

The United States Is Not a Democracy: From Wall Street to Detroit and Ferguson

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Around the world another democracy has begun to manifest itself, one organized by people.

The United States is not a democracy. Occupy Wall Street announced this fact to the world with the 1% and inequality. The protests in Ferguson and Detroit are bringing it to the social and political spheres. Around the world another democracy has begun to manifest itself, one organized by people, from below, in plazas, parks, schools, workplaces and on street corners – a democracy where people are no longer silent and are beginning to take back control of their lives.

There are few, if any, real democracies. The United States however, is in many ways, the worst. It is a country that declares itself the most democratic in the world, and acts as the world police based on this assumption, yet there is absolutely no “rule of the people”. This truth is increasingly accepted by most people, even Princeton University published a study in April of this year attesting that not only is the United States not a democracy, but it most resembles an oligarchy. The report states, “The central point that emerges from our research is that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence.”[1]The Occupy Wall Street Movement in the U.S. and similar movements around the globe, from those in Greece, Brazil, Bosnia and the 15M in Spain all spoke and speak to this issue, whether using the concept of the 99% and 1% or the clear slogan No Nos Representan! (They Don’t Represent Us!). There seems to be general agreement that economic decisions are not made in a democratic way – almost anywhere. And while on the political and social front this has also been increasingly clear, it is now being brought into a more public conversation with the protests in Ferguson against the killing of another unarmed black youth, and the actions in Detroit against the cutting off of water to tens of thousand of families.

Millions continue to watch what is happening in Ferguson, with hundreds of cities and towns organizing protests and solidarity marches – against police brutality and the criminalization of young black men. Conversations, even in the mainstream media, are beginning to question the militarization of the police and use of deadly force against unarmed civilians. To not be able to walk freely in your neighborhood out of fear of being shot by the police, based on your race, and that this attack might be supported in the courts reflects a system that is a far cry from any democracy.

In Detroit, more acts of aggression are being carried out, again predominantly against African Americans. This time it is with people being denied access to water – cutting off water sources is often used as a tactic in war and is without a doubt an act of aggression.

Over 15,000 homes have had their water cut off, in the height of the summer heat. While protests and direct actions temporarily put on hold the potential 300,000 more families at risk of losing their water – those families are again at risk, with cut offs having resumed this week. Little explanation is needed here. A government that allows water to be shut off to families that have no other way to get it (collect or otherwise) is hardly one where the “people decide”.

The U.S. is not democratic. Increasingly people will agree to this, and people who are not politically active or involved. However the U.S. never was democratic, nor was it ever intended to be. In fact, a look at the “founding fathers” of modern liberal democracy reflects that fundamental democratic values, such as participation or popular sovereignty, have never been on the agenda of liberal democracy. Liberalism and democracy have been fierce enemies for hundreds of years. It was the exclusion of the social question from democratic decision-making that made the liberals accept democracy and create liberal democracy as the new form of governance of the emerging production model.

Nevertheless the idea of democracy has been a constant thread in the rule of the few with economic power, the 1%, if you will, since it can be used by critics of the existing order against their ruling interests. This is the reason why those who wield economic and political power, especially in times of crisis, as we are witnessing now in places such as the U.S., Greece, Spain and Turkey tend towards authoritarian rule and the suspension of civil and democratic rules and rights. Over the past few years the crisis of liberal democracy has become so evident that even bourgeois intellectuals cannot deny or oversee it anymore (see Princeton report). But their goal in criticizing liberal democracy is to both make the acceptance of a lack of democracy “normal” and mainstream as well as pave the way for authoritarian and less democratic forms of decision making for the sake of efficiency.

We are taught that there are certain generally shared assumptions and rights that we have as a fundamental part of liberal democracy, things such as limitations on the governments ability to restrict citizens movements and ideas, for governments not to have or use arbitrary power, that fair and free elections take place, and that civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, thought, religion, assembly etc. are respected. We are taught that these things exist and are grounded in the very nature of this democracy. But it is important to make clear those civil liberties and rights we do have are in no way an inherent part of liberal democracy. In fact they were won in long hard struggles, going back to the 19th century and took effect only after the enforcement of the new model of production. And upon closer examination, one can see that just as soon as most all of these “rights” or “liberties” were won, governments began trying to dismantle them, from the right to an eight hour work day in the US, to the right to be free from unlawful search and seizure. Volumes have been written about the encroachment of rights in modern democracies, and while many are outraged, and should be, the fact remains that these rights were never a fundamental part of the conception of liberal democracy.

As Beth, an activist in the anti-foreclosure movement, Occupy Homes Bernal in San Francisco puts it,

“The metaphor of democracy and the story that’s woven around it is I think a very beautiful thing, but it never has been put in effect. It’s really been used as a kind of decoy to keep people’s attention and their fury away from the injustices that happen around democracy.”[2]

Since the 1980s, the hegemonic discourse has usurped the concept of participation and used it in a neoliberal frame to outsource the state's responsibilities on an individual level and strengthen market logic. Nevertheless it is not participation if you can choose your private health insurance because public health has been dismantled and it is not participatory if parents have to take over certain tasks in schools or neighborhoods because the state does not guarantee them anymore. The decentralization of tasks to a local level without the necessary financial resources was also presented as "local participation" by neoliberal politics. It is obviously neither participatory nor democratic if for example certain social services are handed over to communities while the financial resources to finance the services are cut to a level that no longer guarantees a certain quality and range of the services.

The new global movements break with the above concepts of representation and "democracy" and turn their backs on these systems of false democracy while at the same time opening spaces to experiment with alternative and direct democratic processes – spaces where everyone is heard and can participate in decision-making. Democratic mass assemblies have been and continue to pop up all around the globe, from the US, Greece and Spain to Bosnia, Turkey and Brazil. As many participants in movements all over the world described it, the assembly, as a modality, came up intuitively. Marianna from Athens explained, "The assembly is something many of us knew from the university, it's something that we do, something close to us – even with all its problems. So it came up naturally, 'we discuss now and decide what we want to do'." Gülşah Pilpil, Gezi Park activist in Istanbul, Turkey reflected, "Since Gezi Park was evicted people gather in other parks to talk, share and to produce new ideas. In the universities, forums and assemblies have been set up by academics, students and workers." And, as Amador from Madrid specifies,

"Democracy will start to include something like this, an open space for everyone, not a privatized space for those who have economic or political power, and certainly not a privatized space for professional politicians or activists, but a space open to everyone. Democracy would be to ensure that that space stays constantly open to everyone."

Liberal democracy is not democratic. There is not one form of perfect democracy, but there are for sure many forms that are much more participatory and liberating than the one we have now. It is important to look to and participate in the alternative forms being developed and push them even further, such as going from an assembly of workers to a workplace take over, as has happened in a number of cities in Europe over the past year and has been going on in Latin America for over a decade, or going from demanding water not be shut off to community control of water, as occurred in parts of Cochabamba, Bolivia, or to go from protests against police brutality and harassment to community created and run police, as they have in Guerrero, Mexico. As the movements around the globe have been saying, Democracia Real Ya! (Real Democracy Now!) not as a demand, but as something we put into effect.

Notes:

[1]<http://www.princeton.edu/~mgilens/Gilens%20homepage%20materials/Gilens%20and%20Page/Gilens%20and%20Page%202014-Testing%20Theories%203-7-14.pdf>

[2] All the quotations from movement participants, as well as some of the concepts

discussed here come from the newly released book by Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini, *They Can't Represent Us!: Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy* (Verso 2014)

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