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CYNTHIA FARRAR

Dinner with Democracy

Professor Cynthia Farrar invited twenty residents of New Haven, CT, for dinner at Yale University once a week for several months to talk about what democracy means. They were of varied backgrounds and interests, from all walks of life. They found that both individual freedom and the community's well-being were important to true democracy. Also, democracy was not only about politics. Renowned Yale (and University of Chicago) professor Harold Lasswell wrote long ago that politics is "who gets what, when, how." But, Professor Farrar's diners concluded that often, the need to represent group interests and deliver on "who gets what" interfered with real democracy. Exchanging views over dinner in New Haven every week for several months yielded no decisions, no public policy, no budgetary outcomes. It wasn't ancient Athens, just twenty-one people having dinner, sharing their ideas, and that was all; maybe, that was more than enough.

ON A THURSDAY EVENING in January, twenty-one people stood in line in an undergraduate cafeteria, collected their food on trays, and slowly gathered in an adjacent room. A few were affiliated with the university; most were not. Lawyers, political activists, a judge; neighborhood leaders, community organizers, a former mayor; business and religious leaders, a journalist, Yale undergraduates; men and women, of various ages, races, ethnicities, and backgrounds—all stood uncertainly around the room. They had been invited to participate in an extended discussion of democracy. Each week, they would join Yale students and other members of the public at lectures in a special course called Democratic Vistas, taught by fifteen Yale professors from different disciplines. Each week, they would read assigned texts. And each week, they would meet for dinner, with me, and talk.

The first conversation was stilted. I talked too much. Their eyes flicked around the room. They wondered what they had gotten themselves into. To get the discussion going, I asked the group to analyze itself in democratic terms. If this group were to make decisions on behalf of the larger community, how would we assess whether they could legitimately do so? By way of answer, individuals offered guesses as to why they had been invited, why someone (me) had thought they had something to contribute to the discussion: certain kinds of experience or understanding? representing or resembling a particular group in society? commitment to the process itself or to the common good? ability to enlarge the perspectives of others? I posed a further question: if we were to consider ourselves a democratic entity, what would that mean? Would we have to operate in a particular way, such as take turns running the class? What would each person be entitled to expect and be required to contribute? What if some people talked all the time, others not at all? In response, some said that each person brought his or her own agenda. Others questioned the premise that we could act like a democracy: there wasn't enough time; not everyone who needed to be present was there; we weren't trying to produce anything, not even decisions. At the end of the hour and a half, amid the clattering of trays and scraping of chairs, I wondered if anyone would return the following week.

I also wondered what I had gotten them into. I had started from an intuition: that this discussion group would not just talk about democracy, but enrich it. What this might mean became clearer to me over the course of the term. Certainly the initial session was a blind alley. Whatever I may have thought they might accomplish as a group, it would definitely not be defined by adherence to standard democratic procedures and the traditional framework of democratic legitimacy: for example, being chosen by a larger constituency through a fair and open process, making decisions on behalf of that constituency through mechanisms such as majority rule, being accountable for the consequences of those decisions, and the like. Indeed, their contribution might well reside, I thought, in a region not often explored by democratic theorists or reflected in attempts to reform democratic practice. This region was charted by the ancient Athenians and has begun to be mapped more systematically in recent years. Call it participatory democracy, or deliberative democracy. Its defining features are, roughly, these: active participation by a broad range of citizens, a deliberative and at times contentious process of problem solving and decision making, a process that is seen as transforming the individual citizens' civic capacity but preserving their individuality. My own study of the origins of democratic theory in Athens, and my attempts to expand the scope of public participation in local governance, had led me into this territory.

Thirteen weeks after our initial meeting, eighteen people reflected on what we had been through. Their remarks suggest that they too had glimpsed hitherto unfamiliar but appealing democratic terrain:

- "I think it's rare to find oneself in a setting with people who live their lives in a different place in this culture. I don't normally find myself in

settings where people have views and experiences that are so totally different from my own. And people who are in the world of business or academia or the judiciary. I think that one of the things that is peculiar, in a way, about this democracy is the extent to which we all do tend to hang out with people who are like ourselves."

- "There's a certain awe and wonder you get when you sit in a large group of people and discuss in an academic context intensely personal ideas and approaches. Because it really forces you to bring more out than you might otherwise."
- "Before the class started, if you had asked me my thoughts about democracy, I probably would have answered in exclusively political terms. And because of the nature of the class, I would hardly exclude the political, but I now think of it as a much more complex mosaic and I can appreciate the fact that democracy has a lot to do with the way that we think and the way that we live, apart from the way that we vote."
- "A lot of my experience with people who disagreed with me politically, or with whom I disagreed politically, was of a nasty contention. And to see that you could do this and if you did it right, you would still be civil to each other and reach some sort of mutual understanding while perhaps not agreeing, but nonetheless, some sort of civility. It was encouraging. And it has made me think very seriously about running for office."
- "I, who am thirteenth generation in the U.S., have always considered myself a persecuted underdog as a woman. And it seems really odd to other people. But I now see people who feel like underdogs in different kinds of ways, and I think that's what I will take forward."
- "The effect of severing these ties that we have with constituencies we normally represent is that we were able to create a little political community in which we were all created equal. While outside of this room, we are really unequal in social status and wealth and ability, age, other variables. So this was sort of an ideal of citizenship, in which people come together and leave aside their constituencies or the social position they represent and are able to interact with each other as equals."
- "I think one of the other things that made this group successful is that it's not only that there's a defined amount of time and structure and an ending point and sort of an abstractness, but also that we all made a commitment to be here. Even when we disagreed, we got to know who the personalities were and how the discussion went and how people interact with each other and how to talk and not talk and listen, and feel part of this group. And knowing that the same faces would be there each time."

The democratic meaning of what we came to think of as Dinner with Democracy rests not primarily in what people said about each week's topic—though what they said was shrewd, thoughtful, and enlightening—but in what they did together and what the experience did to them. This structured, extended, and challenging discourse among a diverse group of individuals offers a glimpse of an aspect of democratic citizenship not comprehended—indeed, sidelined—by most theories, and many practices, of democracy. Some forms of political theory are concerned with abstract questions of legitimacy (and some political theorists of this kind do invoke ideals of collective civic deliberation to make their case). Another kind of political theory considers the actual activity of political communities—which is my concern here—but tends to ignore the as-yet-unrealized potential for different forms of political engagement.

Interpreters of democracy often frame their analysis in terms of contrasting extremes. Discussions of democratic governance offer two alternatives: (1) reliance on the modern structures of the bureaucratic state, overseen to some degree by a system of representative government said to reflect the will of the people; (2) partly in response to the detachment of the administrative model from popular influence, direct involvement by the people in decision making, through a system of initiatives and referendums. Left off the spectrum is the possibility of regular, ongoing, and direct participation of the people in a governance system that requires collective deliberation and a process of mutual political education, not just the casting of individual votes for either a candidate or a proposal.

Discussions of the relationship between individual and society in a democratic context also offer two alternatives: (1) extreme individualism (libertarianism or assimilation of political processes to the workings of the market); (2) partly in response to the perceived excesses of democratic capitalism, an appeal to community solidarity, to the shaping of individual preferences and values through identification with a group. The invocation of community carries the risk of repressing individuality. Left off the spectrum in this second contrast is the possibility of substantive political engagement with others who are not part of a "natural" group, but who are fellow citizens different in other respects from oneself. From this perspective, citizens are neither members of a tribe nor consumers; what they have in common is citizenship, and they engage in constant renegotiation of the inevitable tensions between public goods and private interests, community and individual.

In both cases, what is missing is recognition of the power of structured engagement among political equals, which not only permits them to express and aggregate existing preferences, but also transforms their

understanding of and capacity to contribute to civic decision making. The participants in Dinner with Democracy did not in any meaningful sense "choose" what occurred. They agreed to join a process and to be open to the possibility of being transformed by it. The structure of the discussions worked on them. They attended, perhaps, because each in his or her own way had an intuition that however rich their lives, however active their involvement in civic affairs (and they were unusual in their civic commitments, from coaching youth baseball to running a program for ex-cons to serving on every significant nonprofit board in New Haven), some important elements were missing: exposure to people different from themselves, the opportunity to argue and articulate their views under challenge, a chance to reflect on the truths they held to be self-evident. They entered, and sustained, a genuinely "political" space of a kind that modern democracy tends to spurn or, at the very least, to corrode. . . .

Indeed, the conversation continually returned to fundamental questions of power: Is choice freedom? Is equality of opportunity really equality? Or are appeals to "choice" and "equality of opportunity"—at least at times—masks for the exercise of power and freedom by those with resources, and the disempowerment of those without? They wished not to challenge the basic commitment of American democracy to freedom and to equal opportunity, but rather to ask what those commitments yield in practice. The participants recognized that the market simultaneously promotes the general welfare and greater inequality, and that other practices considered essential to our democratic society have a comparable effect. Public education, they acknowledged, both diffuses knowledge among the general population and accelerates the advancement of the talented. What seemed important to many of the diners-with-democracy was the resulting increase in fragmentation and polarization. With respect to both wealth and knowledge, they argued that the greatest risk of investing in freedom of choice at the expense of commonness was isolating those left behind both economically, by technological advances, and physically, in concentrated pockets of rooted poverty and despair created by the choices made by others. . . .

The diners-with-democracy identified two characteristics of their own dinner discussions as the key to dealing with the tensions between liberty and equality inherent in democracy: exposure to difference; and a sense of commonness, initially contrived, and then forged. Their experience offers a distinctively political perspective on citizenship. That is, what the citizen-diners said and what they did suggested that it is essential to create a space within which the claims of the individual and society, of money and power and justice, can be explicitly addressed by those affect-

ed, treated as equal members. They intimated that a threshold level of resources and education is required for this. Yet they were skeptical that the operation of the existing political system could accomplish any of these ends. These citizens of New Haven and surrounding towns talked in detail about the ways in which politics, perhaps especially at the local level, had been corrupted:

- "[If you're running for office], you focus only on those people who are for you or leaning for you. Some of those people, after the first phone call, never hear again from a political person. And that's the way the system works today. And it's become more and more sanitized to the point where there isn't really an election anymore. It's who's got the most friends to come out to the polls."
- "How do decisions get made and who makes them? . . . It seems to me that the aspirations associated with the founding of this country had to do with the idea of no taxation without representation. And the idea that people should be able to have some degree of power over things that they care about, things connected to their own self-realizing activities. How many of us think that we have any power to affect things that matter to us?"
- "In my neighborhood, it was a policy of people to state that they had no intention of running for office. And they say that in order to develop a trust to get things done."
- "Periodically, in my twelve years in New Haven, people have asked me about whether or not I would run for mayor. And my response is, 'I am queen of my own bedroom, I am captain of my own tub, I am head of my own organization.' And the reason why I say that is because it's very, very hard not to be corrupted in the current political process. And you have to know that the pressure's going to be there and that's going to work against the very reason why you decided to run for political office or the very reason why you decided to participate in community activities anyway."
- "Last night I had to go in front of the Board of Aldermen to ask the mayor to put us in for $35,000 in the Community Development Block Grant allocation. . . . One of them says, 'Well, why should we give you this money?' By the end of five minutes, it dawned on me, they were talking about our money as if it was their money. It's not your money. I'm a representative of a community coming to the representatives of the people for a piece of the people's money to do people's work. Can you stop it? But this is the kind of thing that turns people off."

. . . Participants in Dinner with Democracy recognized that they were able to engage with each other as equals in part because they left their constituencies and pet projects at the door to the dining hall—and perhaps also precisely *because* they were not being asked to make decisions that would affect others. Members of the group dealt with each other openly and flexibly, as individuals rather than as "representatives" of any particular group or initiative. In a comment quoted earlier, another participant noted that "the effect of severing these ties that we have with constituencies we normally represent is that we were able to create a little political community in which we were all created equal." If they were to make decisions, they would have to take particular groups into account—to act as if they had been selected to represent some group or other, and to be accountable to them for the outcome. This would increase partisanship, inflexibility, a focus on particularist interests, perhaps. As one remarked, "It's a real luxury not to come to any conclusion." But he went on to draw an inference about reforming the way in which existing political structures function: "It's an argument for the point that there ought to be more times when we're not sitting down in a crisis, trying to come out with a conclusion because, then, maybe we'd be more prepared to listen to each other when it was important." . . .

. . . Democracy—alone among political systems—relies on the virtue but also the stubborn individuality of all of its citizens. Disorder is a risk; so is conformity. The challenge is to keep alive both quirkiness and solidarity, both equality and realization of man's individual potential. No system can deliver this result—though some make it easier, while others prevent it entirely. What is required, . . . is continual engagement, imagination, persuasion, openness. This can be accomplished only through the process of interaction between self and other, which is often too ragged and contingent, too much influenced by status and power, and too narrowly bounded, to serve democratic purposes. A more varied and rich and demanding fare—dinner with democracy as the table setting, perhaps—may be needed to sustain the democratic experiment.