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Caution: Deep Philosophy, Steep History and Imminent Threat of Direct Deliberative eDemocracy Ahead

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Book Review Essay

Majid Behrouzi, *Democracy as the Political Empowerment of the Citizen*. Lexington Books, 2006, 2 Volumes.

Caution: Deep Philosophy, Steep History and Imminent Threat of Direct Deliberative eDemocracy Ahead

By Tomas Ohlin

Those who have hungered for an old fashioned political treatise on e-Democracy in its more direct form are invited to read a two volume series by Professor Majid Behrouzi titled: *Democracy as the Political Empowerment of the Citizen*. For them, this is a banquet that will give the famished democrat much to savor, devour and digest.

These books are impressive and fill a need. Indeed, there have been many recent books on new forms of democracy, but this two book set is unique in its size and in its heavy intellectual and academic approach to the subject. They are not easily browsed. However, they will serve as an excellent source of reference and should be on every true democrat's bookshelf. Plus, they end on a positive futuristic note.

The first volume has the subtitle: "*The Betrayal of an Ideal*," but despite its extraordinary length and complexity, it is actually an introduction to the second volume which is subtitled: *Direct Deliberative e-Democracy*. Thus, what the reader finds in the introductory part is an exhaustive history of the philosophy and practice of "democracy" from ancient to modern times. Original democratic schools and theories are described all the way from Pericles, through Rousseau and Marx, to Macpherson and others. This is followed by discussions on various forms of liberalism and public organization including the theories and analyses of Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Joseph Schumpeter and John Dewey. Few if any luminaries are omitted. As I've noted already, this is a traditional treatise on democracy from A to Z and then some. Thus one should expect a lot of citations and footnotes and long sentences and repetition for emphasis.

In general, Professor Behrouzi makes a fairly conclusive case in Volume I that the ideals of democracy are rarely found in practice today and that "representative democracy" is a façade of genuine democracy—by and large. He concludes, somewhat grimly, that modern democracy is in "crisis" and must be replaced in the future by various forms of participatory and deliberative democracy. This thesis is widely shared these days, with a ton of books and articles and opinions along much the same lines. But none are so thorough. This may be a flaw if one thinks of it as a book to read for pleasure or new ideas, but it is a virtue as a reference text.

The second volume is more on the cutting edge of innovative democratic thought and practice today...and for the indefinite future.

This book could have stood by itself, but Volume I surely gives it a rich (some might say opulent) theoretical and historical context. It also lends weight to many important points that the author addresses, issues about how contemporary communications advances fit into his earlier analysis. For example, there is a major issue brewing between those who use computer technologies to improve, enhance or modernize this obsolescent form of democracy in practice today. The way it is framed is e-Government (or digital democracy) vs. e-Democracy (or e-Participation). The way Behrouzi sees it is that “e-Government strengthens the elites” while e-Democracy empowers the citizens.”

So what about such modern phenomena as talking with your legislator via email, or e-forums with politicians, pundits or bloggers, or getting your fishing or driver’s licenses online? According to Behrouzi: e-Government....making the present system seem more efficient, accesible and transparent. The author uses the words “direct deliberative e-Democracy” for the democratic model he considers to be authentic and modern derivations of ancient models and modern deliberative democratic theories. Thus, the “e” for electronic and technological....are not of paramount importance to empowering citizens. The “e” in the author’s conception of “e-Democracy” is comparatively small in size. This is healthy. Organization and forms of cooperation are more central and salient.

And what about electronic voting? Dr. Behrouzi wisely warns that e-voting “at least in the mode it is currently being utilized—only diverts attention from what is truly democratic about the idea. This does not mean the author discounts its future importance in other more democratic processes. In more directly democratic systems, in fact, citizens “will rely heavily on using the latest innovation in e-technologies including voting electronically.” In a country like the United States where electronic voting is highly suspect of fixing two presidential elections illegally and where entertainment elections like “American Idol” are fixed as well and are hardly representative of either the skills of the participants or the will of the viewing audience....these words are accurate. And in a future where citizens can set budgetary priorities, policy agendas, make laws and ratify treaties and constitutional amendments....new forms of secure electronic voting will have the effect envisioned by R. Buckminster Fuller in his epic poem “*No Second Hand God*.” Yes, Fuller’s “First hand God” might well be described as “direct deliberative e-democracy.”

It is important to note, as to ward off irresponsible attacks on his concept of direct deliberative e-democracy, that Dr. Behrouzi does not foresee or desire that all citizens vote on all issues all the time. No one in their right mind could want such a thing for it would preclude the citizenry from accomplishing the more productive and necessary functions of any society. It is made crystal clear that the concept of direct deliberative e-democracy is simply a complementary addition to all representative systems. Appropriately, the author prefers to apply increased citizen influence on “macro” decisions rather than “meso” or “micro” (shorter term, more specific) decisions. This is consistent with Aristotle’s view of a republic being part democratic and part

oligarchic...with the democratic part being that the people set “the direction” for society and the natural aristocracy executes or administers the public agenda.

A question that must be asked about a two volume set of such wide range and futuristic forecasting is: Is it convincing? Another should be: What overall impression is transferred to a neophyte or skeptical newcomer to this field of study, thought and practice? If one has a plethora of free time and a strong motivation to navigate such a long and sometimes difficult intellectual journey, the answer would have to be “Yes.”

These two books provide impressive historical and philosophical knowledge about genuine democracy and democratic development over time and describe in compelling detail some new forms of democracy which clearly can develop in the near future, given our technological communications evolution and revolution. Dr. Behrouzi should be given high praise for a major contribution to real democratic theory and for creating a “gold standard” for new democratic possibilities.