You can’t help but pick up a copy of *The Down-Deep Delight of Democracy* (DDDD) by Mark Purcell. The texture of its title—quadruple ‘D’—and the promise of delight are irresistible. Its timely focus on democracy and the potential we have to become (more) democratic have much to offer critical geography. The idea that democratic futures can be grown from present democratic struggles and that as scholars we might contribute to this growth by recognizing and valuing them is especially important for future research agendas. Purcell argues that democracy is delightful and the desire for it is ubiquitous. He says, if we look with interest we will see this desire and we can cultivate it by giving it space rather than slipping into resentment and complaint. These important points might have been powerfully supported by voices of people in the movements he describes from a distance; however, DDDD is not an ethnographic project. Data from qualitative research would have enriched the exploration considerably.

Purcell extends Henri Lefebvre’s idea - or method - of transduction in search of the ubiquitous desire for democracy: “Our task as political thinkers and actors, Lefebvre argues, is to discover this good, this other world, to remove the barriers that prevent its growth, and to nurture it as best we can” (p. 22). In DDDD, this search begins with philosophers who have thought about democracy over the centuries. It is a substantial literature review of key thinkers on democracy and Purcell’s particular perspective on it. He walks us through Aristotle, Plato, Hobbes, Lefebvre, Deleuze and Guattari, Ranciere, Laclau and Mouffe, Gramsci, Hardt and Negri, Nietzsche, Wallace and others, arguing that these theorists share a desire for democracy. He pulls out the threads of this desire running throughout the evolution of democratic thought from the ancients to the postmoderns.
For Purcell, democracy is the project of identifying and denouncing oligarchy and (re)appropriating our own power. It is the struggle to get out from under oligarchic rule in its multitudinous forms (for example, management over workers, state over citizenry, or administration over teachers and students). “If the gist of modern political theory is an effort to legitimate the transfer of popular power” to institutions, then democracy is “the struggle of people to take up that power again” (p. 73). We should void the social contract by acting as if it never existed in the first place. However, Purcell suggests that being truly democratic (as imagined by radical democratic theory) is too intense an experience to maintain. Rather than ‘being democratic’, ‘becoming democratic’ is the project available to us. This means pushing towards a “horizon of democracy” (p. 87) that can never be reached. The down-deep delight of democracy is a pleasure promised on the path towards the horizon. When we are stuck in anger and ressentiment (Purcell’s word), “we are not discovering our own proper power and our desire for democracy.” (p. 157)

In order to become democratic, we must become active. With David Wallace, Purcell describes the desire to relinquish freedom and its attendant responsibilities in favor of servitude. We have to fight the desire to turn on the television and tune out of the reality of the decisions that affect our lives. For Purcell, desire to be ruled by whatever drug (such as the state, the boss, the television) dulls desire for autonomous creativity - a great obstacle on the road to the democratic delight.

Revolutionary uprisings like Occupy and the Arab Spring are highlighted as concrete examples of the hidden yet ever present desire for democracy erupting in cacophonous delight. Many of us have been in these crowds. So we can imagine the adrenaline rushing through the veins of participants. However, that rush isn’t quite - or at least isn’t only - what Purcell means by the ‘down-deep delight of democracy’. The down-deep delight of democracy comes with the experience of finding ones strength in the world (see p. 157). We can find our own strength in
many spheres. For Purcell it happens with democracy. He suggests that the process of discovering our own power can seep into our bones and every aspect of our lives. These points are among the most interesting raised in DDDD; however, they remain unexplored. They surface in the concluding chapter and stand as a starting point for a research agenda which could look for democratic processes, find joy (and struggle) in them, and explore how they might be given space, supported, and grown.

Purcell says “…we need to discover the down-deep delight of democracy. We need to learn what the delight feels like and what we can do to help ourselves feel it” (p. 158). To be sure, my own research with worker co-operatives suggests that becoming democratic is delightful but it can also be complicated and difficult (see http://www.communityeconomies.org/Home). Becoming democratic takes practice. So it’s important to learn from experience. I would have liked more voices from the democratic movements or even from Purcell’s own life. It would have been interesting to consider the experience of participants in Occupy and examine the activities and feelings at stake in the (self) organizing process of a revolutionary moment.

Again, DDDD is not an ethnographic project but its argument would be more compelling had it given voice to the continuous desire for democracy. Most of the voices we hear in DDDD are those of philosophers and scholars who weren’t addressing desire or delight directly. When given a voice, what do our desires say? And how does this deep-down delight feel? Purcell could have helped the reader understand the delight of democracy by giving voice to people on the ground. I longed for the words of people in Occupy, the Arab Spring or Tiananmen. Their words might have given body to the idea and experience of delight that lasts beyond the orgasmic moment of revolution, after the crowds have gone home for dinner. I saw a one-man play composed exclusively from the words of participants of Occupy Boston (No Room for Wishing - http://dannybryck.com/noroomforwishing/). The single actor on stage embodied a cacophony of
characters with a multitude of desires. He was so moved by Occupy Boston that the movement occupied him!

While a more in-depth examination of democratic struggles on the ground, such as those he mentions as examples, would have been welcomed, DDDD is a great start toward an examination of democratic possibilities. Purcell’s point is that people are finding their democratic strength in the world; people are claiming their own power with others in interesting ways. We can see these practices if we look with interest and cultivate them if we give them space. Actual practices of democratic, anarchic self-discovery are happening everywhere. When we recognize them we can (and should) give them space and help them grow.

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