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DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

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Democracy, one of the greatest ideas humankind has ever developed, is central to any understanding of development. If we take the Greek origin of the word literally, demos meaning "people" and kratein¹ meaning "rule" then we arrive at a system ruled or governed by the people. If we add to the preposition "by" the two other prepositions in Abraham Lincoln's rightly famous formulation in the Gettysburg Address,² "of" and "for", then the system is summed up very nicely: not only government by the people, but those people who govern are really "of" the people; and they govern "for", meaning in the interests of, the people. The people should be the best judges of their own interests so a system where power emanates from people should also benefit the people.

More particularly, people should be the best judges of what constitutes their basic human needs. Consequently a democracy should be the system which would give priority to basic human needs simply because people themselves will steer their resources in the direction of that which they consider "basic", their priority concerns. Democracy is not only the system where people have a say in decisions concerning themselves, but also a system where they have a veto if the concerns are sufficiently basic.

If basic human needs is a nucleus around which any real definition of development, not to mention development practice can be built³ then democracy according to what has been said above should be a major instrument of development. There is no doubt that

democracy very often functions exactly in this way bringing into political focus, and even decision-making, the basic concerns of the people in general, not only the ruling elites, be they autocratic or technocratic (or both). But two major shortcomings in democratic theory follow from what has just been said.

First, a country may be top democratic, giving first priority to the basic human needs of its own people, even to the most needy among its own; yet, the very same country may be highly undemocratic to the outside, in its foreign policies, be they cultural, economic, military or political or all of these in any combination. There is no mechanism where people in other countries affected by those foreign policies participate in the decision-making. The victims of acts of military aggression and/or economic penetration abroad have certainly been affected, but are without a say in the decisions. And this would not necessarily change if all countries became democratic.

Second, the most frequent institutionalization of democracy, based on majoritarian rule (according to free and secret ballot), even when also based on the one man (woman)-one vote principle meaning that the electorate is expanded to the maximum possible at that time (a flexible concept)--does not guarantee that the needs of the most needy will have top priority. If they constitute a minority one might even argue that first priority to their concerns would be anti-democratic. The majority may have their basic needs satisfied even long time ago and move on beyond need, even to greed, leaving the most needy behind.⁴ Hence, this is where the concept of rights enters the picture to guarantee the basic needs of minorities, or of everybody for that matter as there is no

guarantee that even the most democratic country would, in fact, be basic needs oriented. Certain basic needs (and I will argue for survival; basic material well-being; identity or closeness to that which gives basic meaning to life for most people such as one's own language, one's own religion-ideology; and freedom to satisfy these first three classes of needs according to own choice) should be protected by something less ephemeral than majority vote. It goes without saying that this is even more so if the system is majoritarian but the electorate is contracted, for instance in such a way as to exclude precisely those most in need.

And that opens for a third shortcoming in democratic theory: not only should basic needs be protected by basic rights, adequately institutionalized, lest they are "forgotten"; there should also be provisions making majority decisions contrary to minority needs impossible by being unconstitutional. There are certain things a majority cannot decide. They cannot decide genocide, for instance. And I would argue that they cannot decide capital punishment either, and am in doubt about the right of any system to legalize abortion and euthanasia. That autocratic-technocratic systems⁵ would do so is no argument why democratic systems should do the same, although the difference between prescribing abortion and euthanasia on the one hand and making them legal on the other certainly is a major one. In the same vein I would also argue that a majority cannot legitimately deprive a minority of their livelihood, a blanket term standing for material basic needs. That the same applies to deprivation of a minority

of basic spiritual needs in terms of, for instance, language and religion, goes without saying. This case is perhaps better known since such acts do not only hit poor people, but often people high up, capable of defending themselves and of voicing, rightly, their grievances. And finally, indeed: no majority can legitimately deprive a minority of its freedom.⁶

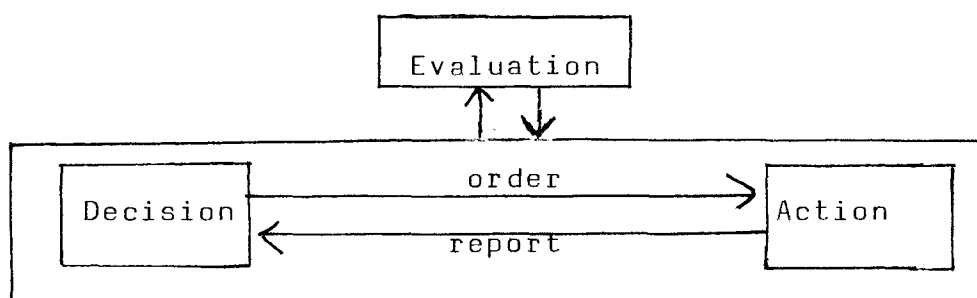
Trivial? Perhaps, but that triviality testifies to something positive: we have come so far in human and social development that what has been said above by many is taken for granted. Nevertheless these principles are infringed in every democracy very often, one reason perhaps being that they are not seen as sufficiently central to democratic theory. And the issue of democracy in foreign affairs is not seen at all, or misinterpreted to mean a more conscious, more informed participation of the national electorate in foreign policy-making, of course no guarantee at all as those affected abroad can not participate. And the latter would not constitute any guarantee either against the second shortcoming mentioned above. When a big country attacks a small country the thought experiment of a pooled electorate voting over the matter solves nothing: the victims might be outvoted!

Which are the conditions for democracy to function? What analytical handle can yield some fruitful insights into this problem? Judging from the very voluminous literature in the field⁷ they are numerous. Only one may be used in this small attempt to answer the question, taking the Greek verb kratein, ruling, steering, seriously, conceiving of the society as a cybernetic mechanism.⁸ The basic underlying metaphor

for thinking about such systems is probably ourselves, the human being, including the very act of thinking. We make decisions, we act. Some action is autonomous and not subject to decision-making. Other acts are not autonomous but the decision-making is sub-conscious, having become a habit. Other decisions are highly conscious but may not be followed up by action if inner or outer circumstances do not permit. In short, the relationship is complex, but a distinction between decision and action is nevertheless fruitful. The complexity calls our attention to a third component, however: evaluation, some mechanism whereby the whole interplay between decisions/non-decisions and action/non-action is reviewed. In the human organism that would be in our consciousness, our self-awareness, or super-ego. Others might use the triad of body-mind-spirit to stand for action-decision-evaluation (but decisions/actions should not be confused with ego/id in freudian vocabulary).

The important point is the triadic structure as indicated in Figure 1:

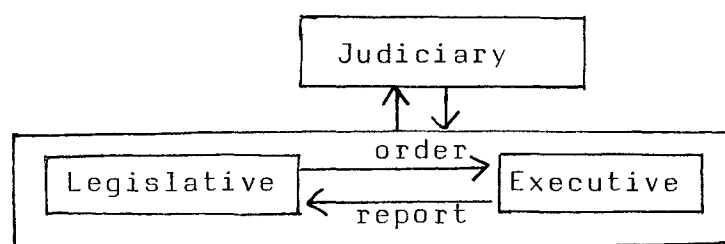
FIGURE 1. General model: Three functions



Evaluation is placed not on top of decisions alone, or actions alone, but on top of the relationship between decisions and actions as an evaluation of the total decision/action system (or sub-system). The person does not or should not only ask himself the question "what have I done?" or the question "what did I want?" but should examine the whole attitude-behavior complex constituting a personality.

And similarly for a polity, the society seen from this angle of decision-making and social action. I do not think it is too far-fetched to see the classical triadic division of power in legislative, executive and judiciary⁹ in this light, only that the judiciary does not only have this high level watchdog function as the key evaluation agency of the polity (the US Supreme Court, for instance), but also many other functions:

FIGURE 2. Elite model: Three powers

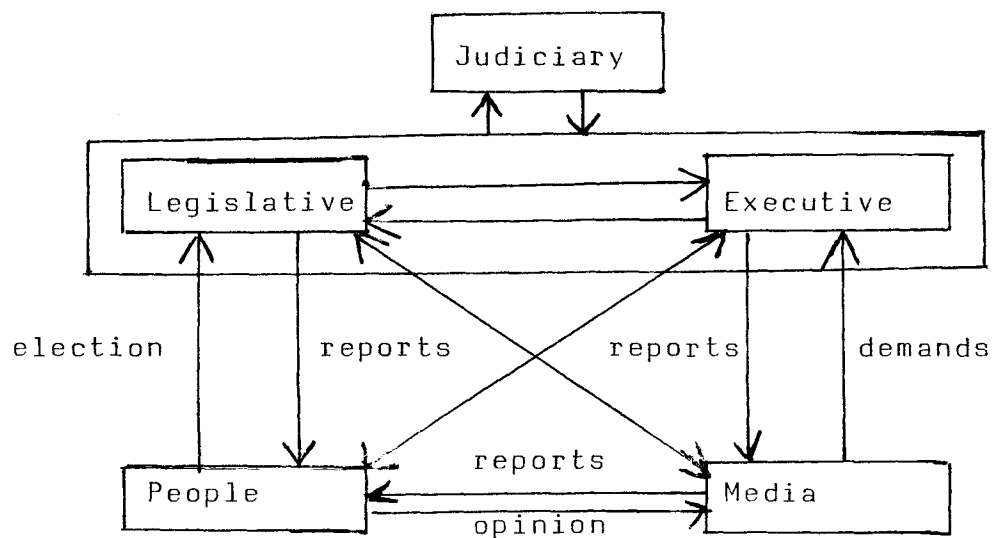


Power may be divided, yet rest with a very small ruling elite. The division principle was a part of general social differentiation¹⁰ often associated with "modernization", the undifferentiated example being the feudal king with his Court, embodying all three powers in one body, even one person. How much of this is myth and how much is reality is beyond the scope of this paper. One problem, in the

process of differentiation, was where to place the king (he is usually placed in the executive branch, but the position remains ambiguous) or simply abolished as an institution.¹¹ So change there was.

Enters democracy. In Figure 3 (see next page) one model is given; using the terms and intellectual methods of this presentation many other models could be imagined. Power 0 is introduced, the power underlying the other three: We, the people.¹² The problem is, however, that the people cannot participate in the day-to-day activities of the legislative and the executive, not to mention the very lofty and more rare activities of the judiciary. There has to be a fourth power "of the state", the media, or the press as it was when this term was first introduced.¹³ What happens in the polity as a whole has to be made transparent, visible at a glance--and this is in principle what the press, the radio, the TV provide. They provide reports both from the legislative and the executive, and communicate to the people. If the people do not read the press they can at least listen to the radio or watch television--multiple media cater to more faculties than one.

On paper the system is perfect. People elect the legislative. The legislative makes decisions and reports back to the people, either directly or indirectly via the media (today they would tend to use the media also for direct communication). The legislative then orders the executive to carry out actions. The executive reports back to the legislative, and also reports to the media, although the latter reports may have to be squeezed out of the executive by people properly trained, so called reporters. The media may serve as an

FIGURE 3: Democratic model: Five powers

alternative judiciary by in addition placing demands both on the legislative and on the executive, as indicated in the figure

This means that in a democracy the legislative/executive complex has three watchdogs: the people, the judiciary and the media. Seen from the point of view of the executive alone there are even four watchdogs since this is also one of the functions of the legislative. Being watched by so many may sound like a heavy burden. In fact it also adds glamor to the job, not to mention power by skillfully pitting some watchdogs against the others, informing one but not the others, etc.

But the basic condition of a cybernetic system is met: the system is a cycle, not a chain. Reports come back to the people who can then initiate new demands in the form of new inputs through

elections or other instruments (referenda, plebiscites).¹⁴ The cyclical structure, however, is only a necessary condition. Another condition would be the capacity of the cycle as a channel to transmit a sufficient variety of "signals". If people can only emit one signal, "yes" and/or the system can only come up with one type of output or action in a ritualized manner and/or the media can only express one opinion, then there is no steering, only stereotyped behavior. With no variety there can be no new reaction to new inputs from the "environment", meaning by that other societies as well as new conditions arising inside the social system.

Sufficient variety, however, is only one more necessary condition. Yet another condition would be the capacity of the channel to transmit signals without too much noise. The variety may be high at one point yet low at another, meaning that something got lost in the process. Variety has to be sufficient all the way.

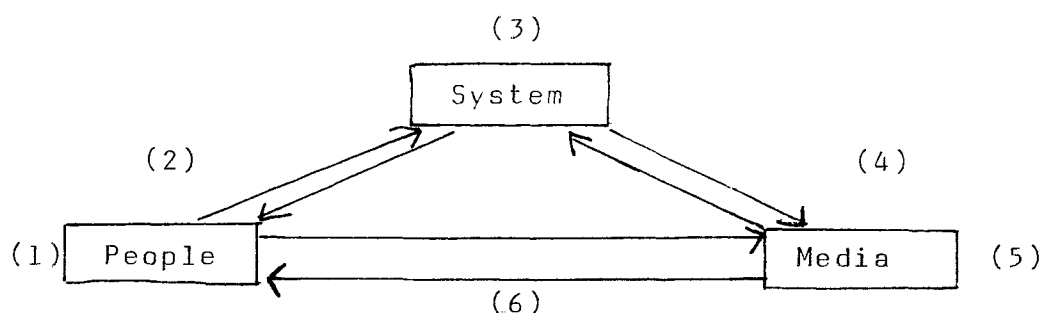
Sufficiently noiseless, however, is also only a necessary condition. Still another condition would be a reasonably short time-lag, meaning the period that passes between two outputs concerning the same issue at the same point in the cycle. In a discussion of democracy the focus is on "people": how much time has to pass between an input to steer the system, an output from the system that directly or via the media becomes an input to people, then to be transformed, and a new output capable of having some steering influence? I am not thinking in terms of the election period as the population has many other ways of exercising control. Some of them may even be as im-

portant or more important than elections, to be discussed later.

With these three perspectives--sufficient variety, low level of noise and short time-lag--let us look at the total structure again. For this purpose a simplified version of Figure 3 is given below.

The classical division of power/labor is put inside a box labeled the "system", assuming that inside that box there are devices similar to the ones described for a larger system but belonging more to classical theory than to the theory of democracy as a whole:

FIGURE 4. Democracy: Three power model



In the figure there are inputs and outputs in all directions, a total of six. They can be organized in an outer cycle, or the high road of democracy, people \longrightarrow system \longrightarrow media \longrightarrow people; and an inner cycle or the low road of democracy, media \longrightarrow system \longrightarrow people \longrightarrow media. The high road is then envisaged as the normal process: people demand something of the system which then reports to or is reported by the media and checked by the people. And correspondingly for the low road: the media takes the initiative demanding something of the system which then acts on the people, and

they may report back to the media what their reactions were. If people speak only every four years, or at most every second year, then the high road may not be used so often. The low road can in principle be trodden every day, almost every hour since there will be many media events in the course of twenty-four hours. Seen in this perspective the question may be asked whether we are not living in mediocracies rather than democracies, the editors being easily convinced that a mediocracy is preferable to people's mediocracy.

Obviously there are six points in the cycle of democracy where something can go wrong. In the figure they have not been identified in terms of inputs and outputs but in terms of actors and channels in the structure. The crucial point would be the extent to which the actors are capable of processing inputs so as to deliver outputs and the channels are capable of transmitting these outputs so that they can become inputs to the next actor. In saying so it should, of course, be remembered all the time that a cycle, like a chain is precisely as strong as the weakest link, whether that is an actor or a channel. In other words, democracy is vulnerable, one reason why there are not too many well-functioning democracies around.

The following are some comments on the six links:

(1) Are people able, on the basis of relevant information, to arrive, independently and after mature deliberation, at a conviction which they then seek translated into politics? Ideally people should be steered by nothing but inner deliberations, stimu-

lated by free dialogue and information freely arrived at. In practice, however, there would be structural and cultural factors interfering with this ideal image.

First, the structure might certainly reward some articulations more than others, and punish some more than others. There may be normative power involved, for instance emanating from a clergy making very clear which articulation is compatible with salvation and which articulation would lead to immediate damnation. There may be reward power involved emanating from economic elites such as landlords, latifundistas, denying work to those who articulate in the wrong direction, rewarding amply the others. And there may be brute, punishment power involved, emanating from the police and the military, or from the aristocracy in the old european system, maiming, killing or both those who articulate in the wrong direction. These three sources, or forces, of power certainly do not exclude each other. In countries where they are all operating at the same time for instance in the more traditional of the South American countries where the population is still exposed to the control emanating from los poderes fácticos, the clergy, the latifundistas and the military (with domestic and foreign capitalists/businessmen also entering the picture as a fourth power)--any freedom to articulate one's own opinion will be fictitious, in spite of rights guaranteed in the Constitution. To mistake the holding of elections for democracy ¹⁵ becomes like celebrating a car without an engine. Nice-looking shell.

Second, the cultural constraints. Behind the one person-one vote ideology are two rather limiting assumptions: that individual persons are holders of convictions, and that all individual persons count equally. These are dramatic assumptions, not satisfied in cultures more accustomed to group discussions where consensus is achieved, or revealed decision-making at the top.¹⁶ In the latter case there may be extreme individualism vested in one person and extreme inequality of vote. In the former case there is actually no assumption of inequality nor that people are not individual holders of convictions, only that individual convictions do not count. The group consensus is what matters.¹⁷ In either case these cultural inclinations may be backed up by structural powers as described above.¹⁸

The assumption of free, individual attitude-formation and equal weighting of the votes are also assumptions best satisfied at the top of society, one reason why electorates usually were restricted to the top.¹⁹ Only those who possess land or fortune in other forms could be assumed not to be influenced by economic power; only those who possess the minimum of education not to be swayed by cultural power. In other words, it is not obvious that the only motivation behind limited electorates was to keep others out. There is also the more positive assumption of including only those capable of exercising their democratic rights according to theory. In so doing the system became self-reinforcing, and that was of course also among the intentions. Those admitted locked the door behind them.

(2) How can people transmit to the system their convictions?

Elections are one possible way of constructing a channel of transmission, but not the only one. One condition for elections to be an effective channel is the presence of sufficient variety. Nation-wide elections may not be sufficiently sensitive to local variations in the issues; issue-bundles or "platforms" presented as party programs in parliamentary democracies or presidential programs in presidential democracies offers the citizens only with a choice of fixed menus, not with the opportunity to express positive or negative preferences concerning the individual dishes. And last but certainly not least; parties or presidential candidates may be too similar to offer sufficient variety. A band is better than one single frequency, yet not a spectrum.

There are solutions to these problems of limited variety. National elections can be supplemental with local elections; voting on parties and presidential candidates with votes on single issues. To increase the distance between the positions offered

one might introduce more parties/candidates, although the number is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for variety. In addition to this there is the third necessary condition mentioned above: little or no time-lag. Ideally there should be continuous contact between people and legislators, elected candidates. One method would be for people to meet with them and discuss the issues. Another would be to "send a letter to your congressman". A third would be to use the mechanism set up in the channel, the party apparatus, which would then presuppose a solid party organization with a broad base in all or most local communities, and quick transmission of messages from the local to the national level in the "system". A party system with which people can identify enough to trust and make use of.²⁰

(3) Is the system capable of transforming decisions into action? The system receives inputs, and under the conditions just mentioned with a high level of variety. But does the system have a corresponding repertory of differentiated actions or policy measures at its disposal? Democracy suffers if the variety of the input into the system is much lower than its output, meaning that people in fact have little to say beyond generalities. Most decision-making actually takes place inside the system. But the system may also offer much less variety in its output than what comes into the system as input. The system has become, or has always been, rigid, inflexible; in other words, coming up with the same standard responses regardless of input. In either case tensions will accumulate whether the system is over-active or under-active relative to the demands placed upon it.

A correspondence in the variety between input and output seems to be a condition for a well functioning democracy, as is also to be expected from a general principle in cybernetics. (Ashby's law).²¹

(4) Does the system communicate its action to the environment?

Or, does the system try to keep its actions secret, protecting itself against the inquisitive examination by media and people?

At the level of the system itself there is a corresponding question: does the executive try to protect itself against the legislative, keeping concrete knowledge of its action away from legislators? The typical example would be foreign affairs, by many held to be a field where secrecy is legitimate. Obviously, if the outputs from the system are not even known to the environment, except, possibly, for some selected members of the legislative, then no democracy can function. The cycle is broken. There is no way in which people can close the cycle, comparing their inputs with the outputs from the system--in general via the media--and hold the system accountable.

(5) Are the media capable of reporting what happens? In other words, do the reporters/editors have a form of understanding with sufficient ²² adequatio relative to the system output, and the media input from the people? Do the media adequately reflect what is going on in the minds of the people and the activities of the system? Do they have a language of discourse adequate to reflect either of them? The question is particularly important with the current transition from verbal to pictorial presentation with the importance of televised reporting. On the one hand a picture is extremely rich; on the other

hand it is imprecise and subjective. Words, given the same amount of time, may be much poorer but also much more precise. A comparison of verbal images may lead to a higher level of consensus than a comparison of picture images. In general, however, this is at least potentially the part of the total cycle with the highest variety, being very explicit, always functioning, and in an open media culture highly diverse.

(6) Are the people capable of receiving the inputs? Generally this is a question of level of education in the population, and more particularly level of literacy for the press; oracy (oral capability)²³ not only in receiving the radio message but also in communicating, in a "two-step-flow-of-communication,"²⁴ to others for discussion; "picturacy", ability to extract information from pictures.²⁵ Schools train in the first of these three, much less in the other two. And yet they are probably all three about equally important for an effective functioning of the cycle on which a democracy is based.

As mentioned above: democracy is fragile, vulnerable. The six points given above can be tested out on any democracy, for instance the United States of America. Thus, of the six parts of the cycle the second, the fourth and the fifth are probably particularly critical in the American case. Structural and cultural constraints would play less of a role, the United States not being run by cultural/religious, land-owning and military elites in the same way as for instance South American countries (or Spain until recently)..

And the two basic assumptions of individualism and one person-one vote are deeply ingrained in US culture, although it certainly took some time before this was effectively extended to the black electorate.

Critical in this connection is the party channel. The two parties are by far too close to each other to offer sufficient variety. The difficulties in creating a third party²⁶ makes the situation even less desirable from the point of view of democratic theory. And this is then complicated even further by the circumstance that little exists in terms of a permanent party machinery, nation-wide and locally based, with which people can interact. On the other hand, more diversity is brought into the picture by local elections (municipal and state levels) and separate votes on issues.

No doubt the US political system has considerable variety to offer in its instrumentarium. One problem not captured by Figure 4, but by the more complete version in Figure 3, has to do with the constitutional role of the judiciary, in the sense of the Supreme Court in the US. Supreme Court Justices are appointed by the executive rather than by the legislative although they have to be confirmed by the latter, giving to the president considerable power, perpetuating his ideology in legal form long after he himself is out of office. But the basic problem with the US political system would be its secrecy, particularly in foreign affairs, its conscious attempts to dupe the media, the people, and in addition the legislative²⁷—with the exception

of the selected few who can be coopted into the executive under special formulas. Crucial information tends to be available post hoc rather than in time for democracy to intervene and prevent very harmful action from taking place; the fact that this is made known afterwards is then celebrated as a major triumph for democracy. ²⁸

Another important problem would be rooted in the media and their very limited language of discourse. There are missing categories, missing dimensions. One might object that there is a coordination between the language of discourse in the political system and the media, and there may be some truth to this. Yet, the media can also be accused of not making use of the freedom said to be at their disposal to expand their language. The net conclusion is that the range of policy alternatives available to the US becomes limited by the limitation of the language in which these alternatives are expressed, with consequences for the whole system. People do not get the necessary challenge to expand their visions from the media. And this provides the media with the perennial excuse: "our readers, listeners, viewers will not understand this----".

Using the principle of the cycle being as strong as its weakest link we arrive at the conclusion of insufficient variety in the channel from people to system, considerable noise in the workings of the system and too high time-lag. When such imperfections accumulate one might expect people to lose interest in democracy, one possible factor explaining the exceptionally low rate of participation in US elections. Nevertheless, even an imperfect democracy may serve to

articulate issues; train people all over in the political process by giving them some, however small, role to play; function as a scouting mechanism finding people with political talent because there are so many opportunities for them to display that talent.³⁰ And, last but certainly not least: making the population co-responsible with the leadership, a factor partly explaining why democratic leaders who fail can resign from office without risking their lives, a considerably better fate than what autocratic leaders may have good reasons to expect.

But the essence of democracy is steering by the people. If that fails there is no way of compensating for the loss. Much too much of the democracy debate is focussed on the second link alone, celebrating the system as democratic if there is more than one party and secret ballot, debunking the system as non-democratic if these two conditions are not fulfilled. This type of political demagogy is both intellectually sloppy and morally derelict. What is the use of elections if there is no real variety in the choice, if structural conditions effectively impede free choice and/or cultural conditions makes the whole exercise meaningless; if in addition the "system" churns out the same policy choices regardless of what is articulated by the people; if key actions are kept secret, away from the public eye; if the press is under censorship and/or under self-censorship by having editorial brain-waves more resonant with system brain-waves than with the people; and the population is illiterate and/or too poor to possess radio and/or television?³¹ Answer: a ritual, a formality that can be used to mask deeper-lying anomalies in the body politic.

None of this, however, is in any way an argument against democracy. On the contrary, the argument is to take the democratic agenda seriously by working on all six links, at the same time. Nor is this an argument against having elections before the other links in the cycle have caught up. That might serve as a pretext to postpone elections forever as has been done recently in some socialist countries (Grenada, and for a long time in Nicaragua).³²

At this point it is important to know that there are other channels of communication short of violence that people can use when the system either does not permit elections, or is unresponsive to the outcomes of elections. The general formula is, of course, civil disobedience, non-violent direct action. This is particularly important given the second shortcoming in democratic theory mentioned above: the lack of inherent protection of minorities under majoritarian rule.³³ Maybe the essence of a democratic system is less institutionalization of elections than the possibility of communicating effectively to the system, be that with elections or with civil disobedience? A signal is sent, an act of despair: we are suffering, the system does not work. The system can choose to respond or to reject, even kill the signal--the latter at its own considerable risk later on. Maybe this broader view of democracy should be built into the core of democratic theory as soon as possible. A new social contract, in other words. The electorate is entitled to civil disobedience as a signal to be respected; but only for the sake of basic needs, and only for and with the most needy.³⁴

With these last remarks the relationship to human development becomes even more obvious. Democracy is viewed as a system sensitive to basic human needs regardless of how they are articulated. But at the same time there is the dimension of social development. For the cycle to function with sufficient variety, low level of noise and little time-lag conditions have to be fulfilled, and all of these conditions can be seen under the heading of social development. There are institutions to be built to ensure accountability of the legislative to the people, of the executive to the legislative and to the media. To this could be added accountability of the media to the people, the people being the cornerstone of the democratic construction. This is best ensured by having the press maximally open to public participation with at least one quarter or one third of the columns at the disposal of the public and not only for opinions, but also for informative and analytical articles.³⁵ Call-in shows, debating sessions on the radio/TV according to general formulas of two-way electronic communication, with lots of public debates and not only with "experts"--that is democracy.

Finally, there remains the basic question not of the economy but of the polity of scale. Essentially democracy boils down to a very horizontal type of interaction along the whole cycle, dialogues among the actors of all kinds, in all directions. This is feasible in small and relatively undifferentiated systems. But is it also feasible in large systems, or will sooner or later peaked, vertical structures emerge with one-way flow of communication and so on? Can electronic communication overcome this difficulty by providing

horizontal, rich, meaningful two-way links, possibly aided with home-based computers, and solve this problem? Difficult to tell.

One answer would be to rely on what is known to work. Democracy as it emerged originally in such places as Greece and Iceland³⁶ was based on small communities with much direct, face-to-face interaction. No doubt the cornerstone of a large-scale democracy would be small-scale democracy, democracy at the local level. But the latter is only a necessary not a sufficient condition for a large-scale democracy to function. And we probably do not yet know how to make large-scale society function in the real sense of becoming a system effectively steered by the people, of the people and for the people. There is the old model based on building stones of small-scale local democracy. And there is the challenge of a possible electronic large-scale democracy. Or a mixture of the two.³⁷

But regardless of what emerges, how, when and where we do not escape from the logic of the cybernetic systems. The system works like Chinese boxes with self-regulating systems inside self-regulating systems inside self-regulating systems. Ethically conscious individuals³⁸ inside rich political quality circles of debate inside local democracies inside national democracies--ultimately inside a world democracy. A dream where the agendas of peace, development and democracy ultimately coincide--overcoming the shortcomings of democratic theory and practice today.