

Dreams of Belonging / Sueños de Pertenencia: The Day Laborer Theater's Democracy Project in Los Angeles

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There is a startling moment in one of the interviews that the ensemble members of Teatro Jornalero Sin Fronteras recorded in fall of 2011 when they asked dayworkers their thoughts on the meaning of democracy.

A man approximately mid-40s, soft-spoken, sporting an unkempt mustache and wearing a dark winter jacket shakes his head slightly, insinuates a faint smile and staring directly at the camera says matter-of-factly: "*There is no democracy in the United States.*"

We can hear the interviewer, dayworker and theater leader Lorena Moran, react to the unexpected statement with an earnest follow-up question: "*why do you say that?*"

The man says: "*because they see us, but they don't recognize us.*" He is quiet for a few seconds and then adds: "*us, the dayworkers.*"

It is not difficult to understand why anyone listening to this man's assessment of democracy in the USA may find his words disorienting. Democracy –or at least the absolute belief in its positive attributes-- is one of the few sacred truths that unite most Americans. Commonplace discussions about democracy in this society tend not to be controversial; it is a subject most people already agree upon, even if they belong to different political parties or interest groups.

Conversations about democracy usually include a few bullet-proof postulates:

- (1) it is good to live in a democracy;
- (2) in a democracy all persons are equal;
- (3) as a democratic country, in the United States there's freedom of expression;
- (4) in the U.S., voters can choose any candidate they prefer;
- (5) democracy is the American way of life;
- (6) democracy is the most valuable asset that the U.S possesses;
- (7) the U.S. has a moral responsibility to protect democracy around the globe.

The story of immigrants in America has also been largely told in relation to the same core beliefs. Americans by and large tend to uphold with respect people who come to this country seeking "freedom" and "liberty" as it is often thought that these motivations for migrating are of a deeper spiritual and moral value than economic improvement. Seeking "freedom from persecution," for example, is legitimate ground for seeking asylum in the U.S. –but the interpretation of what constitutes "persecution" is mostly confined to classic ideas of free expression and political representation. It is not

a concept necessarily tied to losses of jobs, devastation of rural economies, or deprived social conditions.

The research and creative project that Teatro Jornalero launched among day laborers in Los Angeles in 2011 successfully digs past the surface of commonly held beliefs about democracy to offer intriguing and profound revelations about other meanings of the term worth considering.

We are confronted in these interviews with a simple paradox: as democracy is something that most Americans take for granted, it falls to those who feel outside of the mainstream American dream to most intensely engage in debating, dissecting, and appropriating what is allegedly the foundational concept that makes us this nation.

Occupying in society a position of greater risk, vulnerability, and invisibility, it is perhaps not surprising that all the day laborers interviewed expressed a great deal of thoughtfulness and complexity about the subject of democracy. Day laborers can't afford the luxury of treating democracy only as background for living: it is a concept that they link directly to their ability to stay in this country, earn a living, and dream of stability and "progress" for their families.

This particular "outsider" sense that day laborers bring to their thinking on democracy exposes a sense of tension inherent to democracy that more generic discussions tend to skew.

For example: when the man interviewed says that "*there is no democracy in the United States*" he is actually invoking a long-line of philosophical inquiry that posits that any true sense of democracy begins with "recognition." He is contrasting a static **condition** (being seen) with an active **position** (being recognized).

In classic political theory, recognition --of a legal and moral type-- forms the basis for being counted, for voting, for demanding that rights be respected, for being able to express grievances against the government, and confronting one's accuser, and other basic principles of democratic systems of governance and law and order. In other words, it is *the activation of rights* (being recognized) that makes democracy meaningful.

Without "recognition" a person is just a shadow that moves in the night; he or she might be here (be seen), but presence alone is a poor substitute for respect. Through "recognition" a human being is awarded his "day in court" or is able to argue in daylight for his or her worth as a human being. For most of the day laborers interviewed, this movement from shadow to light was their most heartfelt aspiration in America: "*tener las mismas garantías que todos los ciudadanos*" (to have the same guarantees that all citizens have), said another man.

This aspiration is explicitly stated throughout the interviews as a desire to see a comprehensive federal immigration reform enacted. Such reform will ideally attend to

two distinct experiences of day laborer's migration: one, legislation that will establish a path for legal standing ("papeles" or documents) for those whose lives *are already established here* through multiple entanglements of family, jobs, education, language, and culture. Secondly, the legislation would facilitate a mechanism of transnational labor exchange wherein workers could come and go seasonally or according to the basic laws of labor supply and demand (what already happens informally).

When asked the question: "*If you determined that there was more or better democracy in your country of origin, would you return?*" day laborers gave the kinds of mixed answers that sociologists tell us would be expected from a community splintered along lines of social class, migration patterns, and length of time in the U.S.

One man said: "*Claro que sí, es mi tierra*" (Yes, of course, that's my homeland). Another man simply replied: "I don't think so." Yet another day laborer spoke for many when he paused, pursed his lips and said: "*Ahí sí está un poquito complicado*" (now there, you see, that gets to be a little complicated).

Another theme that surfaced prominently in the interviews was the question of worth ---how worth is determined in society and by whom. In this instance, too, the viewpoints of day laborers reveal a long-standing philosophical debate that hardly ever comes up in more superficial uses of the word democracy. One commonplace point of contention in debates about illegal immigration highlights this important split in the interpretation of democracy. On one hand, there is an assumption about legality that states that it is the blanket condition of democracy (those who are legal have rights, those who don't have obligations). In this mode of thinking, the status of "illegality" (having broken the laws of immigration) therefore invalidates any aspiration or claim to democratic benefits.

On the other hand, in the minds of most day laborers' who participated in the Teatro Jornalero project, productivity (labor power) must weight considerably when determining how the worth of a human being (legal or illegal standing) gets accounted for in democracy. Being here is one thing; how one arrived here is another; but more important than either being here or arriving is *what one does* once here.

"At a social level, until we have a document that can testify to the worth we have, we are nothing...until then, people will not see us as a hard-working people, as the labor force that we are," said one day laborer interviewed. The same man who spoke about "no democracy" said later during his interview: "They want our labor, they employ us, they take advantage of our irregular status, but they don't want to recognize us as human beings...never mind being recognized as legal or undocumented, I'm talking about being recognized just as human beings that we are."

The cumulative meaning of democracy that emerges from these insightful interviews, despite the obvious anguished realities, is one centered on action. The characteristic passivity that has been documented among regular American voters seems far away from the reality of these workers' lives. Most of them exalt "*el derecho*

de ser escuchado" (the right to be heard) as one of the benchmarks of the American democratic experience that they find most hopeful.

But there's also a hardnosed pragmatism in their points of view that cuts to the chase of what makes *any* democracy thrive: actions matter more than words. The ethic employed to measure an action, a system of government, a personal lifestyle as democratic or not should be expressed as practice, not rhetoric.

As one day laborer said in closing during his interview:

"La democracia la hacemos nosotros mismos con nuestras acciones diarias; no necesitamos una imagen ni un partido político para tratar a los demás como queremos que nos traten a nosotros."

(We are the ones who make democracy work with our everyday actions; we don't need an image or a political party to treat others as we wished to be treated).