

OUR VISION REMAINS: FREE SPEECH! A FREE PRESS!

FREE MUMIA ABU JAMAL!

by

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Thank you. I would like to express my appreciation to the organizers of this conference for such a timely topic and impressive group of speakers. It is a pleasure to be included. In this brief talk I would like to discuss several issues. First I want to clarify key issues involved with the concept democracy, and the US constitution. With this as a background I would like to review the current context and discuss the issue of democracy during this era. Finally I will end these brief comments with a discussion of expanding democracy in this period dominated by motion toward a police state.

This conference has been called in the midst of a raging debate over the nature of democracy in the USA. This debate is not merely an academic or political exercise, but an expression of fundamental changes in the structure of social life. There are new problems and new prospects. The debate over democracy has to do with how society is to be organized, the relative positioning of groups and individuals. Democracy is a concept that captures something fundamental about the quality of life for the average member of the society, rights and responsibilities, experience and possibilities. Democracy is often thought of as a form of social life, the best example being the two party or multi-party political system, but more important might be the content of social life. This is my position.

The main social determinant of democracy is the economy. The key question is does everyone have a decent standard of living?

This economic basis of democracy focuses on the level of productivity and overall wealth, as well as the equitable nature of ownership, distribution, and consumption. Consider these facts: 80 per cent of the worlds population lives below the standard of living in the USA. Within the USA a majority of children are born at or below the poverty line. These facts alone are enough to qualify any claims about democracy. Being free to starve is hardly something to brag about for all too many people.

Another issue of democracy is whether we the people are being educated and mobilized to become even greater participants in the political life of society. Are people being educated so that they can articulate their interest and fight for the policies they want? This kind of education is a central feature of political culture, and points to whether democracy is an encoded value in the everyday life of a society. There is motion toward a critical enlightenment or a motion toward accepting repressive conditions.

In this context, there can be no discussion of democracy without a focus on the media. Media is a concept for grouping together all of the tools used in the daily education of our society or any society, the print media (newspapers, magazines, newsletters, books, etc.), the electronic media (radio, tv, cable, compact disks, etc.) and telecommunications (phone, satellites, Internet, etc.). In sum, one way to determine the health of political discourse in a society is the quality of the media: Who owns it? What's in it? Who consumes it? What difference does it make?

The last issue I want to mention by way of introduction is that democracy requires that one have access to and control over resources for carrying out their democratic activities. The freedom to organize interest groups and political parties, the freedom of association, is a key issue. Also, I am reminded here of an old adage that free speech belongs to those that own printing presses. Of course we have laws that are supposed to protect those of us who don't own presses, but in this era of desk top publishing and publishing "stores" (Kinkos, etc.) new opportunity has opened up for freedom of speech. I'll have more to say about this.

DEMOCRACY AND THE US CONSTITUTION

It is useful to remind ourselves of the forms and content of democracy as encoded into the US constitution ratified by 1788. It is so familiar to hear the hard line conservatives deal with the constitution as a rigid stone tablet, demanding that we accept things as written, holding firm to the belief that the only interpretation we accept is the one the founders intended. Of course as a Black man I reject this notion without any hesitancy as the constitution did not end slavery then and there, undercounted Black people as less than fully human, denied Black men and women the vote, and the 5th amendment virtually prohibited the liberation of slaves by requiring full compensation to the owners of all private property appropriated by the government. My

view is to hell with the position that what the founders intended is some sort of holy writ. This is a new day.

The US constitution is a historical document of great importance, even with its limitations. The US was created as the result of an anti-colonial war of national liberation. The British had maintained their control to subordinate the economic and political life of the colonies. Laws were passed that held colonial economic growth in check, especially manufacturing and any trade that would compete with British business. Moreover, the colonists were denied formal political representation in defense of their own interests. Throughout the 1760's the British parliament passed the navigations acts, trade acts, and acts that prohibited industrial production all in the interest of holding back economic development in the colonies. After the Stamp Act of 1765 the colonist rallied behind the slogan "No taxation without representation!" The Sons of Liberty and other armed groups formed, leading to the Boston massacre of 1770 that startled the nation when Crispus Attucks, a Black worker, was killed as the first martyr of the American Revolution. Armed conflict led to formulating the constitution.

The constitution was a compromise document, a compromise worked out by privileged elites to mediate their competing interests, but mainly to mediate between their interest as a propertied class against all others. Alexander Hamilton put it clearly when he called on the constitutional convention "to give to the rich and well born a distinct and permanent share in the

government. They will check the unsteadiness of the mass of the people." So, when the document was sent out to be ratified by the states, many state legislative bodies, being more representative of the masses of people, who were armed and still prepared to fight, demanded that some kind of "bill of rights" be adopted immediately.

So, it is often left out of discussions that the political rights we often regard as the most important pillars of our political heritage were amendments to the constitution imposed on the elites by democratic minded forces. The first amendment is a key one:

Amendment 1: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

This new fledgling country fought for the expansion of democracy, at the heart of which was a debate over whether to separate from England and over what kind of society people wanted to have. One example of this is the pamphleteering of Thomas Paine. Even when only a small per cent of the population was literate, the people were anxious for clarity and a proper basis of political unity. Paine published his "Common Sense" pamphlet

and it was an instant hit. During the first 3 months it sold 120,000 copies, and all totaled it sold 500,000 copies.

Another aspect of democracy in this period is the growth of newspapers in the 13 colonies. The first printing press was imported from England and set up in Cambridge, Mass. in 1639. In the 70 years before the revolution there were 100 newspapers, and another 50 sprang up during the war. However, in less than 40 years after American independence another 1200 newspapers were created. The economic underpinning of this explosion of mass education is the industrial revolution. The factory system began in the US when Samuel Slater set up his textile mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island in 1790 based on technology illegally imported from England. The down side of this is that both the newspapers and the factories soon came to be controlled by the same class of capitalists, leaving only a small portion of economic life and public discourse in the press open to the masses of poor and working people. This was part of the imperative to go west and conquer the native peoples. Our history is complex. The American search for democracy was built on denying democracy to some, enslaving others, and committing genocide against the rest!

THE NEW TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

The economy of the US was born in a period of capitalist development, without the backward constraints of local feudal institutions, so technological innovation has been part of

American history from the very beginning. Our current situation bears this out. Social life of the 20th century has been driven to a great extent by technologies based on electricity. From the radio, records, movies, and television the democratic expansion of communications has been unprecedented. This was especially true because of the rural electrification program set up in 1936.

Now, at the end of the 20th century, we are entering an economic revolution that promises to be on par with the impact of the industrial revolution. This is the technological revolution of electronics, computers, robots, biotechnology, etc. A recent surge of publications has been describing this process, including *The End_of Work* by Jeremy Rifkin, and *The Jobless Future* by Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, and *Entering An Epoch of Social_Revolution* by Nelson Peery. These books push us past mere description to an analysis of a deep and fundamental systemic transformation, a revolution.

The main feature of this technological revolution is that it is expanding production while the need for human labor is decreasing. In the 1950's 33% of the workforce was in manufacturing, while today less than 17% is engaged in blue collar work. "From 1979 to 1992, productivity increased by 35% in the manufacturing sector while the workforce shrank by 15%." In 1980, 120,000 people worked for US Steel. Ten years later computer-based reengineering allowed US Steel to make more product than ever with a workforce of only 20,000. The service sector is also restructuring, McDonalds testing its McRobots, or the banking

and insurance industry which estimates that it will eliminate 700,000 jobs by the year 2000. In the last 5 years the wholesale sector has lost 240,000 to direct computer/telecommunications links between retailers and manufacturers, and is not expected to survive. Employment in retail is threatened by computerized or televised shopping. Even knowledge workers are being replaced as the unemployment in electronic is close to that in the automobile industry.

This is producing tremendous wealth, but also extreme poverty and misery. In 1979 12 percent of the full time workforce earned less than the "poverty line." By 1992, 18 percent of the full time workforce was earning less than poverty level. Here in Chicago we have seen the downsizing of steel. Here is what the United Steelworkers report about what happened to steelworkers who lost their jobs between 1980 and 1983. "...38.7% remained unemployed and another 15% either retired or gave up looking for work. This means only 45.7% of those former steel workers have succeeded in finding new jobs....18% could only find part-time work, and, of the remaining former steel workers who managed to find full time jobs, 42% now make less than 80% of the wages they once earned in the mills."

This transformation parallels 20th century agriculture in that 40% of the work force was in agriculture at the beginning of the 20th century, but now it is close to 2%.

Rifkin sums up the overall situation this way:

"We are being swept up into a powerful new technological revolution that offers the promise of a great social transformation, unlike any in history. The new high-technology revolution could mean fewer hours of work and greater benefits for millions. For the first time in modern history, large numbers of human beings could be liberated from long hours of labor in the formal marketplace, to be free to pursue leisure time activities.

The same technological forces could, however, as easily lead to growing unemployment and a global depression. Whether a utopian or dystopian future awaits us depends, to a great measure, on how productivity gains of the Information Age are distributed. A fair and equitable distribution of the productivity gains would require a shortening of the workweek around the world and a concerted effort by central governments to provide alternative employment.... If, however, the dramatic productivity gains of the high-tech revolution are not shared, but rather used primarily to enhance corporate profit, to the exclusive benefit of stockholders, top corporate managers, and the emerging elite of high-tech knowledge workers, chances are that the growing gap between haves and have nots will lead to social and political upheaval on a global scale." (Rifkin, p. 13)

A NEW POLICY DEBATE: DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

My argument is that this technological revolution is the basis for the current debate on democracy, not only the form of

democracy, but its content. This debate is about poor people, but does not include them, they are objects not subjects in this debate. Alvin and Heidi Toffler point to the danger of political parties maintaining an orientation based on the past while missing the way the world will be different in the future. They write "...both parties are busy maintaining nostalgia into their constituents' veins. The Democrats, for example until recent years, spoke of "reindustrializing" or "restoring" American industry to its period of greatness in the 1950s (in reality an impossible return to the Second wave mass-production economy). The Republicans, meanwhile, appeal to nostalgia in their rhetoric about culture and values, as though one could return to the values and morality of the 1950's -- a time before universal television, before the birth-control pill, before commercial jet aviation, satellites and home computers -- without returning to the mass industrial society of the second wave. One side dreams of River Rouge, the other dreams of Ozzie and Harriet."

The new technology driving the policy debate on democracy is a combination of the computer, the telephone, satellites, and new software. These are the components for the Internet, the information superhighway. Just a note on this name, information superhighway. The likelihood is that we're going to get an information railroad and not an information highway. The railroad was the major 19th century transportation breakthrough of industrialization in the USA. It was made possible by the federal

government giving millions of acres of public land free to private corporations to build railroads (from 1862 to 72 Congress gave away 100 million acres), and then allowed them to charge the public fees to ride or ship freight. At a latter stage, based on automobile technology, the government build and continues to maintain the highways we are all free to enter, usually with little or no fees. If the information is a highway we should all be able to get on free, but since we are expected to pay its a railroad we're discussing not a highway.

Unless you look very closely, you will not see bottom-up involvement in these debates and battles. Most Americans are assigned (at best) a passive role analogous to their role as consumers on the future information railroad: ten lanes of traffic to bring "pay per" info-tainment, goods and services to their door, and a footpath to run the other direction. At worst, the information railroad will bring a family an electronic monitoring device attached to their teenager's ankle, once he or she get into trouble with the law and is put under high tech house arrest, with the parents serving as jailers. As Herrnstein and Murray wrote in the recent controversial study (*The Bell Curve*) it is likely that these marginalized communities will be generally viewed within a paradigm that links poverty to crime and it will become common to seek a solution by placing them in "high tech Indian reservations." The high level policy debates on these issues so far have projected a deepening polarization in the United States, which our democracy cannot survive. Moreover, the community

oriented policy coalition is fragmented and has yet to develop a consensus on a set of public policy alternatives.

Once you uncover the bottom up responses to the information age, however, you find tremendous richness, creativity and potential. Computer programmers have used their machines to lobby and monitor Congress on issues of Internet access. A community computing movement has brought computers to local public schools and settlement houses. Librarians, whose professional ethos is to keep information flowing are into this in many varied ways. Students have developed ways to use the Internet for community organizing. These efforts to use and promote the use of new information technologies are part of sweeping more people into a debate. Developers of the technology are reaching out to the uninitiated, those who left behind are part of new untapped markets. There is interest everywhere in catching up on the information revolution and playing a role in a bottom up debate over "Who will decide the future?"

The mainstream ideological consensus on this policy debate has the Tofflers providing the main vision. They advance three political principles:

1. minority power: "...majority rule...is obsolete."
2. semidirect democracy: policy driven by the polltakers
3. decision division: decentralization of government.

In a time when the democratic rights of citizens and fundamental human rights are being called into question, deregulation and decentralization, while maintaining the dominance of the

corporations in a centralized economy, create formal democracy with authoritarian power in tact. The experience of economic marginalization translated into the voices of the homeless, the welfare recipient, the unemployed, and those herded into the criminal justice system from the impoverished "forbidden zones" of America were not being sought out, or listened to, nor counted as part of the policy formation loop. Clinton has argued that we need to re-invent government. We should respond, no, the problem is deeper than that, we need to re-invent democracy - its the economy stupid!

FROM ACCESS TO EMPOWERMENT

Computer technology has replaced printing press technology (started by Guttenberg in the 15th century) as the basis for free speech and a free press. The most basic starting point is the fight for access to the new information technology. There are at least five aspects to this fight for access:

1. access to hardware (phone, computer, modem, etc)
2. access to soft ware
3. access to training
4. access to the Internet
5. access to financial resources

Access puts you in the game, but being in the game and being in a position to win while playing the game is quite another story. This leads us to mention empowerment as a necessary goal

beyond mere access. Empowerment is a tricky concept these days as the government jargon has coopted it into the fantasy scheme for economic development called empowerment zones. What I'm talking about is transferring resources without strings attached or limitations on where it might go. Power is the ability to make something happen even when there is resistance. To empower people locked into permanent poverty means placing the entire society in a cauldron of change. Clearly we're talking about a kind of democracy we've never had and yet must have. As Langston Hughes said, "Let American be American again, the land it never has been yet and yet must be, the land where everyone is free!"

1. empowerment means that there are data bases designed to answer the questions being raised by people in poverty and people fighting all forms of exploitation and oppression;

2. empowerment means that we have enough grass roots people online engaging in conferences for the sharing of experience and forging the levels of consensus necessary for informed united civil action;

3. empowerment means grass roots groups utilizing the technology to engage in publishing newsletters at the grass roots level with the required technical skill to take advantage of the data bases and graphics available on the net;

4. empowerment means that education is transformed based on a new formula: every student with a computer, every school with computer labs, every class room smart, and every teacher with the summer and weekend courses to keep up to date (this should go way

past the innovations brought in after the Soviet Sputnik achievement).

5. empowerment means a new kind of library system by the library is a technical service institution guiding people to information, training them, and sending organizers out to transform the community into an electronically smart space of human habitation, and as it has been, a repository of hard copy.

Overall, information empowerment is not a technical matter, but a matter of politics, or morality, or mass democratic action.

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This talk has been an attempt to attack the illusion and self deception many of us have had about regarding American democracy.

Further I have attempted to show how the issue of democracy is at the heart of the social results of this current technological revolution. These are revolutionary times, dangerous times. This brings me to the issue of Mumia Abu Jamal.

Brother Jamal is a journalist, one of some achievement and standing in his profession. He is on death row. Aside from the state having a weak case, and being very intransigent over granting Jamal a new trial, the case is a ringing bell of warning for a free press in this country. The police have gone out of their way to silence his voice. They try to stop his column published in papers throughout this country. They tried to stop

the publication of his book Live From Death Row. They were successful in stopping his reporting on National Public Radio in a blatant act of censorship. We are all under attack through this case, but many of us are blinded by the circumstances under which the issues have come up. We are afraid of speaking up, or confused, but the issue of free speech and freedom of the press stand out like illuminated bill boards.

There is always an issue that defines the times. These times are about the technological revolution and its impact on society. On the issue of free speech and freedom of the press we have to discuss the Internet, access and empowerment. On every issue there are political battles that define the forces of the struggle. At this time, our case is the imminent lynching of Mumia Abu Jamal. In this kind of forum the title of my talk is the slogan I raise as I conclude my remarks:

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