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# Deepening Democracy . Talk at the Democracy and Human Rights Plenary of the Asia-Europe People's Forum

Thursday 29 December 2005, by [WAINWRIGHT Hilary](#) (Date first published: 9 September 2004).

First, I don't come from Europe as a missionary with a model of democracy in my pocket.

I come from a country where the Prime Minister claims to rule in the name of the people yet the majority of voters either voted for other parties or abstained from voting altogether. I come from a country where a 32% per cent turn out at an election is considered *good* and where turn out at local elections is as low as 11%. And this cannot be described as apathy. The numbers of people signing petitions and writing to MPs has increased and we have seen on February 15th 2003, the biggest demonstration ever on the streets of London and indeed, as the first simultaneous global protest, on the streets of the world.. We face a profound crisis of democratic institutions, a growing gap between the people and the political institutions that claim to represent them. The majority of British people were against the war against Iraq yet parliament supported Tony Blair. The elected representatives of the people responded to the control mechanisms of the party not to the people. We have to conclude that the first instrument of democracy, the universal franchise and the institutions that were assumed to make the vote meaningful: a multi-party system; a free press, even a proportional electoral system, have not proved strong enough institutions through which to achieve the power of the people.

Democracy for me means political equality and popular control. The vote doesn't guarantee political equality - we can see in the US how some people are more equal than others; that money effectively buys power. Neither does the vote ensure popular control because the institutions of both the party and the state apparatus have had all sorts of sophisticated mechanisms that blocked or mediated to nothingness the demands and desires of the people. A yawning gap has opened between the hopeful electorate and the processes supposed to implement the policies for which they voted. So the search is on, not for a substitute for the vote, but for reinforcements, so that by supplementation at its roots, the vote could become a genuine instrument for popular control, and make democracy a reality.

We are not completely empty handed. I want to focus first on the tools and insights for deepening democracy which came from the movements created in the late 60's and 70's in the West in response to the feeble, ineffective nature of electoral democracy - particularly the women's, students' and radical trade union movement. These radical social movements were the product of a very specific historical experience. Although the movements themselves were defeated in many ways, some of their ideas, I would argue, have a lasting relevance which connects closely with ideas and experiments developed in the South, especially Latin America. The radical movements came out of an early frustration with the limits of electoral democracy and a search for genuine forms of

popular control and political equality. Out of their struggles, I would argue it is possible to draw two kinds of innovation which have relevance beyond the movements' particular concerns - gender, workers' conditions, student politics, the environment. The first innovation had to do with power, the second with knowledge.

First, power. The UK generation shaped by the welfare state and the post-war boom developed high expectations which soon clashed with the political blockages of elite **democracy' - which could be summed up as the choice between two different teams for managing the status quo. In the workplace a presumption of equal rights clashed with the authoritarianism/ paternalism of both corporate and public sector management towardstheir'** workforce. While amongst women, a new social self-confidence tried to break the bonds of subordination and secondariness which still pervaded a culture in which, formally, women were now equal.

Traditional parliamentary parties of the left offered no obvious route for these new challenges. Even on these parties' own terms, the elected institutions were weak - too weak to control the growing apparatus of the state, too weak to stand up to the emerging power of the big corporations who usually had strong allies within the state - C.Wright Mills' 'industrial and military complex'. But even more important, the formal power of existing political institutions had no reach over the daily denial of democratic desire in workplaces, public services, the community and the home. People began to take find ways of creating the power to fulfil those desires by taking collective action, directly, in their daily lives. Workers succeeded in extracting from management's dependency on their labour, a source of power to refuse, and from there to control the pace and conditions of work, sometimes moving further to develop alternative plans for production itself . (What is produced? Under what conditions?) What began as innovative responses to particular problems, illustrates a potential resource for democracy of a more general kind. Historically corporate management has blackmailed elected governments on the grounds that the viability of the productive economy depends on deferring to the private market. These radical experiments by the organisations of labour illustrate the possibility of a challenge from within production to such blackmail. It's true labour has no access to capital - other than through state; the investment strike is a card that corporations can, in theory, play. But ultimately corporations must invest somewhere. Workers demonstrating their own plans for industry and being ready to bargain over them certainly helps to challenge the pervasive notion that governments have no choice but to defer to business for economic know-how and productive capacity.

This power within the workplace also provides an antidote to the pressures of private business toward privatisation. Here private corporations present themselves as the fount of all wisdom as far as efficiency is concerned. Alternative founts of wisdom, coming through the trade unions of frontline workers, for example, (or service users) and detailing how to improve a public service, provide powerful counter forces to the private sector's blackmail and pretence of indispensability.

The logic of the women's movement was similar : from within the structures of male and state power women took action to resist it, organising autonomous women's centres of various kinds. They organised themselves in the workplaces to take strike action for equal pay; they organised within the service professions and amongst service users to democratise and equalise the relation between professionals and the public, particularly women. In all this they were way ahead of anything the government or local councils would dream of doing. The consequence of their action was to create a new source of power to pressure state bodies to support and work with women who were taking action to meet women's needs.

The point about these sources of power is that they reside in society, not government, though they need government support for their demands fully to be realised and sustained. Radical political

parties should ally with these social initiatives, joining forces to bring about the changes that they are elected, or campaigning to be elected, to carry through. It is a well worn problem for left politics that leftish governments are elected to office on radical programmes and almost invariably give in to the pressures of private business. People blame political leaders, 'lack of will', 'betrayal.' Or they blame the trade union leadership for not exerting sufficient pressure. They sometimes contrast the compromises of left governments with the radical boldness of a right-wing government. One of the reasons why such right wing governments can be, on their terms, more effective is that they have on their side, acting for them and with them, a whole variety of powerful agents working within society - sections of the media, financial institutions, some senior echelons of the civil service and the judiciary. (The exception proves the rule - management in the NHS, as well as significant sections of the media, were opposed to NHS privatisation and as a result Thatcher, otherwise mistress of everything she touched, had to back off.) The ways in which economic and cultural sources of power in society follow through the electoral victory of the right, granting extra momentum to right wing government is not explicit - it works 'naturally' behind the scenes.

Left social democratic parties have tended to assume that, having acquired the majority vote, they can drive the 'machinery of state' in their direction. The state is not so pliable or neutral. Electoral victory will only produce real change where democratic movements and organisations within society are already exercising all sorts of economic, social and cultural power to bring about change in a common or at least complementary direction to the elected government.

This leads us on to the second innovation and insight from the movements of the late 60's and 70's - a working through of new ideas concerning knowledge. A left party that worked in close and mutually respectful alliances with initiatives for radical change in civil society would require a very different kind of understanding of the role and character of party members, supporters and associates, from the conception traditional to social democratic parties and to some degree communist parties too. The traditional model is of a mass 'rank and file' who vote for the party, campaign for votes, give their dues, and engage in political debate around programme usually drawn up centrally by the leadership of different party groupings. This party model assumes that electoral office brings power to change society. An understanding of the importance of the transformative power of movements and initiatives in civil society requires a recognition and respect of party members, supporter or allies as independent, knowing skilled agents of social change in their own sphere. It implies that the party relinquish its monopoly over developing the programme; that social movements and initiatives are themselves a source of policy and strategy. One of the distinctive methodological lessons to be drawn from the practice of the movements is a break from a positivistic understanding of knowledge as made up only of scientific laws. A critique of positivism had long been underway in the philosophy of science but political institutions lagged far behind. The Cold War had frozen the dichotomy of market-versus-state into the political culture of a generation, and these concepts in turn reflected and consolidated the polarisation of positivist views of knowledge (which implied the possibility of centralising knowledge of society and the economy) against individualist views of knowledge which recognised only individuals and understood knowledge as their property solely - to be linked and co-ordinated through the market or not at all.

The social movements and radical trade union movements of the late 60's and early 70's broke out of Cold War thinking, and they were influenced by, and in turn enacted, shifting conceptions of what constituted knowledge. In their ways of organising - whether it was the consciousness raising groups of the women's movement or the multi-union, multi-workplace committees of the radical trade union movement - the social movements valued practical, often tacit knowledge not available in codified, written form but embedded in people's skills, emotions, and creative activity. They also demonstrated (refuting the neo-liberal individualist model of knowledge) how this knowledge could be shared, debated or interrogated by, other kinds of knowledge to become the basis of purposeful

social intervention. Implicitly, they invented a model of social agency that is constantly experimental rather than pre-informed, with an ability to deal with uncertainty but also to gather and bring together the relevant knowledge to be effective. Their practical experiments helped to give birth to ideas of participatory or popular democracy in the context of (extremely flawed) liberal democracies.

I am abstracting a logic from what was often a messy, confused and ineffective process. Moreover, there was at the time a tendency to dismiss the institutions of representative democracy not simply as weak but as obsolete. The error of this cavalier political stance became all too clear with Mrs Thatcher and her ruthless emasculation of most of what was (relatively) democratic about liberal democracy in Britain - radical municipalities for example. There were some opportunities to put innovations into practice at a local, municipal level in different parts of Europe - for example in Britain and in Italy - but before these experiences could mature, the radical right had taken control. In Italy, with a constitution that, for all its faults has given some protection to local and regional government, there has been more scope for development, but the most developed experiments in participatory democracy, combining direct and delegated forms of democracy with an opening up of representative forms, have come from South, most notably from Brazil.

The Brazilian experiment in participatory democracy has been thoroughly analysed. Here I want to dwell on the features of its history, character and results that make it such an experiment with a wider importance - one from which everyone wanting to overcome the present crisis of democracy can learn, whatever happens to the Lula government.

The essence of the experiment in participatory democracy in many Brazilian cities is this : when the Brazilian Workers Party (Partido Trabalhadores, PT) first won elected office in municipal councils, it almost instinctively committed itself 'to share power with the movements from which it came' in the words of one its first mayors, Celso Daniel. Power lay above all with finance, so the first participatory experiment began with the setting of the budget, specifically the allocation of new investment (participatory budgeting, PB).

Two features of the PT's origins shape or underpin PB. First the PT was born out of the struggle for basic democratic rights against the dictatorship and as a result recognises the value and indeed the necessity of liberal democratic institutions. However, its roots in the popular mass movements of the factories, cities and countryside - the support of whom was a fundamental reason for the success of the movement for democracy in Brazil - and the earlier feebleness of electoral democracy meant that it had direct experience of the need for stronger more participatory forms of democracy. It also had working examples of institutional frameworks for such participatory forms, for example in the radical independent trade unions. Secondly, it was strongly influenced by liberation theology and also the educational theory and practice of Paulo Freire. This meant that fundamental to the PT's culture was a belief not simply in 'the masses' but in the capacities of each individual and the possibilities of people fulfilling that potential through the process of collective social change. This is why I say the decision to 'share power' with the movements was almost instinctive - it flowed from their culture, it was part of why they were seeking office, and why alongside the campaigning for office went support for occupations by the landless, industrial action in the factories, squatting in the cities.

The key features of wider significance of the participatory institutions created by the PT and urban movements include:

Public institutions independent of the municipal government. The government, or at least special departments, facilitate these institutions and report back to them but do not take part in their decisions. These institutions are open to all in the first phase of the decision-making cycle and then based on recallable delegates. These institutions' processes are transparent and rule governed and

constantly evolving in the light of experience, trial and error.

Negotiation between the delegates of these participatory institutions and representatives of both the government and the legislative assembly, in which the mayor and legislature formally have the final say but rarely seriously amend the budget produced by the participatory process because this process has real credibility across the city and the mayor and councillors would lose out electorally if they seriously challenged it.

Most of the research from which I draw my conclusions is focused on the experience of Porto Alegre. It is important not to romanticise this experiment or to deny the considerable problems it faces. On the other hand, fifteen years of trial and error has produced at least four consequences that have wide relevance, fully justifying the international attention that this unassuming little city has attracted. I will explain.

i. Transparency. By opening up the process of implementation to citizens directly affected and the wider public, PB has effectively smoked out the corrupt relationships that had grown up in the hidden areas between the elected politicians and the state apparatus. The way in which powerful private interests have inveigled themselves into the processes of government - whether corrupt local businesses or powerful multinational corporations with their extensive lobbying power - is an important feature of the crisis of democracy. Parliamentary democracy wasn't invented to monitor a large state apparatus. In various ways it has been developed to do so, through special committees of various kinds, but all these mechanisms - Select Committees, Special Investigations, Inquiries and so on - are working from the outside, often after implementation. What a genuinely participatory process allows for is an opening up of the policy implementation process to the day to day involvement by the people affected by the policies. In Porto Alegre in the late 1980's corruption was rife. Now, at all levels of government, the political process being captured by the large multinationals through massive lobbying and assiduous, well-financed networking. This points to the importance of a participatory process at many different levels. For example, workers for a corporation receiving public funds or carrying out public contracts, and communities in the surrounding area, could have rights of monitoring and at the very least consultation, on works in hand.

ii. Redistribution. Over its fifteen year history, the PB has led to a significant redistribution of resources from the high income areas of the city to the poor areas. The basic reason, applicable to other contexts is that the poor are actively involved in the process of resource allocation, and that this process weights the decision-making in favour of those with greatest need for public services and infrastructure. A further, related factor is that taxation became less unpopular amongst the middle classes. By a virtuous circle, as the way in which public money was spent became more open and legitimate so people, beyond the few very rich families who still own a good proportion of the city's land, no longer minded paying their taxes. They could not only see that it was going to useful purposes but could personally participate in ensuring that it did.

iii. Services : the social efficiency of the city's education , medical, transport and sanitation services improved proportionately more than in cities without PB. As discussed, in the participatory budgeting institutions and the extensive popular participation in public administration we can see a process by which practical 'people-based' knowledge is shared, debated, combined with technical knowledge and built into the policy process.

iv. Resisting privatisation. Finally, the history of the participatory budget in Porto Alegre illustrates how participatory democracy can strengthen local democracy vis a vis the private market. There are several instances of multinational investors such as retailers having their proposals scrutinised via the participatory process and yielding concessions on employment, the environment and the

protection of local small businesses. It seems the genuine sharing of power by the elected government with an independent process of democratic popular participation enhances the overall power of democratic public institutions vis a vis market pressures - and also international bodies such as the World Bank.

The search for stronger forms of democracy has generally made most headway at a municipal level - at least as far as new lasting institutions are concerned. But efforts to reinvent democracy are also global ; the global movement for social justice is first and foremost about taking direct action to fill the democratic vacuum left by national governments as they acquiesce in the dominance of multinational capital over international economic institutions. This global movement has meant that local innovations are now of international relevance. The Social Forums taking place on every continent provide an opportunity to learn and develop and exchange the lessons of different localities. This year the World Social Forum will attempt to practice what it preaches in its own organisation and the determination of its agenda. So that over the past few months and the next few months an intense process is underway, by which any organisation can participate in setting the themes of the next forum. This consistency between ends and means is another sign that a new paradigm(s ) is emerging for the agencies of political change.

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