THE FUTURE OF TELEDEMOCRACY

Ted Becker, Christa Daryl Slaton
The Future of Teledemocracy
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The Future of Teledemocracy

Ted Becker and Christa Daryl Slaton
To our Nordic colleagues

Auli, Marcus, Tomas

for their inspiration, support, and friendship throughout the years
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This book began for us in January 1977 at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu. It was the first meeting of a graduate course Ted Becker was teaching for the first (and only) time, with the odd title of "Unconventional Politics of the Future." One of the graduate students in that seminar was Christa Daryl Slaton.

The required texts for the course were Becker's two most recently published books (both of 1976 vintage). Each of them was heavily larded with harsh critiques of American representative democracy. Each prescribed inventive democratic remedies: US Americard—voting by credit card—and The Random House—a randomly selected legislature.

The students grappled with the critical analysis of "the system" and imagined and evaluated novel solutions. At the conclusion of the class, however, most continued on in mainstream political activities, for example, law school, or the military. Only one chose to explore more fully "the unconventional politics of the future." Thus was born a partnership of personal political perspectives and positions that has persisted to this point in time. What began as a heady academic exercise became a fused odyssey into what has truly been, and remains to this day, "the unconventional politics of the future."

It has been a wild and woolly adventure for the two of us. We have found some true blue allies along the way. We have also joined some collaborations of convenience and made compromises to achieve some of our goals. We have been foiled at times by those who opposed our ideology and had the means to halt our experiments.

If we had to add up all the wins, losses, and ties, we think we come out on the plus side. After all, here we are in the year 2000 publishing
our first book together, one that not only describes a series of real gains over the past 23 years, but how we intend to keep at it into the indefinite future.

In addition, some of what we simply imagined in 1977 are now recognizable as new but practical innovations in democratic governance. For example, “scientific deliberative polling” is not yet a “conventional” form of citizen participation, but it exists in several forms, has proved its merit, and continues to expand and be incorporated into actual politics. While voting from the home electronically may not be conventional yet, is there any doubt it will be an option in the near future?

So this book of ours is a major milestone for us. It proves to us that we were not really as beyond-the-pale as some of our colleagues and acquaintances thought we were at the outset and throughout our mutual journey. Maybe we were “slightly ahead of our time,” but the times they are a changin’. After all, this book is not just about us; it is about a growing political movement that includes a lot of acclaimed people, all of whom have accomplished great things.

As we have compelled ourselves to relive this sojourn by writing this book, it has made us recapture the excitement of the discoveries and the warmth of the collaborations we have enjoyed over the years. But the best part of it is that there will be, inevitably, more unconventional politics in the future; new discoveries to be made; old alliances renewed; and new coalitions and projects tomorrow.

*The Future of Teledemocracy* is not just another book to us. It has been a way of life since we first met. And it will continue to be the beacon that draws us together into whatever will come.
As we take a quantum leap into the 21st century and envision the future of teledemocracy, we need to break free from the theoretical bondage that has defined and constrained democracy in the last few centuries. Representative democracy, which emerged from the Enlightenment, along with the revelations in scientific thinking, reached its peak in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Throughout the 20th century, demands and movements for more direct democracy have become increasingly successful in the United States. Struggles for greater economic equality have transformed political systems throughout Europe. Also during the 20th century representative democracy has been on the decline wherever it is in use. Public trust in such government is at an all-time low in the United States and on a downward slope elsewhere.

This high level of dissatisfaction is not only due to unresponsive and out-of-touch political leaders. It is, importantly, the result of the level of frustration that comes from trying to fit new knowledge and new technologies into an outdated political system, one that evolved from the theory, knowledge, and technologies of more than three centuries ago. Although the printing press and new scientific inventions, such as the telescope, greatly expanded knowledge and access to information, the world remained dominated by illiteracy, enormous discrepancies between rich and poor, transportation by boat and horse and buggy, and communication systems that took days, weeks, or even months to traverse from one person to another. At the dawn of the new millennium, however, we have instant communication, rapid transportation, and extensive education, coupled with a tottering, doddering, unresponsive representative democracy.
We will demonstrate in Part I that we are experiencing the dawn of a paradigm shift, the rise of a new worldview. During the Enlightenment, the world experienced revolutionary changes in religion, science, and government that were all connected to how we understood the world, how we studied phenomena, and how we gained new knowledge. Luther, Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, Bacon, Newton, Hobbes, and Locke all shared a worldview that embraced reason, logic, scientific method, certainty, and cause-and-effect determinism. The political philosophers of that time were heavily influenced by the scientific method developed in the natural sciences—so much so that liberalism, the philosophy that underlies representative democracy, has been referred to as “Newtonian politics” (Landau 1961; Barber 1984; Becker 1991; Slaton 1992).

That was then. This is now. A new revolution in the natural science world has preceded many of the dramatic contemporary changes in transportation and information and communications technologies, or ICT. Quantum physics, which arose out of investigations into the microscopic world, uncovered many of the limitations of Newtonian physics and some of the fallacies of universally accepted laws of the natural universe. These new discoveries generated new hypotheses, which produced even greater discoveries and innovation.

Part I examines the relationship between the political theories, institutions, and practices that emerge from a Newtonian paradigm and those that emanate from a paradigm that incorporates aspects of Newtonian thought as well as quantum thinking and chaos theory. As Thomas Kuhn asserted, all paradigms become outdated and ineffective after a time. On the one hand, paradigms are enormously useful because they help us focus our research and give us a common language and method of study. On the other hand, they limit our understanding and our vision because they box us in. Paradigms are useful only as long as they continue to generate new hypotheses and answer more questions. They become obsolete when we become stymied in seeking answers and solutions to unresolved questions and problems.

This became abundantly clear in the natural science world several decades ago. We are asserting in this book that it has now become obvious in the social science world—and more specifically, the political science world—that the prevailing paradigm or worldview, rooted firmly in Enlightenment thought, has trapped us and prevented us from exploring new and higher ground. Chapter 1 will discuss the emergence and components of the New Democratic Paradigm, one that incorporates new ICTs that lead to a transformation of representative democracy into new forms of teledemocracy. Writings of early teledemocratic visionaries like Buckminster Fuller, Eric Fromm, Hazel Henderson, and Amitai Etzioni will be examined to demonstrate the application of ICT in creating a more direct and participatory form of democracy. The chapter will con-
clude with a discussion of how the New Democratic Paradigm is post-Newtonian and offers the theoretical basis for new forms, types, and styles of democracy in the future.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that there has been an enduring relationship between physics and political theory. The problem with modern political theory is that it remains unconsciously and uncritically tied to Newtonian physics and fails to consider the value in new political theories emerging out of the new physics. The chapter explores how quantum theory has been applied in both nongovernmental arenas as well as in politics and calls for a new political science and a New Democratic Paradigm based on the principles of chaos theory, quantum theory, and social energy.

Any structure made by humans—when built on an unstable, incomplete foundation—weakens over time. When extra stress is placed on it, the weaknesses produce unnerving tremors and frightening noises throughout the superstructure. Until the deeper problem is understood, no number of repairmen on the roof, in the attic, and in the kitchen will reduce the vibrating and deterioration of the base. What is needed is a radical reinforcement of the foundation—a correction of the underlying theory of all our social, economic, and political structures. Part I will begin to do that for the rickety political house in which we live—representative democracy.
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A few years back, Francis Fukuyama attracted a lot of serious attention from a wide variety of "experts" on world affairs by trumpeting no less than that the "end of history" was at hand (Fukuyama 1989). According to this viewpoint, the sudden implosion of the Communist house of cards (at least the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist model) meant that there were no more crucial political-economic battles to be waged, now and forever. Representative democracy and global corporate capitalism would be gloriously triumphant forever after.

Actually, this proclamation was equally fatuous to the one made earlier in the 20th century proclaiming the death of God. If this announcement of the end of political evolution were true, and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow were relegated to nonideological squabbling, then the future would indeed be placid and subject only to mundane and dreary projects in social engineering. In Fukuyama's own words,

The end of history will be a sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldview ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technological problems, environmental concerns and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. (Fukuyama 1989, 18)

But if that is so and modern hybrids of representative democracy and the new global corporate order have sated all basic human needs and
yearnings, then what accounts for the continuing military build-ups, the escalating fear of terrorism, the fall of conservative governments in Europe, the upswing in religious/political fundamentalism, and the swelling alienation of citizenries? Why all the trepidation, travail, and trembling over what the future holds for today’s young and restless and for generations unborn? Why are there not jubilant celebrations throughout the world and the giddiness of victory? The reason is obvious: the truly enduring ideological vortex continues to rotate, with wide swaths of material, psychological, emotional, and spiritual destruction in its path and wake.

So, what is the internal and infernal dynamic of this eternal philosophical storm? It is the perennial and perpetual conflict between the powerful and the powerless, the have-lots and have-nots, masculine self-ordination and feminine subordination, the help-themselves and the helpless. In political-scientific terms, it is the millennia-tested war over a fairer distribution of the authoritative allocation of values and consequently a fairer deal of goods, goodies, and goodwill in every society that has ever graced this Earth. Surely the death or dearth of Soviet-style communism in the 1990s has not even begun to terminate this ageless contest—and it cannot, for it turns out to be the disappearance of only the latest superficial symptom of the disease.

Our global situation at the dawning of the third millennium is a much prettier picture than it was when the sun rose on the second millennium. But it is more like the portrait of Dorian Gray: Many governments are warring with segments of their own population; there are still deep class antagonisms everywhere; billions work and toil in poverty while a few hundred billionaires live in obscene luxury; and humankind still shamelessly exploits its sustainable natural environment. Indeed, the number and intensity of antagonisms among ethnic groups, races, classes, and nations is not much less acute and chronic today than eons ago. Thus, grave concerns remain, such as:

- the rapidly warming condition of planet Earth and the vanishing of many of its natural resources;
- the increasing domination of so-called representative governments by tiny cliques of economically powerful and well-organized interests who are, by and large, sexist, racist, and Social Darwinists at heart;
- the astronomical national debts run up by fighting the Cold War, arming the Third World, and pursuing the chimera of some “new world order” run by an imperious global oligarchy and accountable global bureaucracy;
• the nagging sense of isolation and despair among youth everywhere concerning what meaning and value, if any, life holds for them;
• the incapacity of people at community, local, state, provincial, national, and international levels to collaborate on solutions to these and other life-threatening maladies.

So here we are at the third millennium and 21st century, facing uniquely menacing dilemmas. Technological leaps in the past few years have truly converted our universe into a "global marketplace"—where we are a remote-control zap away from everyone else's tragedies, grudges, neuroses, xenophobia, vendettas, and dirty laundry. New high-tech gadgets have provided fabulous luxuries, dizzying speed, unconscionable indulgences, fantastic conveniences, and instantaneous access to oceans of information. But not only have they not assuaged the severe situations that confront us now and will in the immediate future, they have instead compounded them and confounded us. How can we be so brilliant and retarded at the same time?

Still, we see some encouraging signs as well, portents of a better world and enlightened transformations—a political-economic synthesis that will permit America and the rest of the world to cooperate on latent solutions rather than bicker endlessly over patent problems. One of the most promising, from our point of view, is what we discern as the most recent widespread and strongest democratic quantum leap ever in the history of humankind.

From our vantage point, then, Fukuyama was dead wrong. The ancient and future ideological wrangling—democracy vs. oligarchy + hierarchy—is far from over. It perseveres with its antagonists as deeply divided as ever. Those of us on the side of a purer, future democracy see this form of governance holding many solutions to most of the aforementioned threats to human viability. Indeed, we hold this truth to be self-evident: The present and future ideological struggle will be over the emergence and growth of new forms of democracy—particularly more direct democratic mutations at all levels of governance—that integrate the new information and communications technologies (ICT), what we coined as "teledemocracy" (Becker 1981).

FAITH IN DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS

We are not certain whether there is or is not a divine fortune cookie baked by God, Jahweh, Allah, or The Force that predicts a Frank Capra, Steven Spielberg, or Walt Disney happy ending for all humankind: everyone living harmoniously here, there, and foreverafter. Was Hegel right that destiny is the unfolding of a universal idea and that we are
unwitting and sometimes unwilling role players in a drama inspired by the seemingly fickle fantasies of fate? Perhaps. Are there enormous tsunamis of inevitable human progress that we catch on our minuscule surfboards—frequently getting wiped out in the tumbling turbulence? Maybe so. Is the world inexorably moving toward maximum violence and malevolence only to be rescued at the abyss by the Second Coming of the Messiah? Who really knows?

Our work does not focus on a comprehensive and ironclad theory of human destiny that drives our thinking and action. We are not historical, scientific, or biblical determinists. What we do have, though, is the Enlightenment's faith in some degree of continued improvement in the human condition throughout history, a forward movement that seems to us to be peculiarly embodied in and emboldened by the great American experiment. It seems to us that America became a haven for, and stimulant of, a new way of life in the New World for waves of religious, political, and economic refugees during the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. It provided a fresh and seemingly inexhaustible source of individual freedom, economic and social growth, and personal development. For most immigrants, the American dream, with its promise of personal liberty, was a revolutionary concept and it has been so from its inception.

But even before then, there were democratic developments among its Native American inhabitants—demonstrating how the rich soil, variable terrain, teeming wildlife, limitless resources, yawning expanse, and temperate climate of North America provided some necessary and sufficient conditions to conceive of and gestate some strong pulsations of democracy. One brilliant American historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, saw this in terms of how democracy was the most intelligent way to handle the challenges of the bedeviling and bewildering wilderness that confronted those who lived there: “American democracy was . . . not carried in the Susan Constant to Virginia nor in the Mayflower to Plymouth. It came out of the American forest, and it gained strength each time it touched a new frontier” (Beall 1993, 13A).

What we see, then, is one continent on this globe generating a series of impulses that contain the best way for humankind to work together, live together, grow together, and govern together. Experiments in democracy have long flourished in America—in some Native American tribes, along the Oregon Trail, in small towns, in the workplace, in utopian communities, in schools, in political movements, in communications. Some succeeded. Some failed. Some became indelibly etched in our collective psyche and soul. Some mildew in damp, dank crevices of long-forgotten history.

Sure, there have been (and will be) severe antidemocratic movements and fascistic episodes in American history as well. A universal penchant
for hypocrisy has accounted for much of that. Right from the start, those who sought freedom from religious persecutors became in their own right, self-righteous prosecutors. In addition, the despicable and indefensible institution of slavery was as antithetical and inimical to democracy in America as anything could be—and its bad karma continues to plague and cripple America's domestic health to this very day. What is more, in the 20th century alone, we have seen wholesale governmental and widespread private repression of women, labor, socialists, communists, civil rightists, and non-mainstream ways of life. Democracy has not, is not, and will never be the only road Americans travel.

Democratic Waves

It is our view, though, that—taken altogether—there has been a slow and steady progression, a gradual growth, a series of surges that ebb and flow, but move steadily forward in fits and starts to become—per usual—the wave of the future. There have been several famed analysts of American history who have detected and detailed this strange set of recurrent patterns.

Although each has emphasized a slightly different aspect of it, it occurs to us that all these are merely slightly different characterization of the perennial struggle we mentioned before. For example, to historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., there have been a series of "cycles" or "alternations" between "conservatism and liberalism, between periods of concern for the rights of the few and periods of concern for the wrongs of the many" (Schlesinger 1986, 24). Schlesinger also noted that the great American thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson saw this oscillation as vibrating between force fields of "conservatism" and "innovation," and the celebrated American historian Henry Adams likened it to a tension between "the centralization and diffusion of national energy" (Schlesinger 1986, 23).

Our own view is that analogies to cycles or spirals are too Newtonian, too geometric, too neat and tidy to describe real sociopolitical outbursts. We are more partial to metaphors of the new physics that highlight randomness, uncertainty (if not chaos), and unpredictability (Becker 1991; Slaton 1992). Thus, we view these democratic phases as highly charged, erratic, self-contradictory packets of political energy, what we like to call "democratic quanta," that appear to occur with a rough regularity, but with increasing levels of velocity and force.

We particularly appreciate the way that one "global" historian, William McNeill, interprets world history as revealing a kindred mode of political evolution (McNeill 1975). McNeill claims that institutions that allow people to develop and fulfill their potential have a high degree of survival value in the rough-and-tumble of historical change. Thus, states or polities that encouraged their people to develop such potential became
strong by helping harness and channel a substantial proportion of their creative energy. The more of their population that governments can involve in this way, the stronger they become. McNeill, as sort of a democratic Darwinist, points to various events in the stream of European history that helped mobilize large numbers of democratic societies. So, we see these surges as an earthly, global pattern, with the American experience as the first and largest of a few growing and glowing stars in a rapidly expanding political cosmos, one that is mostly darkness, quasars, and black holes.

The Imminent 21st-Century Quantum Leap: Direct Teledemocracy

All this is a backdrop, though, to the current-time mélange that combines (1) space age information and communications systems (ICT) with obsolescent democratic political systems and (2) the conception, development, and promise of authentic, comprehensive Electronic Town Meetings, a modern system of teledemocracy we describe in some detail in Part II of this volume.

Electronic Town Meetings, or ETMs, are a novel blend of (1) advanced and potential Space Age communications-information hardware; (2) cutting-edge computer software; (3) leading-edge scientific deliberative polling (face-to-face and/or electronic); (4) traditional and new forms of direct democracy (DD); and (5) contemporary conflict resolution techniques. All of these, however, are set within, woven together, and informed by modern 20th-century democratic foresight, theory, history, and political aspirations of humankind. They are the key ingredients of a present and immediate future evolution of democracy in America and the world, the furthest expression and expansion of the democratic surge, the additional substance needed to reach a "critical mass." These essentials, when fused, would become a quantum leap in truly empowering all citizens of any polity up to this nanosecond in human history. They amount to what might best be called "Direct Teledemocracy."¹

Indeed, we think these recurrent and future democratic quantum leaps are not occasional or regular phenomena, but are instead akin to an ever-expanding chain reaction. Unlike their physical counterparts in the subatomic or hypercosmic universe, however, these surges of democratic energy are generated at least in part from bursts of human brainpower. Such democratic brainstorms may appear to conventional thinking as daydreams, the musings of eccentrics, intellectual excesses, wishful thinking, or political science fiction. But to their creators, they are designed as practical potions for what even mainstream diagnosticians see as pernicious socio-economic-political conditions. In the never-ending
struggle between the elites and the masses, dedicated democratic thinkers and inventors are often characterized by the conservative and condescending intelligentsia (a.k.a. mainstream experts) as being "crackpots" or rabble-rousers or patronized as dreamers and idealists.

It seems clear to us, though, that new forms of democracy (a constant in political evolution) must spring originally from the fertile minds of visionaries, trailblazers, explorers, theorists, or some combination thereof. Sometimes, they may also be doers and sometimes engineers pick up where seminal thinkers leave off. But imagination is always at least a substantial part of the equation and original thought always precedes democratic experimentation and movements. Innovations in democracy are not the product of spontaneous combustion, no more than are new schools of art or breakthroughs in technology. Vision and theory are always the spark and catalyst. So, let us see what some of these democratic visionaries of the 20th century saw for us in their distant future.

TELEDEMOCRATIC VISIONARIES AND THEIR VISIONS

As far as we know, the first person to divine the rich synergy between direct democracy and 20th century telecommunications was the celebrated Canadian scientist, poet, architect, seer, sire of the geodesic dome, and futuristic sage—R. Buckminster Fuller.

The Jules Verne of Electronic Democracy:
R. Buckminster Fuller

R. Buckminster ("Bucky") Fuller, the Jules Verne of teledemocracy, was sitting in his home one night, April 9, 1940, to be exact, at the outbreak of World War II. Being somewhat despondent over immediate and imminent events, his thoughts drifted to a distant eon, a better world, one in which there was no longer a subjugation of the cumulative powers of any citizenry to the "lesser god" in the person of those who would pretend to speak and govern for them.

This was also the wee hours of 20th-century communications technologies—where the telegraph, radio, radar, and telephone were the crowning achievements. But they were enough to sow Fuller's fecund mind, to cause it to envision a future of veritable, virtual, vibrant, vivid, and vivacious electronic direct democracy where citizens would be voting on the most salient issues of the day. To Buckminster Fuller, this was the firsthand materialization of what has long been known as "democracy"—but which was up to then, and remains in the current practice of indirect democracy, in his mind, only a "second-hand god" (Fuller 1971). Keep
in mind, too, that his vision preceded such present-day realities as space satellites, personal computers, and the Internet by more than a half-century.

What follows are a few choice elements of what he foresaw 60 years ago. Fuller believed that "democracy has potential within it [to fulfill] the satisfaction of every individual's need" (Fuller 1971, 9). And how could that potential be realized? His answer was that "democracy must be structurally modernized—must be mechanically implemented to give it a one-individual-to-another speed and spontaneity of reaction commensurate with the speed and scope of broadcast news [which is] now world-wide in seconds" (Fuller 1971, 9). And how would that work? By what he called "electrified voting." And what good would that do? For one thing, it would yield "an instantaneous contour map of the workable frontier of the people's wisdom, for purposes of legislation, administration, future exploration, and debate" (Fuller 1971, 11). It would also certify "spontaneous popular co-operation in the carrying out of each decision" (Fuller 1971, 11).

The beauty of such a system, in Fuller's mind, was the overwhelming power of such a collective decision-making process. In matters of foreign policy, he saw it as an irresistible force, one that "no foreign power in the world can stand up against" because of a kind of "mystical awareness of multimillions of individuals that they personally have taken responsibility for the course" (Fuller 1971, 11-12).

Fuller also believed that the United States had to take the lead in this because of its important leadership role in world democracy. Once electronic democracy was so established in America, "the credit and imagination of all outside peoples of the world will be so stimulated that nothing will stop them short of attaining a line to that voice. But so to do they must join up with Democracy" (Fuller 1971, 12).

Finally, Fuller was enough of a visionary to understand that as much as he saw a national system of electronically facilitated direct democracy in the United States as the last, best hope for the future of the teeming masses, there was no guarantee it would work. What he advocated was that it simply be given a fair chance. If it was not, then he believed that "future generations will again champion it, and there will be world civil wars until it receives adequate trial" (Fuller 1971, 13). History, since that prediction, has surely not proven him incorrect.

**Teledemocratic Therapy for Political Psychoses: Erich Fromm**

The next vision—in the evolution of this brave new electronic democratic worldview—that we find came in the work of another important thinker of the mid-20th century, the renowned political psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. He believed that by properly using new telecommunica-