

The People Rule

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What is democracy? Well, as most of us know, it comes from the Greek *demos kratos*—the people rule. But what form has that rule taken? Well, in the days of the ancient Athenians, free Greek men used to gather in the *agora*—the marketplace, to debate public policy and vote on it. Fast forward to the Magna Carta signed by King John of England at Runnymede, and it meant limiting the power the king had over his nobles. The serfs and townspeople were left out of the mix. Gradually, though, Parliament came into existence and developed in a more democratic direction over many years, helped along by Cromwell, the Glorious Revolution, the Diggers, the Levellers, the Chartists and others.

In the meantime, in continental Europe, progress was slower, happening first in places like Holland, Switzerland and the Hanseatic League. Gradually, town dwellers—burghers, bourgeois, or folks more commonly perceived as merchants—gained incremental bits of a say over their communities' affairs. The Church as a major property and power holder held things back in continental Europe, as they also had in England. Very little progress in that direction was made until John Locke's ideas, partly brought into formation by the Protestant emphasis upon the individual, helped engender the American Revolution, along with resentment of the planters, bankers and merchants over tax policy. Then the French Revolution, helped along largely by the price of bread, but also by the ideas of Rousseau and Voltaire and the royal and noble impediments to their well-being perceived by French merchants and traders, brought *liberte', egalite' et fraternite'* to the fore. Then, once Napoleon set his troops to marching, those soldiers spread the ideas of the Revolution throughout Europe.

Colonialism and imperialism meant the elites of Europe and America—the metropole—grew ever richer and more willing to share some power and resources with those who could help them rule, with a few crumbs of the crumbs wrested from the colonies granted by the elites to the rest of us. For the people in the hinterlands controlled by that metropole, it meant increasing misery and oppression, but also exposure to Western political and philosophical concepts which they adapted to their home turf.

Filtered through Jean Meslier, Hegel and Feuerbach, democratic ideals were further extended by communist philosophy. This brought forth, thanks to Marx and Engels, wonderful ideas such as "the free development of each is the precondition for the free development of all." That concept, along with the socialist stage, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work" and the communist stage, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need," pretty well summed up the ideals of that movement, as embodied by a working class in revolt. The ever-growing power of the proletarians gradually pushed back the boundaries of suffrage, so that more and more men were able to vote. For women it came later. In some societies, much later. This despite the fact that Mary Wollstonecraft's Declaration of the Rights of Woman was written not long after the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and the Seneca Falls Convention, pushing women's rights, was held in the same year as the publication of the Communist Manifesto. Black people were finally freed from slavery in the United States, years after the first Black republic was fought into existence in Haiti, whose people took inspiration from the ideals and example of the French Revolution. Freedom for America's enslaved came some years after bondage was outlawed in the British Empire. Shortly before Blacks were freed here, peasants were released from serfdom in Russia. Immediately after the withdrawal of Union troops from the South, though, the vote and much of their freedom was taken away from African Americans by Jim Crow laws.

The Communist movement sprang out of Social Democracy as a result of the latter's betrayal of European workers in World War I. Ordinary folk were emphasized in speeches, in political and popular literature as a result of the Communist movement. Real, democratic gains were made,

especially by trade unionists, due to the dedicated leadership of Communist cadres. This started transpiring all over the world.

The communist movement, along with Enlightenment ideals, inspired intellectuals and leaders in the hinterlands like Frantz Fanon, Kwame' Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, Mao, Gandhi, Nehru, Ho, Che' Guevara and, in South Africa, Nelson Mandela, whose African National Congress-led revolt against apartheid inspired the world. The resultant Constitution of South Africa is among the world's most advanced and liberatory, even if neoliberal policies are followed by those now in power.

But then in those countries where communist parties gained power, apparatchiki, nomenklatura, in other words, Party bureaucrats grasped more and more power. What little say over their own affairs working people had won was taken from them. It was taken back by them from 1989-'91, but soon lost again to apparatchiki turned capitalist. In our own country, the Civil Rights, antiwar, women's, GLBTQ, disabled and senior movements extended democracy beyond the suffrage finally won by women in 1920. Eighteen-year-olds won the right to vote.

Already by the mid-'70s in our own country, a pushback had begun. "Too much" democracy was declared dangerous by rightwing intellectuals. Their theories were hearkening back to John Adams, Alexander Hamilton and others and their fears about "King Mob." An all-out assault was made on trade unions. Tens of millions of dollars flowed to conservative thinktanks, churches and the Republican party. Smaller, but still sizable contributions flowed, much of it from the financial world, to the Democratic party as well. The Republicans got more than their share from Wall Street. Elections became more and more expensive for candidates, making them increasingly dependent on massive infusions of cash from the corporate and financial worlds. Regulations in place since the Great Depression were relaxed or eliminated altogether. As a result, wild speculation became the order of the day and, with the collapse of major Wall Street players, we had something called the Great Recession. Millions of Americans were thrown out of work who had not already lost their jobs in the midst of the de-industrialization of America and the gravitation of those industries to low-wage, low-regulation countries. Many of the jobless lost their homes to foreclosure. Many older people lost their life savings, as the bottom fell out of their 401(k)s.

As one consequence of this and the continuing attack on trade unions, a fightback developed among workers, students and other mostly young people. Madison, Wisconsin became the epicenter of a working-class resurgence. Zuccotti Park gave birth to Occupy Wall Street and the many Occupys which started spreading all over the country and the world, along with the Indignados of Spain and the people in revolt in Greece, Britain, Ireland and elsewhere. They were joined by millions of Middle Easterners in the Arab Spring, which developed a like-movement in Israel and had really begun in a non-Arab country, Iran. Working people in China, Vietnam and Thailand fought back against corporate and governmental repression. Popular movements got themselves elected into power in Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Argentina, Uruguay, El Salvador and, briefly, in Honduras and Chile.

Democratic movements were on the rise. In the world of theory, in the meantime, post-Marxists, post-structuralists, postmodernists and their more recent manifestations helped along already-extant multi-culturalist movements and something called radical democracy, a major statement of which was Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy*. Following later on the heels of that was the horizontalism, the general assemblies, the human microphone and the consensus-seeking of the Occupy movement, thanks to anarchist impulses.

With the threat of catastrophic climate change and the race not only to the bottom but perhaps even into extinction which has been developing parallel to all this, the 21st century's democratic impulses could not have come along at a more critical time. If popular movements all over the world can link up, which they can through their mobile phones, their iPADS, their text-messaging and their videos, recording flash mobs and other democratic impulses, we may well save the planet and the vast majority of its people yet. *Demos kratos* will have gone from being the purview of free Greek males to being everybody's purview.

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