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Seeing Like a Democracy: Africa's Prospects for Transforming the North Atlantic Paradigm

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Abstract

Africa holds the potential to successfully challenge the dominant technocratic, state-centered, market-oriented understanding of democracy that the US and European nations espouse. Despite prevalent "Afro-pessimism", especially in the West, fueled by poverty, HIV/AIDS, violence, water shortages, environmental degradation and other problems, the growing stirrings of the centrality of "the people" rather than "the state" in African democracy discourse creates foundations for a robust participatory alternative to Western democracy. The accent on bringing the people back to the centre of democracy is coupled with a growing emphasis on the centrality of the political, understood in richer and deeper ways than ideology, party politics, or narrowly distributive struggles over who gets what.

A new African paradigm of people-centered democracy and citizen-owned politics can energise a dynamic, people-oriented development project. The key is to inform the theory of participatory democracy and popular politics with insights from actual, real world experiences in such politics that have been spreading, largely out of public sight, in diverse settings in South Africa, Tanzania, and elsewhere.

These nascent stirrings suggest a new paradigm created from the combination of theory and practice. Such a paradigm points toward democracy not mainly as economic growth and free elections but rather as a flourishing way of life, balancing public goods with private wealth, embedding the market in democratic values.

If realised, the vision of democracy as a way of life in Africa and its animating, citizen-owned politics can help spark a rebirth of positive liberty in the 21st century across the world.

> *I challenged [citizens]. I did not patronize them. 'If you want to continue living in poverty without clothes and food,' I told them, 'then go and drink in the shebeens. But if you want better things, you must work hard. We cannot do it all for you. You must do it yourselves.'*
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> *Mandela (1994: 614)*

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> *The first Big Idea for the next decade is to articulate an encompassing framework which not only helps better integrate the activities of government but also harnesses the efforts...of civil society...Government...need[s] to promote greater participation and interaction of people with the state.*

Towards a Ten Year Review (Aboobaker and Netshitenzhe, 2004: 106)

Introduction

For all the crises facing African democracies – from poverty to HIV/AIDS, from water shortages to corruption and violence – recent years have also witnessed a note of optimism at variance with the Afro-pessimism fashionable in the West. Stirrings of a renewed Pan-Africanism have taken shape, for instance, in the New Partnership for Africa's Development. Pan-Africanism, as the young Zimbabwean scholar Admore Kambudzi has put it, is fired by possibility. "A vision of the future and plenteous hope has always been at the center of the [Pan-African] movement", he writes (2001: 59). In a similar vein, Dani Nabudere speaks of a "new mood in the African intellectual community for a need for a new focus, a new vision and a new direction as we enter the new millennium" (Nabudere, 2000: 4). Peter Vale makes a compelling case that the African experiences of self-affirmation in the course of overcoming the all encompassing colonial legacy position the continent for an African Renaissance, as well as for leadership in challenging the dominant constructions of power, wealth, and human civilisation in the global economy (Vale, 2002).

Such hope is animated by what might be termed a "return to the people", recalling Amical Cabral. In 1990, the *African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation*, a high level gathering of more than five hundred non-governmental organisation leaders, scholars, government representatives and United Nations agency leaders met for five days in Arusha, Tanzania. The *Charter* strongly stuck the note of optimism tied to participation. "Popular participation is both a means and an end", it declared. "Popular participation provides the driving force for collective commitment for the determination of people-based development processes and willingness by the people to undertake sacrifices and expend their social energies for its execution" (1990: 2). Six years ago, in 1998, the Silver Jubilee conference of the African Association of Political Science in Mauritius similarly called for a renewed popular movement for democracy, different and deeper than the liberal or multi-party democracy of the West (Nabudere, 2000).

In a recent volume on *NEPAD*, Archie Mafeje observes a shift among African intellectuals "from abstract thinking to more pragmatic thinking" which helps to "narrow the gap between intellectual praxis and [everyday people's] practice" and is all about democratisation. In the 1990s, in his view, "the outcomes of the various attempts at democratization in Africa have proven a failure because those at the helm used the same methods and stratagems as their yesteryear opponents".

Mafeje argues the need to move from a state-centered understanding to a society-centered understanding of democracy, what he calls a "new democracy". "In Africa, civil society has not yet been able to assimilate into itself the political society whose ultimate incarnation is the state". Yet the issue is clearly on the agenda. "It is not as if this question had not been raised by some African scholars; the problem is that there are no easy answers" (2002:78).

There may not be easy answers but there is a growing body of practice in popular politics that provides resources for challenging the North Atlantic paradigm and for animating a practical alternative. A story from the work of the Institute of Democracy in South Africa (Idasa) can serve as an introduction.

What is Democracy? The Nigerian Election

In 2002, the Institute for Democracy in South Africa undertook a two year project in Nigeria known as the Programme for Civic Empowerment (PACE). The aim was to strengthen and build the capacity of Nigerian civil society in areas of electoral support, constitutional reform, transparency and peace-building. An Idasa office opened in Abuja, Nigeria, with a three person staff directed by Derrick Marco, a seasoned veteran of democracy work in Africa. The first effort was to monitor and respond to the threats of violence that could jeopardise the 2003 election.

Idasa, a broad NGO which played an important role in the transition to democracy in South Africa, is now one of the few democracy organisations working in the continent, according to Marco, "that have as the basic point of departure country-based initiatives". This meant, in particular, that Idasa worked in partnership with churches and trade unions to establish a 600 person "Alternative Information Network", aimed at constantly gathering information from communities, disseminating information, and working to develop strategies to minimise violence. The Idasa approach differed sharply from election observers from the European Union. According to Marco. Idasa's "angle of vision was Pan Africanism, and the commitment to make the broad democratic project on the continent work". According to the EU observers, questionable practices in some regions after the first round of voting meant a failed election. But Idasa's frame was fundamentally different. It asked questions such as "what is minimally needed to make the democratic process move forward?" "Is there progress in controlling violence?" "Do people feel involved?" Idasa was able to release a statement soon after the polls closed, before others, that the election, while not perfect, was an advance. Idasa's judgment had large effect on international opinion about the election's credibility. It could well have been the key factor in the government's holding of the next round (interview, 2003).

"Seeing Like a State"

All of us think with "frames", preconceptions about how the world operates. A key finding in work on conceptual frames, drawing on several decades of cognitive research about how people perceive and interpret political positions or issues, is that

deeply held preconceptions and frames, are often almost impervious to new information that contradicts people's views. "It's not enough to present evidence," says Susan Bales, president of the FrameWorks Institute, which works with citizen and progressive groups in the US to shift approaches from doomsday warnings to hopeful, practical alternatives. "You have to change the frame" (Bales, in Mooney, 2003).

The North Atlantic frame, or paradigm, for understanding democracy is especially powerful. After the title of James Scott's book, it can be called, "seeing like a state" (Scott, 1998).

Mainstream North Atlantic political and social theorists after World War II shifted the concept of "democracy". Democracy's definition as a "way of life" or as a "commonwealth" – a concept in America that had formed a nonsocialist alternative to the unbridled marketplace with appeal across ideologies into the 1940s – disappeared. In place of such views, theorists such as Joseph Schumpeter (1942), Seymour Martin Lipset (1960), and Robert Dahl (1961) recast democracy as a state centered system guided by technocrats in which citizens' role was voter and consumer.

Joseph Schumpeter gave stark formulation to what came to be known as "democratic elitism" in his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, published in 1942. He argued that ordinary people are incapable of doing more than choosing their leaders in a competitive process: "Even if there were no political groups trying to influence him, the typical citizen would in political matters tend to yield to extrarational or irrational prejudice and impulse." Seymour Martian Lipset defined democracy in his 1960 work, *Political Man,* in ways that were less contemptuous of popular intelligence but still preserved the key roles for politicians and experts:

> *Democracy in a complex society…is a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among candidates for political office (45).*

Lipset and Stein Rokkan's *Party Systems and Voter Alignments,* published in 1967, tied the concept of *politics* itself to what they termed the "cleavages" of modern society, based on divisions between classes, church and state, and clashes between the national state and subordinate group identities based on regions, ethnicities, or language. They argued that these had solidified in the late 19th century and defined the nature of politics and political struggle, "freezing" political identities. Politics, in such terms, amounts to zero-sum battles over scarce resources conducted through the state. Or put simply, politics, in the famous definition by the American political scientist Harold Laswell, is "who gets what, when, and how" (Laswell, 1936).

Robert Dahl, in his study of political decision making in New Haven in the fifties, *Who Governs?*, expanded on the idea of elite rule by proposing that elites compete for support of different interests. The "economic notables" of the city, expressing their interests through the Republican Party, were ineffective in their

plans for development. Only a new Democratic mayor, guided by outside professionals, was able to put together a coalition of voting groups including "the working class and lower middle class ethnic groups, particularly Negroes and Italians and their spokesmen," that allowed progress (1961: 79, 129).

Whatever their differences, however, mainstream social scientists agreed that experts, working with political decision makers, were at the centre of the political universe. As historian Daniel Rodgers has described in *Atlantic Crossings*, a pattern of private alliance between politicians and experts grew up before World War I on both sides of the ocean that gave a technical quality to political discourse. In the late 19th century, American graduate students studying in Europe, fired with reformist zeal to tame the excesses of unbridled capitalism, absorbed the model of scientific objectivity and policy making in private consultation with political leadership, far removed from public involvement. Young intellectuals desired to temper the workings of the market. But they saw this as elite activity. "Students of the first German-trained economists...establish[ed] new forms of authority by colonizing the social space between university professorships and expert government service." In Rodgers' view, "their efforts came to define a central structural element of American progressive politics" (1996: 108).

"We all have to follow the lead of specialists", wrote Walter Lippmann, who set much of American intellectual fashion in the first decades of the 20th century. In his view, a growing body of opinion "looks to the infusion of scientific method, the careful application of administrative technique". In the modern world, science was the model for modern liberal political thinking and technocrats were the model actors. An editorial in *The New Republic* argued, "the business of politics has become too complex to be left to the pretentious misunderstandings of the benevolent amateur" (Lippmann in Jordan, 1994: 75; editorial in ibid.: 76).

Politics is the master language of decision making and power wielding in societies. When politics becomes the property of professional elites, most people are marginalised in the serious work of public affairs. Citizens are reduced to, at most, secondary roles as demanding consumers or altruistic volunteers. Moreover, with the transformation of mediating institutions – parties, unions, even congregations and local schools became technical service providers – citizens lost their stake and standing in the public world. The result, as John Kenneth Galbraith described in *The Affluent Society,* is growing public squalor amidst private affluence (1958).

In the 1950s, the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, a hero of progressive thought because of his seminal critique of racial segregation, *American Dilemma*, argued that "increasing harmony...[is emerging] between all citizens in the advanced welfare state. The internal political debate in those countries is becoming increasingly technical in character" (quoted in Zinn, 1972: 306). Social policies in welfare states of Europe were far advanced toward a technical rational and civically circumscribed politics. Myrdal depicted welfare-state populations as objects,

acted upon by experts and government – "like domesticated animals…with no conception of the wild life" (quoted in Galper, 1975: 113).

The triumph of technique created similarities across political systems. "From the standpoint of the employee", remarked the historian Arnold Toynbee, "it is coming to make less and less practical difference to him what his country's official ideology is and whether he happens to be employed by a government or commercial corporation" (quoted in Galbraith, 1967: 109). State owned businesses under social democratic regimes and even nonprofit organisations produce efficiency-minded management. "Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material costs – these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration", Max Weber described, in prophetic fashion (1946: 214).

In *Seeing Like a State,* James Scott has traced how this frame, or way of seeing democracy and politics, spread across the world. Scott describes how the tools of administrative ordering of nature and society combined with a world view that emphasised science and technical rationality – what he called "high modernism." These became tyrannical when government had little opposition to its policies. The key was "an authoritarian state that is willing and able to use the full weight of its coercive power to bring...high-modernist designs into being...closely linked to... a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist". Scott describes the human toll worked by the combination of these forces in country after country.

> *'Fiasco' is too light-hearted a word for the disasters. The Great Leap Forward in China, collectivisation in Russia, and compulsory villagisation in Tanzania, Mozambique, and Ethiopia, are among the great human tragedies of the 20th century, in terms of both lives lost and lives irretrievably disrupted' (1998: 5, 3).*

Scott is neither anti-government nor an enthusiast for the unbridled marketplace. Indeed, he shows how markets can have disruptive impacts much like the high-modernist state. Scott seems implicitly to point toward a citizen-involving politics as the alternative both to the high modernist state and unfettered capitalism. But others, especially in the US, have tapped popular sentiments against high modernism in efforts to dismantle government in ways that threaten to destroy the public realm.

As Hedrick Smith observed in his coverage of the 1980 US election in *The New York Times*, Ronald Reagan was especially successful in making this kind of argument. "Thousands of towns and neighborhoods have seen their peace disturbed by bureaucrats and social planners through busing, questionable educational programmes, and attacks on family," said Reagan. In Reagan's words, it was a time for "an end to giantism" and "a return of power to the people" (in Smith, 1980). But Reagan's agenda was not simply antagonistic to government; it was also in the service of large business interests and imbued with the ethos of the market. During the Reagan years, acolytes of unbridled capitalism like George Gilder, equating marketplace values with Christianity itself, gained huge followings. In

the 1990s, out-of-power conservatives gave stark expression to anti-technocratic sentiments. "Americans are sick and tired of being treated as passive clients by arrogant, paternalistic social scientists, therapists, professionals, and bureaucrats", said Michael Joyce, president of the conservative Bradley Foundation, in 1992 shortly after Clinton's election. "Americans are clearly willing and eager to seize control of their daily lives again…to assume once again the status of proud, independent, self-governing citizens" (Joyce, 1992).

Joyce's call for a new citizenship expressed honest anger, but it became a resource for the dramatically privatising politics that surfaced in the Bush campaign. "I trust the people, my opponent trusts the government" was Bush's mantra during the 2000 election. His Democratic opponent Al Gore's calls for activist government reflected long standing progressive and technocratic politics that had little role for citizens except as voters and customers. Indeed, Gore had presided over the reinventing government initiative of the Clinton administration, where citizens were officially redefined as "customers" in every federal agency. Gore's progressive but technocratic and market-oriented politics failed (see Boyte, 2004).

After the election, privatised citizenship was central in Bush's Inaugural Address. "I ask you to seek a common good beyond your comfort," Bush proclaimed, "to be citizens, not spectators, to serve your nation, beginning with your neighborhood" (quoted in Schudson, 2003: 270). But George Bush counterpoises citizenship to politics, denying power and interests and eviscerating the commonwealth. For Bush, citizenship means individual acts of kindness and service. The irony of recent American politics is that the posture of anti-technocratic but privatised citizenship covers policies that are anti-democratic in the extreme, using all the tools of modern advertising and manipulation. These range from the war in Iraq, undertaken in the name of "promoting democracy" in the Middle East, to the education reform called "No Child Left Behind". The latter, culminating years of rhetoric about the need for standards and accountability, makes training students for economic roles in a competitive marketplace the only serious educational goal.

Deborah Meier, a proponent of renewing the democratic purposes of American education illustrates trends in the US pointing toward such an alternative. "The real crisis we face is not a threat to America's economic or military dominance but the ebbing strength of our democratic and egalitarian culture." Meier recalls the "traditional public function of schools: to pass on the skills, aptitudes, and habits needed for a democratic way of life", observing that these "are hard to come by; they are not natural to the species. They are as hard to teach as relativity" (Meier, 2003: 16).

Meier's insistence that education's aim is to teach capacities for a "democratic way of life" – a commitment embodied in the East Harlem schools she initiated in New York in the 1970s, from which almost all students graduate and most go to college – testifies to the continued existence of democratic politics. But these are secondary themes in the democracy discourse, in America and elsewhere in the world.

Crisis in the North Atlantic Paradigm

The landscape of democracy around the world in the early 21st century is freighted with contrasts that dramatise the flaws in the North Atlantic paradigm. Since the mid 1970s, a wave of democratic change has swept across the world. Seventy-six countries shifted from non-democratic to democratic electoral systems. Two hundred years, from the Age of Revolution to 1970, produced 50 electoral democracies. The decade after 1985 generated the same number (Holston, 2003: 2).

Yet just as the idea of free elections coupled with unbridled marketplace economics has triumphed, doubts have exploded about its adequacy to address social problems. Thus, the Latin Americanist James Holston documented the disjunctures between formal political democracy and "the civil component of citizenship," in many developing nations. In Latin America, increasing violence, growing poverty, and systematic violation of civil liberties after the advent of free elections have for many raised dramatic questions about "democracy" (*ibid.*) Similarly in South Africa, as Guy Mhone and Omano Edigheji put it, "economic liberalization and formal democracy tend to unravel the incipient contradictions... which had previously been suppressed under apartheid" (Mhone and Edigheji, 2003: 352).

In established democracies, public institutions are also in increasing disrepute. *The Economist* captured the contradiction. "New democracies are used to having well-meaning observers from the mature democracies descend on them", wrote the editors. "If opinion research is any guide, the mature democracies have troubles of their own." Cross country comparisons showed political trust in both politicians and political institutions has been declining sharply. World-wide polls conducted in 1981 and 1990 showed declining faith in parliament, the armed services, the judiciary, the police, and the civil service. Polling in the nineties showed steep declines in confidence in politicians, parties, and parliament in every nation except the Netherlands (1999).

"To what extent do theories of democracy anchored in North Atlantic history and culture remain adequate for understanding its global reach, experience, and quality?" Holston asked at a symposium on citizenship in Latin America (Holston, 2003: 2). It is a telling question that suggests another: What is the alternative?

Democracy in Recent African Scholarship

If North Atlantic theories of democracy are questioned in Latin America, Africa and elsewhere, there is still wide agreement, especially in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, on the need for *democracy*, more deeply understood. Mhone and Edigheji, who noted the problems that elite democracy has engendered, argue nonetheless that "democracy also provides the enabling environment for resolving these very same contradictions" (2003:352). Although by no means universally espoused, three strong trends in recent African democratic and political theory point toward fundamental challenges to the western paradigm.

In the first instance, there is a widespread questioning of centralised state power as the essence of democracy. In the second, there is an epistemological challenge to knowledge production detached from the life and experience of the people. In the third, there is the return of the political, understood in different terms than parties and ideologies.

Perhaps the major obstacle in the way of creating democratic societies is the tendency toward reliance on the strong central state. As Claude Ake has observed, postcolonial governments in most of Africa continue to reflect the legacy of colonialism, and colonial politics itself was constituted by an especially virulent power struggle outside the constraints of legality. "Colonial politics was reduced to the crude mechanics of opposing forces driven by the calculus of power. For everyone in the political arena, security lay only in the accumulation of power" (Ake, 1996: 3). The legacy continues. As Okwudiba Nnoli said, "The state structure bequeathed to independent Africa was still awesome in its power and wealth relative to other social forces in society." Thus, today, "African politicians will jump onto any political programme that gives them any hope...of coming to power" (2000: 179, 177).

Yet the growing emphasis on popular participation as the mark of democracy suggests a dramatic shift away from primary reliance on the central state, at least among significant numbers of public intellectuals. "The post colonial experience all over Africa was intoxicated with the power of the Central State," wrote Akin Mabogunje, a world famous geographer at the University of Ibadan who has been himself deeply involved in development work. Yet "no long-lasting process of development can come from such an over-bloated Central State apparatus while the rest of the society is paralyzed and powerless...[this is] the hard lesson we are learning from the crisis situation pervading all of Africa today" (1999: 31).

Related to excessive reliance on central state power, in the colonial period many African intellectuals absorbed elitist, technocratic values and identities in educational systems shaped by European political philosophy and pedagogy. Herbert Vilakazi has expressed this irony with poignancy:

> *The tragedy of African civilization is that Western-educated Africans became lost and irrelevant as intellectuals who could develop African civilization further. Historically, intellectuals of any civilization are the voices of that civilization to the rest of the world....Africa['s] intellectuals, by and large, absconded and abdicated their role as developers, minstrels, and trumpeters of African civilization... Uncertified Africans are denied respect and opportunities for development; they could not sing out, articulate and develop the unique patterns of African civilization (in Nabudere, 2003: 11–12).*

Yet this model of detached scholarship and intellectual work, too, is undergoing a sustained challenge. Many intellectuals call for an unromantic but also deep and appreciative look at African traditions of civic engagement and democracy. "The sociological reality of ancient Africa is too complex to be simplified through the lenses of Afrocentric romantics as a golden age of freedom, or those of Eurocentric Afro-

pessimists as an epoch of despotism", Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja has written. "[Yet] that many of the people of precolonial Africa experienced a measure of democracy at the village level and, indeed, beyond in larger political communities has been well established..." (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1997:10). Akin Mabongunje, observing the tendency of African social scientists to "think and write as if we are dealing with a society without its own history or culture", contrasts contemporary neglect of patterns of informal civic engagement with "long histories of civic engagement and successful collaboration" in the African context (1999: 38; see also Mangcu, X., 2004).

Vilakazi calls for "a massive cultural revolution consisting, first, of our intellectuals going back to ordinary African men and women to receive education of Africa culture and civilization." Dani Nabudere, quoting Vilakazi, makes a powerful argument for "a Pan-African University" which will have as its overall goal the provision of opportunities for higher and advanced education for students and adult learners in the context of a new African-based epistemology and methodology" (2003: 4).

Third, many now call for a revitalisation of politics as the way to empower citizens and energise democracy. Admore Kambudzi puts this neatly, answering his own rhetorical question, "why center on political renewal?" in Africa when so much else is wrong, from poverty to cultural degradation: "Simply because politics is that arena of power games and plays that has influenced and determined life from time immemorial" (2001: 60). Adele Jinadu, intimates a new politics in calling for "the harnessing [of] a progressive and Afro-centric social science to a human-centred democratic development in Africa...centrally and primarily concerned with the African renaissance" (quoted in Nabudere, 2000:3). In more explicit and elaborated terms, Omano Edigheji has called for "a different kind of politics," citizen-owned and diffused throughout civil society. The objective of such politics, in Edigheji's view, is "self-empowerment of individuals, communities, and localities so that citizens can claim their right to develop themselves and society." Citizen-owned politics is the way people can "reverse the market's pervasive values of individualization, commodification, and monetisation of life" (2003:107). Mabogunje, using the concept of social capital with a far more political and public cast than most current western uses of the term, calls for attention to the way in which local governance structures enhance or erode civic engagement. "How well does the present system facilitate the emergence, growth, or consolidation of dense networks of civic engagement within our communities," in his view, is the "vital criterion for deciding the viability of any system of local governance" (1999: 33, 31).

While there are strong democratic currents emerging in African intellectual life, there are also real world examples, especially in South Africa, that suggest the quickening energies of a different understanding of democracy and politics.

Seeing Like a Democracy in South Africa and Beyond

In South Africa, with the remarkable democratic legacy of the freedom struggle against apartheid extending over generations, the impulse to transcend

inherited western categories mingles with the development imperatives of tapping the energy and talent of the whole society. Thus, a striking feature of the public discourse about democracy in South Africa is its participatory and productive flavor, even from the highest levels of government. "It is today impossible to imagine a South Africa that is not a democratic South Africa. It is similarly impossible to meet any of the enormous challenges we face, outside the context of respect for the principle and the practice that the people shall govern," said Thabo Mbeki in his 2004 inaugural address. Such themes are expanded elsewhere in government rhetoric. Joel Netshitenzhe and Goolam Aboobaker, editors of *Towards a Ten Year Review* report for The Presidency, describe the "dual role" of the state. "[It is] an actor in providing services and helping create an appropriate environment for development, and a leader in forging common cause among the variety of social actors". The *Review* is candid about failures of government practice. "Weaknesses include...lack of public involvement in the enforcement of these principles," they write. "Such public involvement would require a confident citizenry that holds officials to account" (2004: 10, 13).

In the 2001 South African conference on citizen action, Jayendra Naidoo proposed that the challenge is "how to engage effectively with a legitimate, democratically elected government without being either co-opted or needlessly confrontational". He argued that the need is for civil society organisations "to balance a creative tension on several points, being independent but remaining patriotic, supportive but not subservient, outspoken yet not malicious, respectful of the democratic mandate of government yet remaining a vigorous and independent representative of the views" of the citizenry (in Graham and Meyer, eds., 2001: 30).

Such a view implies a fundamental rethinking of the meaning and role of elections in a democracy. It suggests a shift from "seeing like a state," where citizens' fundamental role is to choose their leaders and then function as customers of government services, to continuing, co-creative roles for citizens in constructing democracy as a way of life. From such a perspective, the question in elections is not which politician will solve the problems of society, nor how politicians mobilise support for themselves. Rather, the question is how citizens choose the best partners and the best plans for undertaking democracy's work. Elections are acts of the people.

The view of democracy as a way of life does not devalue the mandate of successful parties, nor the convening, visionary, and other leadership roles of politicians. It does require far greater emphasis on citizen capacities: the habits, skills, confidence of citizens, as well as citizen power and authority. It also points toward the revitalisation of public wealth as a check and complement to private accumulation, another element that can be seen in current ANC thinking. For instance, ANC leader Saki Macozoma's article in the Interfund 10 year study, *The Real State of the Nation,* is remarkable for its valuation of public goods production. Macozoma

recalls, as a model in some ways, the positive contributions of the Afrikaner elite in the 1930s and 40s, which "delivered to the *volk* the public goods ordinary people needed to pull themselves out of poverty"(2003: 27).

Developing citizen capacities and appreciation for the role of public goods production requires retrieving and spreading a richer, deeper democratic politics. As Krista Johnson has observed, government notions of participation often conceptualise a depoliticised civic sphere (or "civil society") where citizens are seen as active, but not involved in the hard work of policy formulation. But the freedom movement generated a view of politics that was more robust, infused through civil society. Democratic theory out of this tradition challenges views which "ascribe to the state the role of knowledge producer, able to develop policy and set the agenda for social transformation" in the name of politics. Popular democrats see de-politicised versions of civil society as using a language of 'citizen participation' and 'people–driven development' to constrain citizens. "The role of civil society organisations [is restricted] to that of mobilization and the implementation of directives from above…based on a clear distinction between government or party experts who 'know' and the mass of the people who are supposed to apply this knowledge, leaving out of the equation the capacity of the average citizen to act and form his or her own opinion." In contrast, "scholars [like Neocosmos, Mamdani, Krista Johnson,, and others] working within the popular-democratic paradigm suggest that what is required is a redefinition of the relationship between ruler and ruled whereby the practices of government are no longer considered to be the privilege of the few, and the majority of citizens are not excluded from the public realm" (2003: 11, 5, 3).

Most importantly, such politics exists not only in theory but also at the grassroots level in practice, as well, both in North Atlantic nations and in South Africa. Lessons from practices of everyday politics, when better incorporated into contemporary African theorisations of democracy, hold potential to form a powerful and compelling alternative to regnant conceptions, which eclipse the citizen.

In the United States and in Great Britain, democratic politics has developed in the last generation with roots especially in the African-American freedom struggles of the 1950s and 1960s that offer a powerful alternative to state-centered, ideological politics. Effective civic efforts like the organisations affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF, US and Great Britain) and the Gamaliel Foundation also have counterpart networks in South Africa such as the Interfaith Community Development Association (ICDA), and the Church Based Community Organization (CBCO) (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001; Warren, 2001; Wood, 2003; Boyte, 2004).

These groups are animated by a philosophically oriented politics, not an ideological politics. Based on democratic and religious values such as participation, justice, concern for the poor, equality, and the sacredness of the person, they include a wide range of partisan and religious viewpoints and racial and cultural groups.

As the new generation of broad citizen groups have grown, experienced successes on issues such as poverty, housing, crime, and school reform, and considered their long range purposes, they added an emphasis on teaching politics. They described themselves as "schools for public life" and they also undertook projects like infrastructure improvement that benefited the whole community, while still advancing the everyday interests of poor, minority, and working class communities. IAF describes the cultivation of an ethos of "standing for the whole" among its members.

"Schools for public life" are self-funded citizen organisations where people learn the arts and skills of a multidimensional and citizen-centered politics. Such political education involves not only specific political information and skills; it adds a strong public relationship-building dimension that helps re-centre politics among citizens. Public relationship-building and understanding self-interests depends on the widespread practice of one on one, a continual process of interviewing. Leaders interview each other, across lines of difference in faith, culture, income level, or party affiliation, to discover what passions and core concerns motivate people. This "thickens" citizen organisations, in comparison with much activist politics that creates relationships based on issue stance or ideology. In teaching the complexity of others from different backgrounds, this political approach also cultivates what might be called a narrative imagination, seeing each person in light of their distinctive, unique histories and embedded identities. The stress on core concepts also generates a dynamic intellectual life, creating a practical theory of action by employing concepts like power, public life, self-interest, judgment, and imagination. Such concepts, in turn, are tied to discussion of the democratic and religious values and traditions that inform and frame their efforts. These emphases create a culture that values the public world and public goods.

The IAF and other broad based citizen groups believe that it is not sufficient simply to protest. To exert power on a continuing basis, citizens must also assume responsibility for their communities' basic public goods and for problem solving. Gerald Taylor, IAF's southern director in the US, describes this as "moving into power". "Moving into power means learning how to be accountable", said Taylor."It means being able to negotiate and compromise. It means understanding that people are not necessarily evil because they have different interests or ways of looking at the world" (in Boyte, 2004: 53). A story from the IAF affiliate in Baltimore illustrates politics that begins with listening and engagement, not advocacy. When BUILD leaders met for the first time with Paul Sarbanes, distinguished senior senator from Maryland, he welcomed them, took out his notepad, and asked, "what can I do for you?" "Nothing", was the answer. "We will be around for a long time, and you are likely to be as well. We want to develop a relationship. We need to understand your interests, why you went into politics, and what you are trying to achieve" (Boyte, 2004: vii).

Finally, broadly based citizen organisations' successes depend on a bold conceptual act: They *deprofessionalise* politics. This conceptual change goes against

the grain of 20th century developments that have seen more and more authority and decision making vested in experts, who in turn view themselves as a class apart from a common civic life. "Politics," in its older meaning, is absent from much of modern life in industrialised, technological societies. Formal politics itself reflects the same technical dynamic. Politics (from the Greek, *politikos*, of the citizen), in its original meanings is the activity of amateurs, not specialists. Politics, as Aristotle argued in the *Politics,* involves a pluralist world, people of different views, interests, and backgrounds interacting in order to accomplish some task. Politics is the opposite of relations based on similarity; Aristotle used the examples of military alliance and families to make the contrast (Aristotle, 1996). But in the expert dominated, marketplace oriented environments of today, both in technological, wealthy nations such as the United States and also in new democracies of the developing world, politics has become controlled by specialists and located in parties. Or, in citizen action efforts, politics is shaped by ideological mobilisers of the people. Progressive politics has often become a demand for more pieces of the pie, without asking who bakes it, how it is baked, or what the ingredients are (Boyte, 2004).

In sharp contrast, broad based groups like the Industrial Areas Foundation affiliates, the ICDA, or the CBCO groups reclaim politics as the activity of ordinary citizens, while they renew an appreciation of public goods. The issues that such groups address and the ways in which issues are defined and developed are the product of extensive discussion and debate within their ranks. The meaning of professional is recast in democratic ways: organisers are coaches and political educators while citizen leaders take centre stage. Citizen ownership of the activity of politics is constantly stressed, and politics is based upon a deep and unromantic respect for the capacities of ordinary people. What is called the "iron rule" of such organising, "never do for others what they can do for themselves", is reiterated to contrast it with a service approach. Meanwhile, politicians are respected when they produce results and are accountable, but are not allowed to dominate meetings or to single-handedly define issues. Interestingly, as recent scholarship documents, this process makes for better political leadership, as well as powerful citizen organisations. The pattern reframes the debate between "participatory" and "representative" democracy by highlighting the dynamic interaction between *both.*

One of the most important features of South African democracy is the development of similar understandings of politics in groups that cross boundaries and contexts, from NGOs to development activists. Everyday politics, for instance, is taught through Idasa's Community and Citizen Empowerment Programme, for instance, and communicated through its All Media Group. Thus, in the run-up to the elections in April, 2004, the Idasa-authored newspaper supplement for all the high schools in the nation illustrated both its reach and its philosophical orientation toward grassroots democracy and politics. Entitled *Youth Vote South Africa*, undertaken in association with the Ministry of Education and the Independent

Electoral Commission, the project consisted of 20 weekly supplements in the chain of Independent newspapers across the nation. "Democracy in its strongest form is really about citizens actively shaping their world, not just thinking about it and talking about it but getting out and doing something about it", read the issue, "Our Picture of Democracy". It continued with many examples and stories for young people to get active in "the public work of democracy, " some drawn from its own partnerships, as in an organising campaign about xenophobia in a township outside of Pretoria. "Regular elections and the freedom to vote are usually seen as the most basic criteria for determining whether a country and its government are democratic or not," said *Supplement #4* "But elections alone are never enough to guarantee democracy, whether it is in a country, a community or a school...How citizens participate in public life and how government exercises its power are more important tests of democracy than elections alone. The real test is whether citizens are able to act and help to shape what happens in society on an ongoing basis". The colorful supplement urged young people to "remember the roots of the word democracy...'people' (demos) and 'power' (kratos)" (Ström, 2003).

Idasa crosses lines in its activities – government, civil society, business, the press, higher education. It is practical, not ideological , committed to a philosophy of democratic change, social justice, and empowerment of those without standing in conventional public affairs. Idasa sees democracy as an ongoing work in which the talents of everyone are needed. "Our whole philosophy is that everyone needs to be included in the work of democracy", says Paul Graham, current executive director. "You can't exclude this group or that group because you think they're bad. You can't legislate them away. The people who are excluded will come back to act like the social problem you expect them to be" (interview, 2003).

This view of politics and democracy reflects the group's originating philosophy, which drew from Greek understandings articulated by theorists such as Bernard Crick and Hannah Arendt, explicitly against the grain of contemporary North Atlantic definitions of politics. Bernard Crick's classic 1962 work, *In Defense of Politics*, sought to warn emerging nations in Africa against ideas of "politics" that were current in Europe. Crick's aim was to rescue the concept of politics, in an older, Aristotelian sense, from its "enemies" such as ideological zealotry, mass democracy, and technocratic modes of thought. Crick's book, along with Hannah Arendt's, are key texts in politics for citizen groups in the US and South Africa. Politics here is what Crick calls "a civilizing activity," the way that people of diverse interests and views in heterogeneous societies negotiate across lines of difference to solve problems and live together without violence (Crick, 1962: 1; Arendt, 1958).

Everyday or citizen-centered politics has a strong justice orientation. Questions of social and economic justice are burning ones in a society where, as of 2003 according to the researcher David Everatt, between 45 and 55 per cent of all South Africans – some 18 to 24 million people – live in conditions of poverty (Everatt, 2003). But the democratic politics germinating in South Africa and elsewhere in

Africa combines a focus on the *distributive* side of politics with an emphasis on the *productive,* public wealth-generating, problem-solving, world-building side.

In adding productive dimensions to the concept and practice of politics, retrieval of African traditions point toward a challenge not only to modern western ideas but also more than two thousand years of political theory. Work, or productive activity, is absent from conventional theories of participatory democracy not only in recent versions (such as civil society and deliberative theories) but over the millennia. The western tradition conceives public life as the democratisation of aristocracy. As Benjamin Barber has observed, "To the Greeks, labor by itself defined only mere animal existence, while leisure was the condition for freedom, politics, and truly 'human' forms of being" (1998: 132).

Hannah Arendt's work, especially her book, *The Human Condition*, retrieved for modern audiences the memory of the vitality of ancient Greek politics. Yet by separating politics from work, she also added an episodic and heroic quality to public politics. Arendt believed that public life emerged for ordinary people only at extraordinary moments – during the American Revolution, the civil rights movement, or, she would doubtless add, the anti-apartheid struggle (1958).

Contemporary democratic theorists like Barber or Arendt simply failed to grasp the cooperative and deeply political qualities of much work. This public and cooperative quality, however, is illustrated in African traditions of cooperative labor that often inform contemporary struggle traditions. In Sesotho, the term *letsema* means cooperative village work on common projects; in isiZulu, *ilimo* is a close equivalent, while in Afrikaans, *saamspan* means "let's get to work". In Xhosa, *dibanisani* means "let's work together for a better future". In Kenya, *harambee* – initially meaning let's put aside differences to work on the larger task – came to be a central idea in the liberation movement. All of these, in turn, point toward a conception of democracy as a way of life built through public work.

The productive side of politics suggested by such traditions emerges clearly in the 10-year study of South African democracy edited by Edgar Pieterse and Frank Meintjies, *Voices of the Transition*. The study is based on two colloquia in which development activists from different arenas – NGOs and community work, academia, government, business, the arts, the media – reflected on their experiences over the decade, invited "to explore any issue of relevance and passion", and to express themselves through various genres, including poetry, fiction, photos, or essays. The collection opens a window into the turbulence and creativity of a decade of change infused with democratic energy. Jenny Robinson challenges the dominant "dismissal of the value of the moment of construction in social and political life that has taken hold in social theory" and calls for "a place for constructive moments" (272–3). Adam Habib takes issue with the misuse of racial categories that obliterate the concrete reality and stories of people's lives (237–48). Edgar Pieterse proposes attention to public places in development work, as well as "mundane aspirations of fun, safety, beauty, pleasure, desire, flirtatious demonstration, dignity, escapism, voice, presence

and so on that give meaning to subjectivity and sociality" (239–40). Metsi Makhetha is eloquent and also politically savvy in describing how she combined professional knowledge with deep respect for the intelligence and capacities of ordinary people, in her work for the Ministry of Housing (145–49).

Signs of a popular, pluralist, public and productive politics in South Africa have parallels elsewhere. For instance, a view of politics as about democratic empowerment, horizontal relations among citizens, and the negotiation among diverse interests, groups, cultures and perspectives, animates the education reform effort HakiElimu (Rights Education) in Tanzania. HakiElimu organises across government, civil society, and communities to involve citizens in school reform and governance structures in Tanzania, while it also impacts national policy. Rakesh Rajani, the director of HakiElimu, contrasts its *political* approach with what he sees as the dominant *technical* approach to school reform practiced by most NGOs and government. "Politics ('siasa' in Kiswahili) has become a bad word here in Tanzania, as elsewhere. We need to reclaim politics from the parties and from the leaders, to make it work for people", says Rajani. He proposes that this requires, above all, "an act of the imagination" (personal correspondence, 2003).

Conclusion

Democracy in western societies has been increasingly hollowed out. Politics has mainly become activity directed by specialists and professionals, often advertising campaigns with thinly veiled contempt for the intelligence and capacity of ordinary people. Policies, even those by political leaders espousing values of justice and equality, are largely cast in the language and the terms of the market.

There is urgent need for a compelling alternative to privatising politics of the sort espoused and practiced by the current American administration. But the technocratic, market-oriented politics of contemporary Washington, while extreme, finds counterparts in "Third Way" politics in Great Britain and analogous, expert-driven politics in Europe as well.

A very different view of politics and democracy is beginning to germinate in South Africa and African societies, and intellectual life. It has not yet formed an elaborated alternative to the North Atlantic frame, but practice of everyday citizen politics combined with the larger theoretical discussion about democracy in Africa clearly create foundations for such a challenge.

We may be at the threshold of understanding democracy as a way of life that balances public wealth with private wealth and understands citizens to be at the centre of politics, the constituting actors and creators of democracy. If so, South Africa and perhaps other African nations could well lead the way.

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