

DEEP DEMOCRACY IS NOT MEETINGS THAT LAST FOREVER:

Community Development Next

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Community development has long been part industry, part social movement. At its core is an idea that American educator and philosopher John Dewey would have recognized but that many of today’s activists, entrepreneurs, and change agents sadly do not. It is the idea of deep democracy. For Dewey, this meant, first and foremost, the essence of community life—the public inventing and deploying the collective means to solve its problems. “Regarded as an idea,” he wrote in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), “democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself.”

This is not what most of us learned about democracy in grade school civics. Dewey’s conception is not primarily about the machinery of government, although reimagining and revitalizing government for each age is a critical part of “inventing

and deploying”; government cannot simply shrink or become a gladiatorial arena. It is not primarily about adhering to a specific decision-making procedure, although procedural rules, forums for both learning and bargaining with each other, and meaningful checks and balances matter. Dewey’s view of democracy is not even about ever-broader “participation,” although the extremes of exclusion and the norm of top-down decision making are not, we hope, in for a great revival any time soon.

As important as these things are for the infrastructure of democracy and indicators of its “vital signs,” Dewey’s view reminds us that a narrow focus on these definitions confuses ends with means and loses the thread. For this century, for the material and institutional tools at our disposal, democracy is two things, which together should define the future of community development and win our full commitment. First, democracy is the craft of collective problem solving, which hinges on developing and using “civic capacity” with and beyond the government. This demands radically different conceptions of citizenship, leadership, and mobilization, all for a different kind of future. Extant conceptions of “working in partnership” barely scratch the surface of what it is possible and required. Second, democracy is giving the greatest number of people—regardless of background, inherited privilege, address, or creed—control over, not just access to, capital as a vital part of control over their own lives and fortunes. As a recipe, we might call these twin ideas “empowerment 2.0.”

DEMOCRACY AS EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

Voting for government officials is only one avenue for citizen participation, political development, and governance. Direct and sustained participation in civic institutions and organizations is equally important. Democracy is defined as much by the democratic practices of civic institutions and organizations as it is by open government elections and procedures. America’s historical practice of “private” (de facto) racial segregation, for example, undermines the essence of democracy—the building of community. Segregation has often turned elections intended to promote

fairness into opportunities for racial majorities to tyrannize racial minorities.

Conversely, democratic civic organizations help develop citizens' capacity to play active roles in problem solving, including the problem of getting past racial and ethnic prejudices through regular civil interaction with those who are different; or more to the point, for discovering that those who are different from us in one respect or another are much like us in other respects. We care about the health and safety of children and elders, we face higher costs of living and struggle to save, we want there to be a planet for our children to inherit and thrive in. This kind of "bridging" is crucial in a society that has rapidly become both more racially and ethnically diverse and more economically unequal.

Local 1199, a health care worker's union in New York, for example, brings its racially and ethnically diverse members together to guide its highly popular program (funded through collective bargaining agreements) that builds and operates day care facilities for its members' children. Unions like this that have multiple venues for member engagement and interaction—and do not merely focus on bosses negotiating on behalf of members for wages and benefits—promote a democratic culture and develop democratic leadership capacities among their members. These habits and capacities spill over into other areas of society. The same goes for churches, schools, and other civic institutions—if they work to *be* civic. Civicness is not an artifact of nonprofit status and therefore cannot be claimed, mechanically, like a tax exemption. Civicness is a question of how an institution operates.

As Dewey recognized long before there was a modern movement called community development, addressing our biggest and toughest social problems requires sustained effort, trust among multiple groups, and the creative exchange of ideas. In vibrant democracies, the processes by which organized groups are brought together to work on social and economic problems cannot be limited to optional, occasional "initiatives," dependent

on philanthropy for funding. They are the *sine qua non* of conducting our public life, the standard operating approach.

The Emerald Cities Collaborative is a good example of this in action. The collaboration is an intermediary organization established to bring together often-warring community, business, and labor union organizations to work out cooperative approaches to retrofitting the nation's building stock to improve energy efficiency. The data clearly show that the most job-intensive sector of the "green economy"—and therefore a key pathway to better jobs and economic security—is the building trades. Yet there has been much conflict between community and labor groups, stemming from high unemployment among predominantly white, unionized construction workers and high unemployment among minority workers. The latter contend that they have been historically excluded from membership in construction unions. The question is, who should get priority access to energy retrofitting jobs, particularly those jobs that include taxpayer subsidies?

The proposed Emerald Cities solution, hammered out over a year of emotionally intense and also information-rich exchanges, is that unionized workers—half of whom are near retirement—should claim the commercial market and train more minorities to fill the shoes of their retiring members. Meanwhile, minorities recruited into union apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs should, for now, focus on residential retrofits, primarily single-family home projects that are, for now, almost all nonunionized.

Intermediaries such as the Emerald Cities Collaborative only partially address the need for go-between functions even in the narrow area of energy efficiency. Many landlords of large multifamily properties have been unable to introduce cost-saving energy improvements, such as installing submeters to monitor and reward individual household energy savings, because many tenants do not believe that landlords will fairly allocate energy savings or provide accurate accounting of energy data. Another intermediary organization, perhaps one funded from energy cost

savings, is needed to bring landlords and tenants together to work on allocation issues and provide both parties accurate and verifiable data on building performance.

DEMOCRATIC CONTROL AND DEVELOPMENT OF CAPITAL

Despite the near-universal characterization of the U.S. economy as “private,” to distinguish it from economies driven by state-owned enterprises and state-centralized planning, advanced economies are social, arguably the most social, of all institutions. Investment firms compete to manage the combined savings of hundreds of millions of citizens; firm managers receive commissions but do not own the funds. The evidence is that investors govern managers so poorly that the latter often form a type of autocracy, but the funds nonetheless belong to “the community,” mainly workers and retirees. Most large companies are publicly traded on Wall Street by investment firms or citizens. Large companies are themselves social organizations (some firms have more employees than midsized cities have residents) managed by salaried professionals. In most companies, workers have little say in decision making despite the social and public nature of the corporation, defined by law. Most technological innovation, the primary driver of productivity and therefore economic growth, is funded initially through taxpayer-funded grants to research institutions and then through socially funded firms. Markets of exchange are also highly social in their function. They are forums for the exchange of ideas, products and services, and civil competition for investment in promising organizations. What gives all of these institutions the appearance of being “private” is not their ownership structure, but the weakness of accountability structures between management and owners.

Yet most citizens lack a basic literacy of economic governance. It is a nontopic even at the university level. Where and how citizens invest their money is arguably as important, and as relevant for democratic engagement, as voting in government elections.

Viewed democratically, for example, investment priorities should be the subject of active debate and decision among the full range of owners and investors, that is, the public—conscious of itself *as* a public, as Dewey put it. It should not be an exclusive domain for elite professionals or financial and legal jargon. There is no *ex ante* reason, for example, why investment and purchasing decisions should prioritize financial return on investment above other social concerns such as environmental sustainability, the health and welfare of workers and consumers, or full employment (measurable social returns).

The failure to democratize economic institutions is as corrosive to government in this century as racial segregation was in the last century. Throughout world history, elite economic control has produced elite political control, as the recently published study *Why Nations Fail* shows persuasively, and ultimately led to economic and social stagnation.

Workplaces can and should be prime sites for democratic problem solving and citizen capacity-building. In March 2012, the United Steel Workers of America and the U.S. branch of Mondragon International—a network of industrial cooperatives headquartered in Spain—took a step in this direction when they announced a new union-coop agreement structured to enhance workers’ roles as investors, owners, and active directors of newly created manufacturing firms.

In the next five years, we predict that more community-based organizations will likewise partner with major health care organizations to deliver better health outcomes at lower cost. It is hard to imagine progress on our ailing health care system that does not include a “market” for wellness that employs and deploys street-level innovation of many kinds. In this regard, community development can become a much bigger contributor to effective *care* (which connotes protection in the broad sense) even as it works more boldly to advance *opportunity* (which demands expanded capability and access to livelihoods).

An ongoing process of creative destruction is reshaping the competitive landscape. As the digital revolution moves from social media to physical science, manufacturing, and design, the infrastructure needed for production of many goods and services will *shrink* from large factories to small buildings or even garages (think of the space once required for mainframe computing versus mobile iPads and smartphones today). Meanwhile, access to tools, education, and information needed for research, production, and distribution of goods and services will *expand* exponentially. The effectiveness of traditional hierarchical corporate management, established to plan and manage large-scale production, will diminish, even if centralized authority retains key functions and firms that are run hierarchically fight to dominate. Smaller, highly creative, energetic, and flexible companies will have new advantages.

With greater access to education and tools for production and distribution, and greater worker participation in the creation and use of those tools, economic productivity could advance substantially. But our larger point is that a deeper and more meaningful democracy could advance too, as a result. Those countries and sectors that promote open source—enabling the broadest learning, the most rapid discussions, and socially diverse and inclusive feedback loops—and that provide the best incentives and structures for active participation will develop fastest and most sustainably. In short, economic democracy is imperative for economic success.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT NEXT

Community development faces linked challenges in the realms of civics and equitable economic development. We have argued that both of these factors promise, and indeed require, a deeper democracy—democracy reimagined, retaught, practiced often. Community development can once again become an arena for practicing what we have outlined as economic democracy, for partnering in creative new ways, and for outgrowing a survivalist dependence on philanthropic grants and government contracts and subsidies. These sources of funding are not the problem, and

they do much good. It is the narrow reliance on these sources, along with resignation to narrow control of the “private” market that obscures the big stakes and opportunities at hand.

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