

# The Promise of Democracy

*[D]emocracy, both in ancient Greece and in the politics of the past two centuries, has never been achieved without a struggle, and that struggle has always been, in good part, a type of class struggle.*

ANTHONY ARBLASTER, *Democracy*

American democracy has never lived up to its promise. Instead, under the banner of a democratic society, indigenous nations were slaughtered or displaced, Africans and others were enslaved, and women were often relegated to the status of cheap or unpaid labor. With varying degrees of blatant and often violent circumscription, people of color, women, and even the white men who did not own property were excluded from the promise that “all men are created equal.” For much of the country’s history, the majority of Americans were excluded from sharing in even the most basic of democratic rights, the right to vote. Thus, citizens have always faced enormous barriers to participating in the American promise of democracy.

But while the picture has often been bleak, much of American history has been marked by the expansion of basic rights to growing numbers of citizens. Frederick Douglass’s contention that “Power concedes nothing without demand” has surely been an accurate characterization of this slow, arduous, and incomplete progress. Slave revolts, the abolition movement, the struggle of native peoples, the rise of organized labor, poor people’s movements, women’s movements, the civil rights movement, and the struggle for gay and lesbian rights, among others, have marked advances in the extension of basic democratic rights and protections to American citizens.

Martin Luther King (1986: 314) once wrote of this slow progress, “While it is a bitter fact that in America in 1968, I am denied equality solely because I am black, yet I am not a chattel slave. Millions of people have fought thousands of battles to enlarge my freedom; restricted as it still is, progress has been made.

This is why I remain an optimist, though I am also a realist, about the barriers before us.”

However, as the twentieth century draws to a close, King’s sense of realistic optimism has largely left our political discourse. The beliefs that democracy can be revitalized and expanded, that justice can be slowly but surely extended to more of our citizens, are badly tattered. Instead, there is a growing sense of foreboding regarding American democracy. While many people abroad struggle to increase their participation in public life, to strengthen fledgling democracies, and to redevelop civil society, many Americans seem to have abandoned any hope of invigorating democracy at home. The reigning political mood in America is a combination of disenchantment, cynicism, and alienation. Although many who have been excluded from democracy’s promise have known this all along, many more Americans are becoming aware that something is terribly wrong with our political and social systems.

The current state of affairs poses a special challenge to the Left, for historically it has been the Left that has agitated most directly for the expansion of democracy. But whereas the American Left at one time carried the flag of change on behalf of working people, with the significant participation of working people, in the last few decades this has no longer been the case. Much of the Left has become distinctly middle class, and the Left’s central vision of robust and diverse democratic participation seems further away than ever. This chapter and the next examine how this state of affairs has come about.

## Evolving Notions of Democracy

“Democracy,” as Arblaster (1987: 62) observes, was originally understood to mean “the people govern themselves, without mediation through chosen representatives, directly or, if necessary, by the rotation of governing offices among citizens.” But over time, democracy has been interpreted in many ways.

In the classical Greek sense, democracy is the idea of popular “power,” derived from the Latin *potere* meaning “to be able.” Politics can be said to be the social organization of power in a society, so democratic politics is the organization of power such that the citizenry is able to act and participate in the decisions that affect their lives. In other words, democracy suggests that it is “the people” who hold ultimate authority. Greek democracy was what we have since come to label “direct” democracy, where many public offices were filled by lot, not election, and direct citizen participation in decision making was the norm. But the often romanticized vision of Greece as the “cradle of democracy” ignores the fact that citizenship was denied to women, slaves, and foreign residents and, as a result, was limited to a quarter or less of the adult population.

As the example of Greek democracy shows, the evolution of democratic thinking has been a long and circuitous one with a more checkered history than is often acknowledged.<sup>1</sup> This history is far beyond the scope of this work, but it

has included repeated attempts by left movements to expand democratic freedoms and full citizenship.

In the United States, after long struggles, the protections of citizenship were often still limited to white men, but the expansion of democracy eventually resulted in increased suffrage rights, trade union rights, and basic freedoms of press, assembly, speech, and religion. But during the struggle for these rights, a new questioning of democracy began. For example, questions arose as to the centrality of elections in guiding democracies. Vilfredo Pareto (1935), Robert Michels (1949), Gaetano Mosca (1939), among others, began arguing that democracy was at heart a fraud and a delusion. Modern governments were, in fact, bureaucratic oligarchies resistant to control by the ballot box. Government could be *for* the people, but it could not be by the people.

The impact of such arguments was minimized by the intervention of the war that Wilson argued was being fought to make the world "safe for democracy." The propagandistic attempts to drum up support for the First World War saw "democracy" being touted like never before. Later, the need to defend against fascist attacks on democracy would be cited as one justification for Allied involvement in the Second World War. But after the war, it was impossible not to recognize the gap between democratic theory and Western reality. In response, theorists tried to redefine democracy. Joseph Schumpeter (1950: 250, 269) argued that we could no longer pretend that democracy meant that "the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will." This elaborate fiction needed to be replaced by the realization that democracy "is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire that power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." Thus, "democracy is the rule of the politician." Robert Dahl (1967) argued that popular rule in the classical sense was a fallacy since it was a multitude of fragmented groups who contested for power and influence. Thus, diverse and pluralistic societies developed competing interest and pressure groups.

According to Schumpeter, significant portions of the population exhibited signs of ignorance and apathy, and consequently democracy as government by the people was not only impossible but undesirable as well. Other theorists concurred. Seymour Martin Lipset (1959: 14) argued that "The belief that a very high level of participation is always good for democracy is not valid." Bernard Berelson (1952: 317) argued that apathy was a welcome "'cushion' to absorb the intense action of highly motivated partisans." It protected against "the danger of total politics." Apathy and acquiescence on the part of the electorate could be seen as positive virtues since they contributed to political stability.

Despite the fact that Western societies wrap themselves in the mantle of "democracy," political theorists have come to realize that the claims of "democratic" societies are oftensuspect. Edmund Morgan (1988: 65) has argued that the idea of democratic rule was a fallacy from its inception. He suggests that the

“sovereignty of the people” was as much a fiction as the earlier notion of the divine right of kings. In fact, he argues that English Parliament’s recognition of the authority of citizens in the mid-1600s was an astute political maneuver. “In endowing the people with supreme authority,” he writes, “Parliament intended only to endow itself.” Popular sovereignty in England, according to Morgan (1988:148), “became the prevailing fiction in a society where government was traditionally the province of a relatively small elite. Although the new fiction slowly widened popular participation in the governing process, those who made use of it generally belonged to that elite and employed it in contests with other members. In doing so they had to be cautious lest they invite a wider participation than they had bargained for.” Despite the fact that it was largely run by traditional elites, government “by the people” gained power and legitimacy by the very fact that it supposedly had the authorization of citizens.

Morgan argues that democracy in the United States was built on a similar deception. The image of the “noble,” small-landholding (yeoman) farmer as the basis of the early republic was a useful myth that helped large-landholding “gentlemen” to maintain political influence, since yeoman farmers were expected to defer to the “better” judgment of “gentlemen.” Part of the motivation for touting the virtues of the “common” landowner was, ironically, to limit the spread of democratic participation. Morgan (1988: 168,173) points out:

The glorification of the yeoman had begun with a denigration of the peasant and carried on with a denigration of paupers and landless laborers, who spent their earnings on drink and went on relief when the jobs gave out, people whom landowners had to support with taxes that ate away at their property. Nor did glorification of the yeoman involve much sympathy with the slaves who manned the American plantations of the South. When Thomas Jefferson talked about those who labored in the earth being the chosen people of God, he did not mean slaves . . . . The fiction of the invincible yeoman thus embodied the same ambiguities as the larger fiction it supported: it sustained the government of the many by the few, even while it elevated and glorified the many.

But even democracy as a fiction proved to be an influential idea. Morgan (1988: 152) writes, “The history of popular sovereignty in both England and America after 1689 can be read as a history of the successive efforts of different generations to bring the facts into closer conformity with the fiction, efforts that have gradually transformed the very structure of society.”

It is these efforts that have been at the core of the left tradition. It has been left movements that, in many different ways, have argued most persuasively for the expansion of democracy and the empowerment of citizens. The Left has often struggled to bring substance to the theory of democracy. But the inclusiveness that usually characterizes left philosophy *has itself* been contradicted by

the reality of the Left's limited social base. Thus, like the history of democracy itself, the **Left's** history has often been a process of trying to bring the fact of democratic participation into closer conformity with the fiction.

## Democracy and the Left

Disparate social movements can be grouped under the broad umbrella of the "Left" because of their common belief in democratic participation by as many people as possible. Richard Flacks (1988: 7) describes left history this way:

Radical democracy, populism, socialism, communism, syndicalism, anarcho-communism, pacifism—all of these are labels for ideologies and organized political forces that, despite their manifold differences and mutual hostilities, have espoused a common idea. This idea is that the people are capable of and ought to be making their own history, that the making of history ought to be integrated with everyday life, that all social arrangements that perpetuate separations of history making from daily life can and must be replaced by frameworks that permit routine access and participation by all in the decisions that affect their lives.

Thus, for Flacks (1988: 7) the "tradition of the left" includes "all forces in **our** society that have sought to democratize politics, institutions, or culture and have sought to encourage relatively powerless groups to intervene in history."

Flacks draws a useful distinction between "making life"—the day-to-day routines that are necessary for the sustenance of life—and "making history"—the pursuit of activities that have a broader social and political impact. Making history includes (1988: 3) "activities that have the effect of changing one or more features of the patterned everyday ways of life characteristic of a community or a society." The heart of the left tradition, he contends, lies in expanding access to history making. It is a tradition that (1988: 101) "includes **all** those who have said that they wanted to replace decision making controlled by private profit and elite domination with processes based on popular voice." Clearly not all left movements have lived up to this ideal. Some have deteriorated into structures of centralized power that violate the philosophical basis of left politics. However, movements that have remained consistent with a democratic vision have struggled to expand popular participation in history making.

Some left movements, for example, women's organizations, labor unions, or civil rights groups, work for the inclusion of particular segments of the population that have been traditionally excluded from political and economic decision making. Other movements, such as peace and environmental groups, seek the inclusion of a more generalized "public" in areas of decision making that have traditionally been the sole domain of government, scientific, and corporate elites. What all these groups share, however, is a commitment to work for **the** inclusion of **all** in the "making of history."

## The Nature of Liberty and the Influence of Capitalism

Associating the Left with the promotion of democracy is not to say that the Right is necessarily characterized by an elitist, antipopulist orientation. Such a belief can blind us to the appeal that right-wing ideology holds for some people who could not—by any stretch of the imagination—be called powerful elites. Instead, the Right nurtures support among regular citizens by promoting liberty as an alternative to the Left's vision of democracy.<sup>2</sup>

Liberty represents freedom from constraint and a generalized belief in the superiority of an individual's rights in the face of encroaching government. It suggests lower taxes, smaller government, deregulation, and other measures intended to shield the *individual* from the impact of government. Unlike democracy, liberty does not necessarily require the active engagement of citizens in political or social spheres.

Whereas a belief in democracy brings with it a commitment to the facilitation and encouragement of political participation, Flacks (1988: 102) argues that "Right-wing ideology is inherently incongruent with political activism." He explains, "To the degree that one favors keeping social initiative away from the political process then it seems contradictory to commit oneself to politics, except when necessary to resist state encroachment." The Left's vision, then, is one of shared participation and responsibility—a public collective vision. With some significant exceptions, in most cases, the Right wants to guarantee a person's freedom to be left alone—a decidedly private vision.

Both perspectives promote empowerment by which people will be able to control their own lives. Left efforts are aimed at advancing social and political processes that enable people to make history. The Right focuses on creating enclaves of private space that people are able to control, free of government intervention.

The exceptions to this general orientation include the call by some on the right for government intervention to enforce moral codes, especially in the area of sexuality, through restrictions on abortion, antihomosexual initiatives, and antiobscenity laws. These are usually justified in the name of local control and community standards. Elements of the Right also call for *increased* government intervention in policing some segments of society—especially people of color and the poor. Finally, there are cases of right-wing and fascist movements promoting aspects of a collective political and social vision.

A belief in the existence of distinct "private" spaces, separate from political state intervention, is essential for the Right because it serves to buttress a belief in the adequacy of capitalism. The Right draws upon traditional liberal democratic thinking in suggesting that the enlightened *individual* self-interest at the heart of capitalist, market-based thinking is sufficient to determine the *collective* good as well. Thus, in this vision, capitalism and democracy are entirely

compatible. Government need not intervene in the “private” realm of the market since to do so would suggest a claim to knowing what is best for people—a knowledge possessed only by the individual pursuing his or her own self-interest.

The left tradition, however, which draws from Marx, suggests a different analysis. It denies the existence of a separate state, totally independent of the economic realm. Most important, this tradition argues that the inequalities in distribution of resources, which characterize capitalism, significantly affect the exercise of political rights that may exist *in theory* but that are denied *in practice* (Cohen and Rogers 1983: 50–51). Thus, state intervention into the market is essential for the redressing of inequalities developed there that, in effect, threaten to undermine democracy.

If the Right’s notion of liberty is carried to its logical extreme—that is, if government essentially withdraws from the lives of its citizens—then at least two developments are possible. First, inequalities that have developed over centuries, based on the accumulation of wealth and resources or based on characteristics such as race and sex, are allowed to continue unabated. There is no need, in the Right’s worldview, for government intervention to alleviate the harmful effects of these or other inequalities. Second, the withdrawal of popular participation in the political and social sphere by a populace concerned solely with liberty, without the corresponding dismantling of the state, means that central realms of political and economic power are abandoned to the potential control of interested elites. The legitimacy of these elites is contingent upon their willingness to check their explicit intervention in the personal lives of citizens (through deregulation, lower taxes, etc.). As long as the elites deliver the primary good of liberty, personal freedom, their control of the central institutions of power are apparently of little concern to adherents of the Right. These elites, then, are free to govern within these constraints.

The Left, however, pursues a different vision and faces a much more complicated dilemma. Carrying forth the left vision to its logical extreme requires the opportunity for active political participation by all. Liberty can flourish merely through the absence of constraint. Democracy, however, requires processes that provide for ongoing meaningful participation from citizens. A powerful left elite is no Left at all. The moment power becomes concentrated in the hands of a few, even if these few espouse leftist beliefs, the left vision is betrayed. Disastrous experiments in state socialism have revealed this fact all too clearly.

Thus, left social movements are faced with the difficulty of facilitating and promoting broad-based political and social participation. Failure to achieve such participation is tantamount to the failure of the left project as a whole. Left democratic theory, then, is based on the assumption that people either want to participate in history-making efforts or they can be convinced of the need for such participation since true empowerment cannot occur in the shadow of elite power structures

A left perspective on the environment, for example, includes not only calls for the preservation of natural resources and the promotion of appropriate technology but also demands for active participation in the decision making surrounding the use of resources and technology. Such popular decision making, it is understood, may result in the elevating of community values over the rights of individual private property. Such themes of collective community control, whether directly or through elected representatives, form a staple of the **Left's** approach.

## Conceptualizing Democratic Participation

The form that democratic participation may take varies. One obvious possibility is representative democracy, as advocated by many liberal democratic thinkers. But Flacks (1988: 216) observes, "The tradition of the left is realized . . . only and whenever the people are making their own history, not when history is being made in their name or with their consent. Thus, the representational mode, however necessary it may be at a given historical juncture, cannot be the defining strategy of leftists if they mean to achieve in history what they say they are about." In addition, true democracy refers to the structuring of power in a **society**, not just in a **government**. Representative government, by itself, is not full democracy.

Activists, too, recognize that politics—the social organization of power—is a battle fought not only in governmental arenas but in more immediate social and cultural spheres as well. Accordingly, the left vision goes well beyond the strict confines of electoral politics and government structures. The personal is political. The organization of "private" life has significant political ramifications, whether it be the politics of the bedroom or the culture of consumption. Sociologists and political scientists have long been commenting on the erosion of distinction between "political" and "private" life that has led to a reconceptualization of politics.<sup>3</sup> The Left and the Right have related to this development in starkly different ways.

The neoconservative movements of the **1980s** saw the state's overextension into the lives of individuals as the source of the emerging crisis of legitimacy of the state. The Right thus wishes to shore up the state's legitimacy by pulling in the government's tentacles. It wants to restore "private," nonpolitical spheres of life, such as the family, promote private school "choice" as an alternative to government schools, and protect private property and market rights from state intervention. (Again, some efforts by the Right are stark exceptions to this trend.)

The Left, by contrast, has also recognized the legitimacy problems of the state. One response has been to attempt to influence state policy by participating more actively in the electoral process and by running progressive candidates. But some left social movements have a different response. They argue that the premise that allowed for the equation of democracy with representative



The middle-class constituency of these left movements once again reminds us of a central dilemma of democracy and leads to an important question: Why is it that social movements that espouse a democratic philosophy of inclusive participation and that claim to speak on behalf of the disempowered on issues that are not class-specific have constituents that are overwhelmingly from middle-class backgrounds?

The question is an important one because the relative nonparticipation of the working class in NSMs contradicts the Left's core philosophy of broad democratic participation. Progressive left movements have positioned themselves as the voice of the disadvantaged and disenfranchised, those who are locked out of meaningful political participation. But as with many earlier experiments in democracy, there is a gap between the Left's rhetoric and the fundamental fact that the vast majority of the NSM Left is middle class, while the majority of Americans are working class.

In the past, the Left has sometimes tried to theorize itself out of this dilemma. In the 1960s when the student and antiwar movements found themselves with little visible working-class support, segments of the movement simply adopted a reformulated notion of working class and claimed that they were the "new working class." Those in the privileged halls of academia were producing tracts that painted students as the oppressed victims of a changing society. Some envisioned students as workers in the intellectual factories of university life, while others saw *The Student as Nigger* (Farber 1969), as one popular work was titled.

Another strategy for dealing with the lack of working-class participation in left movements has been to simply assert that class is no longer a significant cleavage in contemporary society. Instead, some theorize, new forms of "identity politics" have largely displaced class as the basis of significant social-change efforts. Such an approach undergirds much NSM theory. Women, people of color, lesbians and gays, environmentalists, and peace activists all make up segments of such "new social movements" that are, in part, defined by their formation around supraclass issues. While these movements have served as a needed corrective to a class-based politics that too often had been only white and male, the rise of NSMs has led some to see class as archaic and increasingly irrelevant to progressive concerns. But rather than overcoming "outdated" class identities, middle-class new social movements have, in fact, organized themselves along a new class cleavage that separates them from the "old" working class. Theoretical reports of the death of class have, in reality, been greatly exaggerated.

## Conclusion

The question of working-class nonparticipation should be of vital interest to progressive social movements, but it should also be of concern to anyone interested in the reinvigoration of American political life. As long as working

democracy meant government by the people, or at least by their accountable representatives, was premised on the assumption that governmental power was *the* power in society, that politics dominated over social and economic life, and that no factional power or interest group could successfully resist the legitimate might of the popular will.” **But** power in contemporary society has in many cases escaped state control. That is, government **is** no longer *the* power in society. Multinational corporations are the clearest example, shuffling capital and jobs from country to country to elude government restrictions and exploit corporate-friendly environments.

While some argue that economic powers have grown so influential as to subvert efforts of governments, others have argued that power does not have a single base in the economy **or** politics but is instead diffuse, permeating society and taking different forms in different sites. **As** a result, political struggles must be carried out in the broader battleground of culture and society as a whole, not simply in the narrow confines of electoral politics. Some social movements have consequently focused on politicizing the institutions of social life or “civil society” rather than privileging the contest for state power. Such movements wish to reconstitute an independent, politicized, democratic civil society to act as a counterweight to state influence. While the Right wants to separate the state from social life, some on the left want to create democratic institutions that blur the line between government and the governed. In essence, the Left wants to socialize the state and politicize society.

One group of left movements that has pursued such a strategy are the so-called new social movements (as distinct from the “old” class-based labor movement) that are the focus of this work. Habermas’s (1981: 33–34) very definition of new social movements is based on their existence as remaining fragments of civil society struggling against the institutionalized state and corporate structures. For Habermas, the tension between civil society and the state **is** sufficient to fuel discord, making it unnecessary to resort to a model of class conflict to explain political and social divisions. Thus, class takes on a much **less** significant role in New Movement theory than it has in the past. This new mode of diffuse conflict, according to Habermas, takes the form of the struggle between the overinstitutionalized “center” of society “composed of strata directly involved in the production process” (including state, corporations, media, political parties, military, and even unions) and the forces supposedly “on the periphery” that make up new social movements (women, people of color, environmentalists, peace activists, etc.).

But Habermas **is** misleading in his romanticized vision of the “peripheral” forces of new social movements. **As** Habermas (1981: 33) himself acknowledges, inspection of the actual participants in these movements reveals that they are not the inhabitants of “outsider groups” but are primarily “the new middle class, the younger generation, and those groups with higher levels of formal education.” Dieter Rucht (1988: 317), for example, concludes that “the social core of NSMs are neither socially marginal nor economically threatened.”

people are largely nonparticipants in our political system, American democracy will remain a mirage whose legitimacy is, at best, in question. Societies with stark differential class participation will never produce justice.

The Left's vision of democratic participation has not been adequate in overcoming the appeal of the Right's advancement of a more limited vision of liberty. In the end, we must admit that we have yet to create a truly democratic society. Perhaps more surprisingly, we must also admit that the new-social-movement **Left** has largely failed to create organizations that can reach out beyond their middle-class base.

In order to understand why working people by and large do not participate politically, especially in left movements, it is necessary to better understand how working people relate to the world of politics more broadly. It is also important not just to ask what's "wrong" with working people for not participating in left politics, but to **ask** what might be "wrong" with the political system and with what left movements are doing—or not doing—that makes democratic participation unattractive to working people. As the next chapter suggests, the current state of affairs has not always existed.