

# **Let's Talk About Democracy. Real Democracy.**

Cora Roelofs

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Representative democracy reproduces oppressive systems of power. Democracy can take many forms, but to fight for it, first we need to know what we're talking about.

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*The government of the people is the people. That is where the power is — with the people. And the leaders of the people are not all in government. They are all over. — Winona LaDuke, White Earth Ojibwe*

In the United States, we are taught as children that we live in a democracy and that this democracy assures our freedom. Then we are told to stand up and place our hands over our hearts and pledge allegiance to the flag. In fourth grade, I found out what happens when you don't. I was ordered to the hall and questioned by my teacher: why was I not saying the pledge? I shook and stood silent in the face of my teacher's anger. When I asked my activist mother for her advice, she suggested that it might be easier if I quietly changed some of the words — "justice and liberty *for some*" — than to face penalties for disobeying my teacher.

This was an early lesson in what actual American democracy amounts to: a toxic combination of coerced patriotic rituals; worthy but unachieved aspirations; a compromise of our ideals under pressure from power; cynicism; disappointment; and ultimately, weak, rote, or non-participation. For most of us, democracy is little more than periodic voting for someone else to make decisions on our behalf. Under this representative democracy, we are told that our greatest patriotic duty is to vote. Win or lose, we are expected to accept that the elected and other government officials are doing their best to represent us. Yet what we see again and again is that they represent only their own interests, those of companies, and those of people who are even richer than they are. The massive inequality produced by the capitalist system's private accumulation of wealth is reproduced through this so-called democracy. Our recourse, we are told, is to elect better candidates, and/or to march in permitted protests to get their attention. We are also told to participate in various government-sponsored hearings and *Parks and Rec*-style community meetings, where people get to express their anger and propose ideas — only as a valve to let off steam.

The people have no real decision-making power. In the end, the elected and their technocratic advisors are the only ones deemed capable of fair and wise decisions and are regarded as heroic for "doing the right thing." Even referenda — also known as "ballot questions" — allow us only to express our policy preferences, leading to no fundamental change. It is time to talk about democracy — not just in our country, but in our organizations, our communities, and even our families. We can talk about the shallowness or the corruption of democracy in the United States, Mexico and Canada. But we should also talk about how we can build the new in the shell of the old. How can we construct meaningful and fair democratic processes that actually create freedom and liberty for all?

Let's talk about democracy as the means to achieving freedom from hierarchy and oppression.

Let's talk about democracy as the process by which we overcome violence and environmental destruction and all the problems we find ourselves saddled with.

Let's talk about democracy as "the end" that never ends — a process that is always incomplete, but one that assures broad and deep deliberation to make good decisions.

## WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

Nothing about us, without us.

– Disability Rights Movement slogan

Democracy can't be a place where everyone has a voice but no one has any responsibility.

– Astra Taylor

On tour with her recent film, *What is Democracy?* Occupy Wall Street activist Astra Taylor explained why she chose not to name the film after the popular Occupy chant, “This is what democracy looks like.” She chose the question, instead of the answer, because there is no definitive formula or criteria for calling something “democracy.” Democracy may look like a street protest where anyone leads a chant. It may look like a union meeting voting to strike. It may look like a lengthy speech by an elder explaining the founding values of the community. It may be an “assembly of assemblies” where local delegates convene to establish major movement strategies. To some degree, we know it when we see it and we know it when we feel it. More importantly, we know when it is not right, and we can do something about it.

Democracy literally means *rule by the people*, but who the people are and how they rule has to be determined by those same people. Despite the resonance of this idea, history does not have the greatest story to tell about the governments called democracies. By our standards for popular empowerment, most democracies sport glaring faults, such as the exclusion of most people from “rule by the people.” These faults are embedded in the rules, constitutions and processes of these democracies. The system of democracy the ancient Greeks pioneered allowed only male citizens — non-slaves — to deliberate the problems of the city. In the US, after a violent revolution to establish a system of self-government, the founding fathers were inspired to retain the Athenian “free male citizen” participation restriction. However, they ignored the ancient Greek random lot selection process, instead instituting a republican system of electing elites to make decisions on behalf of the populace. According to David Graeber in *The Democracy Project*, this system was explicitly designed to suppress popular revolutionary sentiments about democracy, in particular to reduce the influence of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy — also known as the Iroquois Confederacy — and visiting seafaring pirates who ran their communities through highly participatory and inclusive processes.

It might be countered that democracy has, over time, evolved to become more democratic through representation of women and others from formerly excluded categories. Indigenous peoples, naturalized immigrants and Black people have been elected at every level of government. However, it turns out that non-rich people — the 98 percent — are still almost totally excluded from decision-making, other than selecting which rich people will do it for them. In Europe, parliamentary systems have allowed for the representation of left-wing political parties promising radical rejection of neoliberalism, action on climate change and even the end of patriarchy. Many of us were thrilled when a coalition of these parties took power in Greece in 2015. However, those counting on SYRIZA in Greece or Podemos in Spain to be able to — or willing to — counter pressure from global financial elites have been disappointed.

This distance between the goal and the reality of democracy is what has bankrupted the term for many. In general, historical examples of state formulations of democracy seem to limit the

participation of some or even most of the population — for allegedly technical or meritorious reasons — in favor of the powerful retaining their power. Indeed, Yanis Varoufakis likes to tell the story of a Greek protester in the 2011 uprising who was blocked while attempting to enter the halls of government. The guard stopped her to ask, “Who do you think you are?” to which she replied, “Who do I need to be?”

## HOW CAN WE MAKE DEMOCRACY REAL?

The institutionalisation of radical democracy, where everyone gets a say, is thus essential to creating lasting change. Only real democracy has the potential to simultaneously challenge the injustices of our day and assemble the building blocks of a liberated society.

— The Symbiosis Research Collective

We might begin answering this question of what is democracy, really, by asking some prior questions: Why do we desire democracy? What are the qualities that make democracy the ideal form of governance? What values are embedded in our vision of democracy? How would a commitment to democracy inform our daily behavior? For many of us, the opportunity even to discuss such questions feels both uncomfortable and liberating — a feeling that we might describe as “democratic.” We are not going to get the answers by looking these up in the Constitution, or by any other process except for discussion among ourselves. So here are some themes or “democratic elements” to weave into the conversation:

- **Self-rule/autonomy:** how can participation be more than a right to be heard? How can it be an actual way to influence decisions related to one’s life and common affairs?
- **Membership and community:** who can claim standing to participate in self-rule and at what points in the process? What behavior would get people get kicked out?
- **Voice, individual liberty and creativity:** how can individuals be free and supported to express their unique selves while working with others to make new possibilities?
- **Collective well-being:** how are individual interests balanced and checked by what’s good for the community?
- **Strength in diversity:** how can traditional power hierarchies be flattened in order to assure better, more humanistic decisions and inclusive participation?
- **Deliberation, discourse and discussion:** how do we facilitate productive and respectful conversations?
- **Agreement/decisions:** by what process are decisions made and recorded? When and how can they be revisited?
- **Education and wisdom:** how can new members learn from those who have come before them and become sophisticated participants?

- **Dissent:** what happens when there is not universal agreement? What rights do individuals have? What are the limitations on those rights?
- **Justice:** what are the standards for behavior towards others? How can wrongs be made right and how will the rules be enforced?

Each of these should be considered when we get, or take, the opportunity to constitute a democracy. The answers should be reflected in a documentation of norms and expectations — what some might call rules, by-laws, first principles, community agreements, constitutions or social contracts. If everyone speaks at once or says the same or irrelevant things over and over, it might still be considered a democracy, but it will not be a pleasant or effective one. A well-thought and talked-through structure can prevent the “tyranny of structurelessness,” the re-emergence of hierarchical patterns, and the commandeering of meetings and organizations by those unable to put aside their “me” for a chance at a “we.”

Democracy is notoriously unstable. When chaos descends, the strong voice wins power because we are all fed up and have fallen apart rather than have come together. Or we just do not show up.

In our organizations, we often reproduce hierarchy and domination, rubber stamping, corruption and co-optation. We often hoard information when we should be transparent, or are defensive instead of reflective, and tolerate abuse because it seems too difficult to deal with. In our efforts to get it right, we sometimes cement processes that discourage and exhaust participants without recognizing the need for change, growth, rest and fun. We need to recognize that we are humans with behavioral tendencies, with cultural norms and socialized attitudes, and with different wounds and healing. These influences can be examined and considered as both strengths and potential challenges as we attempt to build trust and make positive change toward a liberatory society. Generous practices aimed at reconciling differences and unmasking subtle domination can be developed through explicit accountability commitments from members of the democratic community. Without justice, we cannot expect to move forward.

Sustainable democratic fora depend on organization, time management and rules. How rules are enforced without the familiar coercive modes is also important to work out. Liberatory aspirations are often easier to agree to — like equal time for men and women to speak — than to realize.

We need to accept that building democracy is a process, and that evaluation, feedback, monitoring and reflection should be baked in. These processes are essential. So, too, is explicit attention to political education or *paideia* — the process of education and the evolution of participants in order to deepen democratic intelligence and commitment. Orientation sessions, study groups and talks where the goal is simply to learn and reflect should also be integrated into our new democratic practices.

We should also recognize that there are preconditions for democracy. There are physical, social and economic conditions that enable everyone’s participation. Physical conditions include making spaces accessible for those with disabilities and providing childcare, lunch and language interpretation. Social conditions include reducing behaviors that discourage participation by the historically marginalized including women, gender non-conforming people and people without academic credentials. This can be done by developing protocols and conscious processes to eliminate racism, sexism, elitism, and so on, such as affinity caucusing, strong facilitation, participation quotas and constructive “calling-in” to encourage reflection, accountability and transformation.

We can also encourage leadership in our horizontal organizations by people who have been historically marginalized by explicitly requesting those voices and by providing opportunities to practice skills such as facilitation and presenting. Asking, “what do we need to do so that everyone, regardless of financial resources, status, work schedules and family responsibilities can participate?” helps address the intense exclusion of the non-rich from participation in democratic processes, including ours. For example, long meetings present a barrier to participation for those who are already exhausted. Answering those economic condition questions helps us realize that work is not equally shared, and that those who make the coffee and clean up need to be able to participate as equals in our democratic processes and that they also need to be able to rest.

## **DEALING WITH THE SHELL OF THE OLD “DEMOCRACY”**

We become a power only through organization. Against capitalist modernity’s attempts to infiltrate the deepest cells of individual and social life to distort its fabric, we must organize against the system with democratic-communal values. Democracy in this sense is the free life-form of society. Since sociality is related to freedom, freedom can only be lived in spheres of democracy. Radical democracy grows society’s freedom spheres. It prevents us from being suppressed and annihilated by statist systems that occupy, alienate, colonize and destroy us. Moreover, it helps us become people who can speak, discuss, decide and act on their own behalf. Radical democracy brings out human willpower. It enables people to be themselves. Such people can meaningfully contribute to their societies. To the extent to which such a person participates in society with their own different attributes, they will create diversity and increase the freedom of that society and of themselves.

– KOMUN

The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.

– Audre Lorde

Many people — right, left, and in between — believe that the way to transform our society is through more people voting and working to elect good candidates. They are hopeful that good people who are elected will be able to enact new policies that reflect more than the interests of the rich and powerful. There certainly is a tradition of candidates promising to do so, but the record does not reflect success. Rather, we tend to get disappointed at their compromises. Many people thought that in the US, the combination of a purportedly progressive Black man as president and the Democratic Party in Congress would lead to a reversal in the escalating impacts of neoliberalism — austerity, inequality and domination of all important decisions by market considerations. But not only did they not stop it, they ramped it up. The banks won and the people lost.

Many continue to count on the elected and hopeful candidates who are anti-establishment to figure out how to win and to transform things from the inside. However, even if it were possible for several progressives to win office, we, the people, would still want to have our own say in how we solve the problems of how we live on the planet. To quote the title of Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini’s book: “They can’t represent us.” We should realize that, even though these people are mostly well-meaning, as well as nice, attractive and clever, they simply cannot solve the complex

problems that we all face. We need more ideas, more resources, more power and more people to directly participate in democratic processes dedicated to righting the wrongs of the past and creating the conditions for the survival of the human and other species.

While progressive and populist candidates raise expectations, we can work toward a different and better system of governance where more of us have a voice. Now is the time to unleash our imaginations and dig into efforts to democratize our lives from the bottom up. It is time to propose, discuss and decide on our own rules. That process is dual power organizing: building democratic structures that de-legitimize the disingenuous elite democratic institutions and rituals by demonstrating what real democracy looks like. These alternative democratic assemblies and working groups can build and repurpose power by making decisions and finding resources to address our critical needs such as housing, food, education, access to land, security and culture.

However, barring the state's collapse under its own contradictions, our democratic structures will stay in the shadows of the legitimized state institutions. The institutions of the state cannot be ignored, but must instead be confronted and pressured to be responsive where possible. Thus, we will find ourselves engaged in the great controversy about the amount of effort to put into "demands" made on governments versus figuring out how to do it ourselves.

We face the strategic question of knowing when to run, when to hide and when to fight. This tension will continue to exist and must be studied.

Under what circumstances will our demands be recognized and make governments responsive? When are they destined to be futile, exhausting and co-opted? When are we likely to face repression and punishment, violently meted out, in response to challenging governments? When can we successfully sustain our alternatives and when do we need to try to gain some of the resources monopolized by the state? Can we simultaneously make demands at hearings and in elected officials' hallways while keeping enough energy for our own democratic assemblies? There may be special circumstances where we give support to the policy initiatives of progressive politicians while holding them accountable to their promises.

Perhaps we can consider the idea of "stands" versus demands. A stand is both a position and a place. We take a stand to say what we want and what we believe, but it is also a place where we can get lemonade and chat about the weather, baseball, kids and politics. It is a public, yet safe place of conviviality, of needs getting met, of the exchange of information, expression of opinions, generation of ideas and making of plans. Stands do not have a beginning, middle and end — as long as the lemonade does not run out. We have lemons, let's make lemonade. And what is the lemonade of our movements for democracy but our commitment to liberation and our ethic of care.



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Cora Roelofs  
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