

# More Democracy, Less Poverty

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AMONGST THE RICHEST COUNTRIES, the United States has some of the highest rates of indigence, especially for children; levels of poverty that are exorbitant for visible minorities and single mothers; a growing maldistribution of income and wealth; and seemingly never-ending increases in the use of soup kitchens and food pantries. As many have observed, a successfully prosecuted "War on the Poor" was launched in the last few decades, initiated by the Reagan administration and accelerated by Clinton, the Bushes, and their allies in Congress. The inability of successive American governments to address the "poverty question" is longstanding; it has been almost half a century since President Lyndon Johnson declared his "War on Poverty." Clearly, something has gone terribly wrong.

We can pose the question as follows: Why does the U.S. welfare state continue to be minimalist and punitive compared to, say, almost all welfare states in continental Europe, notably those in Scandinavia? Most liberals who address the prevalence of poverty in America conclude their analyses with a series of policies that would be necessary to assist the poor, including higher benefits for the unemployed and those on welfare, universal child care and health care systems, and increases to minimum wages. However, following the "to do" list, the question of why these improvements to social welfare have not yet been realized often meets with an embarrassed silence. When this silence is broken, and an explanation is offered, the absence of an effective anti-poverty policy is frequently ascribed to a couple of factors.

One factor, many analysts claim, is that unlike people in other nations, Americans have a hyper-individualist culture and value system that is wary of the state, and that this anti-government creed is a barrier to progressive social changes. For example, Katherine van Wormer, in her contrast of Americans and Norwegians, saw a different "sense of cultural style" between these two peoples: the former are overly competitive while the latter are typically cooperative. Eradicating poverty, then, involves altering beliefs. "Change will come in the United States when the values begin to change and emulate those in Norway." We must emphasize the importance of collective goods and elect leaders who are willing to articulate a more publicly oriented consciousness. She is confident that once "a collective sense of urgency is established (such as a demand for national health care), the mobilization of forces to carry out the prerequisite tasks will follow." [1]

Another barrier to reducing poverty is the apparent "lack of education" on the part of elected representatives. For instance, William Julius Wilson maintains that "larger forces in society," such as "segregation, discrimination, a lack of economic opportunity, [and] failing public schools," play key roles in creating and maintaining poverty. But these forces are mostly the result of government decisions (or non-decisions), specifically "the absence of an effective labor market policy" which has meant, among other things, that "policymakers have tolerated industry practices that undermine worker security." The response to this absence must be "to fashion a new agenda," one which, unlike current policies, reflects "an awareness and appreciation of the devastating effects of recent systemic changes on poor urban populations and neighborhoods." [2]

A related argument is made by Elizabeth A. Segal. She points to a number of perspectives that try to explain the entrenchment of poverty, concluding that the most pertinent of these is the increased social, economic, and cultural distance between rich and poor, which has produced on the part of the wealthy a lack of concern for people who struggle financially. Those who are well off are not distressed by poverty because they do not comprehend it. A positive transformation can unfold when those at the top of the income chart become more empathetic, specifically if they can gain

"insights about the circumstances of [poor] peoples' lives." This need to develop empathy applies especially to policymakers who, due to their wealth, are often unaware of pressing social needs; "it is necessary to help them to understand what it means to live in poverty." [3]

In sum, policymakers are supposedly out of touch with the realities of life for low-income Americans. Those responsible for governing also lack knowledge on how to end poverty. This lack is even more troublesome when it is combined with an absence of statesmanship from the same policymakers. As a consequence, leaders must undergo a process of re-education to bring them to a point when they will finally address the horrible conditions of life for millions of Americans, when they will finally do the right thing. This may involve providing leaders with (new and improved?) policy briefs, lobbying members of Congress and their staff, and taking politicians on guided tours of areas that suffer from destitution. These proposals for action are grounded in the notion that most politicians are well intentioned but lack the information needed to make correct decisions, while ignoring the fact that many politicians are defenders of "business as usual" who are ideologically opposed to the reforms sought by anti-poverty advocates.

In contrast to these explanations, this article suggests that America has the advanced capitalist world's weakest social policy because it has the advanced capitalist world's weakest democracy. America's political system was designed in the late eighteenth century with the intent of keeping the "rabble" at arm's length from political power and that central feature of its system remains unaltered. Democracy in the U.S. today more closely resembles what the ancients called *timocracy*, "political power in proportion to property holdings," which gives the small percentage of rich people an influence on public policy that is "completely disproportionate to their small numbers." [4]

I will conclude that the institutions of U.S. government must be radically remodeled if common people are to gain access to power, a prerequisite for implementing progressive social policies. We need to change the way we do politics, the rules of the political game. This article will do no more than suggest the direction we need to move toward, drawing lessons from electoral systems based on proportional representation, the world's first democracy in ancient Athens, as well as the attempt to implement a version of direct democracy at the local level in Porto Alegre, Brazil. But first, I will briefly draw out the characteristics of the United States' "semi-welfare" state, following this with a sketch of the main features of American governance.

### **America's Semi-Welfare State**

MICHAEL KATZ HAS PROPOSED that America has a "semi-welfare state," because of its strict demarcation between means-tested public assistance, aimed almost exclusively at the poor, and social insurance, "purchased" through participation in the labor market; the huge disparities in the benefits provided to residents of the 50 states; the inordinately large part played by private, for-profit companies in the delivery of services; the relatively important role of occupational welfare, notably the health insurance which tens of millions receive from their employers; and the absence of programs that can be found in all other wealthy nations, specifically family allowances/child tax credits and a universal health care system. Katz concludes that while this system may be "incoherent and irrational," it "resists fundamental change." [5]

The U.S. welfare system is rooted in one of the most unequal of the rich countries. Each year, the top 20 percent of households earn almost 50 percent of income; wealth is divided even more inequitably. It has been estimated that "more than half of all U.S. families are living from paycheck to paycheck with little or nothing in the bank in case of a serious financial emergency." [6] This inequality produces poverty for many citizens regardless of race or gender, though the situation is bleakest for Blacks and Hispanics, with poverty rates around 30 percent; rates are in the 40 percent to 50 percent range for children in these two racial/ethnic groups. Poverty levels are also high for

single mother families, at roughly 40 percent. For children under age five, poverty rates in some inner cities are obscene (60 percent in Detroit in 1996, for example).

This situation would be even worse if not for the existence of the semi-welfare state, put in place, for the most part, during the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that average Americans squeeze out of their government improvements to social welfare only when they are rioting in the streets. Even these gains are limited, though, as they tend to involve little redistribution of income. Programs like Social Security are forced savings plans which give back to individuals based on what they put in, while public assistance programs like Medicaid, welfare, and food stamps prevent the worst excesses of extreme poverty, but do little more. In important ways, American social policy has not advanced much beyond the poorhouse era of the nineteenth century, when a main objective of charitable institutions was to ensure that recipients were sufficiently intimidated so they would not return later, asking for more. There has been an attempt, stretching for almost two centuries, to alter the character of evidently flawed and morally degraded individuals, alongside an obsession with work incentives to prevent "dependence" among the "lazy."

While programs for the poor have always been meager, they nevertheless were subject to a vicious attack, beginning in the late 1970s. Since that time, social welfare has been under almost constant assault, with occasional respites. Clients are portrayed as dishonest and undeserving. Programs are "reformed," which means cutting people off assistance, restricting their eligibility so they do not get in (or get back in) the system, and reducing the amount of their benefits. This is true of not just those on welfare, but for recipients of worker's compensation, disability insurance, and unemployment insurance. This aggressive stance against the poor culminated with the abolition of Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1996 and its replacement by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Welfare rolls were reduced by the millions. Many are now ineligible for assistance because they have gone over draconian lifetime limits (nobody seems to know the number permanently disqualified from welfare, since the government hasn't bothered to count). This battering of America's most fragile citizens is perhaps without historical precedent. It has, no doubt, produced extreme hardship for those huddled at the bottom of society.

The most glaring omission of America's semi-welfare state is a universal, publicly run health care system that for citizens is free of charge at the point of use. About 20 percent of the population is covered by government Medicare and Medicaid; about 65 percent have insurance, usually employer-sponsored, that has been purchased from a private (often for-profit) company; while about 15 percent have no insurance (and millions will remain uninsured even after "Obamacare" is fully implemented). Moreover, having insurance is no guarantee of protection. Among those with access to health care, many are driven into poverty and occasionally bankruptcy by deductibles, co-payments, denied claims, and maximum limits on coverage. This system is also by far the most expensive in the world, yet it is a safety net with gaping holes, and on key indicators such as life spans, it does not perform as well as almost all rich nations (and at least a single poor one — Cuba).

The end product of the semi-welfare state is that, in order to survive, millions of Americans rely on the charity provided by the voluntary sector. Enormous effort is spent every year raising funds and collecting tins of food, day-old bread, and other leftovers common in wealthy and wasteful societies, and giving them to the "down and out" who, in accepting these "gifts," take their final step on the ladder of humiliation. The "culture of charity" in the United States means there is "a whole generation of young people who have grown up with food drives and soup kitchen lines, who think that destitution is a normal part of American life, and that handouts are the normal, and perhaps the only imaginable, response to it." [7] In the twenty-first century, many conservative commentators still place an emphasis on the voluntary sector as a savior to the poor; however voluntarism is unable to cope with mass unemployment and capitalist-induced penury. And so the "poverty question" remains

unanswered. This is mostly the case, I maintain, because of the architecture of American governance.

### **American Democracy**

THE UNITED STATES IS A PROFOUNDLY class-divided nation, and this plays a critical role in influencing who gets what. Social classes exist in societies where productive assets are owned by a few people; they in turn have a great deal of control in the world of work. Meanwhile, the vast majority are wage laborers who follow bosses' orders. Those who possess substantial economic resources tend to also have substantial power in politics, especially in a country like the United States where the rules of the political game are heavily stacked against those who hold little wealth.

This "stacking" process began with the founding fathers, who were well aware that they were creating a republic (a limited government) and not a democracy (rule by the people). They saw it as critical to their success to hold back the democratic demands that were being made by some segments of society. According to James Madison, the propertied and propertyless "have ever formed distinct interests"; hence the role of government is to protect the assets of those referred to by Alexander Hamilton as "the rich and the wellborn."<sup>[8]</sup> This is precisely what the Constitution was designed to do. It established a state in which "the poor would have a voice and a share, but would not be able to outweigh or vote away the interests of the propertied and the wealthy."<sup>[9]</sup>

The House of Representatives is perhaps the only reasonably democratic component of U.S. governance, with each state having members in proportion to its population. The same cannot be said for the rest of the system, especially the Senate. This was a body supposed to represent "states' rights," and its members were chosen by state legislatures until 1913. While understandable given the historical context, the idea that states, as well as human beings, needed representation allowed for the construction of a fundamentally undemocratic legislature with two senators from each state, no matter how big or small its population. Today, with 50 percent of the citizenry, the largest nine states have just 18 senators (two each). Small, conservative-oriented states are vastly over-represented. Senators are now elected directly by voters, but because most senators are wealthy lawyers, business owners, and so forth, they have little in common with the people whose interests they are meant to champion. Having both houses elected directly also complicates matters because the two bodies can claim legitimacy; they both represent "the people." In contrast to the United States, most countries have abolished their "upper chambers" in the last century or so. In nations like Canada and Britain where they have survived, they remain sinecures for appointed party faithful, but they have no legitimacy, and would never dare to defeat a bill that has been passed in the House of Commons.

At the apex of this system is a president who can veto legislation which cannot get a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress. Presidents have powers that cannot, in important ways, be called to account, including the power to launch a military attack on another nation without a declaration of war from Congress. It is yet another violation of democratic principles to have so much power residing in the hands of one person. This is what we expect of a monarchy, a strong element of which is present in America, with the president virtually an elected king. Even then, the president is not chosen directly by the people, but rather through an intermediary body that has become known as the Electoral College. Some presidents, like George W. Bush, can "win" elections despite the fact they do not receive the most votes. Furthermore, the executive and legislative bodies are separated, often at odds with each other, whereas in British-styled systems the prime minister and the cabinet sit in the legislature and, holding a majority where members of parliament vote strictly on party lines, they can pass any legislation they choose, including legislation beneficial to the poor.

The upshot of America's system of "checks and balances" is what many have referred to as a legislative "labyrinth." It is extremely difficult to get a bill through both houses of Congress and have it signed by the president (or have a two-thirds overriding vote in Congress if it is vetoed). Compounding all this is the fact that individual members of Congress wield much power, unlike politicians in parliamentary systems, where a member is required to vote as ordered by his or her leader or risk expulsion from the party. In addition, there are hundreds of Congressional committees and sub-committees, headed by legislators most of whom are prepared to defend private profit-making in general, or more particularly the narrow concerns of their constituents, and/or the ambitions of those who fill the money machines that fund Congressional campaigns. The result is often "gridlock," or a piece of legislation that, if finally passed, is filled with compromises, loopholes, and perks for special interests. Little support can be found in Congress for many of the demands continually expressed by Americans on issues such as health care.

Members from (mostly) the nation's elite are elected to Congress in a system that has only two viable parties, both of which have similar views on major issues (for instance, both are pro-capitalist, pro-"free trade," pro-military, and so on). When they differ, it tends to be on social issues such as abortion, gun control, and prayer in the schools. Compared to other nations, there is an extremely narrow ideological spectrum available to Americans, who have a shocking absence of choice when it comes to electing representatives. Choice is further narrowed because candidates sometimes spend up to tens of millions of dollars in campaigns, not unheard of, for instance, in races for Senate. Contributions raised by "political action committees" and "soft money" spent by (typically pro-business) supporters of candidates clearly affect the outcome of elections. Rich people get taken seriously as candidates, even when by virtue of their experience they have few qualifications for public office (think of Ross Perot or Steve Forbes).

The wealthy receive the lion's share of benefits from this political arrangement. In the last few decades, trillions of dollars have been transferred to the rich in the form of corporate welfare, income tax reductions, and bank bailouts. Conversely, the middle class and especially the poor have been subjected to numerous program cutbacks. These outcomes occur because of the genius of a form of governance where the wealthy do not have to exert themselves much to get what they want. "There are no mass demonstrations demanding tax cuts for big business, more environmental devastation, more wars, more privileges for the rich, or more corporate devastation." [10] Yet, with few exceptions, this is what "we, the people" get. The rich troll the halls of Congress vicariously, in the form of well-oiled lobbyists. It is true that popular struggles can make a difference, but progressive change requires Herculean efforts on the part of the populace who, year after year, throw their nickels and dimes into the Congressional wishing well.

Encouraging the non-elite to take a stand against government (not any particular government, but the *idea* of government itself) is much easier to do when the non-elite play almost no role in that government. It is especially easy when politics produces so few tangible gains for the middle class and the poor. For the average person, it matters little which party wins an election. No wonder Thomas Frank could conclude that America's pro-capitalist political system must "be the envy of every ruling class in the world." [11]

### **Different Democracies**

EVEN WITHIN CAPITALISM, apparently small variations in democracy have important implications for social policies. There are some societies, like Sweden, that have virtually eliminated poverty. They are an example of how more democracy can produce less poverty. Sweden's socio-political life has two features that are radically distinct from the United States. First, it tends to be dominated by influential political parties of the left and left-of-centre, which play a prominent role in government (specifically, the social democrats, greens, and socialists). Swedes elect these parties to govern,

keeping them in office for lengthy periods. Sweden's Social Democratic Party has been the leader of governing coalitions for most of the last three-quarters of a century, since 1932. Sweden is a unique case in the Western world, where a pro-worker party has dominated office-holding for so long. Those who are not part of the economic elite have used their political power to build and expand the Swedish welfare state, considered the "Cadillac" of social welfare.[12] Second, having this type of government also leads to policies that support the self-organization of the working class in the form of trade unions. At least 80 percent of workers in Sweden are union members (the rate has gone as high as 90 percent). The comparable figure is about 12 percent for the United States. For the first time in America, as of 2009, there are more unionized workers in the public sector than the private sector, with the rate among private companies dropping to 7.2 percent, the lowest since 1900, more than a century ago.[13] In contrast, in Sweden strong and effective unions allow everyone to share in the nation's prosperity. Wages are raised, especially for low-income workers, while employment that is poorly compensated (*vis-à-vis* median incomes) is almost eliminated.

Any comparison of Sweden and the United States makes clear that, in the advanced capitalist nations, there are important differences in social welfare. America has no notable social democratic or socialist parties and few unions; it has very limited social welfare and no universal Medicare. Sweden has a powerful left-wing presence in its politics and governments alongside the unionization of almost the entire workforce; it has first-rate social welfare. In general, when labor is strong, social expenditures are high as is the quality of welfare. But the power of labor often depends on the kind of democracy that undergirds this power.

One clue as to how important democracy is in alleviating poverty can be seen when we consider how countries elect their representatives and what the consequences are of that for poverty reduction. The United States and a handful of other nations are among the last in the world to have profoundly unfair electoral systems, known as "first past the post" (FPTP). In each district/riding, electors vote for one candidate. In this system, there is little correlation between the votes obtained by a party and the percentage of seats it receives (though the correlation is closer in the U.S. because most races have candidates from only the two main parties). FPTP is another travesty of "democracy." Sometimes, in countries like Canada, a party wins a "landslide" of seats even when a majority of citizens vote *against* it.

In contrast to FPTP, most European countries (except Britain) long ago adopted an electoral system based on proportional representation (PR). Sweden, for instance, has had PR for over 100 years, since 1909. In this system, the proportion of seats a party receives is roughly equal to its percentage of votes; hence if it earns 30 percent of the vote it earns 30 percent of the seats. This means that the wishes of the people are reflected in a fairly precise manner in their legislatures. In Europe, PR typically produces coalition governments, a situation of majority government where the cabinet ministers are drawn from more than one party. The parties together have the most seats in parliament, accounting for at least 50 percent of the votes cast in the election. So for example a coalition might consist of the social democrats (with 40 percent of the votes - and seats), the greens (with 7 percent), and the socialists (with 5 percent) (with the three of them adding up to 52 percent). The parties acknowledge that the prime minister will be the leader of the largest party in the coalition. But then the parties negotiate over who will get which cabinet portfolios, the policies that will be prioritized, and so on. In proportional systems, the expectation is that you will end up with coalition governments, barring the unusual case of a single party receiving more than 50 percent of the vote. So-called "minority governments" rarely exist in Europe, as they sometimes do in countries with political systems based on the British model. In Europe, coalitions are "normal politics."

The few countries that still use FPTP are not as democratic as continental European countries, which have proportional representation. It is no coincidence that it is nations like Canada, Britain, and especially the United States that have cut most deeply into social welfare in the last few

decades, because they are polities where "ideological minorities" can gain control of the government. Current forms of democracy, especially those that utilize PR, give power to citizens which they in turn can use to reduce poverty, in some instances to very low levels, as is the case in Sweden. But when it comes to abolishing poverty, PR is not a magic bullet. PR is not enough.

Another clue as to what might be enough can be found in ancient Athenian democracy (c. 508/7-322/1 BC). The term "democracy" is formed by joining two words, *demos* and *kratos*. *Demos* means "people"; *kratos* means "power." The original Greek meaning of democracy was "rule by the people" or, more specifically, "rule by the *poor*." Everyone in Athens understood that democracy meant rule by a certain social class, namely the "lower orders," those who toiled in "base and menial" occupations, like farmers and blacksmiths. This is why philosophers like Plato and Aristotle opposed the democracy. They argued that workers had little leisure, which meant they had no time to be educated; so they were unfit to rule.

The Assembly, the main decision-making body, was open to all citizens, that is, all free adult males (hence excluding women and slaves as well as foreigners, those born outside Athens). Ordinary men, the *demos*, had access to political power. Athens "came as near as any community ever has to achieving the democratic ideal of government by people themselves." [14] This is because the Athenians had direct democracy (or what some writers call "strong democracy"). It was direct because citizens *were* the government. In contrast, we have representative democracy (or "weak democracy"). We vote for people who are supposed to represent our views. They make promises, agreeing to do things on our behalf. Electing representatives does not involve "the *exercise* of political power but its *relinquishment*, its *transfer* to others." [15] We give away our voice, our strength.

Today, democracy is equated with voting. A country is deemed democratic if it has free and fair elections that involve two or more competing parties. But in Athens, elections were regarded as *undemocratic*. They were considered an "oligarchic" practice, equated with rule by the rich, rule by the few. The poor felt that if there were elections, the wealthy would likely monopolize political life (like the U.S. Senate, where 68 of the 100 senators are millionaires, with the average wealth for all senators coming in at just under \$14 million). [16] Representation, seen by the Greeks as the opposite of democracy, is now regarded as democracy's basic feature. But representative democracy is a stunted version of "real" democracy. We vote for politicians, and then we have little or no say in public life for the next two to six years. The act of voting is the extent of our involvement. As a result, citizens become detached from the democratic process. Athenians, on the other hand, went to their Assembly almost once a week, so they were fully immersed in political life.

Representative democracy alienates citizens from politics. If politicians are unable to solve our problems, why bother casting a ballot? There has been a dramatic decline in voter turnout in the last few decades (reversed, though likely temporarily, with the 2008 election). Individuals are becoming depoliticized, especially those under age 30. If we are going to address social problems, including poverty, we need to bring back that *other* tradition of democracy, namely "popular power," namely rule by the *demos*.

### **More Democracy, Less Poverty**

HOW COULD ALTERATIONS TO DEMOCRACY improve the life of the poor? One experiment, which has gained much attention worldwide, is unfolding in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre (1.3 million people). In 1988, the Workers' Party won the municipal election, and they soon initiated a process that, in some limited ways, attempts to return to the older, Athenian version of direct democracy. In

the early 1990s, they implemented the practice of "participatory budgets." The citizens of the city decide annually how to spend about 20 percent of the city budget, basically the capital expenditures (they do not deliberate on matters such as workers' wages and benefits, which are negotiated between employees and the government via collective agreements). Recent European and North American "democratic" experiments have involved governments engaging in *consultation* with citizens. People are listened to then often ignored. They soon stop participating in consultation processes because nothing is at stake. In contrast, in Porto Alegre, *decision-making power* has been handed back to citizens.

The system is based on a "participatory pyramid." It begins at the local level, which can be an apartment building or street, where meetings are open to everyone in order to discuss issues that affect the neighborhood. Proposals are made and prioritized. Because these proposals have a greater chance of being implemented when more people participate, there is a material incentive for citizens to become involved in the democratic process. They "readily perceive the results of their mobilization." [17] Proposals then move up to one of the 16 district levels where plenary assemblies are held, with hundreds and occasionally thousands of participants. The district forums determine a list of high priority projects. Neighborhoods nominate delegates to the district forums and appoint councilors to the city's Participatory Budget Council, which is at the top of the decision-making pyramid. The final budget is then handed over to the municipal assembly, which tends to accept, with few modifications, the budget created by the people.

Studies in the late 1990s showed that there is a strong relationship between how poor a district is and how much investment it receives. The most well off district, with more than 20 percent of the citizens, received just 4 percent of new investment, one-fifth what we might expect, given its population. The poorest district, with 2 percent of the population, received 5 percent of new investment, or more than twice as much as might be typical. Impoverished neighborhoods have used their newfound power to improve basic infrastructure. The percentage of city residents on the sewage system doubled within a decade to 84 percent, while almost every home now has running water. These are significant enhancements to people's lives in a short space of time.

The participatory budget process "exerts a massive redistributive effect between the districts and favors investment in the poorest areas"; the objective is "to privilege the most underprivileged." [18] This is achieved partly because the greatest levels of involvement are in these districts. The per capita rate of participation is four times higher in the poorest areas, compared to the richest. Participation rates are high even for the near penniless, the bottom 6 percent or so of the population, a group that is non-existent politically in the United States. Social justice is built into this type of democracy, with the poor rewarded for their activism, unlike America's system of governance where the *demos* is rarely seen and seldom heard. At the same time, the Porto Alegre experiment is not a "miracle solution" to all problems. For instance, it cannot deal with issues that have to be handled at the national level, such as low incomes, unemployment, inadequate pensions, and so forth, nor can it manage global challenges, such as climate change and economic meltdowns. Still, its early results are impressive, to the point where, for Porto Alegre's poor, direct democracy may have achieved more for them in a decade than representative democracy did in a century.

The experiments undertaken in Brazil and many other nations are facilitating a redefinition, a *radicalization*, of democracy. This entails a reversal of the standard view of democratic practice that has come to dominate in the last 150 years. Until the mid-19th century, democracy was seen as a dangerous idea. Universal suffrage, which many were advocating at this time, came in for special criticism. You could not give the vote to workers, the argument went, because they are stupid, uneducated, and apathetic. They are incapable of reasoned thought. Issues are too complicated for the multitude to understand. If the rabble are given decision-making power, we'll end up with "rule by the mob." And so on. But workers eventually obtained *some* decision-making power, which



enabled them to improve their quality of life, when they secured the right to vote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Calls for stronger, direct democracy in the twenty-first century are often met with the same criticisms (ignorance, complexity, etc.) that were made against workers struggling for the franchise 100 years ago. Besides, the critics say, even if people were capable of governing themselves, how could we facilitate mass debate and mass voting? That might have been possible in Athens, but could we replicate this today? Indeed we can — though not in precisely the same manner.

What set of institutions would facilitate "people power"? At the local, neighborhood level, as in Porto Alegre, this could entail full participation of the citizenry. But even with new technologies, this type of participation would not be feasible at higher levels of government (state and federal). One way to get around this is to make increased use of institutions like the "citizens assembly," composed of a number of randomly chosen individuals. They could deliberate on a matter, hear testimony from experts and the general public, and render a verdict. This would produce "decisions close to what the people as a whole would have decided, had they been able to assemble and deliberate." [19] We could take this idea further and have the entire House and Senate selected on the basis of a representative sample. [20] Let's say the 535 members of Congress are chosen at random. What would this produce? For one, Congress would perfectly reflect the ideological spectrum across the population. For instance, if 25 percent of people describe themselves as "conservative," then 25 percent of members would be conservative. However, that's not an improvement over electoral systems with proportional representation, which adequately articulate the various political views in society.

Random selection would be superior to proportional representation (that is, more democratic) in other important ways. For one, it would mean that 50 percent of members of Congress would be female, not 17 percent. As opposed to the current 92 women in Congress, random selection would increase this number *immediately* to 268. Random selection would automatically produce gender equality as well as proportionality based on race, religion, age, dis/ability, sexual orientation, and so forth. Furthermore, and most out of line with the current political system, it would properly represent all income groups/social classes. For example, if 9 percent of the population is unemployed, that means 48 of the 535 members would be selected from those who are jobless. With 12 percent of adults making use of food stamps, 64 (!) members of Congress would be drawn from the ranks of the poorest Americans. If this were the case, we would have public policies *vastly different* from the ones we have now. Imagine someone proposing to restrict eligibility for food assistance programs and then having 60 or 70 members, one after another, go up to the microphone to describe what life is like for those subsisting on the margins of society. These members, all of whom have experienced the indignity of food stamps, could be outvoted by their colleagues, but a strong case would be made against the proposal, not by people appearing as witnesses before a Congressional committee but by *members of Congress themselves*. With this type of representation — a miniature reproduction of the body politic — it is highly unlikely that poverty could reproduce itself decade after monotonous decade.

No country has direct democracy as its main form of governance. This is not because it is impractical but because it is radical. Direct democracy has the potential to realign power relations in society and contribute to the extension of social justice. Meanwhile, poverty is ensconced in the straightjacket of the current political system; political impoverishment produces economic impoverishment. Poverty will not be ended by a Christ-like president or a more liberal-oriented Congress (a virtual impossibility under status quo politics). It will not be ended by hopelessly naïve prescriptions to turn rich, obstructionist politicians into decent, caring humans. Positive changes for the poor will occur only in conjunction with changes to the republic's rules, in the form of the full implementation of democracy. Until that fact is recognized — and acted upon — poverty in America

will never be eradicated.

## Footnotes

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6. Sheila Collins, *Let Them Eat Ketchup! The Politics of Poverty and Inequality* (New York, 1996), 20.
7. Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York, 1998), 139.
8. Both cited in Michael Parenti, *Democracy for the Few*, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA, 2002), 45.
9. Anthony Arblaster, *Democracy*, 2d ed. (Buckingham, 1994), 38.
10. Parenti, 38.
11. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York, 2004), 249.
12. The Social Democrats are currently in opposition. They were defeated in 2006, and they failed to regain power in the 2010 election. Perhaps this portends difficult times to come for the Swedish welfare state.
13. *New York Times*, Most U.S. Union Members Are Working for the Government, New Data Shows, January 23, 2010. Accessed May 9, 2010.
14. Arblaster, 19.
15. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge, 1995), 216.
16. *New York Times*, Your Senator Is (Probably) a Millionaire, November 25, 2009. Accessed April 26, 2010.
17. Marion Gret and Yves Sintomer, *The Porto Alegre Experiment: Learning Lessons for Better*

*Democracy* (London, 2005), viii.

18. *Ibid.*, 49.

19. *Ibid.*, 127.

20. For sake of argument, I will ignore potential constitutional hurdles to this proposal. See Ethan J. Leib, *Deliberative Democracy in America: A Proposal for a Popular Branch of Government* (University Park, 2004).