

Fertilizing the Tree of Liberty: Towards a Renewal of American Democracy

By Steve Szyszko

The success of the American experiment cannot be denied. From its conception in a Philadelphia courtroom it quickly spread across a continent, transforming a barren land into a great nation, turning empty prairies into thriving farms and lazy rivers into busy waterways. And while the steam engine and cotton gin assisted in this process, the bulk of credit is due to Jefferson's novel notion of self-governance¹ which, as Marx noted, "has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together."

In light of this material triumph, it's no surprise American democracy became a source of inspiration for oppressed peoples everywhere. This passion for liberty, once ignited, proved unquenchable, and within a few decades self-rule was the norm: Haiti, England, and even more remote kingdoms soon adopted republican systems of government. While these efforts did not always produce economic growth comparable to our own, they were

a testament to the universal appeal of democratic sentiments. As De Tocqueville remarked:

On many occasions during my travels I've encountered poverty stricken savages, unwashed and unfed, illiterate and without home or hope of ever having one. And always, when it is learned that I have visited America, the talk turns away from a recitation of the savage's sorrows and pains and instead I am assaulted with questions: 'Is it true that in America every man owns a horse?' And is it true that a man can wear a hat any day of the year?' And is it true that a man's house is inviolate and sacred, and therein he can beat his wife and children without fear of persecution by religious or civil authority?' Always, after confirming that such a place is real, I am greeted with a respectful silence, followed often by a vow to someday visit this paradise [...] 2

Because of the special role American democracy continues to play in the world's imagination, it is all the more urgent that the sorry state of our national politics be addressed. Opinion polls and anecdote all re-

