

The Grass Roots of Democracy

A Radical Green View

John Clark

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As I write, the electorate has just dutifully marched to the polls once again to decide which wing of the ruling party will be dominant for the next two years. Some environmentalists are bitterly disappointed by the fact that the results seem to indicate a return to the bad old days of the ecocidal "Reagan of Terror." They can take comfort in the fact that not much has changed under the Clinton regime anyway. An article in the current issue of *Earth First!* points out that his so-called "Democratic" Congress passed almost exclusively *anti*-environmental legislation, and concludes that "it is our duty to maintain our stance against both wings of the business party. When you go on the corporate dole or delude yourselves into believing in Al Gore saviors, you become part of the multinational threat to the planet." Even the mild-mannered Sierra Club recently called the record of the last Congress "the worst since 1970," and warned of what it "is threatening to do, on behalf of greedy special interests, Big Business, Big Industry, Big Land Developers and other anti-environment forces." The election has changed little, other than Congress will now have an easier time carrying out its threats.

What is shocking is not the terrible record of Congress, but the fact that so many people—including numerous environmentalists and social justice activists – still believe that either of the two branches of the official party—the Republicrats—can do anything other than serve the powerful special interests that dominate mainstream politics. Members of the Green Movement stand almost alone in completely rejecting the old politics of the official parties everywhere. In some countries, Greens have created significant alternative parties to transform society using relatively traditional political means. For example, in the recent German elections the Greens became the third strongest party in the Bundestag, the national parliament. Other Greens (many of whom are skeptical of any strategies for change through the nation-state) focus more on local and bioregional politics, grassroots organizing, and the creation of a strong alternative ecological culture. In all cases, Greens contend that the dominant political, economic, cultural, and technological systems must be fundamentally changed if the social and ecological crisis is to be overcome. Greens in the United States have summarized their vision of an ecological society in the so-called "five pillars" of the movement: Ecological Wisdom; Peace; Social Justice; Grassroots Democracy; and Community Economics. On the occasion of the recent electoral travesty, it is particularly appropriate to consider the Green principle of Grassroots Democracy.

Today, there is a desperate need to rethink the meaning of democracy. The conventional wisdom holds that democracy really exists if some document says so, or if certain rituals of mass society take place on regular occasions. In reality, democracy is a dynamic process and a set of human relationships that must constantly be recreated through the reflective, creative activity of communities of free people. True democracy means effective self-determination at the grassroots level of those fundamental social groups in which people live, work, and closely interact with one another. Today, most of us have little control over many of the most basic conditions of life: how our local communities are planned and organized; what we produce and the conditions of our labor; what moral, intellectual, and cultural values will be propagated through our vast institutional structures and communicated through the mass media. In general, people are placed in the passive position of consumers of mass-marketed products, employees in hierarchical enterprises, tax-payers in the centralized state, and clients of huge, impersonal bureaucracies. In such a context, democracy becomes no more than empty political rhetoric and deceptive ideology used to disguise oligarchy.

Greens completely reject the cynical and hypocritical political factions that have perpetuated this alienating, undemocratic system, impeded all liberatory social transformation, and actively promoted ecological destruction. In reality, the so-called "Democratic Party" fears nothing more than *democracy* – a system in which power is exercised by the people, the *demos*, rather than large corporations and vast government bureaucracies. In reality, the so-called "Republican Party" has complete contempt for *republicanism*—a system in which power is a "public thing," a *res publica*, rather than the preserve of privileged, socially-irresponsible private interests. These two wings of the official party share control of the political hierarchy, obediently defend the interests of the economic oligarchy, and dutifully authorize the policies of social and ecological destruction that this system of political and economic power demands. They are rewarded for their efforts with a virtual monopoly on political discourse. They demonstrate

that it is quite possible to fool most of the people all of the time, as they successfully reduce politics to demagoguery, gossip, slander, and the art of blaming one's opponent for all the latest manifestations of evils that are deeply embedded in the dominant system. The electorate is asked to meditate on the profound issue of which conspiracy of thieves and hypocrites is worse than the other, and to ponder the momentous question of whether rapacious, exploitative corporations are better or worse than monstrous, wasteful state bureaucracies. What is really decided is how big a slice of the civic pie each gets to devour. What the public is *not* allowed to consider is the possibility of a fundamental democratization of politics or a fundamental transformation of institutions and values.

Reclaiming authentic democracy means returning to the traditions of the great rebellions against social domination. Returning, for example, to the epoch in the French Revolution, when the citizens of Paris took control of their neighborhoods in meetings of the "sections" or grassroots democratic assemblies. Or returning to the period in the early American Republic when radical democrats formed "Democratic-Republican Societies" to spread similar ideas of liberty, equality, and town-meeting democracy. Or returning to the truly utopian moment of the Spanish Revolution, when peasants and workers by the millions returned power to the grassroots and created democratically self-managed farms and factories. It also means going even further back into history and reclaiming the democratic, participatory heritage of many tribal cultures whose methods of deliberation attained an unsurpassed harmony between respect for each person and commitment to the good of the community and nature. We now live in an age in which these traditions are largely forgotten, and in which once-inspiring terms like "democratic" and "republican" have become the lifeless, hypocritical rhetoric of a system of corporate capitalist and centralized state power.

Greens strive to recreate truly participatory grassroots democracy, in which rule by the people becomes a vital reality rather than mere rhetoric. They propose the creation of institutions like neighborhood and town meetings, citizens' committees selected by rotation and by lot, and democratic assemblies in the workplace. They propose that both decision-making and administrative functions be radically democratized, so that political domination cannot be disguised as "representation." They work to extend democracy to all areas of public life, including not only the narrowly political, but also such important realms as education, communications media, and, not least of all, economic institutions. Greens reject the empty debates of liberals and conservatives over whether the federal government or states can better control peoples' lives, or whether big government or big business can better solve the world's problems. Greens propose instead the radical decentralization of power to the local level, where people live, work, and feel the social and ecological effects of public policies. Finally, they seek to create a truly democratic culture in which the vast potentialities of each person are valued, and which takes as its most essential task the formation of free, intelligent and morally-responsible citizens whose concern for the good of the community—the human community and the larger community of nature—is one of their most deeply-held personal values.

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