



Afterword to *You Call This A Democracy?: Who Benefits, Who Pays, and Who Really Decides*

by Paul Kivel

AS THE EVIDENCE IN MY BOOK, *You Call This a Democracy?*, makes abundantly clear, we do not live in a democracy, a country run by the people for the people. A few thousand powerful individuals, the power elite—predominately white Christian men—run most of the major institutions in our society for the benefit of the ruling and managerial classes. They make the decisions about our employment and working conditions, our health, the legal system, who votes, whether we go to war, and the state of our neighborhoods and cities. The ruling class and power elite also decide who gets to run for higher political office, who wins, and what the winners can accomplish once in office.

It may be tempting to attach the label democracy to some aspects of this, such as voting, but the extreme concentration of wealth and power in the U.S. means that we are a long way from a real democracy even in the narrow arena of electoral politics.

As I write this follow-up to my book, the impact of undemocratic wealth and power has been revealed to a shocking extent by the destruction generated by Hurricane Katrina. The managerial and ruling classes have the transportation, mobility, connections, insurance, education, and skills to minimize the long-term damage to their lives. Many have certainly suffered heart-wrenching losses. But the majority of those dead, ill, stranded, without connections, influence, insurance, or the ability to move and find work are poor, are people of color, are women, are elderly, are people with disabilities, are children.

The coastal vegetation that provides some protection from hurricanes has been severely cut back for ruling class profit. The toxics in the water have been dumped by corporate polluters. The repairs to the levees were slowed to fund pork barrel projects for politicians. The National Guard troops and equipment for emergencies were deployed in Iraq to protect oil company profits.



The contracts to provide aid and start the rebuilding are going to the same war profiteers, such as Halliburton and Bechtel, which have been pushing the overseas war drive. At every level of the disaster, class, race, and gender are markers of who benefits, who pays, and who really decides.

Not only do we not have a real political democracy in the U.S. but at the same time the power elite has hypocritically cloaked our foreign policy in a myth of exporting democracy to other countries. We are supposed to ignore the fact that our government has supported military dictatorships throughout the world and has actively worked to overthrow democratically elected governments in Iran, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Greece, Panama, Chile, Venezuela and other countries. We are supposed to ignore the fact that our government's policies have more to do with the control of strategic resources and the elimination of models of real democracy than with a concern for public participation and self-determination in other countries.

The myth of democracy in the U.S. and the good intentions of our foreign policy towards the rest of the world have been amplified by President Bush who speaks of the “world democratic movement” and the “global democratic revolution” and the “forward strategy of freedom”—all based on non-democratic U.S. military power and the invasion of other countries. New ruling class organizations, such as the World Movement for Democracy and the Community of Democracies, as well as older groups, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, are using the mask of democracy to disguise their efforts to undermine the democratic aspirations of many peoples throughout the world.

What does democracy mean? Is it still a useful term? I think we need to embrace the concept of democracy but we need to have a much deeper understanding of it.

In the simplest sense, democracy means the participation in decision-making by the people affected by those decisions. With some exceptions, if someone is making decisions that affect your life without your participation then that is undemocratic.

It is not surprising that so many people have accepted a watered-down ruling class concept of democracy which is limited to the ability to vote once every four years for one of two hand-picked rich, white, Christian men. We are not educated in democracy and we are not given a daily opportunity to practice democracy. There is not democracy in our families, in our schools, in our workplaces, or in our neighborhoods. Most of us have never experienced a



situation in which people come together and make decisions based on mutual respect, full inclusion, and equal participation. If this were truly a democracy, would we have so few opportunities to participate in decision-making?

We have much work to do to redefine the concept of democracy and to restructure the political, economic, cultural, and social institutions in our lives so that democratic participation is widespread, informed, and meaningful. We can each strengthen that work today by asking the following four questions about every situation we find ourselves in. Then we can begin to incorporate democratic practice into our daily lives.

Who is not included?

Who is not respected?

Whose voice is not heard?

Whose vote does not count?

Those who are not included cannot be participants. We need to be constantly looking around the room and asking who is affected by what is decided here but is not present? Even if it delays the process, or takes more resources or accommodations, we have an obligation to insure that everyone who has a significant stake in the issue at hand is at the table.

Those who are included are not necessarily respected. Those who are not respected are not able to participate fully. Who is listened to and who is not? How are people, and the cultures, languages, histories, and experiences they bring, acknowledged, honored, and visible? What can we do to make sure that everyone is respected and feels respected?

Participating and being acknowledged are not the same as being heard. Often subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) levels of power and privilege prevent the full participation by everyone involved. What are the personal, organizational, or institutional barriers that prevent some voices from being heard while guaranteeing that the interests and needs of those with the most status, wealth, influence, or privilege will be responded to?

Finally we must ask whose vote does not count, or does not count as much as others. (I am using the word vote loosely because there are important and valuable ways to make decisions that don't rely on voting, such as different processes of consensus.) It is a false



democracy if everyone is included, respected, and heard, but at the end of the day some people's votes don't count, or count for less than other people's. Of course there are situations, such as in our families, where adolescents and adults have more experience or ability to participate fully than young children. But even in our families, it is vital that we develop age-appropriate processes of participation for everyone.

Let's ask some hard questions about our own democratic practices. If you have children, how much democracy is there in your family? What kinds of discussions, family meetings, skills and experience would have to be developed so that every member of your family, at an age-appropriate level, would be able to participate in family decisions? What difference might this make in your family? In your children's lives? In your own life?

How much democracy is there in your workplace? Have you accepted undemocratic structures at work and yet said that you live in a democracy? What might it be like to work in a worker-managed workplace, or a co-op, or other, less-hierarchical structure? Is there anything you could do to push for more democratic processes where you work?

Why don't we teach about and practice democracy in our classrooms? We have a national government and ruling elite which talks about democracy but dictates educational standards from above, and every level of the educational system dictates to those below. Students receive education but don't have real opportunities to practice democracy. This process does not begin to prepare them to live in a democratic society.

Everyday we have an opportunity to practice democracy. We have an opportunity to challenge structures of inequality and structures which exclude, disrespect, silence or undermine the participation of marginalized groups. Everyday we have an opportunity to experiment with forms of participation that build relationships with others, unleash creative problem solving energy within a group, and challenge the false democracy that we are presented with.

Much of the resistance to the ruling class and power elite in the U.S. has come from bottom-up, grassroots, democratic organizing. The civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, workers' movements, the lesbian/gay/bi/trans liberation, welfare rights, disability rights, anti-globalization, and anti-war movements were all built on people coming together in a variety of democratic processes involving collectives, support groups, direct action



groups, meetings, forums, co-ops, consciousness raising groups, and councils.

The challenge to the myth of democracy promoted by those in power has always been the active practice of democracy by those of us getting together to build a better world. We must not be fooled by ruling class rhetoric. We must deepen and extend the practice of democracy into all the spheres of our lives. Only then will we be able to come together to build a society that is built on democratic participation and that nurtures and sustains the lives of all of its members.

You Call This a Democracy? Not yet, but we each have a role to play in making it happen.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.