy, protecting the existing unequal social order. It is then that the elite have a crisis of governability and complain about an excess of democracy. Radical justice from below always pushes the limits of the official justice from above. How hard it pushes it depends on how active the popular classes are in their struggle. That is, it depends on how much democracy there is at any given moment. The elites cannot stand too much democracy; the people always want more. That’s why there is protest.

And that’s why we continue to need the clear voice of Howard Zinn. The current efforts at health care reform are a good example. Popular sentiment has long favored public provision of health care either along the lines of the Canadian system or as a second preference, by a public option added on top of the present private system. But as is painfully obvious for some time now, the political establishment, beholden to wealthy special interests, is not able to come close to this popular concept of social justice. The dysfunctionality of the system of representation to express the democratic will of the people is reflected in the current stalemate.

In 2008 we saw in the U.S. an invigorated electorate focused on replacing the imperial presidency of a globalized state with a new leader who promised change. And although he came into office in the midst of a structural crisis in the economy –a circumstance that offered a unique opportunity for far reaching changes –the new administration sought to operate within the existing institutional structures of power. President Obama came into office as a community organizer. But once inside the capital beltway, he proceeded to govern by the rules of the establishment. As a result all he was able to do was rescue financial institutions from their self-inflicted crisis. By relying on an existing political process that excluded popular participation, he only demonstrated the dysfunctionality of that process for representing the popular will. And by embracing the imperial role of the dominant globalized state, he is perpetuating an imperial presidency. The fundamental lesson is clear: an undemocratic polyarchy will be able to continue to rule until popular protest transforms the political and economic institutions and brings popular classes into power.

Venceremos !