

Revote or Revolt?

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Wait a minute: Weren't we the people who were supposed to push the American system into a crisis of legitimacy?

By "we" I mean those small but feisty pockets of U.S. society dedicated to rabble-rousing, trouble-making, and fundamental change. For a shut-it-down radical like me, the election mess in the United States has been altogether too surreal, coming at the end of a raucous year of politics in the street.

I'm one of those who believe that our political process is thoroughly corrupted by moneyed interests and that the two major parties often differ only in which corporate masters they serve. The heated battle underway between Democrats and Republicans strikes me as wildly out of proportion to their actual political disagreements - a classic example of what Freud famously called the narcissism of small differences.

Yet still I find myself drawn into the vote-counting drama, as if an accurate tally would constitute a democratic outcome, in an election between two plutocrats hand-picked by ruling elites. I cheer the African-American students from Florida A&M; University who took over the state capitol building for nearly 24 hours to protest the voting irregularities. I'm moved by the stories of Holocaust survivors weeping at the realization that they voted for Holocaust-denier Pat Buchanan. I'm stirred by accounts of protest rallies in Florida whose fervor echoes the black voting rights struggle of the 1950s and early 1960s. And I realize that - despite having voted for Ralph Nader, with zero regrets - I really do dislike Bush more than I dislike Gore.

Over the weekend, I walked over to a hastily organized protest in Times Square, one of many taking place around the country. Promoted almost entirely on the Internet, it had a very home-spun and spontaneous flavor. Nobody had yet created buttons or t-shirts. The signs were nearly all hand-lettered. The crowd had clearly not been mobilized either by the Democratic Party machine or any of the usual protest organizers (labor unions, advocacy groups, college organizations, whatever).

The protesters, who numbered perhaps 700 at their peak, came up with chants full of faith in the basic political process:

"No fuzzy ballots" "Will of the people" "Every vote counts" "This is about democracy"

The signs were in a similar vein:

"Let Grandma's Vote Count" "No Jim Crow Voting" "Isn't this a Democracy?"

But that ultimate question - is the United States in fact a democracy? - was something that no one was really asking. And that virtually no one is discussing during the topsy-turvy process of battling over the vote.

That evening, I went to a screening of "This Is What Democracy Looks Like," a remarkable new documentary on last year's Seattle WTO protests, which takes its name from the most famous of the chants coined there on the streets.

It was on the third day of the protests that I first heard that chant. Having successfully disrupted the WTO's meetings through a nonviolent blockade, we had variously been tear gassed, pepper sprayed, shot at with rubber bullets, deafened with concussion grenades, beaten, arrested, and chased. Martial law had been declared, and all of downtown Seattle had been decreed a "no protest zone," where it was illegal even to carry a sign opposing the WTO.

Thousands of people - including many Seattle residents who had not originally joined the protests, but who were outraged by the complete decimation of civil liberties - decided to defy the ban on public assembly and began to march through the city. Our numbers swelled as we crossed downtown and then headed uphill toward the jail where those arrested for protesting on the previous day were being held. As the enormous and defiant crowd neared a spot where I had seen the police viciously gas seated, nonviolent protesters two days before, the chant went up - "This is what democracy looks like" - and moved me almost to tears.

For what this brave and extraordinary crowd was saying - echoed by every crowd that has since taken to the streets for global justice - was that real democracy is not confined to the voting booth or the halls of government. Democracy is when those without power join together to hold the powerful accountable; when people refuse to have basic decisions about their lives taken out of their hands. Democracy is loud, often unruly, and always public.

The outcome of this election certainly matters. But it's dwarfed in importance by a great many other fights taking place through direct and collective action: for campaign finance reform; against racial profiling and police brutality; against corporate domination and the privatization of public goods; and so on ad infinitum. For democracy will not win, no matter who goes to the White House.

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