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Interview

Democracy, Pedagogy, and Advocacy 2022

Steve Parks and Srdja Popovic

For the past two years, Steve Parks and Srdja Popovic have been engaged in a discussion on the global state of democracy. Parks has spent the past thirty years working with democratic advocates locally, nationally, and internationally to support their goals for increased political rights, work which has led to the creation of New City Community Press as well as Syrians for Truth and Justice. Popovic began his advocacy work through co-founding OTPOR!, an organization widely credited with toppling the Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević in 2000. Since that time, he co-founded and directs the *Center for Applied Nonviolent Actions and Strategies* (CANVAS), which has offered training to advocates in over 50 countries. In 2021, these conversations resulted in the creation of the *Democratic Futures Working Group*, an international alliance of academic and global democratic advocates exploring how new democratic models of organizing and governance are emerging from the grass-roots interaction of indigenous traditions and the legacy of Western-colonialist rights paradigms.

In the following discussion, Parks and Popovic begin by discussing the current state of democracy, both within and beyond the United States. Within this context, they focus on the need to create new public narratives about the value of democracy which operate on a local, national, and global level, often drawing off non-Western paradigms. Such narratives, however, only gain power if they exist within broad coalitions of individuals, communities, and organizations, often requiring uncomfortable alliances and compromise. And it is unclear, to Parks and Popovic, whether the current scholarly and pedagogical frameworks of the university are capable of teaching students the knowledges and skills to create such narratives and alliances. For them, the question becomes whether classrooms focused on democracy require a fundamental revisioning of who should teach and who belongs in the professoriate. Ultimately, they pose the question of what “professional credentials” qualify someone to develop a pedagogy and a writing classroom premised on democracy and advocacy.

Parks: We recently co-taught several writing courses whose primary theme was democracy and human rights; whose primary requirement was for students to undertake political analysis and write as public advocates on an international context; and whose primary goal was to connect such written work to actual strategies to build nonviolent democratic campaigns for justice. We were fortunate to have global human rights activists join our conversation, often though Zoom, such as Slobodan Djinovic, *OTPOR!/CANVAS*; Husam

Alkatlaby, *Hakuna Movement/Aleppo*, Syria; Dani Ayers, CEO of *MeToo*; Andre Henry, *Black Lives Matter*, CA; Johnson Yeung, former convener of the *Civil Human Rights Front* and Secretary-General of the *Hong Kong Federation of Students*, and Myo Yan Naung Thein, a leader of the democracy movement in Myanmar. Given the fact these courses occurred during and in the aftermath of the January 6th insurrection, we found ourselves wondering about the current state of global democracy, the type of advocacy which was being created to push back against a rising authoritarianism, and, ultimately, who is best suited to teach such skills to university students. Which means we returned to our usual topic: Is there any reason to be optimistic about democracy? How do we understand the organizing now occurring? How do we teach it to our students?

Popovic: In terms of global democracy trends, we are in the worst place since 1992 per the *Freedom House* report (Repucci and Slipowitz). You can take one look at that report and conclude democratic movements have become less successful. But this is a bit of a false conclusion. True, *statistically*, the movements have become less successful, but this statistical decline is a result of there being more democratic movements (Chenoweth). Instead of 100 movements and 56 (56%) successful movements, there are 500 movements and 160 (32%) of them are successful movements. More important than such statistics, I believe the Dictatorship-Democracy dynamic is the core concept to notice. According to this report, the most dramatic change in democracy is in the places considered to be democratic countries. When you look at the largest chunks of the global population, democracy shrunk in India, democracy shrunk in the U.S. This happens due to the phenomena of “Erdoganzation.” You have a politician who’s democratically elected, like Erdogan in Turkey. That elected leader starts packing the media with their people, the courts with their people, who then collectively start pushing the “party agenda” (De Witte). At this point, you have the *How Democracies Die* situation, as discussed by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, where democracies die slowly as institutional prisoners of autocratic leaning rulers and political parties (Levitsky and Ziblatt).

Parks: My sense is the Trump administration was a failed attempt (or test run) at “Erdoganzation.” And I think quite a few folks were shell shocked over the speed at which democratic traditions seemed to be weaponized on Trump’s behalf. There seemed to be just too much trust in a large segment of the nation that “institutions” and “traditions” would block the excesses of Trump’s presidency. But it became clear that our nation-state’s strong independent institutions were fortified primarily by tradition, not legal structures. And we witnessed the weakness of those traditional “checks and balances” in Congress as a result of hyper partisanship and weak politicians (as Levitsky and Ziblatt demonstrate). What we discovered is that when a political figure, such as Trump, gains power, “Erdoganzation” is more possible than

most would like to think. And I think we need to understand the Republican push to limit voting rights nationally as an attempt to set the stage for the next “Trump-Erdogan” to succeed in dismantling fundamental democratic guardrails against authoritarian political leaders. This is one reason that the protests and public actions against these moves are so important.

Popovic: This highlights a central conclusion of the *Freedom House* report; not only are we witnessing one of the darkest moments in decline of world democracy – the number of countries where democracy has shrunk rose to unprecedented levels - but also that this decay comes mostly from previously “democratic” countries sliding down on guaranteed freedoms to “hybrid regimes” and “semi democracies.” It is sad to see the U.S.A., India, and my own homeland, Serbia, leading this list of “bad students” of democracy. If these past several years have taught us anything, we need to understand that the time is now - more than ever - to find ways to mobilize participation of the people in “democratic” countries, and to prevent “Erdoganzation,” where general apathy and low participation enabled power hungry (and originally democratically elected leaders) to topple down democratic institutions from above.

So what is the response? First, you don’t take democracy for granted (Friedler). Second, you stress participation. Any positive social change starts with understanding that you need community, a collective commitment. And if you want to succeed, you need all sorts of people. You need all these different players, different talents, and different qualities. That is, both science and empiric experience teach us that to succeed, democratic movements need coalitions (Goldstone). You need both numbers and diversity to succeed. So, the very nature of nonviolent social change is actively promoting the idea of horizontal connections within a community. Social networks are central intermediary structures on which individuals and groups construct solutions that allow them to cope with the deficiencies resulting from the formal system (Adler-Lomnitz-Lomnitz and Sheinbaum).

If you are a fan of George Orwell’s *1984* – the anti-utopia playbook of effective totalitarianism - you get the clear idea how these types of governments are trying to cut this type of horizontal relationship. They want you to report on your brother if he misbehaves. This is because in an autocracy, the people are lonely, lost, isolated. They only look up to their boss or down to their subordinates. Autocracies don’t want people to look left and right because, if that happens, people can figure out they have the power to create change. They can figure out that five of them can change one policy in their building; 50 of them can change issues on the street. For an authoritarian status-quo, that’s a very dangerous line of thinking because, ultimately, that means 500,000 of them can change the government. This is exactly why autocracies discourage horizontal networks, group civic action, and any form of independent collective action initiatives.

Parks: I agree coalition-building is a central concept about nonviolent organizing to protect and expand democratic culture and governance. Such coalitions seem to face particular difficulties at this particular moment. There are always tensions caused by attempting such work. For instance, I have heard you argue that to create change, “You have to make the police your friends. You have to bring them over to your side.” Given the brutal treatment police have enacted on Black communities and their failure to often protect Asian/Asian-American communities, I’ve seen how such a suggestion can appear to deny the reality of such abuse. Yet, all evidence points to the necessity of such alliances. Here I’m thinking of a story told by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, who was on the *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. She speaks to how a particularly brutal police officer was finally released from prison. She made the point that the final moment of the process of the “truth discovery” that led to someone being held accountable was reconciliation – to call them back into the culture, allow their humanity to be recognized (Marchese). I think such reconciliation is very difficult to achieve right now. In my experience, it is very difficult to state, “I’m going to work with someone who has a polluted past.” And this is despite any acceptance of consequences of past acts by that individual. There’s a notion of purity that blocks the actions required to enact collective change. And if the goal is to create the coalitions that create the change you want to see in the world, notions of purity within organizing efforts are ultimately a form of self-aggrandizement.

Popovic: Insisting on “Moral purity” damages the possibility of change. Whenever you see a movement that was successful throughout history, the movement succeeded through the diversity of its allies. I always cite the environmental movement since, at least in Europe, it is “the least political” movement. It’s also where my own degree in environment/biology gives to me some insights. Environmentalism started as a set of crazy folks tying themselves to nuclear power plants (Yeo). They would talk about moral purity and would never talk to the companies. How did the movement end up? How did it advance? It was when *Greenpeace* began sitting at the same table with the “other” stakeholders, such as environmental protection agencies, the fossil fuel industry, and solar panels industry. The lesson here is not to look at people as individuals to like or dislike, to determine their morality. Instead, the lesson is to try to understand where their values might overlap with your campaign’s values. Rather than total purity, you should try to discover situational alliances that move your stated values and goals forward. At one point in life, you need to decide whether you want to be right or successful. And being successful very often means making compromises.

Parks: At some point, through engaging in collective organizing, you need to learn that your personal opinions, your own purity, are not as important as creating systemic change that directly impacts the material reality of those

too often on the side of privilege. So, I think part of what is required at this historical juncture by advocates, by Composition and Rhetoric faculty (to speak from my own position) is to work to create public narratives that enable coalitions to produce change. And as we take up such work, we need to build into that public narrative a global perspective. This new “public” must demand an international concept of democracy and democratic rights that disallow certain actions by the United States.

And to repeat what many others have said, this work also entails replacing a neoliberal national and international framework focused on market and morals, where morality is replaced with economics. As long as you allow capitalism to move unfettered from national, international, and collective rights-based concepts, there’s this sense that politicians are acting ethically by meeting with dictators to expand “markets.” In that world, quality, human rights, all those concepts that organize people around a common fate, get washed away. That said, I don’t want to be seen as romanticizing the United Nations or past declarations of international rights. Too often, those rights have been used to historically mandate Western concepts to non-Western nations. To some extent, if we want to reimagine democratic organizing, democratic governance, emerging in the cracks of neoliberalism, we also need to support global efforts to reimagine human rights as emerging not only from “the West” but from Indigenous and non-Western frameworks. We need to try to understand (and not just blithely and insincerely accept) the actual possibilities decolonial articulations of communal responsibility and shared governance might offer.

Popovic: I would only add that frameworks to understand the interconnection of democracies should not be the domino state-by-state effect, the argument used to perpetuate the Vietnam war and other global conflicts. Rather, the interconnection must be a set of norms and values as well as international charters, starting with human rights, freedom of the press, and so on. The need for such global norms seems vital – even if they must be renegotiated in the current moment. This is because if global opinion in times of globalization becomes that such value-based concepts are stupid, bureaucratic shit, that we only care about how much we earn, you will have silence on the human rights atrocities occurring in Myanmar by the military ruling authority. You will have Obama being very democratic, but at the same time, being in bed with dictators. You will have Trump’s silence and public admiration of guys like Kim Jong Un or Putin. So, there is a need to reset to international norms. It’s not inventing the wheel because we have already signed up for the concept of such norms and already have some useful norms in place. It’s re-inventing a more inclusive and just set of norms.

I would also add such work is necessary to re-establish belief in the moral value of democracy over authoritarianism. In this international context, I think such work has broader meaning. It is connected to people’s view towards “truth.” It is not because people don’t believe CNN is “telling the

truth” that democracies are failing. It is because people don’t believe in democracy. So, the very evil nature of the poison coming from Mother Russia and other places is the stance that “Oh, democracy, autocracy doesn’t matter. It’s the same shit.” The “same shit” is the real danger. If you kill values, then all these documents and norms, which were based on values, they don’t work. If you say, the United Nations is just a bureaucratic mechanism of the world dominance of the U.S. or China or whoever, actually you are erasing these values adopted after bitter lessons of two world wars from history. You are erasing the possibility of such collective values guiding our global community. You are making everything very relative. Democracy can’t work without values. Human rights are based around values. Equality is a value category first, that application of the simple truth that all men and women regardless of race, ethnicity and religion or sexual preferences are born equal.

Parks: To go to my earlier point about the need for new public narratives, I’m not convinced such a language of shared values exists. Instead, I would say we are living during the moment of this new public narratives’ invention, where such discourses are integrating into (and altering) how networks of power can operate. We can point to new identity terms; expanding freedom to choose pronouns for ourselves; the infusing of counter-stories within educational institutions as positive signs. James Carville, though, has criticized such “woke culture” for pushing away white working-class voters and has argued that “wokeness” effectively kills the chance for large political coalitions. And the Republicans are clearly using elements of this new narrative to animate elements of the white working and middle-class against such tools as critical race theory, leading to school libraries banning books by African American authors. The issue becomes how do you reanimate an ethics of communal responsibilities, grounded in new possibilities instead of historical systems of exclusion, in the language available in the present moment? In some ways, such language is local, in some ways it’s national, in some ways international. But undergirding it all is the concern of creating a process that enacts the positive daily benefits, the enhanced material reality possible, in the face of brutal political and cultural assaults on the very communities doing this important work.

Popovic: I think it’s a two-way process. One, we are talking about educating people about their power to tackle injustice of any kind. Go back to the environment. Environment is always a good case because my kids are more environmentally aware than I am. And, of course, I’m far more environmentally aware than my parents. So, we might look at how this generationally expanded understanding worked. Part of it is that we gained access to more information. Part of it is that science took a stance. The most important part of it, however, was gaining an immediate connection between the concept and the reality, and that happened through the educational system (Ellsmoor).

To make durable change in how people connect with democracy, then, one must embed it into education, but not only by teaching people about the values, but actively practicing those values and processes.

Parks: I think we are trying to do some of that work with our new course, an entry-level required writing course co-taught with Myo Yan Naung Thein. In that course, we began by having students read theoretical materials on the value of nonviolent organizing by scholars such as Gene Sharp and Erica Chenoweth. That is a pretty typical move, I think, for an academic course. We then supplemented those readings by having students take part in CANVAS training materials that focused on how nonviolent movements utilize a set of skills to create a unity of vision, map the political terrain, and analyze the pillars of power that are supporting authoritarian regimes. (We were fortunate that in a diminishing COVID world, you were able to travel and actually work with the students directly.) When they read Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University,” then, that essay became a piece about how students should use nonviolent theories and strategies to actually re-invent, alter, the pillars of power that keep certain voices and heritages intentionally excluded from classrooms. Somewhat oddly, “Inventing” became a manifesto for change, an opportunity for students to test out how the skills/concepts they were learning could transform their own education.

Again, though, I realize that elements of this course might also be somewhat typical of an entry-level required writing course. I think where we moved to have students “actively practicing those values and processes” as in our partnership with Myo Yan Naung Thein, who is a nationally recognized democratic advocate from Myanmar. When the military recently led a coup to topple the democratically elected government, Thein had to flee the country to escape certain arrest, torture, and death. Since that time, I have been working with him to create the Burmese Democratic Futures Working Group (BDFWG), which sponsors research to support democratic advocates resisting the coup. By bringing the work of this group into the class, our students were able to take their sense of academic writing, nonviolent theories of social change, and CANVAS organizing materials to produce work for the BDFWG. Some of these materials are still being developed, but essentially, the students are creating a publication of personal narratives of how the coup has impacted the lives of Myanmar citizens, coupled with a brief overview of Myanmar history. Many of those who were interviewed had to flee to the Thailand border to escape arrest after protesting the coup. These narratives also highlight the need to respect all ethnicities in Myanmar, an important element emerging within the resistance movement. This book will be published in the Working and Writing for Change series and our hope is that it can be used in a variety of writing and rhetoric classes, as have other such books in the series.

More than just produce a book, though, students are using the CANVAS strategies to develop a “curriculum” to support/encourage students

across U.S. universities to hold a day of “protest” in support of democracy in Myanmar. Here the students are blending their sense of academic research and public writing to create materials which will bring in participants. They are mapping the terrain, understanding what pillars within a university might be brought into supporting Myanmar participants, then providing tactics and strategies for other university students to use on their campuses. In some ways then, our course is attempting to not just provide our students with the skills to actually practice the skills and processes of democracy and nonviolent change; we are also asking our students to become “teachers” to other students. I think our hope is that such work will translate into their being able to undertake similar projects within their own U.S.-based communities as well.

In fact, one of the more interesting elements of the course has been the discussion on how creating a public narrative in support of political change in Myanmar has led students to think about political change narratives in the U.S. There seems to be a sense that political change here is occurring through individual networks activating themselves rather than some unified organization. This is somewhat the case in Myanmar, which is a larger and different discussion, but in Myanmar, you have a national government in exile which at least as a rhetorical trope is framing the endpoint of the resistance movement. That is, the goal is a new democratically elected government in Myanmar.

I’m not sure such a unified “group” or “organizing” shapes today’s political narratives or campaigns in the U.S. today.

Popovic: I think we are experiencing a moment where the connection between public narrative and political change movements are undergoing a transformation. When you look at the history of movements, such as the *Solidarity* movement, the core of it was a big organization, namely *Solidarity*. It was the labor union, but it was also a big organization. You want to look at the Civil Rights Movement of the late 20th century. The core of it was a coalition of organizations, including its radical wing party called the Black Panthers. What is interesting with the new contemporary movements, according to Carne Ross, is that movements have changed their shapes. According to Ross, what distinguishes new social movements is there is no spine of the organization (Ross). You can’t really say, “Okay, this is the *Indivisible* group that got the manual and then learned how to build coalitions with local groups, then they start exercising strategies and tactics or whatever.” Today, organizing occurs more on the *Occupy Wall Street* horizontal model.

Here we can add in the work of Benjamin Press at Carnegie, who runs the *Protest Tracker*, an interactive database of anti-government protests in the last three or four years (Press). It looks at public triggers and how such triggers have changed organizing. That is, the first thing that connects individuals within this new strain of movements is a trigger. They start with a trigger, not an organization. And in the internet era, such triggers spread

horizontally with a lot of speed. They tend to replicate across a vast terrain of geography very fast. So, they start in Minneapolis, but 15 days after that, you have public marches in New York, Philadelphia, in Florida, in Louisiana, everywhere. They spread horizontally like wildfire. It's not only numbers. It's also territorial cover. Given this context, they are very difficult to control and very difficult to suppress because they are unpredictable.

Such trigger movements are not typically created by existing organizations. So, being leaderless gives them speed and spread, as well as making them less capable of being oppressed. For instance, the real trouble for Putin is not 10,000 people defending Navalny in Bolotnaya Square in Moscow. It is the fact that you have 150 people in a tiny town in Siberia, which an ordinary person can't find on the map, which came out to march at -15 Fahrenheit (see "Russian Protestors"). This is the real problem for a dictator because he can't predict these people. He can't trace the organization. He can't corrupt, repress, blackmail, co-opt, and put the leaders in jail. Because contemporary movements are horizontal, they are very difficult to decapitate, because there is no head.

But I would argue that the lack of an organizational structure also makes such movements less effective and more difficult to coordinate from the side of the movement itself. It's different than the normal structure of the movement. In those movements you have recognizable stages – the emerging phase, building phase, engagement phase, exponential phase. And then somewhere, you have bureaucratic costs, whatever, and then the numbers go down if you succeed, if you get co-opted, if you get tired, if you get repressed, whatever. With new movements you have a different algorithmic curve. New movements start with large numbers under the banner of a term, a hashtag, not a fully realized public narrative linked to a strategy. That is, the numbers are there before the organization. The reason why many of these movements fail is that the numbers are there before a forward-looking strategy. It is connected to triggers, so by its very nature, it's doomed to fail because it's reactive.

Successful movements typically share an understanding of a common goal, that understands these are the numbers we need to mobilize, these are the pillars of power, the institutions that need to be swayed to our cause, and these are the institutional changes we want to achieve, such as desegregate schools or legalize gay marriage. It doesn't matter the topic. New movements are not issue based. They are event based. They become issue based as a new public narrative about that trigger gains traction. So, the police kill an unarmed Black man, and you have millions of people using hashtags to show communal commitment to justice. Then one hashtag, such as BlackLivesMatter (BLM), gains dominance. Now BLM is in the position to build a manifesto, an agenda. But unlike the *ANC Freedom Charter* which guided the anti-apartheid movement, BLM doesn't start with such an articulated vision/strategy. The movement ends up with very disciplined protests of BLM

people in places like LA and then more join, more form protests. Some of these protests will be in front of Trump's hotels. Some will do actions which are very strategic, because locally they were very strategic, actions which reflect an emerging manifesto for change. And then you have local tactics which harm the strategic purpose, like 20 angry activists who have burned down a *Wendy's* in Atlanta. You have angry activists with helmets who barricade themselves starting the "Battle of Portland." All these actions, done under the name of the hashtag BLM, enabled their opponents to label the whole movement as "sick and deranged Anarchists & Agitators." And potentially damage their just efforts at systemic reform.

Parks: First, I should note the fact that we are two white men discussing a movement initiated by a Black women's hashtag and leadership. We probably do not want to position ourselves as "explaining" what should have been done by BLM advocates. I think, in fact, we can learn a lot about the complexity of creating new inclusive structures for advocacy through considering their impact and organization. For instance, you're saying that those movements are less successful, but I'd argue that what BLM did was to shatter the public narrative around police. Fifteen years ago, the public rhetoric was the police were a "thin blue line" against outbreaks of crime and expanding drug culture. Every politician wanted to stand next to police for a photo-op. There was a romanticization of police and a demonization of minority and immigrant communities in large cities that politicians actively utilized in their campaigns. I could argue that these spontaneous, spread-out, geographically dispersed movements actualized resistance at such a scale that it broke that public narrative, that hegemonic consensus. Such a cultural shift in public narrative is a success.

I understand it's not as initially successful in terms of local changes in policies – though I'm sure research would show legislative and policy impact. But re-invoking your discussion of the Civil Rights movement, thinking about its early days in the late 1950's, I would argue part of the success of the Civil Rights movement was the public shift in narrative about what was going on in the South. The visual images of the protesters being attacked by dogs and water hoses shattered a certain consensus. I think that one way to think about *BLM* or *Occupy* is that they shattered the public narrative, which is all to the good. But what *Occupy*, as a movement, was less successful in achieving was a positive public narrative—a beyond-critique stance. To my thinking, they remained only at a level of triggered, of oppositional, not productively coalitional. As you argued, *Occupy* lacked a coherent "spine" to produce actual change in systems of power—legislative or economic.

Popovic: Agree and not, we need to distinguish between two things. One thing is the argument that public awareness rising always has a positive impact on an issue, whether that issue is racism, such as police abuse or legislators denying people equal access to vote in a place like Georgia. When we talk

about the success or failure of a movement, the question is whether the demands *were met*. Take Egypt. Everybody can argue Egypt is in a worse place now under Sisi than it was under Mubarak, but this counts as a successful movement. These people wanted to replace Mubarak. They succeeded and then something else happened, but this is history. This is not looking at one movement.

If you look at the goals of the movement, like BLM, they came after the trigger. Again, the goals of BLM appeared after the numbers were reached, at which point, it becomes very difficult to define whether or not the movement has succeeded. You may argue that it brought large numbers of people to be involved. You may argue also they brought a lot of people from the political middle. For instance, you will find even in a conservative place like Colorado Springs, whole neighborhoods have a BLM sign in their yards. This is a very White town, a totally White town, perhaps having only 6% of its population being Black. So, even in very White, conservative places, it engaged audiences. This is not the question of participation. Once again, the numbers are high. So, it's not disputable that the numbers are huge. Because these numbers were reached before defining the strategy, because these numbers are produced around vague ideas, or things connected to the triggers, these movements are less likely to achieve their demands because these demands are not clear and start appearing after the momentum is lost. That doesn't necessarily mean that movements like BLM are not going to be turned into a longstanding organization, which will eventually shift power; I think it will, but I'm just generalizing about the new structure of movements.

And the reason for such a hope returns us to Benjamin Press' fourth element in his analysis. Element number one was trigger, not issue or organizational based. Element number two was horizontal super spread, super decentralized in decision-making. Number three was that such movements are very difficult to suppress, very difficult to predict, very difficult to manage. The fourth thing, which is interesting, because it's decentralized, carries a characteristic which was very important in my movement, *OTPOR* in Serbia. This is the characteristic of ownership. In Serbia, it was a reaction to the fact that people were sick and tired of leaders, political leaders. So, we said, "This is not the movement of members. This is the movement of leaders." So, everybody is the leader. That was our reaction to Milosevic's attempt to decapitate our movement. That was the way to produce more local leaders. That was the reason we invested a lot in training of these people. We wanted the movement to be local because every day, we expected the top 15 people in *OTPOR!* to end up in jail or worse. That was the reaction to the situation. We said, "We will make it horizontal because this guy is getting more oppressive by the day. It's only a matter of time before he's going to go after us." And we want the machine to keep going, whatever happens to the 10, 15, 30 people who started the show.

This is the reason we trained people for public speaking, because we knew he's going to go after people who go public. This is why I never gave a public speech in two years of the movement. I did not give a single speech. I mean, it made more sense for me to train tens of people to do public speaking. When these people are public speaking, people were seeing young faces and more people thought that they can public speak as well. And more people aimed for public speaking. This is how you got thousands of people who can jump on a trash can and do a ten-person rally, which is once again very complicated to oppress because there are plenty of trash cans. This is how you develop ownership. Because there is no structure, organization or visible leaders, people tend to feel belonging to the movement. People feel like shareholders. So, this thing is not owned by someone else. It's not a family-owned business. It's not organization, corporation-owned business.

Parks: I agree that ownership of the movement is a key feature. I live in Chestnut Hill. It's like 90% white. It's a very low stake thing to put a *Black Lives Matter* sign up because we're all "liberal." It doesn't really mean that much that you've put it up in some ways because there's no risk associated with it. But as we put the signs up, we talk as neighbors about how to buy the signs, pick the posters. Don't you think part of what the result of movements like *BLM* is, then, is the formation of local networks that develop local agendas on how to implement something like *BLM*? So, in a way, such a movement does spread out geographically very quickly. It doesn't appear, at first, to have a central leader. In this new model, one of the results, successes, would be that you had these locally defined groups and actions confronting the local officers who were doing the damage in their communities. It's not a success in that you get a federal intervention. But in the US where it's all state's rights and the police are all locally hired, that *BLM* ethos spread and distilled into community moments that do produce change. Right? I think it is a success if police are surrounded by a culture that holds them accountable, a community that actively witnesses and responds to their behavior, even if the actual policies are still being reformed. As Ben Kuebrich notes in "White Guys Who Send My Uncle to Prison," police suddenly feeling the need to call a community member "Mr. Bonaparte" represents the beginning of shifts in power (Kuebrich). It's that ground up communal change, perhaps triggered by a hashtag, that creates the actualized power base from which real negotiations with political leaders can begin. Which is why I was wondering why they are not seen as successful earlier in our discussion.

I also think we need to recognize that Alicia Garza, who created the *BLM* hashtag, had significant organizing experience prior to *BLM* (Garza). She worked in California, the Bay area, in a variety of roles and organizations. This had given her experience in traditional organizing as well as the need to control the public narrative. I think it had also given her, perhaps not a list of specific legislative goals, but a clear sense of the historic demands and current issues in which those demands were being articulated

within Black communities. And not unimportantly, Garza had direct experience in how “organizing” was too often premised on excluding Black community members from leadership, particularly Black women. Her decision then to organize BLM with a decentralized structure (with consensus building moments among the distributed leaders) was a strategic decision to both give ownership of the movement to individuals who were typically excluded from leadership roles, such as African American women, as well as an attempt to avoid the “charismatic” leader syndrome, who as she notes are typically understood as men. And, as she also notes, movements often fail once the charismatic leader is gone, through personal decision or assassination.

What I’m pointing to, then, is that the traditional structure of a movement “spine,” has also operated to position some individuals as leaders, some as followers, often along lines of race, class, and gender. This intersectional structure of exclusion might not be as evident in Poland, which is not as racially diverse as the United States, but I think the attempt to create new movement structures needs to be understood as addressing such issues. Garza acknowledges there are some weaknesses in this model, such as quick decision making, but, my sense is, other important goals are being achieved. In a sense, with BLM, we are watching new forms of organizing, of democratic processes, being reinvented.

In fact, I initially reached out to you because of your experience doing grassroots education with democracy advocates across, what, over fifty nations. I had this sense that what I had understood as “activism” was premised on an ad hoc consolidation of leftist academic theory and historical case studies. In a way, I felt that what I was teaching, the skills and practices of advocacy, were no longer representative of what work was actually being done on the ground. My knowledge, such as it was, was disconnected from the new knowledges about community, organizing, democratic structures being created by advocates within social movements. And to a great extent, after working together for several years, I think my concerns were well-founded.

Popovic: I’m not a scholar and maybe this is my personal bias and disappointment about the futility of much of the academy’s approach to everyday issues, but what we are doing now in schools, I believe, is the equivalent of teaching people the theory of climate change without teaching them how to recycle or compost things. That is, when it comes to democracy, you can find the amazing courses, the great theory, the super cool research, the whole top-bottom thing. In academia there is no lack of it. There are zillions of experts for constitutional rights who will tell you exactly how certain types of constitutions are more resilient to attempted dictatorships. And there is research that will explain to you how countries that depend only on one commodity, like fossil fuels, are more likely to end up being authoritarian. There is no lack of these resources. There’s plenty of courses where this research is read. What is not being taught is the practical skill of recycling, what is not

being taught is the practical skill of self-organizing, of changing your environment through collective action.

Parks: You're dead-on that the vast majority of college courses are theoretical investigations, but there are a growing range of community partnership or service learning courses within the university where as part of the course, students would go tutor after school, help clean up a park, or go work at a nonprofit. My sense is this type of engagement came to be how the university thought of itself as teaching democracy – teaching civic engagement as reformist volunteerism. Though clearly, many in my field of Composition and Rhetoric pushed back against such a limited vision of engagement. Still, I do think much of this work, even the oppositional work by white scholars such as myself, emerged within an assumed belief structure that “democracy worked” in the United States. The pillars supporting that democracy (voting, etc.) weren't really placed into question. That being the case, you could have your students sponsor a fish fry on Friday and believe you were teaching them important civic engagement skills (and often a racial blindness to their privilege).

Today, post-January 6th, post George Floyd's murder, such models seem woefully inadequate (if they ever were adequate). The stakes are higher now, and I'm not convinced that the academy has the skillset to train people how to actively defend democracy. I'm not convinced that the traditional models of scholarship, pedagogy, or partnership that mark most graduate students' education enable them to teach their students to defend democracy. And our students need models to not just defend democracy but to expand its participatory practices beyond the supremacist structures in which they emerged. That's why you and I have worked to ensure that individuals, like Andre Henry from BLM- California, can teach students about the work of securing racial justice. That's why we have someone like Dani Ayers, *MeToo* CEO educate students about organizing for gender equity. That's why someone like Myo Yan Naung Thein is needed to place democratic advocacy within a global context. And in some ways, that's also why we created our course with Myo Yan Naung Thein as we did. I think more hands-on active involvement with democratic struggles is vital.

The academy has been structured to ensure that the current privilege of the few remains acceptable, that democracy's maintenance of the status quo is a success. In a world where democracy is being attacked openly by white supremacists, where communities of color are refusing to accept a return to the status quo, new forms of democracy need to be built, drawing from Indigenous, Western, Global, and Decolonial knowledges. And, in my experience, the academy is not set up to produce such engaged public facing research/pedagogies. They've never been in the business of developing students in such skills. That's why I think advocates need to be brought into the university as teachers, as researchers. We need to be less infatuated with

a PhD and more engaged with the expertise that might create the world our scholarship theorizes about.

Popovic: This is my world. I teach people *how to do* stuff, not *what to do* stuff. I think there is plenty of *what to do* stuff, and very little of *how to do stuff* when it comes to democracy -at least when it comes to democracy and advocating of human rights. And to learn *how to do*, you need exposure and experience. This is something that an expensive education can't buy, but it is something everyone needs to learn.

Parks: I clearly agree with you, but I want to push back a bit. I see you framing this issue as “faculty = knowledge” and “advocates = skills.” I would argue that such a framing is a very university-based way to talk. Such a framing positions the university as having all the knowledge, which then frames advocates, such as yourself, as only having skills. I would argue, though, that when you talk, when Alicia Garza talks, when Myo Yan Naung Thein talks, there's a real theoretical knowledge base behind it. There's a theory of what community should entail, what it means to work in common respect for each other. There is a theory about how public space should operate, a theory of collective justice, equal rights. It's just many of those skills and derived theories critique how the university operates, which is modeled on elitist knowledge circulating to create a power nexus which only allows for certain forms of political change.

I think part of what a democratic-informed classroom would teach students, what I hope our current class with Myo Yan Naung Thein teaches students, is not to denigrate the advocate as possessing only skills, but to recognize how their education has stopped them from understanding the emergent theories being deployed to create structural change. The idea is to teach students that if they understood advocates as intellectual theorists with knowledge, they would gain an understanding of more robust possibilities inherent in democracy, in participatory processes. You would understand that theories have greater power, greater importance, and greater circulation than to just appear in an assigned essay or academic journal.

Popovic: Or to be instilled with a sense of duty that you can only implement your education in such venues if you want to be “serious,” “scholarly.”

Parks: Agreed. Typically, I would argue, a university education positions change as tweaks in the pillars of existing power, not fundamental changes to power. Advocates, such as the ones just mentioned, they are saying “No, there is a need for larger structural changes in terms of structural racism, structural economic inequality.” And that work requires a different set of skills. There are the skills to exist within existing structures. And then there's the skills to change those structures. They seem different to me. But I also think it is a difference that the university, as a system, wants to maintain by supporting only the weakest vision of democratic engagement. And they will maintain this difference, exclude these new forms of democratic education, even if

only to make sure advocates don't become professors, that professors don't become advocates.

Popovic: Even if this is a very “revolutionary” idea to some administrators, I believe it only makes sense that democratic organizing skills are a central element of a students’ education. It makes no sense to me as a liberal, not to you as a liberal, not to me as an activist, to you as an organizer, to divorce commitments to democracy as theory from the skills which protect its existence. My natural science structured brain says you change things by trying and failing. You learn how to take function by trying to replicate it in an experiment. You learn how a fish works by cutting it open, studying its parts – learning why a dolphin is not a fish based on its internal workings. This is how you learn any natural science. If these teachers encourage you to do such hands-on work in the natural sciences, and they make a program to equip you in the natural sciences, how come when it comes to learning about democracy, learning how to create robust democratic structures, this is politics? Why is this a politicization of the classroom?

Parks: I think the trick the academy plays upon you is to say that by teaching the 5,000 Latin terms to define democracy, you are teaching your students how to operate on democracy. But what they’re really doing is they’re teaching a very narrow spectrum of what democracy means, hence Latin not Indigenous roots for what collective means, what the role of government is and so on. They’re saying you don’t need to open the fish to see how it works. Just inject some red dye which will expose a small part of the workings. Keep your eye on that part, ignore everything else. Whereas I would argue a real education would be to break democracy down into components, understand its full workings so well you can “heal the fish” or, perhaps more accurately, discover what we thought was a fish was a dolphin all along – that there are different, better, more inclusive ways to structure our public space. What if democracy can mean more than we were ever taught to imagine?

What if there were suddenly hundreds of Professor Srjda Popovics, Professor Alicia Garzas, and Professor Myo Yan Naung Theins? How might that change our students’ education? How might it change my field’s sense of professional responsibility? I think maybe it’s time some of us more privileged professors took on the institutional work to find out.

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