

Musings on Deep Democracy

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IWC's seminar room was completely full recently for a Saturday afternoon seminar on "Developing Deep Democracy". The seminar raised questions about what democracy really is and what its purposes might be. Conventional definitions of democracy such as rule by the people or rule by the governed (two different connotations?) were contrasted with the aims of 'deep democracy'. Questions about democracy include:

- Have we ever really had a true democracy where power is distributed sufficiently equally among all persons and decisions were made "by the people, for the people, and of the people"?
- What are democratic ideals? In many cases, democratic ideals have not prevented massive injustices in its name.
- Are democratic ideals, such as the Jeffersonian vision developed in the United States, worth pursuing as an avenue of social and citizen regeneration in a time of cultural disintegration, institutional hegemony, mass society and seemingly passive citizenry?
- Do a sufficient number of individuals have the wisdom necessary to make a democratic process viable?
- What is the role of the family and education in sustaining and creating forms of flourishing democracies?
- What about all the other conditions which support democratic functioning?
- Can there be such a thing as a 'deep democracy'?

Both representative democracy (voting for representatives with accountability and transparency) and direct democracy (citizens directly deciding issues

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affecting them in town meetings or with referenda) might be perceived as limited 'mechanisms' for aggregating votes and interests.

Deep democracy might enliven and make more relevant these processes by building local self-rule through strengthening community. Deep democracy strives to build an active, participative realization of a more self-governed, self-organizing, local community based on the principles of reciprocity and conviviality in social life. These would include a re-localization of the economy, alternative livelihood potentials, voluntary resource sharing, recognition of ecological limits, employment of deliberative and direct democratic methods, and the encouragement of lifelong learning in the arts, crafts, and sciences. A model of deep democracy assumes the rights of citizens to self-rule and self-organization by encouraging creative integration of public policy differences with decisions involving a series of expanding concentric circles from "the bottom up". In this way, citizens gain experience with engaging greater and greater diversity over time. Various forms of public initiatives that are both situationally responsive and enabled by a series of flexible, inclusive consensus-building processes and norms would be used for both educative opportunities for self-rule and community awareness as well as points of resistance to outside intrusions of concentrated political or economic power. Certainly, the process of building deep democracy must begin with, and be sustained by, principles and practice of tolerance and civility.

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