Preface

Turn-of-the-century America was supposedly a place of widespread skepticism, cynicism, and disillusionment about government and about the possibilities for democratic input. We went out to live for a year in several communities spread across one state of the United States to see if local democracy was in fact in trouble and if so, why. The specific questions we asked are still at the center of debates across the United States: Who is being excluded from a putatively imperfect democracy? Which issues are being settled behind closed doors? How can we account for the current limitations of U.S. democracy, and how do we create remedies that ensure more meaningful participation by a greater range of people? What are the ethical imperatives and sources of democratic hope that continue to spur some residents to undertake political action in the new millennium?

Local democracy has contended with distinctive and sometimes formidable new social, political, and economic conditions over the last three decades. Various changes, often called “globalization,” have shaped people’s jobs and affected where they work and live. These “post-Fordist” changes in corporate flexibility and reorganization include downsizing, outsourcing, deindustrialization, the emergence of the service economy, the rise of factory farming and decline of the independent family farm, and increased domestic and transnational migration in response to changing U.S. labor markets.¹

When we began the project in the late 1990s, we suspected that these economic changes were relevant to claims by pollsters and media pundits about “apathetic” and “angry” voters, though we saw such claims as superficial at best, uninformative or misleading at worst. It seemed plausible that reactions by people to these vast social and economic transformations could include as well the scapegoating of minorities and immigrants by the victims of downsizing; new forms of apolitical consumerism; middle-class withdrawal from participation arising from preoccupations with work and time; the functional disenfranchisement of large numbers of workers due to economic duress; and anxieties generated by the presence of new migrants, including mobile professionals, transnational labor migrants, retirees, and tourists.

Rapid political change has also altered the conditions for local democratic participation. Privatization and devolution of social services to state and local municipalities—initially associated with the Reagan/Bush/Gingrich “revolution of government” of the 1980s and early 1990s—have affected the way government itself works and prompted fairly dramatic changes in the way public monies have been allocated. For example, relatively less is spent on schools
and more on speculative economic development projects, less on pollution control and more on prisons. The role of government has been radically questioned, as has the definition of public resources and, indeed, whether a public sector should exist at all.

The institutional changes wrought by this “revolution” and the economic transformations just mentioned have been joined by the rise of neoliberalism—briefly, the idea that the market offers the best solutions to social problems and that governments’ attempted solutions, in contrast, are inefficient and antithetical to the value of freedom. Together these processes—privatization, devolution, and neoliberalism—have constituted what we call “market rule.” Market rule is an experiment of grand proportions that has fundamentally shifted the meaning of American democracy in the late twentieth century, as we observed it being played out in the five communities we studied in North Carolina.

As all this begins to suggest, there is not one simple story about the changing shape of democracy. Thirty-five years of dramatic economic change have affected communities across the country in very different ways. Some have experienced an influx of new capital; others have undergone deindustrialization or the reorientation of production, as with new forms of agribusiness. Some have experienced in-migration of retirees, labor from Central America, or high-tech workers from other regions. Others have experienced depopulation.

In virtually all areas, there is a widening gap between the rich and poor. This gap not only threatens the principles of equality and fairness in life chances but also creates a democracy gap as well as an ethical challenge to those who profit from a diminished government.

This study illustrates the value of a comparative anthropological approach to U.S. politics, the study of which has been dominated by a narrow definition of democratic political participation as voting, political party membership, and financial contributions to candidates. By following up with participants to the disputes, we learned about local activism, and we eventually came to agree with theorists of democracy who argue that, under current conditions, such activist associations are the best hope for revitalizing democracy in America.

Collaboration

We should say a bit about the more unusual aspects of researching and writing this book. It results from a unique collaborative, comparative, ethnographic research project. Ethnography is a research method that involves living with and listening to people as they make their daily lives. We observed public meetings of all sorts, listening as people spoke about local issues with
each other at bus shelters and barber shops, at soccer games and workplaces, at government meetings and in their homes. We had informal conversations and formal interviews with people who participated in the publicly aired disagreements that we studied. We attended school board, city council, and other meetings. We watched the way people were welcomed or not welcomed into debates on issues to be decided. And we listened to people tell their political autobiographies and reflect on their relationship to democracy and the powerful challenges history has presented to them and their communities. All told, the book, which was written through a collaborative process among all the authors, reports on almost five years of ethnographic field research.

Survey research based on a priori questions and categories and media pronouncements have often been constrained sources of orthodoxy on democracy’s problems. Ethnography’s value is that it allows us to understand how diverse members of a community—not just the elites and better-off residents whom journalists and other social scientists mainly interview—think and live; it allows the extensive ideas and modes of living of the people we met to challenge prevailing understandings. Further, an ethnography of local politics redefines the meaning of the political, discovering how people seek to achieve the public good not only in one way—such as in voting—but in many ways.3

We met the challenge of doing ethnography across many sites by meeting extensively before, during, and after conducting a year’s fieldwork in each of the five communities. Finally, over several months of intense discussions, we came to agree that the book reporting our findings should be organized by a number of themes, which extend like braided strands across and through different chapters to weave, as it were, our larger argument. Each multisited and comparative chapter therefore treats a theme on local democracy and its variations. In organizing our book this way, we have resisted a common temptation among anthropologists to structure the book sequentially by site, as would a cultural gazetteer touring from one community to another.4

The outcome, we hope, is not simply to defamiliarize the familiar but to focus on the intimate processes of local democracy as experienced by the people we met, and to discover the implications for American democracy as a whole.

Our research opens wider the debate about democracy, asking questions scholars have not adequately explored regarding how contemporary political, economic, and cultural processes have changed the conditions for political participation. The new conditions are arguably more open, providing some space for vitally expanding democracy through what Fung and Wright call “empowered participatory governance,” but input and inclusivity are not guaranteed.5 Instead, effort is necessary to nurture the development of more participatory
forms, identify and address the needs of underserved populations, and ensure inclusion in decision-making processes.

It seems crucial, as our government putatively works to bring democracy overseas, to examine our democracy and ask whether it has been downsized or diminished at home and, if so, how we might cultivate its renewal. What difference would it make in people’s lives were local democracy to become a reality here? The people we spoke with across one state told us very clearly.