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## UNIVERSALIZE POWER: BUILD THE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT

Ben Manski



If we want to universalize justice, we best begin with the recognition that social systems are systems of power. Different systems favor and subordinate different groups of people, creating systemic injustice.

Capitalism is a system that empowers those who own capital and that constrains the possibilities for those who don't own capital to govern themselves. It undermines the capacity for working and poor people to develop financial independence and maintains the unproductive financial supremacy of global capitalists.

How should we evaluate social change campaigns that demand justice for all—*something that the current system cannot provide*—and yet accept the continuation of that system? Some social change efforts do just that, ignoring the fact that in the end, one cannot universalize justice without also universalizing power. Yet others seek to universalize both justice and power.

Today we see mounting evidence of awareness of the need for disparate struggles for justice to join together in transforming the relations of power throughout society. Such movements to universalize and equalize power are more commonly known as democracy movements. Democracy movements are becoming one of the more widespread and vital social movement forms of the 21st century.

The United States is no exception. Almost anywhere one turns, there is

evidence of a growing movement for democracy in the United States. This movement is engaged broadly in a series of constitutional reform campaigns, as well as within particular social sectors in a range of efforts to democratize the economy, elections, government, security, and education.

The day-to-day work of building democracy continues to move forward on these and other fronts, often submerged beneath the surface of media publicity, though plainly visible to any who pay attention. At times over the past 20 years, however, the US democracy movement has broken through and seized attention, forming in the millions of people in the streets of Seattle, Madison, New York, Oakland, Ferguson, Chicago, Los Angeles, and thousands of other communities, occupying public spaces, and chanting that "This Is What Democracy Looks Like!"

In the post-midnight hours following Election Day 2016, massive crowds filled US streets protesting the announcement that Donald Trump was to assume the Presidency. Again, the cry was "This Is What Democracy Looks Like!," signifying the gulf between the democracy movement in the streets and the official institutions of Republican government in the capitals. At that moment, afraid of Trump's promises to dismantle public education and the free press, deport millions, jail his opponents, and to ignore constitutional limitations on his power, millions of people came to understand

their personal issues as part of the larger democracy struggle. In this way, Trump's ascendancy compelled all progressive movements to realign themselves with the democracy movement, and to begin to transform that movement in the process.

## The Democracy Crisis

If we want to get a clear sense of where today's democracy movement might take us, and what it might take to get there—even in the face of one-party rule and a Trump Presidency—we'd do well to understand where this movement is coming from. After all, like today's movement, the challenges we face today also have their origins in the 1990s and late 1980s. We are confronted by the same global economic, ecological, and political forces that began to reshape our lives back then. And many of the same individuals, institutions, and networks that arose then are still in play today. The essential mechanisms of our social struggles are the same. What has changed over the past several decades is the intensity of those struggles.

Many of the core conflicts of the 1990s involved resistance to corporations and to the things corporations were doing. The resistance was personal and stemmed from the inherently undemocratic structure of corporations and their vast material and political control.

Workers fought back against union busting and factory closures all across the so-called "Labor Warzone" of the industrial Midwest.

Students resisted the corporatization of their schools, colleges, and universities.

Farmers organized against corporate agribusiness and the biotech giants.

Mothers, fathers, and children tried to defend themselves against the

dismantling of the welfare and social services they relied on.

Prisoners and their families mobilized against private prisons and mass incarceration.

Journalists faced media consolidation and began to create their own media.

Indigenous red, Black, yellow, brown, and other frontline communities took on the extraction and pollution industries that tried to put mines, dumps, and incinerators in their backyards.

All these and more came together through coalitions that combated NAFTA, GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade], MAI [Multilateral Agreement on Investments], FTAA [Free Trade Area of the Americas], and the WTO. A globally-oriented, anti-corporate, pro-democracy politics emerged organically out of these sectoral and social struggles. People harmed by transnational capital could often figure out for themselves that corporations are institutions that serve the interests of those who own and manage them, not those they employ or claim to serve. Or in other words, "that it is not the things that corporations *do* that is the problem, it is what corporations *are* that is the problem."

That last phrase was a commonly repeated lesson of the Program on Corporations, Law, and Democracy (POCLAD), an organization that throughout the 1990s brought together thousands of activists from different social sectors in weekend gatherings to "rethink the corporation, rethink democracy." Those gatherings influenced the growth of a wave of new national, sectoral, and local organizations dedicated to building a democracy movement in the United States, including the Democracy Teach-Ins and 180/Movement for Democracy and Education on college campuses; the community-based efforts of the Alliance for Democracy,

Reclaim Democracy, End Corporate Dominance, Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund, and Democracy Unlimited; the business sector's American Independent Business Alliance; and the electoral democratization efforts led by the Center for Voting and Democracy, Green Party, New Party, and Labor Party. In each of those efforts, individuals began to self-identify as "democracy activists" and to implement detailed strategies for replacing "corporate rule" with "real democracy."

All of those efforts began in the 1990s, as did others still relevant today, including the Black Radical Congress and the modern immigrant rights, equal rights, and labor movements. Very little *explicit* pro-democracy activism occurred in the previous decade. What changed?

What happened between the 1980s and the 1990s was the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, a set of events that deeply impacted life and politics in America. Around the world, new markets opened up to transnational capital. Major corporations pushed hard to establish a new global economic order. And every institution of American life—including its political, legal, educational, and media institutions—became subject to the neoliberal blackmail of offshoring and the race to the bottom. The capitalist message was clear: accept the corporate take-over of social welfare and public services or we'll take our capital elsewhere. For Americans, as for people everywhere around the globe, capitalist expansion created a generalized sense that democracy was in crisis.

This look back to the 1990s helps us to understand the logic of the democracy movement in the United States today. That logic includes the emergent reality that aggressive capitalism of this sort produces social movements that are aggressively democratic. One

hundred thousand people shutting down the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999, and chanting "This Is What Democracy Looks Like!" is an example of aggressive democracy. May Day 2006's Un Día Sin Inmigrantes [A Day Without Immigrants] was a case of aggressive democracy. And so too has democracy beaten in the pulse of the Wisconsin Uprising, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter, each of them efforts to assertively universalize power.

## Democracy Is Everywhere

Since the 1990s, democracy activists in the United States have worked both to deepen and to broaden the movement. Deepening the democracy movement has meant strengthening existing campaigns to democratize particular institutions and social sectors, as well as sometimes initiating new ones. Here are just a few examples:

- In the *education sector*, students, faculty, and staff across the United States have come together to demand full funding for public education and an end to college tuition fees and student debt. They have organized student–faculty–staff–parent coalitions, and in some cases have transformed those coalitions into lasting unions.
- In the *national security sector*, active-duty military, military families, and veterans have come together with community-based activists to organize for the democratization of the military, beginning with the National Guard, and for the honoring of existing international treaties that outlaw war.
- In the *community sector*, elected officials have worked with community activists and independent political parties to advance reforms that strengthen local government's home rule powers, make

local governments more participatory, use local governments to expand cooperatives and other democratic economic institutions, and implement community control over policing.

- In the *energy sector*, a new wave of energy democracy and climate democracy initiatives are using public power and participatory reforms to rush forward the transition to a renewable energy economy.
- In the *public sector*, reforms such as rank choice voting, proportional representation, public financing, and same-day voter registration are advancing in some areas of the United States even as efforts to defend voting rights continue everywhere.
- In the *core economic sectors* of manufacturing, retail, finance, and services, workers and community members are expanding cooperatives, community ownership, credit unions, and democratic currencies and exchange as they build the plural raft of democratic economic alternatives to capitalism.

In the same period that activists have worked to deepen democracy in these sectors (as well as others: media, law, art, faith, social movements, food, agriculture, family, and more), they have also succeeded in broadening and raising up the democracy movement at the level of society itself. That the slogan "This Is What Democracy Looks Like!" has for some of us become an overdone, tired chant, speaks to how far we have already succeeded in making audible a new popular unity. Everywhere that chant goes up to the sky is another self-declared front in the democracy struggle. And accompanying the Seattles, Wisconsin, Liberty Squares, Freedom Plazas, and Fergusons, furthermore, are a series of more institutional social movement efforts that have helped to broaden,

integrate, and raise up the democracy movement in the United States.

The U.S. Social Forum and the Democracy Convention are two ongoing processes that have contributed mightily. The U.S. Social Forum, part of the World Social Forum process, has gathered thrice, first in Atlanta in 2007, then in Detroit in 2010, and most recently in San Jose and Philadelphia in 2015. The Democracy Conventions met in 2011 and 2013 in Madison, Wisconsin, with the next meeting planned for 2017 in Minneapolis. In these mass gatherings, people working on democracy campaigns in different social sectors have been able to come together to compare notes and develop common agendas. The Democracy Conventions, in particular, make an effort to help activists "get out of their silos" and to build synergies between their efforts.

Constitutional reform campaigns for adoption of the Right to Vote Amendment, the Equal Rights Amendment, and the We the People Amendment are also providing critical cohering functions for the US democracy movement. Through each of these campaigns, broad and often overlapping coalitions are forming to democratize the basic law of the United States. As an illustration: a farmer in Wisconsin, an unemployed worker in Massachusetts, a teacher in Texas, and a small businessperson in Idaho may believe themselves to share a common interest in amending the Constitution to overturn *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) and to help end corporate domination of politics and the economy. And in fact, such diverse constituencies have demonstrated that they do share common interests in constitutional democratization, passing resolutions supporting the language of the We the People Amendment in over 700 municipalities and states.

Trump's ascendancy is a genuine threat to all of these democratic initiatives, as

well as many others. Yet Trump came to power on the backs of voters furious at corporations, Wall Street, and corporate trade deals like NAFTA and the TPP [Trans-Pacific Partnership]. Millions of these Americans will become disenchanted with Trump's solutions, which will only increase corporate power, government corruption, and economic hardship. The democracy movement, born out of decades of resistance to corporate capitalism, rooted in the cultural soil produced by America's historic democracy struggles, provides working Americans with an alternative to both Trumpism and Clintonism that is both radical and familiar. The movement is as radical as the disempowerment that most of us feel; it is as familiar as our professed national identity as the land of democracy, freedom, and equality.

### **Not Just a Movement, a Revolution**

The work of creating, deepening, broadening, and raising up the democracy movement in the United States has long begun. What must be done from here?

First, we must recognize that the US democracy movement does not move in isolation. When the movement first became visible in 1999, it did so at the meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle. When activists mobilized for voting rights in the Florida 2000 and Ohio 2004 Presidential recounts, they sought international election observers. When Wisconsinites were preparing for the Wisconsin Uprising of 2011, they invited activists from Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia into phone conferences for a briefing on their democracy struggles.

Moving forward, Americans need to find more ways to move beyond national borders in building the global democracy movement. It is not enough

to seek democratization of the US Constitution and US institutions. We must also increasingly articulate and fight for a democratic global economy and polity that protects human rights, ecology, and local democracy at a global level. And just as we support democratic resistance against fascism and authoritarianism in other countries, we must actively seek solidarity from activists in other countries, recognizing that the struggle for democracy in the United States is a vital concern to people around the world.

Second, we should recognize that democracy activists have been doing something right. And because they've been doing something right, the language of democracy has become hot in some funding circles. One danger of such moments is that innovators become victims of their own success, and get left in the dust. Rather than launching new initiatives inside the Washington Beltway that use the language of the democracy movement without paying attention to where this new politics came from, major foundations and institutions should invest in the resource capacity of the same organizations that developed and raised up the democratic politics of the past 20 years.

For instance, in 2004, a number of us who'd been active in the 1990s movements started the Liberty Tree Foundation for the Democratic Revolution with the express purpose of building the democracy movement in the United States. Liberty Tree has been engaged in that work ever since, playing critical roles in much of the history described in this Interlude. Practical experience produces knowledge and plans for building the democratic leadership and organizations, and for taking advantage of the political opportunities and crises of the future, as well as serious thought about what it will take to not only win democratic reforms, but to secure them.

Furthermore, because of this history, Liberty Tree and its partners are better prepared than Washington DC-based organizations for the kind of progressive populist economic, cultural, and social struggle that the Trump ascendancy necessitates.

This leads me to my third conclusion: at some point in the next decade, democracy advocates in the United States will find themselves facing the problem of having succeeded beyond common expectation. Such success will certainly come in the form of mass uprisings such as that of Wisconsin. Success may even far exceed that, and come in the form of political power, as won by political parties of radical democracy and liberation most recently in Greece, Portugal, and Iceland, as well as earlier in South Africa, Haiti, Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay, and elsewhere. And like most of those cases, the democracy movement in the United States now faces the double prospects of repression and mass mobilization: repression by an unpopular authoritarian ruler; mass mobilization in response to that ruler's illegitimate actions. Therefore, the democracy movement must become

ready to succeed beyond expectations, and to not only consolidate its successes, but to continue to push forward.

The goal, after all, is to universalize power. And if the experience of the democracy movements of the past 20 years has shown anything, it is that societies dominated by capital are extremely resistant to genuine democratization. The existence of a democracy movement in the United States suggests the possibility of a democratic revolution in this country. The ecological and social alternatives to democratization are dire. It is in our best interests to make the most of that possibility.

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