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# Book Review of Democracy Works: Joining Theory and Action to Foster Global Change

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*Katz Reviews Dickinson et. al./ Societies Without Borders 5:1 (2010) 94-96*

***Book Review***  
**Democracy Works: Joining Theory and Action  
to Foster Global Change**

edited by  
**Torry D. Dickinson and Terrie A. Becerra**  
with **Summer B.C. Lewis**  
(Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2009), 272 pages.

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*Democracy Works*, a compilation of essays, reflections, and research of scholar-activists, restores the all too common divides we sociologists are familiar with. The divides between theory and praxis, human and nature, global North and South, and local-global. Instead of privileging one social inequity over the other, the contributors of *Democracy Works* go to great lengths to remind readers that our identities and lives are comprised of intersecting hierarchies which connect us across geographic, political and social divides. *Democracy Works* is an organized trajectory towards social action leading the reader from a general overview of social theory and methodology to specific case studies and democratic social movements. The authors do a convincing job of ultimately reminding sociologists why both theory and action are pivotal in working global social change.

Part I offers a brief introduction of the history, theory and methodology necessary to engage in a deliberative and participatory democracy within a globalized world. However, while deliberative democracy is a system based upon shared values and decision-making in pursuit of the common struggle for justice, the reader is left to question if that is truly the case. For instance, in Chapter 3, 'Deliberative Democracy as a Foundation for Sustainable Social Change,' authors Schenck-Hamlin, Steffensmeier and Schenck-Hamlin make the common error of well-meaning activists and researchers. While the authors acknowledge the conundrum of privileged individuals being the demographic most likely to participate in deliberative organizations, they conclude that

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given the local and global problems of the world that have the greatest impact on those who are not privileged, 'a challenge to social activism as well as to deliberative democracy will be giving voice to these groups worldwide' (p. 54). There it is again. The notion that, we, whoever we are, the privileged, are charged with giving those less privileged, 'a voice.' While this sounds noble in deed, it further reinforces the idea that it in order for social change to happen the privileged must give voice to the silenced and oppressed. Rather, perhaps we should consider that they already have a voice, and in lien with the rest of this text, the structure is organized in such a way that does not allow them to be heard.

Part II of the text moves on to address intersecting identities in everyday life, as well as within activist paradigms. Based on stories of political prisoners such as Mumia Abu-Jamal to working as an agent of social change in women's cooperatives in Latin America to the need to embrace non-violence, the authors challenge the reader to consider their place in a globalized capitalist economy and world system. As Lewis and Staley posit in their article on a Guatemalan women's textile cooperative, we women, and especially Western feminists, must admit that our 'material quality of life comes as a direct result of the exploitation of women and men from the South or third world' (p. 132). A point often understated in much work on social action, but highlighted well in this section, is that reflexivity is crucial. We must pause for a moment, as Susan Allen's entry on nonviolence reminds us, and critically examine how we fit within, and often benefit from, the existence and maintenance of the global capitalism. Only once we realize that our quality of life is often at the expense of others are we able to truly meaningfully engage in movements for social justice. Even, and especially, those working for social change but carefully consider how their everyday lives may actually directly contribute to the problems of the causes they are working so ardently to eradicate. Aptly stated by Rhonda Janke in her section on sustainable agriculture, 'everything that we do is political. Every purchase we make or don't make is a statement' (p. 231).

Part III of the text offers examples of how and what rebuilding civil society means. And above all else, a crucial element in global social change is the empowerment and uplift of women. Women are the key for societal social uplift and often bear the brunt of injustices. Readers

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are reminded how statistics are deceptive and often obscure the gendered realities of global social problems such as water scarcity. Gender must be seen as an organizing principle undergirding social justice, rather than a convenient add-on when it seems relevant. In doing so, fundamental shifts in the social organization of how we conduct research and address social problems will occur. From this, ecofeminist perspective, as Valerie Carroll reminds us, means offering ethical and equitable alternative systems rather than replicating existing systems of domination.

In sum, *Democracy Works* does what it sets out to do. It provides readers with a merger of theory and action in pursuit of social change. Social action is exemplified through the transformation of social systems, the dismantling of the hierarchical world system, and others through the formation of new cultures and belief systems. From stories of fair trade cooperatives, sustainable agriculture, political prisoners to global water issues, readers are reminded, and encouraged, that the future of participatory democracy and social change begins with their partnership. Now.

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