

ACTION PLAN ASSIGNMENT #2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concerning Establishing a Participatory Direct Democracy  
in the United States of America

By

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#### Abstract:

The real possibility of a direct democracy, through direct voting, on the local, state, and national level now exists with the advent of Internet technology. This review of literature discusses the possibility and explores philosophical concepts of democracy and reviews the books “Democracy, Real and Ideal” by Ricardo Blaug, “Democracy in America” by Alexis de Tocqueville, “Strategies of Change” by Steven Vago, as well as some web sites devoted to the subject.

Largely a critique and analysis of the philosophy of the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, the book “Democracy, Real and Ideal” by Ricardo Blaug (1999, State University of New York Press) examines his philosophy in relation to the theory and practical aspects of democracy. Habermas’ work includes a theory of democracy and his exploration of the realistic practicality of democracy and an in depth analysis of his normative theory of democracy and his theory of judgement. “Only where democracy is conceived as an everyday and real interactive process can we understand what it might mean to truly rule ourselves” (p. xv). In the study of Habermas’ discourse of ethics, references are made to Hobbe’s Leviathan and Locke’s concept of protective rights (p. 12).

Democracy is discussed in relation to the rationalism of Plato and the empiricism of Aristotle. The essay mentions that Locke’s theory starts with the natural human rights, Hobbes’ begins with rational death avoidance (or survival instinct), and Kant begins his premise with the idea of pure practical reason (p. 6). Kant says: “ a person is subject to no law other than those he (either alone or at least jointly with others) gives to himself”, a thought which is greatly influenced by Jean Jacques Rousseau and Kant also refers to a social contract like Rousseau’s. Kant’s support of the moral law assumes that mankind is essentially good and moral by nature, a concept which figures heavily in democratic theory (but Hegel criticizes Kant’s philosophy as being overly abstracted and not applicable to reality). Also explored are Aristotle’s episteme (objective knowledge), techne (technical knowledge), and phronesis (practical reason) in relation to democratic theory (p. 23, 24).

The what, who, how and where of political theory including the location of the democratic process, as well as Rousseau’s concept of popular sovereignty, are discussed. “The normative theory requires that the maximum number of people be involved and that the procedure they use be as fair as possible” (p. 50). According to J.F.Bohman: “more democracy ... is possible ... so long as citizens find the public sphere a discursive space for criticism, learning, and new forms of associations” (p. 54). R. Bernstein says: “If we don’t strive to realize the conditions required for practical discourse then we will surely become less than fully human” (p. 54). And from K. Baynes: we need a “robust and multifaceted model of the public sphere in which individuals can deliberate about the collective terms and conditions of the common lives” (p. 54). Blaug concludes his introduction with: “If we forget what he (Habermas) has taught us we will achieve nothing, for the world is full of theories of deliberative democracy that, lacking normative sophistication, amount to little more than heart-warming remonstrances, fantasies of positivistic control, or mere semantic incantation.” (p. 127).

Concerning the actual functioning of the democratic fora, Blaug mentions that the application of democratic theory in reality “has always had a profound distrust of the people” (p. 133) as evidenced by the American Constitution.

Habermas states (p. 134):

“What we need is a hegemony of democratic values, and this requires a multiplication of democratic practices, institutionalizing them into ever more diverse social relations, so that a multiplicity of subject-positions can be formed through a democratic matrix. It is in this way — and not by trying to provide it with a rational foundation — that we will be able not only to defend democracy but also to deepen it ... a project of radical and plural democracy ... requires the existence of multiplicity, of plurality, and of conflict, and sees in them the *raison d’etre* of politics”.

In “Democracy from the Participant’s Perspective” (p. 136), a discussion ensues concerning a “breakout of democracy”, which has definitive characteristics and its own life cycle. When this breakout occurs and as public interest increases, the people will, in Rousseau’s words “fly to the assemblies”. “With a breakout of democracy we have Satre’s ‘group in fusion’, Pizzorno’s ‘mobilization’ type of political participation, Mansbridge’s ‘fragile bubbles’ of ‘unitary democracy’, Phillip’s ‘internal democracy’, Moscovici’s ‘consensual’ participation, Arendt’s ‘oasis in the desert’ or ‘elementary republics’, Charter 77’s ‘parallel poleis’, and the opening of a Habermasian ‘public sphere’.” (p. 138).

Blaug mentions the democratic decision making process as having five elements: 1. problem recognition 2. deliberation 3. decision making 4. implementation 5. evaluation (p. 141). L. Goodwyn (1981, p. 146) mentions that democratic institutions build slowly so, in their development, patience is required. And Blaug says: “While mistrust of the political consciousness of the populace has served to ground the need for elitism in democracy, participation itself is just as frequently appealed to as the supreme educator. If practiced regularly, perhaps at first on tasks appropriate to the level of learning, participants can make significant gains in proficiency.” (p. 146). K. Elder refers to the three levels of society as micro, meso, and macro (p. 149).

Concerning the democratic participatory process, Blaug states (p. 151):

When we begin to consider the a movement seriously challenging the power of the state, we reveal the extraordinary lack of knowledge we have accumulated over our history regarding what it actually means to rule ourselves. the flight into liberal democracy evinced by those countries who have recently joined the “democratic” club shows both the collective paucity of our understanding of such a process and also the dangers in imagining that one “revolutionary” push, one legitimating social contract, one constitutional founding, can relieve us of the need to preserve genuine democracy. Where we conceive of a social contract as an ongoing procedure requiring constant work and attention, so do we understand that deliberative capacities must be learned, practiced, preserved, and patiently extended.

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Blaug also discusses the issue of emotions in the democratic process (p. 153) but mentions that, according to Rousseau, “once you have citizens, you have all you need” (p. 155). S. Behabib is quoted as saying: “the question is not whether discursive democracy can become the practice of complex societies but whether complex societies are still capable of democratic rule” (p. 156). I think that, with the advent of Internet technology, they are.

In “Democracy in America” (1848), Alexis de Tocqueville explores, in two volumes using a sweeping and panoramic view, the process of government in the United States and his view of its type of participatory government. His essays cover various aspects of American life and government including the sociology and psychology of the American people, discussions of local, state, and federal governments as well as an in depth analysis of the United States Constitution and discussions of the practical philosophy of democracy.

In “Why it can strictly be said that the people govern in the United States”, he says:

In America the people appoint both those who make the laws and those who execute them; the people form the jury which punishes breaches of the law. The institutions are democratic not only in principle but also in all their developments; thus the people directly nominate their representatives and generally choose them annually so as to hold them more completely dependent. So direction really comes from the people, and though the form of government is representative, it is clear that the opinions, prejudices, interests, and even passions of the people can find no lasting obstacles preventing them from being manifest in the daily conduct of society.

In the United States, as in all countries where the people reign, the majority rules in the name of the people.

This majority is chiefly composed of peaceful citizens who by taste or interest sincerely desire the well-being of the country. They are surrounded by the constant agitation of parties seeking to draw them in and to enlist their support.

Steven Vago in “Strategies of Change” probes the three components of social change which are agents (leaders -- directors, advocates, backers, technicians, administrators, and organizers -- and supporters -- workers, donors, and sympathizers), targets (micro, meso, and macro), and methods (empirical-rational, normative-reeducative, and power-coercive). All of these components would be used to develop an interactive form of direct democracy following the principles of Peter Reason’s Participatory Inquiry and Peter Park’s Participatory Research, both of which are types of Participatory Action Research.

Some websites that explore the idea of direct democracy are:

<http://www.democracy-online.org/> (another list of related links and sources)

<http://lone-eagles.com/democracy.htm> (list of related links and sources)

<http://egov.mit.gov.in/> (egovernment development in India)

[http://www.developmentgateway.org/node/130619/?page\\_id=3647](http://www.developmentgateway.org/node/130619/?page_id=3647) (worldwide egovernment)

<http://thomas.loc.gov/> ( the proceedings of the U.S. Congress and egovernment development)

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de Tocqueville, Alexis (1848, 2000). *Democracy in America*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc.

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