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ABSTRACT

To say that community control is democratic means that such control is consistent with the ideas of the democratic tradition. Even so, participation is hampered by the "natural" apathy of people. but the fact of apathy has too little research as to its causes to be well understood; perhaps, apathy is a rational response to a society which discourages participation. Democracy is a theory which identifies itself with opposition to and protest against social justice. As to the question of educational expertise, the limits of expert authority are the limits of expert competence. Feed back from the community lets the experts know how expertise is serving the community. Too, there is a clear distinction between expertise, and the values which a community wishes its experts to follow. Finally, community control is an issue transcending any urban function, and is intimately involved with the demands of democratic theory. (Author/DM)

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Democratic Theory And Community Control

by Burton Zwiebach

This monograph is another in a series of occasional papers on urban issues to be prepared and published by the Institute for Community Studies. The views reflected in this monograph do not represent any policy of Queens College.

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DEMOCRATIC THEORY AND COMMUNITY CONTROL

by Burton Zwiebach

Community control is a form of participatory democracy. And whether participation is democratic depends on the context of that participation.

Democratic theory is primarily concerned with the larger society, for in the absence of its democratization, the democratization of certain groups within it is seldom significant. Thus, democratic theory is political in the basic and traditional meaning of that word: by "political" we commonly refer to the manner in which we tend to certain external arrangements of society which are important and of *general* concern.

This, at least, is how politics has most usually been understood by its chief theorists and practitioners. Those processes which do not seem to concern society generally or which do not seem especially critical to it are distinguished in our ordinary language from the more inclusive processes.

Defense of a policy as democratic say, to one concerned with politics, become significant when it implies that the policy will result in increased democratization of the *larger* society, rather than democratization of the *smaller* group alone. This reservation is consistent with our ordinary usage of the word "democratic." The increase in participation by all members of a corporate board of directors may be called democratic if we are concerned with the way that the board tends to its own arrangements. Yet it would not normally be said to have any democratic implications for society at large.

This reservation has serious implications for our recommendations on how community control is to be exercised, or on who is to compose the relevant community. For instance, if the group which controls a school is made up only of the parents of the children in attendance, bound together *only* as parents, we would have a good deal of trouble detecting democratic implications for society at large. We would be concerned with the relatively narrow participation of a relatively small group in an important but relatively restricted social process. What implications such participation would have for society at large are not clear, nor indeed is its effect upon the self-esteem of the participants at a time when so many other processes work to depress such self-esteem. I suspect the results would be less than dramatic and would have little effect upon the group's relation to society at large. Parental participation under these circumstances would thus seem to have marginal democratic implications for the parental group and no democratic implications for society.

But if the control of the schools is a function of a *community*, or if some identification between the people comprising the community is a probable outcome of decentralization, the democratic potential would be large. A minimal democratization might occur if the parents voted for the community school board not simply as parents, but as representatives of a community with some more general capacity for self-determination. The most impressively democratic solution, however, would be to convert these urban communities into sub-governments—that is, to decentralize as many urban services as is feasible and transfer these to the control of communities. Any solution with claims to be democratic must exist somewhere between th se points.

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Community control and democratic traditions.

To say that community control is democratic must also mean that, whatever its relevance to society at large, such control is consistent with the ideas of the democratic tradition.

Democratic theory rests on the conviction that political decisions should be made by consulting the collective preferences of the citizenry. This implies citizen participation at some point in the decisionmaking process. Further, such participation is seen as strengthening an already existing democracy not because the citizenry is necessarily wiser than an elite body, but because participation helps to create better citizens and a specifically democratic mentality; this latter point cannot be emphasized enough. Democracy values the dignity of the individual and participation in the political process is one way of creating and supporting this dignity. *For political participation gives the individual a kind of his ability to control a segment of his social environment.* It develops in him a confidence in his political efficacy (however marginal). It satisfies his need for reasonably successful encounters with his environment. In short, it helps him to value himself.

The problem is that, classically, most democratic theorists believed that meaningful participation required an identification between the individual and society, a belief in the effectiveness of one's participation, and a capacity to communicate with one's fellow citizens and leaders. Which, they felt, could hardly be realized in large societies. Further, it was impossible to consult the citizenry, to ascertain collective preferences in a large state. Democratic participation thus involved a degree of social intimacy and mutual concern; it could exist only in a society "where the people can readily be got together and where each citizen can with ease know all the rest. . . ."[8]

This concern with size was not merely theoretical. In England and the United States, the first attempts at constructing democratic governments occurred in small communities, such as those isolated communities on the American western frontier. Radical political groups which held themselves out as democratic did not try—as the Levellers had during the English civil war—to convert the national government to democracy. Rather, they isolated themselves as far as they could into small self-governing and self-sufficient communities and identified democracy with their *internal* politics. Such groups included many Owenite, religious, and primitive communist communities.

As industrialization developed and the possibility of viable small societies was radically reduced, some democrats altered their concern with political space. But, at least in the nineteenth century, radical democrats did not abandon this concern because they did not see how democracy could work in the large state. Just as Aristotle argued

[8] J.-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, III, 4. See also *ibid.*, III, 1 and the famous discussion of patriotism in his *Discourse on Political Economy*. Montesquieu makes the same point in his *Spirit of the Laws*, VIII, 16. In Federalist 10, Madison, while defending the large republic, distinguishes participatory democracy from representative government and argues that a small state is a requirement of the former. Hamilton, Madison, Jay, *The Federalist* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), p. 59.

that a polis which is too large would "forfeit its nature" as a polis,[4] so radical democrats felt that any participatory system, representative or otherwise, would lose its democratic character in large states. The retention of this theory was no doubt due in large part to the substantial influence of anarchism and cooperativism upon mid-nineteenth century democrats. Writers like Godwin, Shelley, Owen, and Proudhon tended to associate not merely participation but all valuable human relationships with small group association and it is interesting that their successors (Marx and Durkheim for example) worked to make this view consistent with the facts of mass industrialization rather than alter the theory.

This created celebrated tensions in radical democratic thought. In the case of Marx, it is hard to see how public ownership of massed capital could take place in a Rousseauistic environment. Nevertheless, Marx contrasted the large political state necessary for bourgeois society with the possibility that the small community could somehow be the political form of proletarian democracy. Thus, he seized upon the Paris Commune of 1871 as the paradigm revolutionary state (despite its being anarchist rather than "Marxist" in inspiration) and interpreted it as a small populist democracy.[5] Further, the logic of Marx's denunciation of the state and of his prediction that it would wither away (*i.e.*, lose its coercive character) under socialism, implies the desirability of the small associative polity--a model not too different from that of Paine or Owen.[6]

The "New" Democracy

In mass societies, political participation is radically altered. Direct participation by individuals is largely replaced by individual participation in groups which, except in the polling booth, represent the real participatory units of mass democracy. Direct and immediate representation is replaced by a complex system of representation, with interest groups and coalitions playing roles classically restricted to parties, citizens, and statesmen. Thus, while some essential features of democracy are retained, one feature is drastically modified. Yet the new democracy has its advocates, including some famous ones: Schumpeter, Herring, Truman, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, Dahl. They argue that this system is democratic and is the only version of democracy consistent with existential reality.

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[4] *Politics* 1326a-1326b. Similarly, in the *Ethics*, he says that "you cannot make a city of ten men, and if there are a hundred thousand it is a city no longer" (1170b). H. D. F. Kitto presents this argument by producing a conversation between an ancient Greek and a modern London club member. The Englishman asks why the Greeks had not united into a single state.

> The Greek replies, "How many clubs are there in London?" The member, at a guess, says about five hundred. The Greek then says, "Now if all these combined, what splendid premises they would build. They could have a clubhouse as big as Hyde Park." "But," says the member, "that would no longer be a club." "Precisely," says the Greek, "and a polis as big as yours is no longer a polis."

(H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 79.)

[5] Marx, *The Civil War in France*, *passim*.

[6] There are many references to this in Marxist literature. The *loci classici* are *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875), IV; *The Civil War in France* (1871), Third Address, 3; Engels, *Anti-Duhring* (1878), Part III, 2. See the discussion in John Plamenatz, *German Marxism and Russian Communism* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1954), pp. 152-164.

The problem with the democratic tradition, these revisionists argue, is that it overemphasized the role of popular participation in a democracy and hence was led to place too much stress on size. In fact, however, most citizens do not participate in politics except to choose leaders who participate for them. Even so, participation in voting is notoriously low. People are "by nature"[6] apathetic, and it is naive to think otherwise. Therefore in de-emphasizing participation, the new democracy merely registers a fact of life and attempts to deal with a reality in which participation is a function of groups and elites.

This indeed is the crux of the debate. *If political apathy is natural to man, this reinterpretation of democracy is legitimate and the relationship of democracy to small states is dissipated. Democratic theory is satisfied by an elitist system of representation which is compatible with large societies.* The problem with this argument is that it assumes the truth of its most crucial contention. The assumption that apathy is natural to man is a gratuitous one, consistent with, but not demanded by, the evidence. For most of the evidence concerns the *fact* of apathy; very little time has been spent researching its *causes*. And this evidence bears more than a single interpretation: the fault of the revisionists has been less in their collection of data than in the questionable inferences they have drawn from it.

May apathy not be a product of a society that operates to discourage participation? Such an interpretation is surely consistent with the evidence relied upon by the revisionists, especially since that evidence is descriptive rather than causal.

> Political apathy . . . may stem from feelings of personal inadequacy, from a fear of endangering important personal relationships, or from a lack of interest in the issues; but it may also have its roots in the society's institutional structure, in the weakness or absence of group stimulation or support, in the positive opposition of elements within the political system to wider participation; in the absence, in other words, of appropriate spurs to action, or in the presence of tangible deterrents.[7]

There is also some direct evidence which can be used to support this view as against the view that apathy is natural, although this evidence is sketchy and far from conclusive.[8]

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[6] Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 225.

[7] Jack L. Walker, "A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy," *American Political Science Review*, LX (June 1965), p. 290.

[8] For instance, it is interesting that participation was substantially greater in the nineteenth century than in the twentieth (Walter Dean Burnham, "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe," *American Political Science Review*, LIX (March 1965), 7-28. Again, there is some evidence that crime may be a substitute for participation as an outlet for frustration and tension (Frederic Solomon *et. al.*, "Civil Rights Activities and Reduction of Crime Among Negroes," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, XII (March 1965), 227-236, discussed in Walker, pp. 290-291.) Conditions in which many people work seem also to contribute to apathy. (Lewis Lipsitz, "Work Life and Political Attitudes: A Study of Manual Workers," *American Political Science Review*, LVII (December 1964), 961-962).

Furthermore, apathy may be a rational response to a system that discourages participation. American party politics impels politicians to avoid dramatic issues and sharp conflicts, to minimize ideological differences, and thus to present citizens with few issue choices. It is not surprising that many voters do not see voting as a rewarding or meaningful act. Participation can mean something more than occasional lever-pulling and something less than total immersion in politics; yet opportunities for such participation are rare. Increasingly, corporate executives and trade union leaders make decisions which critically affect the quality of our lives. Yet policymakers such as these are not formally political actors and their primary responsibilities are to that narrow group of people upon whom they depend for office. Even if I can fight City Hall, I cannot fight General Motors; and when Chevrolet tells me that I must pay fifty dollars more for its automobiles, I have less recourse than when my town tax goes up twenty.

What is the result? It is that the most clearly perceived characteristic of our society is not the invitation to participate but the authority of those in command. May we not then conclude that the common man betrays good sense if he chooses to resign from political participation? *Is apathy not a rational response to the enormity, impersonality, and unresponsiveness of society?*

The new democratic theory is one which has sacrificed almost all of the democratic vision to the pursuit of a reality which is dependent upon a dubious interpretation of available evidence. The ability of a democratic society to enlist the energies of its citizens in order to further their civic education and their capacities for individual development—which Mill saw as the primary justification for participation and which contemporary writers are re-emphasizing [8]—has been sacrificed and what has been substituted is a democratic shadow, a democracy void of the democratic vision and the democratic mentality. Perhaps our circumstances produces such a result. But it is not the inevitable alternative of mass democracy.

Community control implies that the multiplicity of decentralized functions will give to the communities a character of subgovernments or parallel governments. For the governing bodies of these communities (whether a single governing body or a separate body for each type of function) will seek not merely to influence public policy or to affect it indirectly, as a pressure group might, but directly to satisfy basic needs of their constituents through authoritative policymaking. They thus differ in principle from involuntary or collegial groups such as trade unions. And because they could involve the community as a participating body of citizens (sub-citizens if you like), they would have the capacity, if they chose to, not merely to act for their constituents, but to *enlist their constituents' loyalties.* In the case of Black and Puerto Rican communities, this enlistment of loyalties may amount to a monopolization of loyalties. This mobilization of loyalty is what entitles these units to be seen as more than mere communities performing functions delegated by superior authority. Combined with a formal, if limited, grant of quasi-governmental status, it gives to these units a legitimacy indistinguishable from that usually attributed to government rather than that associated with voluntary associations.

[8] See, e.g., Henry S. Kariel, *The Promise of Politics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 62-69 and *passim;* Lane Davis, "The Cost of Realism: Contemporary Restatements of Democracy," *Western Political Quarterly,* XVII (March 1964), pp. 37-46.

The loyalties so enlisted are far greater and more passionate than those which can be mobilized by city governments. This provides an additional spur to participation. Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that community organizations will strive to create and maintain such loyalty and will be driven, as the city is not, to encourage participation. This, I think, is due to the tenuous and delicate power position of the community organization. That position is apparent when we examine the characteristics of these subgovernments.

First, community organizations would control certain defined and limited local services. Second, they would be institutionally derivative, even if authoritative in their own right. That is, there will remain a reasonably strong urban authority with definite if attenuated budgetary, contract, planning, collective bargaining, and similar powers. Third, the subgovernments would be dependent financially upon the city or the state. Fourth, they would clearly lack their own judicial machinery and would thus be dependent upon the city and state for judicial enforcement of their decisions. These formal limitations—and others—mean that effective community control can exist, but that the authority-in-fact of the community governments can be eroded if they cannot maintain sufficient political influence. This disability, common to many local governments, is more pronounced in the case of the community subgovernment. But the influence of the subgovernment upon the city derives to a great extent from its ability to mobilize its basic resource—its constituency. There is thus good reason to expect the community subgovernment to try to retain and expand the loyalties of its constituents and to encourage their active identification with the subgovernment.

Finally, the mobilization of loyalty would aid in the development of the cohesiveness and sense of political efficacy necessary to revive democratic participation. Encouragement of participation combined with an increase in the influence one might exert on important matters may counteract, in basic ways, the anti-participation factors in other aspects of American political culture.

Democracy and Social Justice

From its connection with moral values democracy has developed another unique historical association: it is a theory identifiable, as no other theory has been, with opposition to social injustice and it is a theory that justifies the protest against such injustice. There are three reasons for this. First, there is a pragmatic one, especially relevant in the modern west: realization of the aspirations of disinherited groups is usually best aided by appealing to democratic norms. Second, the logic of democracy implies that the aspirations of a group—insofar as they actually involve the liberation of that group from inferior status and its accession to equality—reflect the values inseparable from democracy. Third, the realization of these aspirations converts a disinherited group into a group integrated into society and thus able to play a role in that society's politics.

The relationship of social justice to democracy is not merely a matter of theoretical speculation. That relationship has been perceived and acted upon throughout the history of the modern period. It has persistently been invoked by exploited or powerless groups to justify not merely the realization of their aspirations were non-

political. The English revolutionaries of the seventeenth century saw democratic theory as the vehicle which justified their economic and moral claims as well as their claim to political power. Democracy was to them inseparable from a host of liberties: liberties of speech, religion, political participation; legal liberties such as habeas corpus and fair trial; and most important, perhaps, the liberty to follow the common economic callings

Democratic theory was used to justify the demands of British working class movements for the extension of the franchise. But it was also used to justify demands for the humanization of the work process and economic equality. The best example of this is the contrast between the Owenites, who profoundly influenced British working class movements, and the Chartists, who did not. The latter seemed to view democracy instrumentally: reform of the House of Commons would lead to legislation favorable to the working class. Owen on the other hand, saw it as involved in the general attempt to humanize and liberalize the social environment. He advocated democracy as much because it was the political system most consistent with these values as because of its instrumental uses.[10] Indeed, Owenites generally felt that the Chartists overestimated the instrumental value of democracy, a perception which proved prophetic.[11] Later, democracy was seen as the political form of the socialist society by Marx. So, too, workers' control of industry—the "guild socialism" of the early twentieth century[12]—Wilsonian self-determination, and Debs's notion of trade unionism were justified by reference to democratic theory.

To advocates of decentralization, this feature of democratic theory is especially pertinent. For whatever its implications are for the whole of society, decentralization is now intimately connected with the legitimate aspirations of certain radically dispossessed groups. It is not merely a way to subject political and bureaucratic authority to the control of communities: it is a vehicle for liberation—an institution designed to satisfy many of the basic needs of these groups—and hence a vehicle for dignity and individual realization.

THE QUESTION OF EXPERTISE

It is often argued that education is an area where specialized knowledge and professional skills are necessary. The opinions of the common man may simply be out of place here: it is not a question of democracy but expertise.

In dealing with this type of question, the greatest democratic theorist of our time,

[10] See, generally, his *New View of Society* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1953); *Book of the New Moral World* (London: E. Wilson, 1836); *Life of Robert Owen by Himself* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920).

[11] "An Owenite complained that the lower orders are quite assured that a radical reform of the House of Commons must prove the grand panacea for all our woes." M. Beer, *A History of British Socialism* (2 vols.; London: G. Bell and Sons, 1919-1920), I, 171.

[12] See G.D.H. Cole, *The World of Labour* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1913); *Self-Government in Industry* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1919); Samuel Hobson, *National Guilds* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1919); A. J. Penty, *Guilds, Trade and Agriculture* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1921).

A. D. Lindsay, once remarked that even the most expert shoemaker cannot know where—or if—the shoe he has made pinches. The inexpert wearer must tell him.[13] So, the most skillful statesman or administrator cannot know the full effects of his policies without hearing from those he rules. "It is sadly instructive," Lindsay commented, "to find what a gap there always is between the account even the best administrations give of the effect of their regulations and the account you can get from those to whom the regulations apply."[14]

Men being what they are, and societies being what *they* are, the free addressing of complaints by the powerless to their rulers is not an everyday occurrence. This is especially true where the powerless have learned to expect little from authority except control or humiliation and react accordingly—that is, say what they conceive the authority figure expects to hear. For example, how many children, confronted by overbearing or hostile teachers, have denied what they believed to be true or assented to what they believed false? Communication or frustrations, complaints, and hostilities must take place through institutions in which the communicants either feel somewhat at home or anonymous. A riot serves this purpose painfully. But political institutions strongly identified with the communicants serve the purpose as well, with somewhat more beneficial results. If we are interested in finding out where the Negro's shoe pinches, the organized community offers us a classic way.

But defending decentralization in principle does not require us to waive practical and prudential objections to it. Such objections are always relevent to delimit the scope of a normative theory and to allow us to discover the practical boundaries within which that theory is realistic and relevant.[15] May it not be that it would be unwise to subject education to popular control, that it would lead to poor education?

This objection has an extremely limited application. In the first place, the limits of expert authority are the limits of expert competence. When a question of national health insurance is up for debate, the doctor's expertise does not qualify him to talk as an expert about the social benefits or costs of such a system, the effects upon the tax structure, or the political dangers inherent in the measure. These are political and economic questions, not medical ones. They are questions about which he has no better right to be listened to than any of his fellow citizens who have attained a comparable degree of enlightenment. In education, the question of the best administrative structure for a school system is a question about which the teacher has no special knowledge. Perhaps it will be thought that the school administrator has such knowledge. But it is the school administrator to be the judge of his own area of competence in public policy-making. Clearly there are very good and obvious reasons to have that determination made by the community or its representatives.

[13] A. D. Lindsay, *The Modern Democratic State* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959 [first published 1943], pp. 269ff.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 270.

[15] See W. G. Runciman, "Sociological Evidence and Political Theory," Laslett and Runciman (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society: Second Series* (Oxford: B. H. Blackwell, 1962).

Second, we must make a clear distinction between expertise--where the professional is entitled to demand a major voice—and the *values which a community wishes its experts to follow*. I may be unqualified to tell a lawyer how to plead his client, but I am surely entitled to join in a demand that the bar make provision for representing impoverished clients. The control provided for by decentralization is not control over the techniques of education, but over the values which educators ought to pursue. It is control over moral ends, not professional means. The inarticulate dissatisfaction of parents with the performance of the schools is a legitimate point upon which they may be consulted: they are being asked where the shoe pinches.

The crisis in education is a crisis of values, where even technical questions may only imperfectly be separated from moral ones. In the first place, it is a challenge to the prevalent middle class version of what education entails, to the attitude that the poor—especially the black poor—are unteachable in the absence of a drastic reform of their social, cultural, and familial conditions in directions accepted as normal by middle class whites. Yet there is evidence to indicate that what is holding up the education of poor blacks is a set of values masquerading as facts, which are held by middle class whites.[10]

The extent to which educational techniques are bound up with values can be seen if we ask how we are to measure educational progress. There was a time, not very long ago, when educational achievement was measured by I. Q. tests or their equivalents. These tests were finally seen to be culture bound, dependent for their validity on a particular set of values. In their place, we have substituted reading proficiency tests, which recent examination has also found to be culture bound. Some people have turned, or rather returned, to the belief that education is successful if it turns out students equipped to function in the society around them and possessed of skills demanded by and useful to that society. Skipping over the question of what this implies for education in totalitarian societies, we can see that this test, like the others, involves the acceptance of certain values. Now there is nothing bad about educational achievement being measured partly by values. But in this event we must accept the notion that the educator is not the only person competent to assess those values.

The black community has asked that black history, literature, art, be included in the school curriculum. They have asked that their children be provided with visible symbols of black authority. These are questions which concern various professional disciplines and about which experts may have much to say, provided their self-interests are not involved. But they are also questions requiring choices between values, between ends as well as means, upon which the community ought to be consulted.

In the end, community control is an issue transcending education, police, or any specific urban function. It is an issue intimately involved with the demands of democratic theory and it cannot be discussed without reference to that theory. This does not prove that, in our present circumstances, democracy entails decentralization or that we can justify decentralization by referring only to democracy. It does mean that those opposed to decentralization ought to consider the meaning of its rejection.

[10] *Educational Achievement and Community Control*. Monograph I, Institute for Community Studies, November 1968.