

EITHER OR

After more than half a century there are still many things about the United States, now my country, that I don't understand. I first came to this country in January of 1950, knowing almost nothing about America other than that the streets were paved with gold. At the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, the professor who was my advisor gave me a long lecture about the United States. *America is the only democracy in the world*, he said. I did not respond but he must have seen my expression of unbelief, because he added, *Democracy is a two-party system. What they have in Europe with hundreds of parties is not democracy*. When I said something about the Netherlands having elections and calling itself a democracy, he said with scorn, *You have a Queen, don't you?* That clinched the argument for him. Nine years later I became a citizen of this country (immigration laws changed every half year at that time, it seemed to me). I could vote but most of the time I did not understand what either party stood for; I liked some of what this party said and something else of what the other party said. I rarely voted at all in national elections. I lost interest in politics. It seemed to me that there were politicians whose views could fit in either party, until more recently, now the difference is of course obvious.

Looking back I still wonder about this two-party system. I've read the Constitution; there is nothing that forbids a third or fourth party that I could find. I remember a few brave people who ran for president representing a third party. They rarely got more than four or five percent of the votes and usually those votes were lost from the Democrats. A politician friend told me that *"technically we are not a democracy but a republic."* So is France, Germany. Aren't they?

In the year 2009 it is all too obvious that We the people are not ruling this democracy. Both Houses of Congress have fought viciously, ignoring, and not the least concerned about what all the polls said "we" want. The Republicans obviously are disciplined, vote as a block (bloc?). They announced without shame that they would vote against anything and everything this president proposes. The number of Republican voters I read somewhere is actually a small proportion of all registered voters, but Senators of small States, representing an even smaller percentage of the population of the country, have enormous power through a strange rule that says the Senate needs 60 votes to pass a Bill. If there are less than 60 votes the Republicans will filibuster. Does that mean a filibuster cancels the vote, or holds it up? What if there are, say, 59 votes for the passage of a Bill, and the Senators just let the other party filibuster for a few days, a week,

and then... pass a Bill with 59 or even 51 votes. My dictionary gives two meanings for filibuster: 1 an action such as a prolonged speech that obstructs progress in a legislative assembly while not technically contravening the required procedures; 2 historical a person engaging in unauthorized warfare against a foreign country. And that is democracy? The 2000 election revealed another strange aspect of this democracy when after much confusion, recounts, in the end the popular vote count counted for less than how many "electors" a candidate can acquire, and in the end the "winner" was declared by a five to four vote in the Supreme Court. This year another aspect of our democracy showed itself overwhelmingly important: the lobbies who can "buy" our representatives by what cannot be other than bribes. In countries we look down upon buying votes is called corruption, here it is lobbying. And apparently nobody thinks it strange that most of the lobbyists once were working in Congress, or perhaps the other way around. Who or what is actually ruling this country?

Probably all governments are flawed one way or another, but for a country that thinks of itself as the richest, most powerful, most democratic in the world, the flaws are too obvious and too visible. What I don't understand is that nobody seems to worry much about it. Not the Media of course, but We the people don't seem to care either.

Maybe We the people are so confused about all the different voices yelling at us that we've given up on politics. I have noticed that in national elections usually only slightly more than half of registered voters vote.

This year there are liberal Democrats, Blue Dog Democrats, Centrist Democrats, not easily put into what is here called left and right. (What here is called left is closer to right of most western European countries, and our right is considered extreme off the board right in Europe). And, another unique aspect of American politics, here the hottest issues are "pro choice" or "pro life," gay marriage, and that dirty word "abortion," issues that in almost all other countries are not considered the stuff of politics. Is it any wonder that foreigners who know we pride ourselves on having "Separation of Church and State" are confused? If the Constitution declares that Church and State are to be separate how do moral, or religious issues get into politics?

Then add lobbies that represent corporations, or the interests of foreign countries, does that make a democracy run by and for the people?

Within the Republican party there is a visible difference between extreme right which is also extreme Christian, and not so extreme right, ordinary Christian, sometimes even moderate. I imagine that most if not all Republicans are for capitalism, which they call a free market (including our right to control the world market) and the only function of government is war.

Democrats on the whole also seem to be capitalist. At least they seem to accept the inevitability of capitalism. But some Democrats also believe that government may have something to do with caring for people. And most Democrats also seem to be for war, any war, anywhere.

This two party system is never mentioned, never questioned, but obviously considered essential, set in concrete. And it also makes every discussion a war. In countries where another kind of democracy allows many parties, every issue, every consideration is often a loud and wordy process of making compromises which end with three parties for and seven against, and another two neutral.

Now I'm beginning to understand that Representatives do not consider themselves to represent We the People, but the economic interests in their State. They vote in order to get money for road repair, or a factory, or a prison. From my point of view their votes too often seem to be motivated by their local economy, not the well being of people. I used to think that democracy is about people. No?

If we had more parties we could be honest: one party that is Christian, another for Capitalism, another for the People, another Anti-War, another for Empire. Or even a party for women, another for Catholics. It is easy to see how different coalitions between these kind of parties could be made for different issues.

But evidently that is not possible here. We are an ironclad two party land.

It is obvious that I do not understand this democracy and that my own values do not sync with the values or motivations of politicians. I do understand the major issues, but I cannot understand how anyone could object to, for instance, regulation of banking, or a real reform of what is misnamed the health care system—the existing system is not health, but medical care, focused on the high end, high tech end of medical care, that is why it is so expensive. I know something about health, I was professor of Public Health for many years. It seems to me that the Bill(s) now struggling through Congress may well be worse than what we have now. I understand most of it will not go into effect anyway until four years from now. That means it will give the Health industries four years to

really stuff their coffers. And in those four years what would prevent the health industry to raise costs every six months? Within the four years our present system probably will run aground. Whatever must be done when it all implodes will cost an awful lot more than a real health care reform would have cost today. But capitalism rules this nation with an iron fist.

Then there is Climate Change. The consequences of not doing much of anything about our burning coal and oil at an ever increasing rate will be so serious that it will bankrupt us in the foreseeable (near) future. Yet it is also very American not to be able to think ahead more than a few months. Our economy is more important than global warming, I remember Mr. Bush saying. Maybe for many people it is more important to feel good than to worry... I keep thinking about the world my grandchildren will inherit.

I am ignorant, of course, but I cannot help but see a seriously flawed political system, now virtually in the hands of big banks, big pharma, health insurance, medical equipment companies, big food and agriculture corporations, and of course big oil, coal and gas — and all that should be in caps of course. The big corporations have bought Congress, and perhaps the other branches of government as well. Where does that leave “we the people?”

Someone enlighten me?

You can email me bukanaku at me dot com.

robert wolff, the last days of december 2009

