

## DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS

Review of the State of American Democracy Conference, Oberlin, Ohio, November 15-17, 2017

By Herman Greene

Why would David W. Orr, one of the foremost ecologists in the country, decide late in his career that he needed to focus on democracy?

Perhaps the background for this decision is found in his book *Down to the Wire: Confronting Climate Collapse* (Oxford, 2009), where he wrote:

There is a considerable movement to green corporations, and that is all to the good. But only governments have the power to set the rules for the economy, enforce the law, levy taxes, ensure the fair distribution of income, protect the poor and future generations, cooperate with other nations, negotiate treaties, defend the public interest, and protect the rights of posterity. Errant governments can wage unnecessary wars, squander the national treasure and reputation, make disastrous environmental choices, and deregulate banks and financial institutions, with catastrophic results. In other words, we will rise or fall by what governments do or fail to do. The long emergency ahead will be the ultimate challenge to our political creativity, acumen, skill, wisdom and foresight. (Orr, *Down to the Wire*, 7-8)

Or maybe a reason can be found in *Dangerous Years: Climate Change, the Long Emergency, and the Way Forward* (Yale, 2016), where he wrote of three existential threats—nuclear weapons, climate change and ecological deterioration, and artificial intelligence—and how

each will require permanent vigilance and long-term governance of a kind that we can scarcely imagine. . . . No one knows whether democratic societies can develop the capacity and stamina to master the complex challenges of the long emergency. . . . For better or worse, our best hope is to resuscitate democracy. (*Dangerous Years*, 10-11)

No doubt, the 2016 US Presidential election and the Trump presidency weighed heavily on him. In his 2017 essay “Democracy and Climate Change” he wrote:

The rise of Donald Trump and the alt-right are not accidents, but rather a logical, if extreme, outcome of a half-century of neo-liberal economics and hard-right politics that energized a predictable undertow of fear, insecurity, resentment, and ignorance. We would do well to remember that history and understand how it grew into a force strong enough to threaten democracy, civic order, quite possibly world peace, and increase the already substantial possibility of rapid climate change.

So he acted because he realized that government is the essential actor in dealing with the existential threats to humanity and all of nature, and that in the US, and elsewhere, democracy

is in crisis and autocracy, fascism, populism, demagoguery, despotism, and oligarchy have entered or knock at the door.

Orr's gamble or wager (see "The Wager of Democracy," by David Orr in this issue) is that democracy is the best hope for the kind of effective long-term governance needed, but not this democracy, not the crippled democracy that exists in the United States today. So he set out to bring attention to democracy, to call leaders engaged in many fields and say to them, your field is important, but you must focus on democracy. This is the unavoidable issue for those who care about the future. And he raised a lot of money and held one national conference, and will hold three or four more, on the State of American Democracy.

I was fortunate to be able to attend the first conference held at Oberlin University in Ohio. This was an invitation-only event. David worked with Robert Kuttner of *The American Prospect* and others to bring together some of the most important social thinkers in the United States . . . journalists, political scientists, authors, social activists, economists, educators, constitutional lawyers, ecologists and others. Speakers included Tim Eagan, Jane Mayer, Diane Ravitch, Gus Speth, Pete Wehner, Pamela Karlan, Jonathan Alter, Thomas Edsall, Sabeel Rahman, Jessica Tuchman Matthews, Rev. William Barber, J.D. Vance, Terry Tempest Williams. See the complete list [here](#).

I don't know the exact number who attended. I would say around 300. We came from all walks of life, but all were engaged people who were concerned about our democratic government. We sat around tables and had times to converse among ourselves as well as listen to the speakers. We found ourselves in an unusual space, forty-eight hours of concentrating on one thing, the state of American democracy.

There were so many insights, I don't know where to begin. In our democracy 41% of registered voters didn't vote in 2016, especially the poor. The Electoral College favors voters in lightly populated states—the vote of a person in Wyoming weighs 3.6 times more than a vote cast by a Californian. Voter ID laws, permanent disenfranchisement of felons, closing of precincts and other means suppress votes. Gerrymandering favors voters of one party over those of another. A tiny percentage of voters provide the majority of contributions to campaigns. Much was presented that raised questions about to what extent we can call the United States a democracy.

Tim Eagan, a columnist for the *New York Times*, began the conference on a sober note. He said this is triage time for American democracy, very urgent, the problems go deep. Social and political norms are broken without consequences. Trump is a symptom not a cause. The United States has the lowest social class mobility of any advanced industrial country. People don't think they have a stake in the outcome of elections. Civic literacy receives little attention in schools. In a survey one in three young people could not name a single branch of government. Social media is the biggest purveyor of misinformation. False stories are planted by foreign agents. More voices don't make us better informed. Wild conspiracy theories gain credence on Info-Wars and other sites. Truth has been relativized. Legitimate professional media is being

delegitimized. How can democracy function without facts? Thoughtful content doesn't go viral. Voter ID laws have been passed in 34 states and they disproportionately affect the poor. Gerrymandering has become a science. By 2040, 70% of the US population will live in 15 states and they will elect only 30 out of 100 US Senators. One in six Americans would support military rule. Only 30% of millennials believe it is important to live in a democracy and 40% believe it is okay to regulate speech. Democracy in America is in a dark place.

Egan also said that people are fighting back. While he gave hopeful examples, his talk and that of other speakers left attendees in a very somber place.

We who say so lightly that we live in a democratic country were and are called to reflect. Is democracy important? Is it the best form of governance to take on the incredible challenges of the future? Can we make democracy work?

Democracy, like the other great challenges of our time, presents wicked issues. There is no simple key to strengthening the state of American democracy. What this conference did and what the future conferences will do is to immerse thoughtful caring people in the reality and question of democracy and give them handholds on the issues we face. We who want to focus on ecology or race or poverty or justice or any of a thousand other things were and are called to care about and for democracy.