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An Experiment in Participatory Democracy: A Case Study*

Most academics on this continent are by now thoroughly familiar with the rather redundant term "participatory democracy." It has come to describe the process within which university faculties and administrations share decision-making powers — once their exclusive responsibilities — with students.¹ But though the term is familiar, the process itself is not, since it is in most institutions a recent innovation or one contemplated for the future. This paper is a description of one university department's experience in introducing participatory democracy. The department in question is a sociology department within a large Canadian university. Most of the members were trained in the United States where experiments in this area have been going on for some time. Perhaps this fact, together with the youthfulness of the department itself (it has been in operation for less than six years, and the oldest individual among its sixteen faculty members is less than forty) encouraged a liberal attitude in the matter.

Before the experiment in student participation was introduced for the academic year 1969-70, there had been considerable interest in the topic among both faculty and students. However, proposals for implementing the idea were initiated

*In this paper, every attempt is made by the author not to discuss individuals in the department. This is not to deny the fact that members in the department, as individuals, did contribute their share to the success or failure of the experiment. The purpose of the paper is to gain sociological insights into the problem of participatory democracy in a university. The author gratefully acknowledges the helpful criticism he received from several faculty and students in the department. They are too many to be named here.

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by the former and, during the discussions which followed, the students requested five seats for their representatives in the departmental assembly. This request was introduced as a formal motion at a faculty meeting. Inevitably, there were arguments for and against it; but ultimately, the faculty consented to include students in the departmental assembly, to give them full privileges and powers and even to increase their number to seven. Thus, a new departmental assembly of twenty-three was created — one composed of sixteen faculty and seven students. Moreover, the students were granted parity in all departmental committees, together with full privileges and powers. However, it was agreed by both students and faculty that these arrangements would be regarded as an experiment and at the end of the academic year 1969-70, both parties were free to reconsider the matter.

Although student participation was thus established in principle, making that principle operational involved many difficulties. There was, for example, the problem of voter eligibility which might be restricted to sociology majors or might include anyone enrolled in a sociology course. To this was added the whole problem of administering the elections. The practical difficulties presented in these areas were compounded by complications discovered in student attitudes. They were at best cautious about, and at worst, suspicious of most administrative proposals. The brief and transitional nature of their responsibility encouraged caution, while suspicion was fostered by the very nature of student elections. These generally involved a small slate of nominees and a small voter turn-out. This inevitably stimulated an independent and even "missionary" attitude on the part of student representatives, who frequently found themselves in power by dint of their *own* will, rather than that of the majority of their peers. Yet administrative revolutions — even democratic ones — seem elitist by their very nature and the department seemed prepared to accept this fact, at least in the initial stages of the experiment.

deterioration of the experiment

The experiment moved smoothly in its early days, particularly since the faculty allowed more student representation than the students asked for themselves. But before long, the different interests and orientation of faculty and students be-

gan to emerge. For example, the students showed more interest in undergraduate studies, particularly in the areas such as social revolution, political sociology, etc., whereas the faculty felt responsible for graduate studies and the "traditional" areas of sociology. Unfortunately, these different interests, instead of becoming a source of checks and balances, became the ground for increasing antagonism. This was not always overt, since some students were uneasily aware that the assembly included teachers actively involved in evaluating their class work. Consequently, one student representative resigned, two did not attend regularly, and still others did not participate in much of the discussion. These developments put great pressure on those few students eager or willing to participate. Possibly their concern to redress the impression created by their fellow students often forced them to more outspoken and intransigent positions than they might otherwise have taken.

There is an obvious theoretical problem raised here, but one to which few people have given serious thought. It concerns the question of whether participatory democracy is possible between two groups, one of which is responsible for evaluating and, therefore, in some sense, controlling the other. In a democratic political constituency where there is no such control, this question is rarely raised. But in the universities it cannot be ignored. To create the facade of participatory democracy, without altering the control structure implicit in the student-teacher relationship is to embark upon an extraordinarily difficult course. Nothing demonstrated this more powerfully during the experiment than the students' own sense of their paradoxical situation. They simply absented themselves, first from polling stations, then from assemblies, so that the roles created for them fell finally, by process of default, to self-appointed "leaders with a mission."

As a result, the atmosphere in the departmental meetings became increasingly artificial. The meetings took on the quality of a game of politics with students and faculty classified as "pro" or "anti" student or establishment. In the case of a candidate for appointment to the faculty, ideology became a key issue. Thus, radical students demanded a Marxian sociologist to counteract the over-abundance of "establishment" sociologists in the department.

In all these arguments, the proponents of student participation tended to make democracy itself an ideology, rather than one of the several principles for departmental guidance. Of course, this group failed to see the inherent contradiction, in

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many circumstances, between the principle of democracy and the principle of professionalism. The very discussion of such issues *within* a university assumed student-teacher relationships based upon a non-democratic principle of authority. And if this authoritative principle proved unsatisfactory in its exclusive application to problems of departmental decision-making, the democratic rule seemed no less limited. In fact, the two systems demanded very subtle adjustment but within the hardening political circumstances, such adjustment became increasingly difficult. For example, students were aware of the paradoxical situation in which the faculty's invitation placed them. They seemed eager to overcome the problems, either through simple withdrawal or, among those who elected to participate, through the acquisition of a more complete power — a power, for instance, over grading or hiring. In the areas where they might have made useful and innovative suggestions — those under the jurisdiction of the Curriculum Committee and Library Committee — there was very little interest or activity. Factors like these made participatory democracy, not only burdensome, but anomalous as well. This was especially true for those teachers who prided themselves in their professionalism. Sociologists, they argued, cannot do their subjects' bidding, any more than medical doctors can prescribe the medicine of their patients' choice. Of course this does not mean that they can ignore the rights and feelings of students or patients. For the teacher this is to suffer not only the disadvantage of remoteness, but to rest one's authority in a self-centered concept of professional elitism that throws the whole point of teaching into question. This elitist concept is a real and ever present danger with the "professional" argument: witness faculty emphasis upon graduate versus undergraduate programs and publishing versus teaching. How can a department adjust these various difficulties?

Consider the major complaints of the students. In the department in question these were much the same as they were everywhere else on the North American continent: large classes, irrelevant course contents, and bureaucratic administrations. Of course those who complained about large classes were the same ones who supported a "democratization" in the universities that would ultimately open it up to very large numbers of students. They seemed unaware of or indifferent to the contradictory nature of these two demands. Paradoxically too, bureaucratization is, to some extent, a product of this same "democratization." The larger the system becomes,

the more difficult it is to run it on a personal basis. Relevance of course content was, no doubt, a legitimate area of concern. However, those who argued for relevance were thinking in terms of a few pressing social problems they themselves felt. But academic institutions, if they are social agencies, are not so in any simple sense because part of their concern is to transcend the problems of the present.

One of the chief student complaints, namely bureaucratic administration, deserves more consideration. To begin with, we should realize that this is a traditional and not a recent problem and the professional has never fitted easily within a bureaucratic system. The inherent problems in administering professionals⁴ are compounded in the case of academics who are used to extremely broad freedoms of thought and action — broader than any other group in modern society. But the fact is that a large social system, whether democratic or bureaucratic, cannot run effectively without the practical hand of good administrators. It is true, of course, that often they become originators of programs; but in the past academics and students, too, have shown an indifference toward and a disinterest in matters of governance. Many administrators therefore, exercise extensive powers by right of default. Herein lies the seed of future resentments and criticism.

The corrective lies through departmental co-operation. But it is also true, that an administrator can have too much "co-operation" from his colleagues. No administrator can afford to become a mere instrument of the majority. Even in democratic organizations, authority represents delegated power. The entrusting of delegated power to the administrator represents one of his traditional "rights." It is not fashionable to speak of these rights, but they are a fact of life which a sociologist — indeed, any reasonable person — should not ignore. The departmental assembly, however, felt free to do so. As a result, suspicions, resentments and frustrations over administrative activities increased. Problems became particularly acute during the discussion of an applicant for a position on the faculty. After a long and heated controversy, the applicant was turned down. With no real justification, the students' vote was regarded as the deciding factor. Their supposed culpability was enough to "radicalize" the whole atmosphere of later departmental assemblies.

With growing conflict and tension, there was an increasing preoccupation with rules and regulations on the part of both parties. In fact, the assembly seemed to develop more rules

than it could handle. References to the Robert's Rules of Order were frequent. Everyone became a victim of another difficult situation, though all seemed in this instance to understand a little more clearly that it was one of their own making. Finally, it became impossible to get anything done so that the assembly had to take the extraordinary action of abolishing all these rules and regulations which the department had only just been adopting. At least one lesson was clear: no number of rules and regulations will save a department which lacks basic goodwill among its members. Or, as Durkheim pointed out, the contractual elements of a social system must have a firm basis in underlying non-contractual elements.

In one of the last meetings before the summer vacation, the students introduced a motion for the continuation of student participation in the department, an act which was a violation of the original agreement to treat the whole thing as an experiment and give the faculty time to reflect on the experiment. The spirit the students showed in that meeting was one of confrontation, not of experimentation. The faculty sensed the power politics behind the motion and voted it down. The necessary non-contractual element of which Durkheim spoke, together with its subtle spirit of administrative adjustment and cooperation had ended. So had participatory democracy.

the paradox of the tragedy

Prior to this experiment, the sociology department had been regarded as a liberal, progressive department in many ways. In several courses, students had considerable control over their grades; the department gave financial aid to most students in their qualifying year. In all this it took justifiable pride, and perhaps encouraged its members to believe that the discipline they taught offered special benefits for the creation and successful operation of social systems. On the basis of these interests and assumptions, the department went further than any other in the university in its efforts to foster student participation. But ironically, no department failed so completely to satisfy needs in this area.

It is interesting to consider why this should be the case. To begin with, sociology seems to attract more radicals than do other disciplines. These students come with what we call an "action-orientation." To their dismay, they find themselves involved in a remote, detached and highly speculative world of

statistics, computer application, or theory construction.³ Their frustrations on discovering this are not only directed at the discipline, but find a reflection there in the age-old conflict between humanistic sociology and scientific sociology. The sociology department becomes, then, a focus, a stage upon which the drama that belongs to another and a larger context, can be enacted.

summary and conclusion

The episode described above raises a number of interesting questions. First, can an experiment in participatory democracy be successfully carried out in a single department within a university? The author is inclined to say "No." Second, can departments expect student participation to be democratic? Again, "No," particularly in the beginning. Third, can participatory democracy be meaningful between unequals, one of which has direct control over the other? Here too, the author is inclined to say "No."

Certain cautionary conclusions are obvious as well. Both students and faculty contributed heavily to the failures in participatory democracy. Neither could adjust with sufficient speed or conviction to the limitations of the departments' condition. The frustrations that grew out of these failures only compounded the difficulties. However, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that there are no simple solutions to the problems faced in this area. The students tend to be too unprofessional to comprehend the complexity of the problems inherent within the situation; their anti-administrative bias is such, moreover, that they find it extremely difficult to work upon practical programs; their sense of the limitations of their situation, when combined with the foregoing factors, leads them to resolve difficulties simply by demanding more power. The whole situation is one that fosters confrontation rather than communication, problems rather than solutions, and so discourages active or willing administrative interest. In order to remedy this, administrators must realize that there is nothing sacred about achieved solutions; students must understand that visions are subject to revisions; and the faculty must be encouraged to believe that professionalism is only one among a number of necessary considerations in a teaching department. And all parties must show restraint, patience, and above all, a genuine respect for others.

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To most involved in the experiment described above, these reorderings of attitudes seem things more to be wished for than expected. Yet the author wishes to conclude this paper on a positive, not a pessimistic, note. An experiment is a success or failure only to the extent that the people involved learn or fail to learn lessons from it. The experiment in participatory democracy of the sociology department provided valuable lessons for administrators, faculty, and students. With patience, reflection and hard work these may teach us something.

references

1. For details on this topic in Canada, see Gerald F. McGuigan, ed., *Student Protest*, Toronto: Methuen Publications, 1968; Tim and Julyan Reid, eds., *Student Power and the Canadian Campus*, Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1969; and Dimitrios J. Roussopoulos, ed., *The New Left in Canada*, Montreal: Our Generation Press — Black Rose Books, 1970. In U.S.A., see Seymour M. Lipset and Sheldon S. Wolin, eds., *The Berkeley Student Revolt: Facts and Interpretations*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965; and Michael Brown, ed., *Politics and Anti-Politics of the Young*, New York: Glencoe Press, 1969.
2. For the discussion on the conflict between professional and bureaucratic orientations see, Richard H. Hall, *Occupations and the Social Structure*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969.
3. This point is already noted by Robert W. Friedrichs in his *A Sociology of Sociology*, Toronto: Collier-Macmillan Canada, 1970, pp. 77-78.