

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



# Democracy and beyond

Amedeo Bertolo

Amedeo Bertolo  
Democracy and beyond  
1994

Retrieved on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021 from [autonomies.org](http://autonomies.org)  
*This text was originally presented at the conference, "El anarquismo ante la crisis de las ideologías", Barcelona, 1-3 of October, 1993, and subsequently published in Volontà, n° 4, 1994 (Translation by April Retter, with minor alterations)*

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)

1994



# Contents

<i>Ideological warehouse</i> . . . . .	7
<i>The Government of All</i> . . . . .	10
<i>Forms of the Political</i> . . . . .	13
<i>The Scale</i> . . . . .	16
<i>The Dominant and the Dominated</i> . . . . .	18
<i>A Model</i> . . . . .	22
<i>Libertarian Democracy</i> . . . . .	23

conomic democracy,<sup>26</sup> which we may call self-management. And it is not possible to have self-management unless the economic subjects involved are equal, that is, without the integration of manual and intellectual work ...<sup>27</sup>

A libertarian democracy (to employ a neologism<sup>28</sup> which is more or less synonymous with possible, practical anarchism) is impossible unless the *ethos* of society and its fundamental values do not have at least a certain coherence with direct democracy and self-management, that is to say, with equality, freedom, solidarity and diversity in the strong sense. In the *strong* sense. That is, anarchy or something close to it, as I wanted to demonstrate.

---

<sup>26</sup> See Takis Fotopoulos, *Toward an Inclusive Democracy*, London, 1997.

<sup>27</sup> See two “classics” of anarchism: Mikhail Bakunin, *op. cit.*, chap. on “Integral Education”, and Pëtr Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow* (ed. by C. Ward), London, 1974, chap. on “Intellectual and Manual Work”.

<sup>28</sup> To my knowledge, this expression was first used by Gaston Leval (*Espagne Libertaire. 1936–1939*, Paris, 1971, pp. 217–225).

ing of capitalist ideology is in fact impossible) and to bend it to its own “rationality”.<sup>25</sup> Politics, more modestly, but no less dangerously, tried to explain itself “from its own perspective”. There have been attempts to submit society to politics, which have had considerable historical and ideological significance: Leninism, and its third-worldist forms more or less contaminated by it, as well as fascism: “everything for the State, nothing outside and against the State”, as Mussolini said.

But the economic, political, legal, ideological-religious, etc, are precisely *functions* of society, functions of a “social body” which is not economic, nor political, nor... The awareness of the existence of diverse functions within the complex physiology of the social body is undoubtedly an important addition to our knowledge, knowledge necessary for a radical transformation of society as it is, but it is also important to recognise and understand the close links and interrelationships between the various organs and functions.

“Holistic” medicine can only be seen as progressive *after* anatomy and physiology have already identified and studied the various processes of the human body, including the as yet little understood psychosomatic relationships. The holistic conception may be valuable as something *beyond* anatomy and physiology. Practised as something *less than*, it will be just magic or charlatanism.

Anarchism, as a “holistic” conception of society, can only be a *beyond* politics, economics, and so on (not an ingenuous and primitivist *less than* or *before*). The social is not just an arithmetic sum, a mechanical combination, of politics, economics..., but rather an organic interrelationship of political, economic and other functions. There can be no real democracy in the political sphere unless all those acting in it are socially equal (or if you prefer, *equivalent*). Thus it is not possible to have political democracy without eco-

---

<sup>25</sup> See Luciano Lanza, “Il mercante e l’utopista”, *Volontà*, n. 1–2, 1990.

*If understood to the letter, a democracy must be a stateless society ...*

*Power belongs to the people insofar as the people truly exercise it themselves.*

Giovanni Sartori

The concern in this essay is with democracy from an anarchist point of view and – secondarily – with anarchism from a democratic point of view. In the course of this reflection, I will occupy myself above all with those aspects of the two political and philosophical categories which are relevant to a confrontation between them, that is to say the essential differences and similarities between democracy and anarchism.

This means that neither democracy as it is commonly understood (“representative” democracy) nor political anarchism (as anarchists see it), nor even that particular primary form of democracy, “direct democracy”, which is a sort of category of passage between democracy and anarchism, will be analysed in depth. Each one of these categories would require, for an adequate critical reflection, much more space, so that we will limit ourselves to brief definitions for the purpose of comparison, or better yet, to a general assessment of their compatibility/comparability.

The thesis that I will defend is precisely that democracy and anarchism are not reducible one to the other, but (under certain conditions) they are also not antithetical. Anarchism is at the same time the most fully developed form of democracy and its irreducible overcoming; a *beyond* it – as the title of this text suggests.

Accordingly, is a *beyond* democracy conceivable? Yes it is, a quantitative as well as qualitative *beyond*. By analogy to what I once wrote about freedom,<sup>1</sup> the anarchist conception of freedom is both *more than* and *different* from the liberal one. In simpler

---

<sup>1</sup> Amedeo Bertolo, “I fanatici della libertà”, *Volontà*, n. 3–4, 1996. An abridged English translation of a previous version of this writing was published as “Fanatics of Freedom” in *Our Generation*, vol. 23, n. 2 (1992), pp. 50–66.

terms, this *difference* or diversity lies in the fact that for liberals, the freedom of single individuals is limited by that of others, while for anarchists it is enhanced.

However the *different* freedom of the anarchists also encompasses that of the liberals, while moving beyond both *quantitatively* and *qualitatively*. Quantity is essential as without it there is no guarantee of quality; a *different* freedom must at the same time signify a *greater* one. Even religious fundamentalists (Christian, Muslim, etc.) speak of *different* freedoms which are however less freedom, both at the individual level and at the collective one – particularly individual.

Thus the political idea of the anarchists is – and must necessarily be – greater democracy, over and above anything else; otherwise, it would be a *less than*. This is in fact what anarchists maintain: that it is both greater and different.

So the anarchist concept of the political space is of something both quantitatively and qualitatively *beyond* the democratic one. This is so above all as regards the reigning democratic idea, that is, representative democracy, but also in comparison to more radical conceptions, such as for example “participatory democracy” ...<sup>2</sup> and even for so-called “direct democracy”.<sup>3</sup>

The anarchist idea of political space – which we could call “political anarchy” – is, in fact, *together* more profoundly democratic and something different, something else.

How then can something be one thing and at the same time another? It is possible. Difficult though it may be to comprehend, it is in fact possible. Here we are not speaking of “things” in the physical world, but of “things” of the social-political imaginary. And

---

<sup>2</sup> David Held, *Modelli di democrazia*, Bologna 1989, p. 332 (English edition: *Models of Democracy*, Cambridge, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> For a fairly full discussion and benevolent critique of direct democracy from non-anarchist perspectives (the first neo-marxist and the second liberal socialist) see David Held, *op. cit.*, pp. 157–178, and Norberto Bobbio, *Il futuro della democrazia*, Torino, 1993, pp. 36–61.

and (even less) a majority, may be accepted by anarchists as the criteria for political decisions in specific contexts, but never as a way of deciding in absolute terms what is good and what is bad, what is beautiful and what is ugly. Even liberals see certain areas of “human rights” as lying outside the majority mechanism, and among its wiser exponents, they are quite sceptical towards the power of the majority. For example: “for the democratic doctrine, the simple fact that the majority wants something is enough to make what it wants good; [...] the will of the majority determines not only that something is a law, but also that it is a good law”. And again, “it is at least conceivable that under the rule of a very homogeneous and doctrinaire majority, a democratic regime could be as oppressive as the worst dictatorship”.<sup>24</sup>

There is yet another and perhaps even greater way in which anarchism goes *beyond* politics. Politics, like economics, is a dimension of society which became visible and “autonomous” of the totality of social functions at a “certain point” in history. As such, it can be seen as a historical *creation*. The political function, like the economic one, has always existed in some form and to some degree in every society, but (apart from the Athenian interlude) it is only in recent centuries that it has been perceived, described, prescribed, studied and practised as a form in itself of the social. After Machiavelli, Hobbes, etc., and above all after the Enlightenment disenchantment of the world and its “worldly” de-sacralisation/re-sacralisation of domination.

## ***Libertarian Democracy***

Like economics, and almost at the same time, politics too was “autonomised” in relation to the social magma in its imaginary and institutional representations. Economics tried and tries to explain the social in terms of its own categories (the “utopian” undertak-

---

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich von Hayek, quoted in D. Held, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

## *A Model*

Planning forms of direct democracy is already a move *beyond* democracy as it is generally understood, as representative liberal democracy. A *beyond* that – as we have said many times – presupposes *more* democracy (not less) and, jointly, a *different* democracy. Direct democracy places much greater power in the hands of every individual who constitutes and institutes the *demos*, while breaking up, decentralising and diffusing political power.

Direct democracy is a discrete approximation to political “anarchy” (absence of domination). And in fact, in both theory (as with Proudhon and Bakunin) and practice (in the various revolutionary situations where anarchists have played a decisive role, like Spain in 1936), the political forms suggested and experimented with have been those of “direct democracy on a federal basis”.

This is a good approximation to political anarchism. It is nothing more but nor is it *anything less than that*. Political anarchism is certainly founded on a further *beyond*, but just as the Christian ideal is sainthood “in the image of Christ” and yet all Christians – including the saints – settle for less, indeed for much less, as *tending* towards the ideal, so too do anarchists.

There is another sense in which anarchism goes *beyond* democracy. As has already been said, anarchism is a principle for organising reality which goes beyond the political sphere (and indeed beyond the social sphere too, but this is beyond the scope of this article). As a philosophical, ethical and aesthetic principle, it stretches beyond the political arena (which is that of democracy) and indeed rejects it. It moves beyond it because even the extreme model of direct democracy is not really enough.

Even a face-to-face assembly could pass unanimous decisions that are horribly incompatible with anarchism. The direct democracy of Athens could burn Pythagoras’ “books” or condemn Socrates to death, but nobody can make an anarchist accept the *justice* of a verdict which punishes heterodox ideas. Unanimity,

these latter “are” according to different modalities which depend on the point of view from which they are viewed. Anarchism, in this case, can be seen as an extreme form of democracy and as a different form of constructing the political space, or even as something which lies *beyond* the political space. We will see.

Before preceeding, it must be clearly stated that we have in mind certain definitions of democracy (or better *democracies*)<sup>4</sup>, which were always until now implicit, but which have gradually become more explicit. These definitions are *relatively* neutral – total neutrality being neither possible nor useful. They are definitions of anarchism first and foremost from an anarchist perspective (although bearing in mind the democratic critique) and of democracy from the democratic perspective<sup>5</sup> (although bearing in mind the anarchist critique).

First, however, grant us a digression which is only apparently off topic.

## *Ideological warehouse*

When I am in a bad mood (and I almost always am when I have to submit an article, and even more so when I am late with it) and I look around me in the “ideological warehouse” of anarchism, I feel as if I were in the back of some second-hand shop. Not of an antique shop, as some malicious enemy of anarchism might have it, but worse – amid a scrap merchant’s wares. In among time-worn set phrases, declarations of principle, articles of faith, slogans, fine sentiments, verbal extremism, statements of affection, recollections, the dearly departed ... for the most part, what I see are retro pieces.

---

<sup>4</sup> See David Held, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> See Murray Bookchin, *Democrazia diretta*, Milano, 1993; Id. *Remaking Society*, Montreal, 1993; Id., “Communalism: The Democratic Dimension of Anarchism”, *Democracy and Nature*, 1995, pp. 1–17; Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, Yale, 1989; Giovanni Sartori, *Democrazia. Cos’è*, Milano, 1993.

As is known, retro pieces are not not old enough to be antiques, but they are old enough to not be truly modern, contemporary, or almost. I know that anarchism has produced original and important things in the last fifty years (and particularly in the last twenty to thirty), original and important and “new” things, that is, modern things in the proper sense. And I also know of course that anarchist thought has preserved very beautiful “antiquarian” pieces, that is, of classical anarchism, and that it still bases itself largely on these and that it is by humiliating the ingenuity and rich potential of the “modern” that the “old”, that is, the “vulgate”, has built itself a shell of common sense to protect its fragile identity.

The identity of the “classics”, of the founding fathers of anarchism, was so strong that they could even contradict themselves (or apparently contradict each other) without any great difficulties. Lucky them!

In 1848 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was a member of the National Assembly; in 1849 he wrote a crystal clear and devastating attack not only on the state and the government but on the political dimension *tout court*. In 1863 (with *Du Principe fédératif*) he put forward a plan that proposes anew an autonomous political sphere and he speaks of communes, provinces, regions, and, – Hear ye, hear ye! –, of states and governments.<sup>6</sup>

And listen to what Mikhail Bakunin wrote to his friend and comrade from Naples, Carlo Gambuzzi, “You will perhaps be surprised to hear that I, a passionately convinced abstentionist, am now suggesting to my friends that they stand for election to the national assembly. This can be explained by the fact that the circumstances have changed”.<sup>7</sup> The circumstances ... Was good old Bak by chance no longer an anarchist? Just think of it. It is just that while anarchism today holds up abstentionism as a *principle*, for Bakunin it

---

<sup>6</sup> Giampietro Berti (ed.), *La dimensione libertaria di Proudhon*, Roma, 1982, p. 77.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in François Munoz, *Bakounine et la Liberté*, Paris 1965, p. 228.

inhabitants would primarily be governed by its own decisions and not by those of the province, let alone those of the region, etc. etc. in a federal succession. This would be a democracy in which “peripheral” political realities (city neighbourhoods, towns, regions, etc.) would not be entities far from a central power, but in which the “central” body would be a federal articulation of the power base. This is not just playing with words.

Under representative democracy, on the other hand, the power to decide is delegated to a body of political *professionals* and the *only* power left to the *demos* is that of choosing its representatives (however, under conditions in which there is good reason to doubt the real and conscious freedom of choice), and power grows rather than decreases as you move from the political “periphery” to the centre, from the local to the national. This is a different dimension of democracy. It is not a *demos* which governs itself, despite contradictions which cannot be eliminated, but which can be controlled once their existence is recognised, but a *demos in whose name* someone governs, with some mechanisms for creating and/or simulating consent.

There is a qualitative leap in the nature of the apparent continuum of democratic forms.

A democracy that is compatible with the anarchist rejection of domination (and in political terms, of the division between the rulers and the ruled) is necessarily a “direct” democracy in the above sense, that is, strongly rooted in democratic assemblies and with a necessary but controlled system of temporary political delegates. *Delegates* may be elected or chosen by lot (why not, as it was the case with the magistrates of Athens), but would be truly *representatives*. Under no circumstances would there be a political class (whether of one party or several, makes no difference) cut off from the *demos* by the simple fact of being *professional* politicians.



of representative democracy, that is, the myth of its democratic nature, in the original sense of the word.<sup>21</sup>

Democracy is the government of the *demos*, of the people.<sup>22</sup> The *demos* has been defined in various ways, on the basis of sex-gender, of citizenship, of electoral census, of age, and so on. In its most wide-reaching form (as, for example, in Italy today) it includes virtually all citizens (which is not the same as all inhabitants, though almost), regardless of class, wealth, sex and race over the age of 18. How then does this *demos*, which is the great majority of Italians, exercise its “government”, its “power”? It does not exercise it in person; that would be self-government, direct democracy. Instead it delegates its declared right to an elected oligarchy which then exercises this power in its own name. And it is not as if the only choice was that between an unlikely anarchism and an electoral oligarchy (representative democracy)... As Dahl says,<sup>23</sup> even though representative democracy may have major defects (euphemism) there is no better alternative... Ah, but there is.

There is the alternative of direct democracy integrated in a system of federations and confederations, in the broadest sense, in a greatly decentralised political sphere in which the mandates of even the delegates of the basic social structures can be revoked and limited (albeit with relative room for manoeuvre) to specific decisions, and where the power delegated in a coordinated situation is always less than that which is not delegated. This would be a democracy in which the interests of a community of ten thousand

---

<sup>21</sup> See Robert Dale, *op. cit.*, who sets out and argues against the critique of democracy from various points of view, including the anarchist one, even if in fact the critique is based on a writer who is not an anarchist (Robert Paul Wolff). See also E. Colombo, “Della polis...”, *cit.*

<sup>22</sup> E. Colombo (“Della polis...”, *cit.*) in fact says that, according to some Hel-lenists, the term democracy (which was created by enemies of democracy) is inappropriate as *kratos* which means domination or force exercised by one part of the society over an other, while legitimate authority is *arkhè*. It would thus be more correct to speak of *demarchy* than *democracy* and maybe of *acracy* than *anarchy*.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Dahl, *op. cit.*, pp. 75–76.

was a *strategic choice*; or even, judging from the above quote, a tactical choice.<sup>8</sup>

Very well then, but what does this have to do with the theme of the present text? It has to do with it, but tangentially; it has because the image that anarchists today have of democracy is heavily influenced by the anarchist vulgate, just as the idea that democrats have of anarchism (apart from some clear cases of ignorance and bad faith) is heavily influenced by their vulgate.

Let us take, for example, the statement of principle that “anarchists do not vote”. If this is a fundamental principle, it is inevitable that the vulgate maintains that not only are anarchists opposed to voting in certain historical (social, economic, political) conditions, but that anarchists do not vote and will *never* vote in any event. This is something that is sublimely absurd. *Sublimely* because it is a declaration of faith that is totally utopian, and utopia is an essential element of anarchism. *Absurd* because it is entirely devoid of that common sense (rebellious common sense, of course, not a “casalinga de Voghera” [idiomatic: “petty bourgeois house wife” -T.N.] common sense) without which there can be no “possible anarchism”, that is, an anarchism that is significantly present in social transformation, with revolutionary strategies.

To avoid any misunderstandings, I should say that I am fifty-seven years of age, I have *never* voted in any of the many elections – almost all of them touted as “decisive” – in Italy in the last thirty-two years. And I am well with this. But this is not the point, or at least not here.

So what then is the point? I will again let Bakunin speak and his program for a post-revolutionary society: “The basis of all political organisation in a country must be the totally autonomous commune, always represented by the *majority* of the votes of all adult

---

<sup>8</sup> Errico Malatesta too, 25 years later, wrote that “for us abstentionism is a question of tactics”, although he added that it is so important that when it is abandoned we risk abandoning the principles (E. Malatesta, F.S. Merlino, *Anarchismo e democrazia*, Ragusa, 1974, p. 60.

men and women there residing” (my italics).<sup>9</sup> And again: “The election of all national, provincial and communal representatives [...] shall be by *universal suffrage* of all adult men and women”(my italics).<sup>10</sup>

And this brings us back to the subject.

## *The Government of All*

Francesco Saverio Merlino, who was an anarchist until the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and later moved towards libertarian socialism and then liberal socialism, wrote in his testament: “the government by all = the government by none”.<sup>11</sup> And, shortly before he died, he left a handwritten note: “democracy = anarchy”. Merlino goes beyond the similarities that I see and dissolves their identities, either because he underestimates anarchy or because he overvalues democracy; or for both reasons.

We can always begin with Merlino’s two statements (which seem to derive from pairs of clear affinities: government by all/democracy, government by none/anarchy) as a starting point for a more deep-reaching comparative analysis of democracy and anarchy. Starting, as we said, with certain useful definitions for such a comparison.

Let us begin with anarchy. Anarchy can be (and indeed has been) understood in different ways, even by anarchists themselves. In particular, for what interests us here, anarchy can signify a society *without government*, or *without a state*, or *without power* (or better, *without domination*). There is a need to further specify these interpretations. What, for example, is meant by government? Anarchists often speak in positive terms of self-government, so

---

<sup>9</sup> Michail Bakunin, *Libertà eguaglianza rivoluzione*, Milano, 1976, p. 93.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Giampietro Berti, *Francesco Saverio Merlino*, Milano, 1993, p. 414.

Let it be quite clear that I am by no means trying to equate fascism and liberal democracy. May the Non-existent Supreme Being spare me this! This would be a logical operation (so to speak) of the worst anarchist “modernism”. I am simply trying to show that the term “democracy” covers a semantic space that stretches from *direct* democracy in the strict sense to *authoritarian* democracy, passing through forms of limited and controlled delegation, to forms of representation that are generically limited (a true and proper “limited partnership”) and periodically renewed through *electoral* mechanisms (in the dual sense of choice and selection), which unite the elements of agreement and co-opting to varying degrees. If direct democracy in its “pure” form represents one pole of this *continuum*, the *liberal version* of representative democracy (which is the best form, I believe, that has been theorised and practised to date), does not represent the opposite pole (to authoritarian democracy), but is undoubtedly *closer* to it.

It is no coincidence that in periods of social crisis, when confronted by the risk not so much of revolution as of radical reform of economic power, liberal democracy has shown no great difficulty or reluctance in “letting itself be transformed” into its authoritarian counterpart (and on occasions into true dictatorship) for however long it may take to remake, with the good and the *bad*, the consensus of the ruling/dominant class to allow for a return to a more “liberal” form of democracy.

And it is only natural that representative liberal democracy should be closer to the authoritarian pole of democracy than to the libertarian one. It is in fact the “human face” of the “rational” division between the ruler and the ruled, the political counterpart of the division between dominant and dominated, of the class division of society and of its hierarchical structure. There is no reason to belabour this point here since there is a wealth of writings, both anarchist and non-anarchist, which have demolished the myth

put it mildly) with the functioning of a society that is a little more complex than that of the Inuit (Eskimos), of the Yanomani (based in Amazon) or of the Nuer (a Sudanese population). That is, *if they are taken to the letter*.

It is worth leaving this question to one side for a while, as we turn to the question of representative democracy.

### ***The Dominant and the Dominated***

Democracy as it is generally understood, as vaunted by various self-styled liberal-democrats, is *representative* democracy and not simply *democracy*. Even the “people’s democracy” of the former so-called socialist States was representative democracy, on their own terms, of course.

Even Fascism was, in its own way, a representative democracy. Its “political class” represented the Italian *demos*, it was just that the forms and modes of representation were different from those of pluralist, multi-party political systems. And, of course, a non-negligible detail, the freedom of speech, of the press, of association... were significantly limited. But then what belongs to the “liberal” ambit does not necessarily belong to the “democratic” one. Who can deny that on the eve of the second world war, the fascist regime enjoyed the support, active or passive, of the majority of Italians, i.e. of the people? And who can deny that the *Camera dei Fasci e delle Corporazioni* (the Italian Fascist parliament) was an elected body representing the *demos*?

An anarchist friend from Portugal recently pointed out to me that Antonio Salazar’s regime regularly held semi-democratic elections (“semi” according to a liberal conception, freer anyway than in Cuba or Bulgaria) ... and he won them all. Even in the last one, shortly before the “carnations revolution”, the regime won an (admittedly slight) majority.

that what they reject must be a *hetero-government*, government imposed on one part of society by another, a *subordination* of the governed to those who govern, and not the function of government *per se*.

And the State? The state is a particular historical form of legitimisation and organisation of political power. Its legitimacy is rational, bestowed by a real or supposed “popular will” rather than by the will of God or who knows what else. However, it has within itself a hierarchical conception of society, of the State as a paradigm of power, or better of domination;<sup>12</sup> the State is an institution (or a sum of institutions), but above all the imaginary *instituting* [constituting] form of modern class domination.<sup>13</sup>

As regards power, the majority of anarchists understood or understand by “evil” power (that which they deny) hierarchical power which entails a relationship of command/obedience. In the case of political power (always in the negative sense), it is *not* the normative function of society, *nor* the “collective political force”<sup>14</sup>, but the expropriation of society as a whole, the *political corpus* of society, of this function and its corresponding appropriation by a minority. As was said: in a society divided between those who govern and the governed, the power which anarchists reject is that which is constantly exercised by the former *over* the latter. Anarchy is not equivalent to *anomy* (i.e. the absence of norms), but, rather, with the necessary specifications, to *autonomy*.

Personally, for reasons of semantic articulation, I prefer the term domination<sup>15</sup> to signify the expropriated power of the “collective

---

<sup>12</sup> Eduardo Colombo, “Lo Stato come paradigma del potere”, *Volontà*, n. 3, 1984.

<sup>13</sup> See René Lourau, *L’Etat incoscient*, Paris, 1978.

<sup>14</sup> Giampietro Berti (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.45.

<sup>15</sup> See Amedeo Bertolo, “Potere, autorità, dominio”, *Volontà*, n. 2, 1983. An abridged English translation was published with the title “Authority, Power and Domination”, in Laslo Sekelj (ed.), *Anarchism. Community and Utopia*, Praha, 1993, pp. 137–166.

force”, retaining a more neutral meaning for the term power, although fraught with hierarchical potentialities in a hierarchical society. I also prefer to use the term domination to talk of *permanently asymmetrical* power relations, including those social relations which fall outside the political sphere. This includes those “analogously” asymmetric relations between humans and nature which can be traced back to the same imaginary of domination carried over from the social.<sup>16</sup>

Let us return to anarchy. Anarchy is a principle of organisation of reality, a non-hierarchical conception of the world, libertarian in the strong sense, which extends *equally*, but not only, to the political sphere. Not only. Anarchy pertains to the the realm of philosophy, ethics and aesthetics before belonging to – and is more than – the domain of *politics*. Although it is this latter political dimension which is of interest to us here.

So since anarchists claim to have a conception of society which rejects domination but not the collective functions of the organisation of society (rejecting only the hierarchical forms and the implications of domination), it can perhaps be said that anarchists believe in a government/non-government, in a state/non-state, in a power/non-power. This only seems to be paradoxical since the first term in each pair refers to a neutral concept of the corresponding function, while the second refers to the actual function founded on a hierarchical principle.

For the State, too, it is necessary to be clear about what we really mean by this term. We do not mean the State as it has been historically configured, legitimised and rationalised, which anarchists have rightfully shown to be an exemplary form of modern domination, the central hierarchical institution of reality and of the social imaginary of the post-Enlightenment, but rather the State in

---

<sup>16</sup> See Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, Palo Alto, 1982.

having to simplify questions and the possible options to a binary level of yes/no. In such a case, whoever simplifies the question has in a certain sense already partly decided the answer. Not even in the best possible scenario can this be considered direct democracy in the true sense.

So over and above face-to-face democracy, there is inevitably a dimension of democracy which is in some way *indirect*, at least *in fact*. There are federal and confederal forms of “direct” democracy. As Bakunin said, “every organisation must work from the bottom up, from the commune to the central organ, the State, by the route of federation”.<sup>20</sup> And such federal and confederal forms must inevitably make use of some form of “representation” (the quotation marks are to distinguish it from the particular forms of representation familiar from representative democracy).

The form which anarchists have given to such “federal” representation (in both theory and practice) is an *imperative* and *revocable* mandate. This mandate can *at any time be revoked* by those “who gave it”, that is, through direct democracy in the strict sense. It is difficult, but not impossible, to imagine this “immediacy” even for second and third degree mandates (delegates elected by delegates and so on). But, *imperative?* The authority of the mandate comes with the fact that politics is also the art of mediation, of compromise, and the decision-making process (at all levels, from the local meeting, through to all the different levels of delegation) is one of compromise between opinions and interests that need not be opposing (although they sometimes are), as much as diverse. How then is it possible to find an equilibrium on the basis of authoritative, that is, *rigid* mandates? Only mandates that are reasonably flexible can produce a satisfactory compromise.

Among the three features of direct democracy which anarchists see as “necessary” (*unanimity*, *imperative* and *revocable* mandates) two at least are – if taken to the letter – difficult to reconcile (to

---

<sup>20</sup> Michail Bakunin, op. cit., p. 92.

## *The Scale*

Once we move beyond a certain numerical threshold (one hundred, five hundred, a thousand people?), direct democracy in the strict sense of face to face, democratic assemblies, no longer works. It cannot work, because for face-to-face democracy to work, those present at a meeting must know each other – at least a little – and have a certain degree of mutual trust. They must be able to talk in other situations as well and, last but not least, they must be able to contribute directly to the discussion, if they wish, leading up to a decision, as this is an integral part of the decision-making process.

Anyone with any experience of assemblies knows that beyond a certain dimension they tend to move closer to demagoguery than to direct democracy, with the majority of the “participants” in fact merely being present. In this way, the “public” changes from a deliberating people to spectators with varying degrees of interest and motivation, just like the audience of a spectacle (theatre, concert, cinema) or a football match. They are transformed from the *thing* to its *representation*, even if emotionally involved. Direct democracy becomes *represented* democracy.

Where does this threshold lie? This depends on many factors: the greater or lesser complexity of the subjects in question, the “democratic maturity” of the participants, their knowledge of the subjects, their psychological makeup, their willingness to be *really* involved in the decision-making process, and the relative homogeneity of their values and their *effective* interests. But whatever the circumstances, there is a threshold and it is not very high.

The long-lasting “utopian” experiment of the Israeli kibbutzim shows that the upper limit for a real directly democratic assembly is somewhere around a hundred persons. It is certainly far from hundreds of thousands. To gather this number of persons together in a stadium does not mean they will discuss a question and reach an agreement, seeking an acceptable compromise. Even putting a decision to the hypothetical electronic vote of a million people means

the sense of a “republic” (*res publica*,<sup>17</sup> the public domain), a term which the classics of anarchism used more than once in a neutral sense.

Words do of course very often carry heavy emotional and ideological connotations – and in this case, most certainly -, which is why anarchists prefer not to use in a neutral sense words like “government”, “State” and “power”, words which History has profoundly marked. In the same way, they reject the word “party” for their political organisations, even though these are undeniably forms of party/non-party. It is a party because it is a social group organised to pursue certain values and interests, but it is a non-party because it has no hierarchical structure and is not directed towards gaining power.

## *Forms of the Political*

Anarchists, even when they have wanted to go *beyond* politics, as we said and as we will see further on, they have not however refused to propose, both in words and deeds, forms of politics compatible (although not identifiable) with anarchism, understood as the absence/negation of domination. In the same way, in the economic field, even while recognising something *beyond* economics, they have always suggested economic forms which essentially boil down to what can be called *self-management*.

What then is the government/non-government that anarchists have proposed and propose for the political function of society?

The forms of the political proposed by them are essentially reducible to so-called *direct democracy*. Whatever Merlino may have said, democracy, even in its direct form, is not anarchism (and nor is self-management in the economic field). It is not true that the

---

<sup>17</sup> As E. Colombo shows (“Della polis e dello spazio sociale plebeo”, *Volontà*, n. 4, 1989), *publicus* is derived from *populicus*, i.e. “of the people”, which is clearly relevant to democracy.

power of all is at the same time the power of none, or at least not entirely true. There is still some measure of coercive power (or better, imperative power), even if only through moral sanctions. It is power *over* someone, not over no one.

So even the limited form of direct democracy, democracy that operates face-to-face and through unanimity (i.e. only through unanimous decisions), limited also by its *limited* area of practical functioning, is not necessarily anarchist in the fullest sense. It may *perhaps* be so in political terms, since theoretically there is no domination if each norm is decided upon and each decision is taken by all, and above all, by *every individual* concerned.

This distinction between all and every individual is important since for the anthropological type suggested as desirable for anarchism (what one author<sup>18</sup> has called the *communitarian individual*), “political sovereignty” does not lie with society or with the individual, but in the continual unresolved tension between the two. If the former prevails, even in a democratic form, it is tyranny. If the latter prevails, then there is disintegration and loss of sense. Anarchism is jealously individualist, but also generously communitarian. And it is perfectly aware that the individual, the *unique*, is also and inevitably a *social* product.

If everyone – to return to our subject – deliberates consciously and freely and, at the same time, respects the deliberations (not “obey”, notice) this is not the domination of one part of society, even less of “all” over the individual. I leave aside the problem, not insignificant theoretically, of norms established in the past and still in force due to social inertia, norms which an individual has not always joined in setting or approved of and which they cannot modify and which therefore represent a form of domination of the past over the present. But for the present we can leave this aside. So if everyone ... etc, sovereignty lies both and harmoniously in the individual and the collective. Direct democracy, on a theoretical

---

<sup>18</sup> Alan Ritter, *Anarchism: A Theoretical Analysis*, Cambridge, 1980, chap. II.

level and in its “purist” form, can reconcile the apparently irreconcilable.

However what we have outlined is a limit case, as used to be said. Unanimous direct democracy is only applicable to non-generalisable situations, that is, on a small level and with an extreme homogeneity of values and interests. Beyond this smallest dimension, delegation becomes essential. Without a strong homogeneity there must be a mechanism for decision making over and above unanimity.

If decisions were always and only *really* unanimous, very few would ever be taken, even within groups with a high level of social and cultural homogeneity. It is true that when there is a certain level of homogeneity and where there are no opposing interests, “unanimous” decisions can often be reached without any great difficulty or exhausting discussions as an individual (or a minority) may well withdraw their opposition to the opinions and so to the decisions of the majority. But is this not a particular (*consensual*) form of majority decision?

When the collective subject of decisions (whether composed by ten, one hundred or one thousand people...) is heterogeneous in terms of values and interests, unanimous decisions, even in the limited form described above, become difficult, if not impossible. It is then that the democratic mechanism of the majority comes to seem the lesser evil among the possible decision-making criteria. A lesser evil that is from the anarchist point of view. The majorities may be simple, absolute, qualified, even highly qualified (two thirds, four fifths, nine tenths...), but they are majorities nonetheless. When the anarchist Errico Malatesta replied to Merlino, who had accused him of having said that in certain situations a majority decision is better than none... he did so by accepting, in substance, the majority criteria.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> E. Malatesta, F.S. Merlino, *op. cit.*, pp. 42–43.