Anarchy and Democracy

Center for a Stateless Society

2017

Contents

June C4SS Mutual Exchange Symposium: Anarchy and Democracy (Cory Massimino)

June 1st, 2017

Mutual Exchange is the Center for a Stateless Society's effort to achieve mutual understanding through dialogue. Following one of the most divisive Presidential elections in recent U.S. American history and a dangerous victor's contested ascension to power, the political climate is one of intense ideological strife and disagreement. There is no better time to refocus at least some of our efforts on respectful and mutually beneficial discourse. Periodically delving into the weeds of complex theoretical topics to collaboratively experiment with ideas is not only necessary for individual and collective intellectual progress, but is part and parcel of anarchist praxis itself.

"Fighting over the definitions of words can sometimes seem like a futile and irrelevant undertaking. However, it's important to note that whatever language gets standardized in our communities shapes what we can talk and think about," says William Gillis in his lead essay of our June symposium. Indeed, rather than pointless "infighting" and social posturing, the Center for a Stateless Society hopes to create a platform for free expression that benefits authors and readers alike by productively clarifying our values and principles.

Whether or not any sort of resolution, consensus, or agreement results from our ensuing dialogue is, perhaps ironically, not the point. Ten anarchist authors have chosen to participate in an in-depth examination of the idea of "democracy" and how it relates to anarchy. I hope they are able to develop, advance, and popularize their individual ideas, but also set a standard for productive, yet diverse debate that is sorely needed right now.

Combining the Greek words demos ("common people") and kratos ("strength"), democracy means "rule of the commoners." The philosophical and political debates surrounding democracy extend back 2500 years to Ancient Athens. For much of recent history, many people consider democracy to be a cherished value to protect and spread across the globe, while many others see it as a privilege they hope to someday enjoy. Even others, from all over the political spectrum, see democracy as an enemy to be squashed.

This C4SS Mutual Exchange Symposium will explore what anarchists have to say about democracy. What is the historical relationship between democracy and anarchy? Is democracy always entwined with the state? What should anarchists think of democratic government? What are truly democratic values and how do they relate to anarchist values? How does democracy relate to market exchange and social organization? How should those interested in social change view democracy? How do causes like feminism, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and anti-capitalism relate to democracy?

It is no secret that a President Trump is reigniting debates surrounding democracy and democratic values among many commentators. What will a Trump presidency mean for democracy around the world and how should anarchists react? Moving forward in the 21st century it is imperative that we get to the roots of these nuanced debates so that we are better prepared to build the new world in the shell of the old, while also staying afloat in the stormy seas of authoritarianism, political violence, turbulent geopolitical alliances, and genocide.

The June C4SS Mutual Exchange Symposium features the Center's own William Gillis, Kevin Carson, Nathan Goodman, and Grayson English in addition to Shawn Wilbur, Wayne Price, Alexander Reid Ross, Gabriel Amadej, Derek Wittorff, and Jessica Flanagan. Every day this month

the Center will publish another entry in our ongoing conversation from one of the ten authors fleshing out their thoughts regarding the above questions and issues. Some essays will remain stand-alone contributions while others will provide back-and-forth commentary between multiple authors.

I look forward to seeing these prolific and nuanced writers hash out all their points of disagreement as well as agreement and hope you stay with the Center throughout the entire month to gain both theoretical and practical insights from our symposium.

Before the exchange kicks off tomorrow, June 2nd, here are some preliminary texts and resources related to the longstanding anarchist debate on democracy that I hope are useful going forward:

- *The Anarchist Critique of Democracy* – CrimethInc.
- *Are Anarchism and Democracy Opposed? A Response to CrimethInc.* – Wayne Price
- *Against Democracy* – Coordination of Anarchist Groups
- *Neither Democrats nor Dictators: Anarchists* – Errico Malatesta
- *An Anarchist Critique of Democracy* – Moxie Marlinspike and Windy Hart
- *Democracy is Direct* – Cindy Milstein
- *Occupy and Anarchism's Gift of Democracy* – David Graeber
- *Direct Action, Anarchism, Direct Democracy* – David Graeber
- *Down With the Law!* – Libertad
- *Anarchy and Democracy* – Robert Graham

Mutual Exchange is C4SS's goal in two senses: We favor a society rooted in peaceful, voluntary cooperation, and we seek to foster understanding through ongoing dialogue. Mutual Exchange will provide opportunities for conversation about issues that matter to C4SS's audience.

Online symposiums will include essays by a diverse range of writers presenting and debating their views on a variety of interrelated and overlapping topics, tied together by the overarching monthly theme. C4SS is extremely interested in feedback from our readers. Suggestions and comments are enthusiastically encouraged. If you're interested in proposing topics and/or authors for our program to pursue, or if you're interested in participating yourself, please email C4SS's Mutual Exchange Coordinator, Cory Massimino, at cory.massimino@c4ss.org.

1. The Abolition Of Rulership Or The Rule Of All Over All (William Gillis)

June 2nd, 2017

Fighting over the definitions of words can sometimes seem like a futile and irrelevant undertaking. However it's important to note that whatever language gets standardized in our communities shapes what we can talk and think about. So much of radical politics often boils down to acrimonious dictionary-pounding over words like "capitalism," "markets," "socialism," "communism," "nihilism," etc. Each side is usually engaged in bravado rather than substance. Radical debates turn into preemptive declarations of "everyone knows X" or "surely Y," backed by nothing more than the social pressure we can bring to bear against one another. And yet — to some degree — we're trapped in this game because acquiescing to the supposed authority of our adversaries' definitions would put us at an unspeakable disadvantage. The stakes of debates over "mere semantics" can be quite high, determining what's easy to describe and what's awkward or laborious.

Thus the partisan impulse is usually to define our adversaries out of existence: muddying their analytic waters, emphasizing any and all negative associations, and painting their conclusions as insane, verboten, or outgroup. At the same time we leap on any and all positive associations we can twist to serve our own ends. Debate over definitions is so often merely a game of social positioning: every word reverberating with the different associations of different audiences and thus what alliances you're declaring or managing to ascribe to your interlocutor. Language is a messy, complicated, and nebulous place where fallacious arguments are not only par for the course but often thought to be how the whole thing hangs together. In the worst corners of academia and "radical" politics this is embraced wholesale, where philosophy is reduced to mere poetry and cheap ploys of emotive resonance: batted back and forth with an underlying smug derision at the entire affair. "*Have you ever noticed that we use the same word for your job — your occupation — as we do for the occupation of Iraq?*" and this is somehow treated as insightful rather than doing violence to clarity and honesty.

Obviously my biases here — and social affiliations — are quite apparent. While there can be a place for rhetoric to convey emphasis and it is sometimes necessary to counter fire with fire, in general I find these opportunistic language games detestable. Whenever possible I prefer a subversive linguistic pluralism, happy to adopt the language of those I'm speaking to, declaring myself, for example, pro-"capitalism" or pro-"communism" in some contexts and against "capitalism" or against "communism" in others. If by "capitalism" some poor soul means nothing more than economic freedom then I'm fine adopting his tribe's language to reach him — the same holds true with "communism". Yet opportunities for such ecumenism are few and far between; even in those situations where we can escape tribal jockeying and arguments from popularity, such words almost always carry hidden baggage through their broader associations, with the explicit definition hiding the implicit conclusions of its wider use. When it comes to semantics, I'm of the opinion that our first step should always be to discard popular associations as much as possible and decipher what are the most illuminating or fundamental dynamics at play, *only then* attempting to realign or reserve our most basic words for the most rooted concepts. If our final mapping of concepts to terms is idiosyncratic or provocative, or if it strips away the full array of associations found in common use, then perhaps all the better.

While such an approach is often contentious, I believe that it offers a relatively nonpartisan compromise and starting point in definition debates. Let us hold off as much as possible on barraging each other with claims about what's more "authoritative," much less what can be leveraged as proof of such, and likewise abandon the negative and positive association-judo. We can always return to this after we've sorted out what sort of realities are even before us to map our vocabulary to. This offers us a certain efficiency, handling some quite heavy work at the start, but at least offering us something other than an endless quagmire going forward. More important though is the danger that jumbled interpretive networks or misaligned concepts pose when normalized. Terms that fail to cut reality at the joints can mislead and obscure, make some basic realities incredibly hard to state or address. In language we should seek depth, generality, and accuracy first and foremost, not mere rhetorical expedience. There is a place for the play of "interestingly" open interpretations but such hunger should not consume us and sever our capacity to act.

Democracy and Anarchy

In many contemporary western societies "democracy" retains positive (if nebulous) associations. Naturally, many activists have therefore repeatedly tried to latch onto that term and redirect it in narratives or analysis that line up with their own political aspirations. "You like chocolate, right? Well anarchism is basically extra chocolately chocolate. It's more chocolate than chocolate. It's like *direct* chocolate."

This opportunistic wordplay is at least self-aware, and such maneuverings seems fair game to many. After all, isn't "anarchy" a similarly nebulous word — a site of contention and redefinition?

Yet I'd argue that the situations are quite different. The fight over "anarchy" is an inescapable one for anarchists because the world we want will never be obtainable as long as the term's historical definition goes unchallenged. In every language that touched ancient Greek, "anarchy" bundles together the explicit definition of "without rulership" with the implicit definition of "fractured rulership" (what should really be called 'spasarchy') in a nasty Orwellianism that makes the concept of a world without domination unspeakable and often unthinkable. We have a term for the abolition of power relations and we use it instead to refer to chaotic, violent, dog-eat-dog situations of strong (albeit decentralized) power relations. In short, the fight over the definition of "anarchy" is a battle to untangle an existing knot.

On the other hand, "democracy" tends to stand for majority rule and etymologically for the rule of all over all. If there is an Orwellianism at play it is seems to me one of being *too* charitable to the term, sneaking in associations of freedom when one is in fact describing a particular flavor of tyranny. A situation more akin to "war is peace" than the "freedom is slavery" is at play with "anarchy."

Honest proponents of democracy can of course contend that such an "ideal" would look nothing like our contemporary world and so the characterization of our nation states as "democracies" misrepresents what true democracy would actually be. But it would still be a dystopia to anarchists. "Rulership by the populace" is clearly a concept irreconcilable with "without rulership" unless one has atrophied to the point of accepting the nihilism of liberalism and its mewling belief in the inescapability of rulership. Or perhaps even going so far as to join with fascists and other authoritarians who silence their conscience with the ideological assertion that one cannot even limit power relations, only rearrange them.

Etymology isn't destiny but it does carry a strong momentum and corrective force. I'm not sure why we should feel obliged to fight an uphill battle to redefine "democracy" in a direction consistent with anarchist aspirations. And in any case, from an abstract distance it seems wasteful to assign two terms to the same concept.

Those claiming that democracy and anarchy can be reconciled seem to either be rhetorical opportunists — gravely mistaken about what they can and should leverage — or else they seem gravely out of alignment with anarchism's aspirations, treating "without rulership" not as a guiding star but a noncommittal handwave.

Perhaps this is today the regrettable consequence of a few decades of anarchist recruitment from activist ranks, a conveyor belt that has sadly often resulted in the most shallow of conversions. Rather than a fervent ethical opposition to rulership, we've often settled for merely instilling a mild distaste for collaboration with the existing state on leftists, sometimes going no deeper than "you want to accomplish X with your activism but have you noticed that the state is in your way?" This has led to generations of activists — many I count as close friends — who have never considered how they might achieve their standard collection of leftist desires like universal health care in the absence of a state. When pressed they invariably describe a state apparatus, squirming in recognition and cognitive dissonance. "*Oh, sure I'm describing a centralized body wielding coercive force and issuing edicts, but it wouldn't be, you know, The State… because, like, well it wouldn't systematically kill black people at the hands of the police.*" Such an anemic analysis of the state's crimes never ceases to be shocking. Just as the gutless defanging of anarchism's radical ethical hunger and dismemberment of its philosophical roots to a mere political platform is invariably depressing.

Let us be clear; if anarchy means anything of substance then many of these people are not really anarchists. At least not yet! They do not believe anarchy is achievable or even thinkable. And this is reflected in their own frequent aversion and/or equivocation in relation to the term "anarchy," gravitating more to some positive associations they have seen made with it than the underlying concept of a world truly without rulership. Compared to our present society they want the things often associated with anarchism without the core that draws them. I was — for a time — hopeful that such individuals would move to the much more open term "horizontalist." In truth they'd be better described as minarchist social democrats, who want a cuddlier, friendlier, flatter, more local and responsive state that makes people feel like happy participants and doesn't engage in world historic atrocities.

Yet for those of us who have tasted the prospect of a world *without* rulership, this is simply a difference in degree of dystopia. If it truly were possible to achieve some kind of enlightened social democracy without wealth inequality, systematic disenfranchisement of minorities, and with some decentralization of state function, anarchists would still go to the barricades because *this is not enough.*

If anarchism is to mean anything of substance, it is surely not merely an opening bid from which you are happy to settle. Anarchy doesn't stand for small amounts of domination: it stands for no domination. Although our approach to that ideal will surely be asymptotic, the whole point of anarchism is to actually pursue it rather than give up and settle for some arbitrary "good enough" half-measure. Such tepid aspirations is what has historically defined liberals and social democrats in contrast to us.

But it's important to go further, because "democracy" doesn't solely pose a danger of half-measures but also of a unique dimension of authoritarianism. A pure expression of "the rule of

all over all" could be a hell of a lot worse than "Sweden with Neighborhood Assemblies." The etymology itself seems to best reflect a nightmare scenario in which everyone constrains and dominates everyone else. If we seek to match words to the most distinct and coherent concepts then perhaps the truest expression of "demo-cracy" would be a world where everyone is chained down by everyone else, tightening our grip on our neighbors just as they in turn choke the freedom from our lungs.

To be sure few proponents of "democracy" specifically define it as "the rule of all over all." There are many distinct dynamics that folks single out and focus on, but none of these definitions directly address the problem of rulership itself.

Democracy as Majority Rule

The most conventional definition of democracy among the wider populace is today quite rare in anarchist circles. At this point "majority rules" is rarely advocated by anyone in my experience outside some old fogies in the underdeveloped backwaters of the anarchist world like the British Isles, and its use in ostensibly anarchist meetings or organizations now rises to moderately scandalous. But it's maybe worth reiterating that majority rule can be deeply oppressive to minorities. If 51% of your neighborhood committee votes to eat the other 49% alive, that's a hell of a lot worse than a situation without majority rules where one person refuses to mow their lawn and thus unilaterally inflicts their malaesthetic on the rest of the neighborhood.

Proponents of such tyranny by the majority love to pretend that the only alternative is "tyranny by the minority." But anarchist theory is all about removing the structures and means by which rulership can be asserted or expressed *by anyone*, majority or minority.

This is probably not the place to list them all like some kind of 101 course, but one example is superempowering technologies like guns that asymmetrically make resistance more efficient than domination. Such technologies are directly responsible for the increase of liberty over recent history. In an era where capital intensive undertakings like trained knights on horseback trumped anything else, you got rulership by elites; when the best weapons are one-kill-averaging soldiers, you just line up your troops and the one with the biggest count can be expected to win. But high-ammunition guns give every individual a veto against the lynch mob outside their door, allowing guerrillas to impede empires that vastly outscale them in capital. Technologies like the printing press and internet function similarly. And on the other side of the coin, the infrastructural extent and dependent nature of modern technologies of control or domination makes them brittle against resistance, easily prey to acts of disruption and sabotage. These tools — along with technologies of resilience and self-sufficiency — allow individuals to reject the capricious edicts of anyone, be they a minority or a majority.

Ideally anarchists seek to highlight and strengthen such dynamics with the political approaches we take, treating everyone like they have the most powerful of vetoes, capable of destroying everything, of grinding everything to a halt if they are truly intolerably imposed upon. This focus on individuals stops "the community" or other beasts from running rampant, forcing a detente tolerable for all parties. Such truces are far more likely to be attentive to the severity of individual desires, because "one vote per person" is incapable of reflecting just how much a person has at stake: something we could never hope to make objective and would be laughable to try to have a collective body legislate.

What norms fall out of such an assumption of veto powers are complex (and I've argued left market property norms are likely to be one) but at the center is always freedom of association. The consensus society is one primarily comprised of autonomous realms so that individuals can minimize conflict between their swinging fists and maximize the positive freedoms provided by collaboration. But note also the psychological norms. Majority rule treats people as means to whatever ends you want (rallying a large enough army at the polls), whereas a consensus detente can never lose sight of the fact that people are agents with their own particular desires. There is no subsumption of one's subjective desires into merely being "one of the vote-losers", a bloc rendered homogeneous and dehumanized by such democracy.

Okay agree some, but maybe we can say that consensus itself is democracy?

Democracy as Consensus

This is probably the most charitable way of framing "democracy" but here too are deep problems.

There's a massive difference between consensus that's arrived at through free association, and consensus that's arrived because people are locked into some collective body to some degree. Often what passes for "consensus" within anarchist activist projects is merely consensus within the prison of a reified organization. Modern anarchists are still quite bad at embracing the fluidity of truly free association, and we cling to familiar edifices. Our organizations reassure us insofar as they function like the state, simplistic monoliths that exist outside of time and beyond the changing desires and relations of their constituent members.

Truly anarchist approaches to consensus would prioritize making the collectivity organic and ad hoc, an arrangement that prioritizes individual choice in every respect. Not just the prospect or potential of choice but the active use of it.

This would mean adopting an unterrified attitude about dissolution and reformation, learning new habits and growing new muscles that have atrophied in the totalitarian reference frame of our statist world. As it now stands, the prospect of going separate ways on a thing if we can't reach consensus on a single collectively unified path strikes absolute fear into the hearts of most.

For consensus to be truly anarchistic we must be willing to consense upon autonomy, to shed off our reactionary hunger for established perpetual collective entities. Otherwise consensus will erode back in the direction of majority rules, individuals feeling obliged to tolerate decisions lest they break the uniformity of the established collective. Almost everyone of this generation is quite familiar with the general assemblies of Occupy that endlessly and fruitlessly fought over essentially just what actions would be formally endorsed under a local Occupy's brand. Clearly in many cases we should have just gone our separate ways, working out not a single blueprint but a tolerable treaty to allow us to undertake separate projects or actions. The brand provided by The General Assembly was a centralization too far, creating such a high value real estate that everyone was obliged to fight to seize it. Surely anarchists should resist the formation of such black holes.

Okay, but regardless of the size and permanence of the collectives involved, maybe democracy is just collective decision-making itself?

Democracy as Collective Decision-making

While there are unfortunately many pragmatic contexts on Earth that oblige a degree of collective decision-making, it's dangerous to fetishize collective decision-making itself.

Many young leftist activists get caught with a bug that suggests the core problems with our world are those of "individualism" by which they mean a kind of psychopathic self-interest that is inattentive to others. The solution, this bug tells them, is to do everything collectively. To stomp out anti-social perspectives by obliging social participation. If we all go to meetings together then we'll become more or less friends.

The unspoken transmutation they appeal to is one where extraversion and being enmeshed in social interactions will somehow suppress selfish desires. Of course in reality the opposite is often true. The most altruistic people in the world are often introverted individuals who prefer to act alone and the most psychopathic predators are often those most at home manipulating a web of social relations.

Many leftists are scarred by the alienating social dynamics of our society and seek meetings as a kind of structured socializing time to make friends and conjure a sense of belonging to a community, but this is absolutely not the same thing as engendering a sense of altruism or empathy. If anything collective meetings are horrible draining experiences that scar everyone involved and only partially satiate the most isolated and socially desperate. Like a starving person eating grass, the nutrition is never good enough and so the activist becomes trapped in endless performative communities, going to endless group meetings to imperfectly reassure base psychological needs rather than efficaciously change the world for the better. (I say such cutting words with all the love and sympathy of someone who's nevertheless persisted as an activist and organizer attempting to do shit for almost two decades.) Collective decision-making itself is no balm or salve to the horrors that plague this world.

But that's not even the worst of it. Collective decision-making is itself fundamentally constraining. It frequently makes situations worse in its attempt to make decisions as a collective rather than autonomously as networked individuals.

The processing of information is the most important dynamic to how our societies are structured. A boss in a large firm for example appoints middle managers to filter and process information because a raw stream of reports from the shop floor would be too overwhelming for his brain to analyze. There are many ways in which aspects of the flow of information constrain social organizations, but when it comes to collective decision-making the most relevant thing is the vast difference between the complexity our brains are capable of holding and the small trickle of that complexity we are capable of expressing in language. As a rule, individuals are better off with the autonomy to just act in pursuit of their desires rather than trying to convey them in their full unknowable complexity. But when communication is called for it's far far more efficient to speak in pairs one-on-one, and let conclusions percolate organically into generality. "Collective" decision-making almost always assumes a discussion with more than two people — a collective — in an often incredibly inefficient arrangement where everyone has to put their internal life in stasis and listen to piles of other people speak one at a time. The information theoretic constraints are profound.

If collective decision-making is supposed to provide us with the positive freedoms possible through collaboration, it offers only the tiniest fraction of what is usually actually possible. That there are occasionally situations so shitty that collective decisionmaking is requisite does not

mean anarchists should worship or applaud it. And one would be hardpressed to classify something far more general like *collaboration* itself as "democracy".

Okay, but maybe we can reframe democracy as an ethics?

Democracy As "Getting a Say in the Things That Affect You"

It got particularly popular in the 90s to frame anarchy as a world where everyone gets a say in the things that affect them. And for a time this seemed to nicely establish anarchism as a kind of unterrified feminism. But let's be real: there are plenty of things that massively affect you that you should have no vote over. Whether or not your crush goes out with you should entirely be at their own discretion. Freedom of association is quite often sharply at odds with "getting a say over things that affect you."

This may seem in conflict with the moral we drew from our discussion of consensus and the necessity to create a detente grounded in a respect for individual vetoes, but it's important to remember that we weren't settling for the naive first-order resolution where anyone strongly affected by something sets off a nuke. There's a kind of meta-structure that emerges in any network of people upon consideration. The detentes we ultimately gravitate to involve certain more abstract norms, that are more generally useful to all than their violation in specific instances. Respect for freedom of association is one such very strongly emergent norm.

And in any case the goal of anarchists is freedom, we champion a decentralized world — among other conditions — precisely so that it might dramatically increase our freedom, not chain us down. This means at the very least cultivating a culture of live and let live when someone blocks you on Twitter rather than setting the world ablaze because you feel entitled to their attention.

Similarly if everyone in your generation starts using Snapchat — which you dislike — that puts you at a disadvantage: such an emergent norm clearly affects you in a negative way. But this doesn't and shouldn't give you cause to bring your peers before the city council and demand that Snapchat be outlawed. The norms of freedom of association, freedom of information, and bodily autonomy cleave out distinct realms of action that can affect third parties immensely yet should not — barring absolutely extreme situations — be dictated or constrained by them. Every invention and discovery changes the world but you don't get to vote against the propagation of truth, however disruptive it might be to your life.

Okay, but maybe we can reframe democracy as not as any kind of system but as a demographic?

Democracy as "The Rabble"

In recent times David Graeber has re-popularized the historical association of "democracy" with large underclasses. And it's true that in certain points in history "democracy" served alongside "anarchy" as a boogeyman of the horrors they were claimed would arise if the ruling elites lost their stranglehold on the populace.

Certainly we anarchists leap to defend the unwashed masses from those sneering elites. The prospect that the rabble would demolish the elites' positions of power or get up to dirty and uncouth things with their freedom is something we embrace. But just because we despise those who despise "the rabble" doesn't mean we should embrace any and all mobs or the concept of

"the mob" itself. The positives that can be wrestled from this use of the term surely aren't worth explicitly opening the door to "mobocracy".

This archaic use of "democracy" has obvious subversive potential in our present world, flipping the positive affect built around "democracy" by our current rulers and returning it to those in conflict with them. But anarchists are not blind proponents of "the masses" in any and all situations, something this rhetorical opportunism would lock us into. The masses can be horrifically wrong, and what is popularly desired can be quite unethical. It's not vanguardism to resist pogroms or work to thwart the genocidal ambitions of majorities like in Rwanda. There are endless examples of "the masses" seeking to dominate, and our goal as anarchists is not to pick sides but to make such rulership impossible or at the very least *costly*.

Anarchists aren't engaged in team sports; while we often defend underdogs in specific contexts, we're not out to back one demographic against another in any kind of fundamental way.

Okay, but does "democracy" still have a role as a transitory state?

Democracy as a Transitory State

This is a complicated issue because obviously it depends on a host of abstract and practical particulars. We've covered a lot of different definitions one encounters among apologists for "democracy" in anarchist circles, and what I've tried to highlight among all of them is both a lack of any explicit anti-authoritarianism as well as a series of lurking problems that risk warping things in an authoritarian direction.

In some situations, certain things going by the name "democracy" would likely pose half-steps in the direction of anarchism. The replacement of a feudal lord with a village assembly would almost certainly be an improvement. We can get distracted with concerns about possible failure modes and lose sight of what's actually happening on the ground. Just because the democratic processes of Rojava could theoretically bend in a more sharply nationalistic or racially oppressive direction doesn't mean that they actually are. There are many situations where participatory democracy represents a major step forward, even something anarchists should fight for with our lives.

But when democracy is idealized — when it's generalized or elevated as an ideology rather than as a pragmatic strategy in a specific context — things gets dangerous. The risk of such idealization is inherent to its use. And oftentimes democracy serves as a half-measure that actually impedes further progress. The Chomskyian strategy of compromise and "incremental steps" that secure bread today can actually further entrench power structures while providing minor ameliorations.

Democracy is in almost every definition a kind of centralization and such centralization pulls everything under its control. Just as with other types of states, once you establish a centralized system with far-reaching capacity it starts to become more efficient for individual agents to try to do everything through the state: to capture it for your ends rather than working to build solutions from the roots up outside of it. Even those with sharp anarchist ideals start feeling the pressure to go to the General Assembly rather than doing things outside of it as actual agents.

Like shooting people, in our messy and deeply dystopian world democracy may sometimes be necessary and strategic, but as anarchists our every inclination and instinct should be to avoid such means by default, to only cede to them kicking and screaming, and never cease feeling distaste. We must not lose sight of our ideals and even as we can only asymptotically approach them

we must still attempt to asymptotically approach *them* rather than asymptotically approaching some halfway point.

And of course let us not forget that a world where say a social democrat like Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn gets their way might even actually end up *worse* than our present horrorshow. Liberal and socialist policies have a long history of making worse the things they were supposedly out to fix.

Okay, but isn't that unfair since the whole point is direct democracy?

A Note About "Directness"

It's annoying how often young activists attempt to create a spectrum of democracy with varying levels of mediation or representation that places anarchy as synonymous with the most direct democracy. It's true that depending upon a representative to speak on your behalf is an insanely inefficient approach — anyone who's dealt even just with spokescouncils pooling few dozen people knows this. We know that due to the shallow bandwidth of human language, conversation itself is ridiculously inefficient at a means of conveying the fullness of our internal desires and perspectives, so delegating to someone else with only the vaguest of outlines of what you want is surely much worse.

But what I find particularly pernicious about the reduction of anarchism to a mere "direct" qualifier on "democracy" is that it plays into a fetishization of immediacy that has already ideologically metastasized among anarchists, indeed often among those more insurrectionary or individualist figures on the other side of the debate over "democracy". The issue with representation in my mind isn't the lack of immediacy but a matter of limits to the flow of information. It's a subtle but crucial difference.

A number of anarchists or former anarchists have in recent years increasingly grown to treat immediacy as the secret sauce — the very definition of freedom. This stems from a philosophical confusion over what freedom is and a very continental or psychological focus upon emotional affect, focusing on a phenomenological experience they associate with "freedom" — that is to say a kind of spontaneity or impulsive reaction rather than reflection (since in our present world reflection often brings to attention just how constrained we actually are). To consider an action is precisely to chain it through a series of mediations, to filter and parse it. It's important to note that the reactionary approach smothers one's internal complexity, ultimately reducing an agent to a mere billiard ball. When treated as an ideal, immediacy necessarily involves the suppression of consciousness and thus of choice.

The problem with collective decisionmaking isn't that the discrete deliberative bodies involved process information or ponder choices, but that such arrangements are ridiculously inefficient at it compared to individual autonomy: an embrace of the full agency of their constituents. A more organic network of reflective individuals would provide more choice — that is to say more freedom.

Against All Rulership, Always

To people in the trenches just trying to grab whatever weapons they find useful, all this philosophical criticism of "democracy" no doubt appears to be an ungainly impediment. But anarchism is not a pragmatic project myopically concerned only with what can be won here and now. Our

most famous triumphs have been our foresight — often our predictions of dangers to come from various stripes of "pragmatism" and "immediacy." Anarchism is a philosophy of infinite horizons, taking the longest and widest possible scope. An ethical philosophy of stunning and timeless audacity, not some historical artifact trapped in a limited set of concerns. This sweeping consideration is what enabled us to correctly predict the failures of Marxism, and it's a tradition worth maintaining. Bakunin's denouncement of Marx took place in a context long before Kronstadt and all the atrocities that would eventually become popularly synonymous with Marxism. Such "abstract philosophy" and non-immediacy split the ranks of those fighting against the capitalist order, weakening what they could bring to bear in the service of workers' lives that very minute. And yet the world is clearly all the better for it. Thanks to the anarchist schism with Marxism, the struggle for freedom was able to survive.

I'm not saying that a system of direct democratic town councils are going to be set up somewhere in the world tomorrow under the banner of "direct democracy" and turn genocidal or into some kind of totalitarian small town nightmare, but every take on "democracy" is nevertheless pretty distant from anarchy and thus unlikely to stay true. When your ideal isn't pointed at freedom itself it's only a matter of time before the runaway compounding processes of domination warp its path.

I am, at the end of the day, happy to grimace slightly and move along when some comrade I'm working with spouts something about "more democratic than democracy!" just as I'm capable of biting my tongue with the sincere but confused trapped in Marxist or anarcho-capitalist languages. Semantic battles are not the be-all and end-all, but attempts to appropriate the general goodwill towards "democracy" have yet to latch onto any underlying concepts worth validating. It seems to me that a far better practice is to stick somewhere close to the etymology of the word (the rule of all over all) and its near universal associations (majority rule).

One might object on the semantic grounds that it's better to assign our words to their most positive possible interpretations, but I do think it's important to have words for bad things, to be able to describe the array of possibilities we oppose with any sort of detail. It's important to be able to see and comprehend the various flavors oppressive systems can take. Even if we don't presently live in a full-blown democracy with all the horrors of a true domination of all over all, it's still an illuminating extreme and one that I think warrants highlighting.

Anarchism's uniqueness is that it doesn't seek to equalize rulership but to demolish it, a radical aspiration that cuts through the assumptions of our dystopian world. Anarchism isn't about achieving a *balance* of domination — assuring that each person gets 5.2 milliHitlers of oppression each — but about *abolishing* it altogether.

2. Democracy, Anarchism, & Freedom (Wayne Price)

June 3rd, 2017

> *"As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."*
>
> *—Abraham Lincoln*

"Democracy" and "anarchism" are broad, vague, and hotly contested terms. Even if we stick to specific definitions, there are still arguments about what these definitions mean in practice.

(Lincoln's quotation, above, seems to be about the preconditions for democracy.) This is not just a linguistic dispute. The argument is not just over "democracy" but over democracy, not just over "anarchism" but over anarchism. Still more controversial is the relationship between these two broad terms.

I will use the definition of "democracy" as "rule of the commoners"—a definition going back to classical Greece. The "commoners" were both the majority of the population and the lower classes (of free, native-born, males, in ancient Greece). By "anarchism" I mean total opposition to the state, to capitalism (but not necessarily to the market), and to all other forms of oppression. This is pretty broad, but it rules out "anarcho-capitalists," not to mention "national anarchists" (fascists).

On the relation between anarchism and democracy, anarchists have held varying opinions (those who addressed the issue, anyway). Many reject "democracy." Mainly they make two arguments. One is that "democracy" is the official ideology and rationalization of most capitalist states today. They do not wish to support this ideology, the main justification for the modern state. Instead, they wish to expose it and oppose it, advocating "anarchism" as the goal. (They do not necessarily deny the advantages of living under a capitalist democracy, as opposed to fascism or Stalinism, say. But they point out that even the best capitalist democracy is still really a form of rule by an elite minority of capitalists and their agents.)

The other main argument raised by these anarchists is that anarchism, by definition, rejects all forms of domination. This means domination of the many by the few, but also of the few by the many (the "commoners," the working class, the "people"). Since "democracy" means a form of rule, then anarchists must reject it, they argue.

Anarchism is Democracy without the State

However, there are other anarchists who regard themselves as supporters of democracy. They claim that anarchism is the most extreme, radical, form of democracy. This is my view (I have written two essays on this topic; see Price 2009; 2016). I see both "democracy" and "anarchism" as requiring decision-making by the people, from the bottom-up, through cooperation, clashes of opinion, social experimentation, and group intelligence.

But "democracy" means collective decision-making. It does not apply to matters which are of individual or minority concern only, such as individual sexual orientation, religion, or artistic taste. Free choice should rule here, whatever the majority thinks.

Democratic anarchists recognize that "democracy" is used as an ideological cover for the rule of a capitalist elite (it is still the "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie"). The ideal of "democracy" is contradicted by the reality of the state and capitalism. In fact, the capitalists have never lived up to their "democratic" program. This contradiction could be used to challenge the system, to expose its fraudulent claim to be "democratic," to justify opposition to the real state. Almost no one in the U.S. is for "anarchism" or even "socialism," but almost everyone is "for" "democracy." *Why not* use the ideal against the reality?

Actually the capitalists limit their claim of "democracy" to the government apparatus. They do not claim that their economy is democratic. Instead they justify their corporations (totalitarian in their internal organization) by using the rationalization of "freedom," specifically the "free market." Anarchists make a *revolutionary challenge to capitalism* by advocating a democratic

economy. (For example, a federation of worker-run industries, consumer co-ops, and collective communes.)

Even those anarchists who reject "democracy" because of its ideological use by the capitalists usually advocate "freedom" or "liberty." But these terms are just as much ideological watchwords of capitalist society, used constantly to justify its un-free reality. If it is all right to use "freedom" against the false proponents of freedom, then it is all right to use "democracy" against the pretended advocates of democracy.

Secondly, these anarchists deny that anarchism contradicts "democracy" in principle. They point out that virtually all the anti-"democracy" anarchists advocate "self-rule," "self-governing," and "self-management." These terms are no different than "direct democracy" and "participatory democracy."

If everyone is involved in *governing* (participatory democracy), then there is no *government*—no special institution over society which rules people. Anarchists are not against all social coordination, community decision-making, and protection of the people. They are generally for some sort of association of workplace committees and neighborhood assemblies. They are for the replacement of the police and military by an armed people (a democratic militia, so long as that is necessary). This is *the self-organization of the people*—of the former working class and oppressed population, until the heritage of class divisions and oppression has been dissolved into a united population.

In short, *what anarchists are against is not social organization but the state.* The state is a bureaucratic-military socially-alienated organization of special forces (professional politicians and armed people). It stands above and against the rest of society. Anarchists want to abolish the state. They do not believe in the possibility of a "transitional state" or a "workers' state." The self-organization of the people, through popular assemblies and associations, needs to be democratic (self-managing). *Anarchism is democracy without the state.* The people themselves must be able to manage all of society from below.

Does Democracy Require Domination?

Does this radical democracy still mean the coercion or domination of some people by others? Let us imagine an industrial-agricultural commune under anarchism. Some member proposes that it build a new road. People have differing opinions. A decision will have to be made; either the road will be built or it won't (this is coercion by reality, not by the police). Suppose a majority of the assembly decides in favor of road-building. A minority disagrees. Perhaps it is outvoted (under majority rule). Or perhaps it decides to "stand aside" so as not to "block consensus" (under a consensus system).

Is the minority coerced? Its members have participated fully in the community discussions which led up to the decision. They have been free to argue for their viewpoint. They have been able to organize themselves (in a caucus or "party") to fight against building the road. In the end, the minority members retain full rights. They may be in the majority on the next issue. (Of course, dissatisfied members may leave the community and go elsewhere. But other communities also have to decide whether to build roads.)

The minority may be said to have been coerced on this road-building issue, but I do not see this situation as one of domination. It is not like a white majority consistently dominating its African-American minority. In a stateless system of direct democracy, all participate in decision-

making, even if all individuals are not always satisfied with the outcome. In any case, the aim of anarchism is not to end absolutely all coercion, but to reduce coercion to the barest minimum possible. *Institutions of domination* must be abolished and replaced by bottom-up democratic-libertarian organization. But there will never be a perfect society. This is why I began by defining "anarchism" as a society without the state, capitalism, or other institutions of domination.

Conclusion

These issues are of vital importance under the Presidency of Donald Trump, with its right-wing direction, and the fierce fight-back against it (the "Resistance"). Supporters of Trump claim his right to attack the people and the environment due to his election—this is "democracy" they say. But his popular opponents also appeal to "democracy" in order to de-legitimize him ("Not My President!"). They note that he lost the popular vote, that there was voter suppression of People of Color, and interference in the election by the FBI and by Russian agencies. But their political strategy is still electoral, to elect Democrats. This is an excellent time for revolutionary anarchists to identify with the fight for democracy, even while rejecting the supposedly "democratic" capitalist system which brought Trump about.

There are broader questions of anarchism and democracy which I am not discussing here. How to form effective federations and networks while still rooting them in face-to-face democracy in the workplace and community? How to resolve conflicts of interest and opinion through intelligent discussion? Such issues will be dealt with pluralistically through experience and experimentation. A society based on radical democracy and freedom will not be perfect. But it will give humanity a chance to live productively, freely, and happily.

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3. Democracy: Self-Government or Systemic Powerlessness? (Derek Wittorff)

June 4th, 2017

Democracy: the universal war cry of justice. We're told by the left — both moderate and radical — that all socio-political problems almost always arise from a pure *lack* of democracy. We're told all social manifestations of authority, inequality, and hierarchy require democracy as a political solution. If there happens to be some kind of democracy in a society, and there remains the problem of hierarchy, the problem is always attributed to there not being *direct* democracy, or that there isn't free association between individuals and collectives. Either representatives of an *indirect* democracy are corrupting the very function of the system, and acting in their own personal interests (which is generally how republican systems devolve into a plutocracy), or the freedom of others to leave the collective if they don't like it, ironically the "like it or leave it" motto usually held by conservatives when addressing political dissidents and immigrants, isn't being upheld and enforced.

Most libertarian socialists tend to believe that freedom of association, or decentralism, is a cornerstone of a well-functioning democracy. They believe that individuals must first consent to the democratic decision-making of the collective by association, and that the potential choice to disassociate rules out the imposition of such majoritarian decision-making on the minority. At first glance, this appears to be fairly reasonable and consistent with libertarian socialist criticisms of the State. However, what is grossly overlooked are the internal dynamics of democracy and fundamental inquiry as to whether democratic organizing principles *per se* are libertarian and egalitarian in nature. Does freedom of association institutionally prevent the majority forcibly expropriating the power of the minority? Is democracy technically anarchist?

Anarchy, by definition, means "no rulers" or self-rulership in the most distributed sense: rule of each by each ("each" according to anarchist sociology includes both collectives and individual persons). It is the political opposition to all social hierarchy and centralized authority. Democracy is by definition "rule of commoners" which is assumed to be personified by the majority (i.e. rule of all by the majority). I believe that these two forms of decision-making are irreconcilable. Anarchist sociology (adhering to Proudhonist theories of individual sovereignty, collective force, social contract, and federation) while being heavily influenced by classical liberal notions of free association, ultimately went further in its social analysis to conclude that "the people" was too general a concept and didn't involve enough individual and collective sovereignty necessary for freedom from the State. Collectives and persons may be individual products of "the people" as this monolithic concept of the masses, but recognizing the autonomy of each to determine how best to compose "the people" was key in the formulation of anarchist notions of justice, equality, liberty, freedom, peace etc. The liberal notion of "the people" can just as easily include a minority of politicians, military personnel, and capitalists as much as it attempts to exclude them, in the name of granting commoners power, because of failed liberal institutional analysis of State and Capital. As Proudhon critiqued in *Solutions to the Social Problem*[1]:

> *"The sovereignty of the nation is the first principle of both monarchists and democrats. Listen to the echo that reaches us from the North: on the one hand, there is a despotic king who invokes national traditions, that is, the will of the People expressed and confirmed over the centuries. On the other hand, there are subjects in the revolt who maintain that the People no longer think what they formerly did and who ask that the People be consulted. Who then shows here a better understanding of the People? The monarchs who believe that their thinking is immutable, or the citizens who suppose them to be versatile? And when you say the contradiction is resolved by progress, meaning that the People go through various phases before arriving at the same idea, you only avoid the problem: who will decide what is progress and what is regression? Therefore, I ask as Rousseau did: "If the People have spoken, why have I heard nothing?""*

Anarchism seemingly radicalized the concepts of free association and decentralization to its logical extreme and therefore destroyed the theoretical legitimacy of a liberal democratic State.

Many anarchists believe, particularly after the hegemonization of anarchist communism after the Black International, that anarchy (rule of each by each) was best expressed by communism

[1] Chapter 2: Solutions to the Social Problem. (2011). In P.-J. Proudhon, & I. McKay (Ed.), *Property is Theft!* (p. 3). AK Press.

(rule of all by all), and that some form of democracy is *de facto* necessary to synthesize both communism and anarchism. However, the practice of communism, if not politically consistent with anarchism, may conflict with anyone's conception of liberty, equality, freedom, unity etc. That's why I believe that democratic measures fail to reconcile the two philosophies. Not everyone could have access to the capital of everyone else at any given time. There would be unresolvable conflicts that only a bureaucratic ruling class, practically absolved from all blowback of its imposing statecraft, could try to solve by forcing others to share and be subordinated to the Collective Democratic Will. Nonetheless, as all anarchists know, that process of centralization institutionalizes unresolvable social conflicts that inevitably ends in war. Authoritarian communism has proven a historical and ethical failure.

In my opinion, there seems to be a theoretical antagonism between the idea of communism and decentralism, *particularly* if democracy is the governing principle aimed at developing some kind of synthesis. To give anarchist communists some credit, not all support democracy, and even those that do maintain a belief that this community would be approximated by means of federalism. "Full communism" is indeed an ideal that cannot be immediately and perfectly attained, and democratically operated collectives would eventually federate to and break down conventional barriers to access *between* collectives to best attain it. I criticize this practice based on the topic of this paper. Simply put, *democratically* operated collectives wouldn't be able to federate in a way that destroys all barriers to access because the power dynamics of democracy internal to a collective maintain a different set of barriers to access. Namely, the barriers to access would be drawn between the activity and resources of the minority and the majority when a certain proposal is adopted, a given direction solidified, and a collective goal determined. This is essentially *systemic powerlessness*, a distinct form of oppression, and federating those systems institutionalizes the barriers on a massive scale to the virtual effect of a State. Freedom of association is *not* a remedy for power dynamics *internal* to a collective; it is only a remedy for those power dynamics *shared* between collectives. Free consent, or giving permission to be ruled, is not the same as mutually agreeing upon how to rule ourselves, or freely choosing to rule oneself. Majoritarianism is hierarchical and antithetical to anarchy, and no amount of decentralization can change that.

It seems that the anarchist notion of radical decentralization may have delegitimized the idea of the liberal democratic State, but it didn't necessarily go so far as to delegitimize the idea of democracy in our minds altogether. Maybe our ideas of decentralization weren't radical enough: an idea I'll explore later in this piece. Even in the absence of the State — a centralized monopoly on oppressive violence — the idea that freedom of consent alone necessarily presents the greatest degree of anarchy *within* a democratically operated collective is totally absurd. Ironically, this argument sounds like the "anarcho-capitalist" narrative that capitalist hierarchies are fully capable of being anarchist if they are not enforced as the dominant mode of organization by the State. This narrative holds that competition (i.e. free association with some capitalist connotations) on the free market ensures that no one would be forced to join a business through some kind of state, and that this *somehow* means that absolute authority of the capitalist over their wage-laborers, *in the specific context* of that capitalist business, or within the *territorial monopoly on oppressive and violent force* of the capitalist's property, is technically anarchist. Nevermind whether competition eventually dissolves capitalist businesses because of economic inefficiencies; this is clearly wrong on a political level, because hierarchy exists within that specific context of the business and property. No hierarchy can be a logically professed option, or conscious practice, of anarchist philosophy because hierarchy and anarchy are not reconcilable. Libertarian socialists recognize

this, and criticize "anarcho-capitalists" on this front. However, I've found that certain libertarian socialists are incapable of applying this same logic to their own mode of decision-making. Even without the oppression of violence, democracy suffers from the oppression of powerlessness that prohibits and expropriates the power of each and all to determine the specific combination of labor, capital, and talents that is decidedly best for each and all. That powerlessness may reinforce the need for other kinds of oppression such as violence, exploitation, cultural imperialism, marginalization, etc.

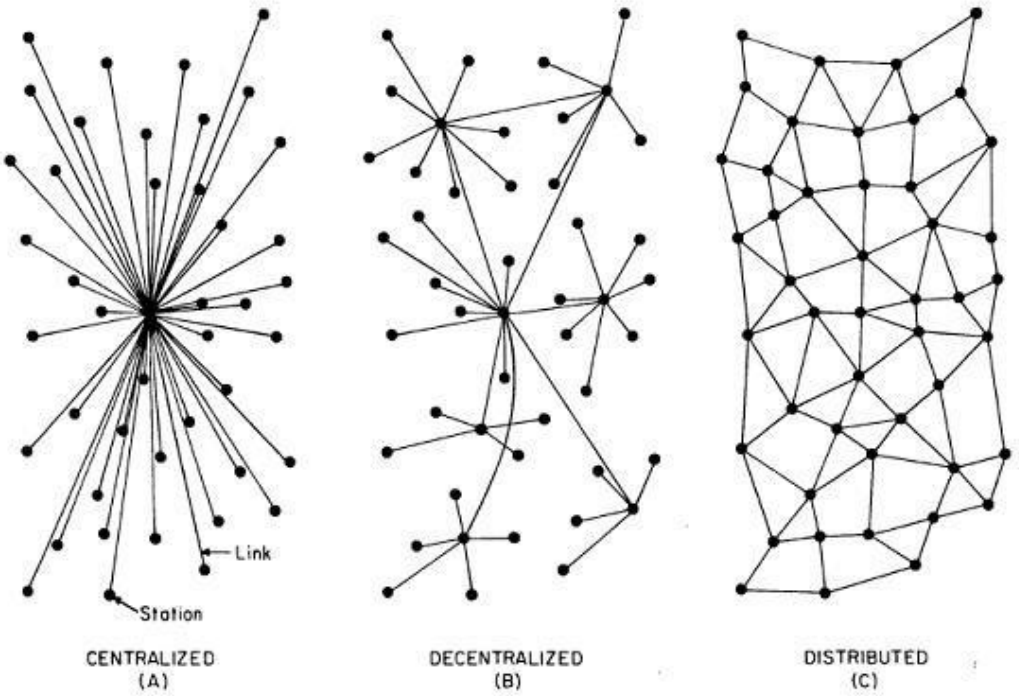
When backed into this corner, libertarian socialists of all kinds will argue that democracy is less hierarchical than a capitalist business, and that even the worst cases of a 51-49% margin are still less unilateral than a capitalist doing anything they want without the say of their workers. This may be true. However, a person can be on the losing side of a vote 100% of the time. This might not be a normalcy, but this is a possibility inherent to democracy. Even if not everyone is a member of the minority, the minority is ruled by a majority. Whatever the circumstances may be, this is a socio-political hierarchy, and the degree of unilaterality doesn't change that. The vote of the minority might be organizationally involved but their vote has had no effectual impact on the operation of the group when the majority forms. Obviously, most people won't be on the losing side of the vote all the time, but since it surely happens some of the time it reveals that direct democracy isn't so much the dissolution of social hierarchy as the continuous shifting and alternation of who composes the majoritarian hierarchy.

This kind of formal hierarchy ultimately reinforces informal power dynamics as well. People who are normally on the winning side of a vote can develop their own subgroup, forming a majoritarian tendency that antagonizes the minority voters to follow their rule. There can be an informal power dynamic of silencing the dissent of those who have an equal vote. Proposals may not even reach the table if some folks don't feel empowered enough to propose them in the first place because some winning majority and collective direction has been normalized. This reveals a false assumption that votes necessarily indicate the full participation of everyone because there's more to decision-making than voting on proposals that were informally pre-constructed by the majority. This is often how workers in capitalist workplaces forget how economy functions for each individual, which reinforces the outrageous belief that the organization they're employed in is just a social body that operates for the sake of itself *separately* from the interests of each of those within that "unity collective"[2]. Democracy doesn't appear to fully recognize and change that condition. Many radicals will scoff at this point and tell me that if someone doesn't like the group's direction, they can find another one they do like, or essentially just bite the bullet and internalize the costs of the majority's decisions for the sake of collective action. They defect to the free association argument. But like I've said, consenting to a mode of decision-making does not change the very structural nature of that decision-making process *per se*.

Many are probably wondering what I propose for decision-making in the context of collective action. Surely anarchy as the "rule of each by each" cannot be individualist in the sense of atomizing each person, as if they're isolated beings! It's obvious that each individual is born from a social context with complex relations that progressively develop their personhood, conditions, groups, organizational forms, etc. The alternative would be the flawed (and indeed it is) Crusoe economics of Austrian and classical political economy!

[2] Wilbur, S. P. (2015, August 29). *All Actors Are Collective Actors: The Unity-Collectivity*. Retrieved from The Proudhon Library: https://blog.proudhonlibrary.org/2015/08/29/all-actors-are-collective-actors-the-unity-collectivity/

Well, I propose consensus. There are probably cries of opposition from all directions: "consensus doesn't work in large groups," "it takes too much time and energy to develop consensus on every decision," "consensus suffers from the same informal power dynamics of a core group that you mention about democracy," and more. In reality there are many forms of consensus — many of which are problematic — but I think that some forms are very broadly applicable to most economic functions of a society where politics is not the institutionalization of oppression, or the exercising of power and manipulation, but rather the mutual process of liberation and freedom. To interject here, an individual and federal model of consensus-based groups also outlines a conceptual distinction between historical notions of anarchist decentralism/federalism (often involving democratically elected delegates of groups and regional federations up to international congresses) for a potentially more theoretically coherent notion of distributism, illustrated here:

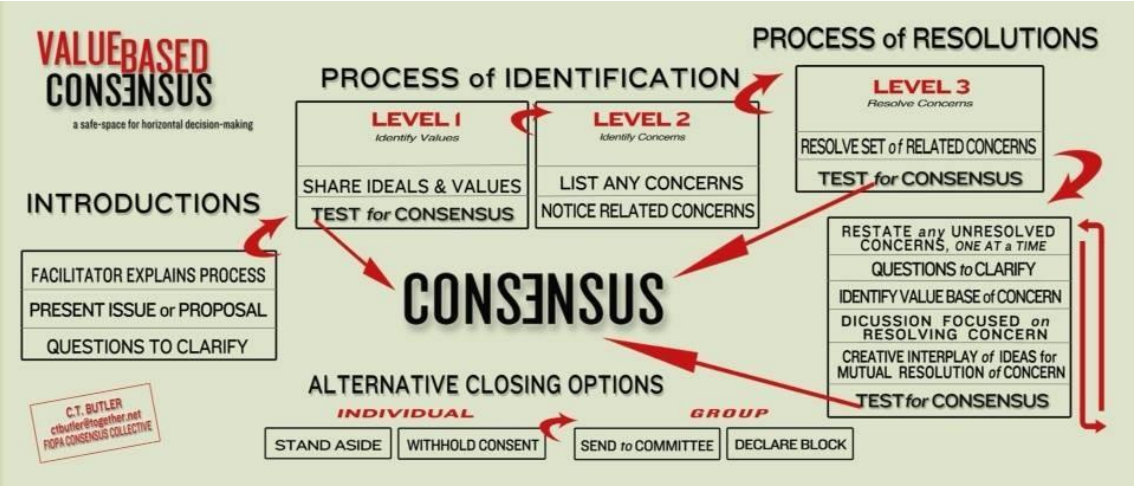


That being said, consensus processes can become hierarchical[3], and to that extent of course antithetical to anarchy, but I think there is fundamentally more room for experimentation. Let's imagine that an informal power dynamic within a consensus-based group practically forms and subordinates either a minority or majority to the will of authoritarians, or forcibly pushes certain individuals out of the association by the barriers to access created by its social hierarchy: for example, because of some kind of white toxic masculinity discouraging the participation and membership of women and POC. At least this power dynamic is not being crystallized as it would be under the mechanisms and structure of some democracy! Not all consensus models practically become hierarchical, which cannot be said about democracy. That being said, small affinity groups can easily be inclusive and reach consensus without the necessity of formal structures

[3] Ryan, H. (2007, July 13). *Blocking Progress: Consensus Decision Making in the Anti-Nuclear Movement.* Retrieved from LibCom.org: https://libcom.org/files/consensus.pdf

preventing conflicts from breaking down communication, goals, or agreements on proposals. Individuals and even subgroups can break off from the initial group to pursue their own goals. This breaks down the very notion of formal organization, and makes informal organization an obviously important tool for anarchists. However, when certain goals require large-scale organization, and no matter the goal we do not want to sacrifice our principled support for anarchy, I propose a specific form of consensus known as "formal values-based consensus", or "formal consensus." This was most notably adopted by Food Not Bombs[4]: arguably the largest and most effective anarchist project in recent history.

A few years back I had the pleasure of meeting C.T. Butler (a cofounder of Food Not Bombs) who formulated the formal consensus model in his book "On Conflict and Consensus"[5]. We discussed the history of Food Not Bombs, the common problems identified with various consensus models (such as the Quaker model used by 1970's anti-nuclear activists and David Graebers "modified consensus" which was often used during the Occupy movement), and the dimensions of his model and how it attempted to resolve those problems. The central problem that he found in most consensus-based groups, which has become the common critique among proponents of direct democracy, is the lack of participation that creates a core group and system of minority rule. This is largely caused by the ability of any one person to block a proposal, coupled with the group's value for unanimity often promoting discussion but not resolving to consensus. There's also the problem of repressing certain conflicts, which causes problems down the road. This institutionalizes conflict, and creates an environment of exclusiveness, competition and secrecy. C.T.'s solution was to create more procedural mechanisms designed to facilitate the greatest amount of participation, promote extreme clarity on the unified collective goal, and foster agreement on new proposals. The more effective these mechanisms, the greater the amount of participation there would be, therefore ensuring the horizontal, inclusive, transparent, and effective nature of the process. I won't go through all the details, so here's a depiction of how the process works:



[4] Food Not Bombs. (n.d.). *Politics – Introduction.* Retrieved from Food Not Bombs: https://www.foodnotbombs.net/bookpolitics.html

[5] Butler, C., & Rothstein, A. (1987). *On Conflict and Consensus: a handbook on Formal Consensus decision making.* Retrieved from The Anarchist Library: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/c-t-butler-and-amy-rothstein-on-conflict-and-consensus-a-handbook-on-formal-consensus-decisionm

It may seem fairly complex, but I won't argue too much about the details here. Not coincidentally, oftentimes the disadvantage to this model is having everyone understand the process and underlying agreements of the organization (i.e. high compliance costs and barriers to entry). I've made my criticism of democracy partially about internal barriers to entry/access, but those barriers are constructed by the hierarchy between the majority and minority. In the case of formal consensus, its barriers to entry are not the result of hierarchy, but instead the nature of self-management: at least self-management associated with the highly skilled workforce and complex division of labor of a large-organization. Formal consensus simply reveals the real costs of individual responsibility and self-management in large organizations. As anarchists, that's a cost we'd be willing to pay for freedom. And why complain? The costs are arguably less than a democracy with its institutionalization of conflict, exploitation of the minority, lack of freedom, and other issues. Down with democracy!

4. The Linguistics of Democracy (Alexander Reid Ross)

June 5th, 2017

Democracy is a word that evokes an array of affective responses depending on time, place, and people involved. For the Patriot movement, democracy stimulates a constellation of ideals, values, and principles. People who view the Patriot movement's adherence to such forms as hypocritical might attempt to recuperate the term or abandon it entirely. To decipher the usage of democracy in everyday discourse, we must first plunge into the phenomena of words, concepts, and ideas in efforts to understand and properly define it. The following admission must be made: I use terms for practical purposes but with intent, recognizing that their meanings as defined in this essay cannot be seen as universally understood. Suffice it to say that they are adequate to the facts of this piece but should not be seen as their only conceivable usage. Words are useful in context and must not be made into altars. This is, perhaps, the first principle of understanding the word "democracy."

Most people will agree that the world exists to us insofar as we can perceive it. That it is not a formless soup of undifferentiated matter, existential phenomenology tells us, is due to our ability as a species to discern one thing from another. Such discernment can be driven largely by the evolutionary form our species has taken. For example, I cannot keep my eyes open or breathe underwater. At the same time, discernment can be intentionally conditioned through cultural practice and repetition, like "acquired tastes" such as wine.

The ability to perceive distinction and recognize things as our senses perceive it certainly remains within the domain of the subjective. To this world of the affective is typically assigned the word, "notion." If one has a notion of something, one feels it intuitively. Only together through experience and common notions can we agree upon a baseline existential-perceptive reality. It is through the affective, the sensual—the accepted as well as the rejected—that we understand the world of things as a world of objects that can be put to use. This public motion toward cooperative fellowship is typically linked to the "idea"—a momentous event where our consensus reality intertwines subject and object to recognize the utility of things and their consequences. As we gather ideas and accumulate knowledge based on consequences to our actions, we develop concepts or "frameworks" through which we interpret the world and clarify our understanding of its workings and ours.

Lastly, we come to that which is called "the truth." The truth is not a statement of objectivity, it is an expression of a reality that has been socially produced. Here I disagree with the French philosopher Alain Badiou who, in the Heideggerian vein, approaches the truth event as an act of destruction that returns the subject to a pre-reflective condition of emptiness. Rather, it is my understanding that the truth presents simply an affirmative statement or group of statements that correctly articulate the premise on which social reality is produced. Hence, truth becomes a matter of constant negotiation over experiences superior and inferior, desirable and undesirable. It might be ably said that truth is the method of inquiry that recognizes fact from fiction and seeks to use knowledge toward the advancement of others as well as one's self, or, as Turcato calls anarchism, "the method of freedom."

Here, truth becomes a dialectical phenomenon of human experience relatable to the universality of fact on the basis of humanity's long and short term desires. It is, then, a way of living more than a strict observation. A way of living considered true and accepted for its providential merit is considered a principle. The consensus about reality is constantly tested through art, which really is nothing less than that which makes us what we are. The consensus about truth lies in the realm of philosophy. The consensus about principles lies in the domain of the political.

The first philosopher in European history to truly understand these terms was Aristotle, because he recognized that people's equal potential to know the truth and to follow right principles, which return to a subject who knows what they want and want the right thing. Aristotle identified politics as the act of being together in the city and identifying as a political community. People form mutual associations and "political friendships" on the basis of common agreements on the experience of life and happiness. The mutual benefit of collaborative labor binds the city in practical thought and turns it toward logical administration. As city life unfolds in its beautiful reasoned chaos, its appreciation reaches the philosophical, from which it can be theorized as a whole, a la Jane Jacobs. Democracy, for Aristotle, becomes the sum total of theory, which we have understood as the sublation of notion, idea, concept, and principle.

We must remain critical of the Aristotelian tradition, of course. Though he is roundly critiqued for believing slavery to be a consequence of inferior will, Aristotle also insisted that democracy cannot truly exist in a state of slavery, and that democracy manifests the superior form of human political participation. I will not defend the Ancient Greek understanding of slavery, save to point to Frantz Fanon's deliberation on the "master-slave" dialectic in which the philosopher identifies liberation through self-emancipation.

The most important thing to point out in Aristotle, rather, is his sexism and classism. Enfranchising class divisions within the city, Aristotle automatically pitched experiential equality into the crisis of economic inequality. The basis for this failure of economic and political thought lies in Aristotle's assessment of women as lacking the logos of politics. Women's authority belonged in the oikos, the household, from which we receive the root for our words economy and ecology. Women cared for the running of the household, its economy and relation to the outside, while disturbingly men sought socio-political status often through pedophilia. If, as Marx claimed, man is not a political but first a social animal, it is crucial to recognize even in Marx the placement of oikos and economy at the root of social intercourse.

What Aristotle and his tradition leaves us with, then, is a problematic theory of democracy that contributes to both its critique and rectification. If Aristotle's understanding of democracy is plagued by patriarchy, it is also a decisive defense of human equality. The hypocrisy here should aggravate any believer in truth, given our understanding of truth as a way of living that

closest resembles what we understand to be factual, accurate, and of positive consequence to our community. In Theory of Democracy, Giovanni Sartori states, "Aristotle defined a stateless, direct democracy," yet even here we recoil from such a thing where it is dominated by patriarchy.

One does not have to wait for Utopian Socialists like Fourier and Robert Owen to see the patriarchal oikos delinked from the principle of equality in the interests of latent democratic tendencies throughout the Medieval times. Far more insightful historians than myself have delved into the practices of some Cathars, Beguines, and Franciscans who sought to develop alternative forms of social organization, family life, and political practice. Three hundred years before the birth of Marx, Thomas Müntzer terrorized the German princes and Pope alike, discussing the abolition of property. A hundred years following that, the Diggers and Levelers identified common lands as the crux of a community grounded in an openness, humility, and generosity.

Truly, such people had imperfections, believed in false notions, and their movements suffered for that. Yet they each challenged the essence of authority as it existed in their lives, and generally from a position of equality. When the Ciompe rebelled against the Florentine elites, they insisted that the clothes of the nobility were the only things that distinguished them. Similarly, during the French Jacquerie, the concept of equality formed the basis for a rejection of the crown. When the Huguenots rose against the Bourbon monarchy, they similarly insisted that the sovereignty of the people would overcome that of a dubious government.

Without these movements the French revolution is unimaginable. Without the French revolution, it is impossible to conceive of the Mazzinist secret societies that emancipated Italian states, or the Blanquist insurrectionists inspired by them, or for that matter the incipient societies that conglomerated into the Workers' International. The key for these revolutionary movements of the Enlightenment was not merely equality but liberty articulated through the political system of democracy. It would be the sovereignty of the people enshrined in the principle of liberation from oppression that comprised the egalitarian impulse of revolution.

Here lies the greatest problem: where democracy existed on the conceptual level for Aristotle, and could be linked to the Constitution of Solon through the school of Aristotle, it was distinct from the theory of democracy as a discrete political system. For it was the manipulation of democracy on that high governmental level of bureaucracy, where Abbé Sieyès, who pronounced that the Third Estate wants to be everything, could usher in the reign of Napoleon, and the main internationalist of the revolution, Anacharsis Cloots, could be sentenced to death at the Moulin à Silence. If it is democracy on the level of principle that motivates people to revolution, it seems as though democracy on the institutional level causes their ruination.

Why does this occur? Are the "people" too immoderate? Do they need a good lord? Anarchists have always insisted not. Anarchist historian George Woodcock writes of early anarchist, William Godwin, "It is in discussing democracy that he is original and characteristically anarchistic." PJ Proudhon understood a better system of political economy as functioning along federalist lines according to a "workers' democracy," a valuable corrective to Aristotle's class-stratified demos. It was not this concept of a "workers' democracy" that Marx argued against but Proudhon's own resistance to Marx's efforts to control the discourse of revolution. Throughout his lengthy attack against Proudhon, Marx succeeds in conveying one argument well: that Proudhon delivers false ideals rather than principles mobilized through practice. Unfortunately, here Marx appears more jealous than correct, as his own critical position in the workers' movement failed at every turn to propose a viable positive alternative to capital.

As we range through other anarchists as different as Errico Malatesta, Emma Goldman, Lucy Parsons, and Bertrand Russell, we find continued efforts at redeeming democracy in principle while providing a scathing critique of its institutionalization. The anarchist challenge to the political system extended from principle of truth and justice irreconcilable with the enfranchisement of modern capitalism. They insisted that the revolutionary declaration of equality and freedom be honored in thought, word, and deed. With Malatesta, they loved the theory of "true democracy." Through the Spanish Civil War, much of the anarchist struggle against the Marxists was representative of the struggle over the theory of "workers' democracy" and how to execute it. In more recent times, such a theory has developed outside of the exclusive property of the proletariat, extending as well to the geographic reorganization of a municipality, vis-à-vis the "direct democracy" of Bookchin's libertarian municipalism, or to all of humanity, as perhaps with David Graeber's "baseline communism." On another level, perhaps one could envision a socio-political understanding that decentralizes conventional anthropocentrism through the methodical practice of equality and freedom, as decolonial scholar and anarchist, Maia Ramnath, has suggested.

While some anarchists remain absolute in their rejection of everything to do with democracy, their proud stance often remains in keeping with the principles that produce it. One might claim to reject the existence of freedom, like some neo-atheists, while politely rationalizing every judgment as an effect of probability and failing to analyze the randomness of being in the first place. One might deny the fact of equality on the premise of a refusal to simplify or homogenize without recognizing that the division between the same and the equal marks the first distinction that formulates an intellectual understanding of the world and the contiguity of its internal functions.

One might negate the theory of democracy and remain an anarchist or whatever; essentialism is useless to discovery and inquiry. However, where even the most colloquial usage of the word "democracy" is construed as rank sectarianism, discourse is denied and the conditions for a better world stifled. In keeping with the anarchist tradition, the systems of representative democracy as they have enfranchised the political sovereignty of tyrannical corporations must be overcome. But let us recognize the origins of such systems through methodical study, and attempt to fulfill our principles by overcoming their failings rather than lapsing into self-destructive solipsisms.

5. Anarchy and Democracy: Examining the Divide (Shawn P. Wilbur)

June 6th, 2017

Philosophical Considerations

If we had the luxury of sticking to the *philosophical* terrain, the question of distinguishing anarchy and democracy would, it seems to me, pose very few problems. Certainly, it would be unlikely to pose the persistent, seemingly intractable problems that it does at present. *Anarchy* describes the absence of rule, while *democracy* describes rule by "the people," and it seems fairly uncontroversial to maintain that the two concepts fall on opposite sides of a divide marked by the existence of *rule*, of *archy,* however narrow that divide might sometimes appear. On the two sides of that divide, relations are structured according to two distinct, opposing principles of social organization. On the one side, there is the *principle of authority* or *governmental principle*,

which provides the rationale for hierarchical institutions like the State, capitalism, the patriarchal family, etc. On the other, there is an *anti-authoritarian* or *anarchic* principle, perhaps still only vaguely understood, which might form the basis of social relations free from hierarchy, claims of authority, and the various forms of exploitation that seem to inevitably arise from them.

Still, even this terrain can be difficult to navigate when we attempt to clarify the relationship between these two concepts, and their underlying principles, as we inevitably must do when we turn back to the very practical aspirations of anarchists: the transformation of relations based on the principle of authority into anarchic relations.

It seems that the infamous "problem of the transition" also has its conceptual side.

Can we, for example, think of the transition from *authority* to *anarchy* as movement along some kind of spectrum—perhaps with increasingly libertarian forms of democracy as a kind of bridge—or is the situation more complicated? If we can identify some kind of continuous pattern of development, an evolutionary line that passes through both democracy and anarchy, then perhaps the problem of the divide is less serious, and the possibility of talking about one in terms of the other is opened.

Consider a text like "Civil Disobedience" (1849), where perhaps Thoreau's language suggests just this sort of *governmental spectrum,* with "no government" as its final term:

> *"I heartily accept the motto,—'That government is best which governs least;' and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,— 'That government is best which governs not at all;' and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have."*

And consider how that phrasing recalls Proudhon's definition from *What is Property?* (1840): "Anarchy, absence of master, of sovereign, such is the form of government that we approach every day…." There is obviously a sort of paradox involved in the notion of a "government… which governs not at all," but we might try to get around it by imagining that government was something essentially quantifiable and that the transition would then be an "elimination of the absolute" (to borrow Proudhon's phrase), bit by bit, until none of the original quantity remained.

The distinction between "big" and "small," or "more" and "less," government is, of course, a very common one. But perhaps one of the very clear lessons of the Trump era is just how slippery and uncertain those distinctions can be. We see things like the obviously inadequate attempt to quantify "government" by the number of regulations in place, without any more direct measure of the impact of the regulations. We are forced to weigh the "size" of one piece of preemptive legislation against all the various bits of local law that it governs in advance. And, ultimately, when we examine the range of legislative forms employed and attacked by the present regime, perhaps the clearest lesson is that within a *legal order* the influence of law is ubiquitous. Acts are finally either licit or illicit, permitted or prohibited, but in either case they are subject to some form of regulation. And what is true of the legal order seems to be true, in general, of most forms of social order under the regime of authority. Government seems to be a matter of *qualities*, rather than quantities—and perhaps the "quantity of government" never really changes. What seems necessary is to transform the quality of an enormous number of different relations, by reconstructing them on a new basis, according to a different principle.

In his manuscript writings on Napoleon III, Proudhon presented a stark choice:

> *"…archy or anarchy, no middle ground.*

> *Archy can have one or several heads: monarchy, polyarchy, oligarchy, exarchy, heptarchy, etc.*
>
> *If the polyarchy is composed of the wealthiest, or of the nobles and magnates, it is called aristocracy; if the people en masse is the preponderant element there, it is a democracy.*
>
> *But the number of heads changes nothing in the end; as in the case of God, plurality is detrimental."*

The condemnation of democracy—an *archy* with *all the possible heads*—seems perfectly clear: "plurality is detrimental." And in *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, Proudhon present a striking alternative to the spectrum we have been considering:

> *"Every idea is established or refuted by a series of terms that are, as it were, its organism, the last term of which demonstrates irrevocably its truth or error. If the development, instead of taking place simply in the mind and through theory, is carried out at the same time in institutions and acts, it constitutes history. This is the case with the principle of authority or government.*
>
> *The first form in which this principle is manifested is that of absolute power. This is the purest, the most rational, the most dynamic, the most straightforward, and, on the whole, the least immoral and the least disagreeable form of government.*
>
> *But absolutism, in its naïve expression, is odious to reason and to liberty; the conscience of the people is always aroused against it. After the conscience, revolt makes its protest heard. So the principle of authority has been forced to withdraw: it retreats step by step, through a series of concessions, each one more inadequate than the one before, the last of which, pure democracy or direct government, results in the impossible and the absurd. Thus, the first term of the series being ABSOLUTISM, the final, fateful [fatidique] term is anarchy, understood in all its senses."*

In this account, democracy is, first and foremost, the last stand of absolutism, the ultimate rear guard action of government in retreat. It is the *most inadequate concession* of the principle of authority. We again have the notion of a governmental series, ranging from the most naive expressions of absolutism to anarchy ("in all its senses," which is a qualification that certainly must be explored), but where the other formulations suggest a connection between the approach to anarchy and the *refinement* of democracy, government's final form, the connection here is clearly more complicated.

The key to understanding how Proudhon understood the relationship between democracy and anarchy here is that qualification: "understood in all its senses." For those who might have encountered it in the published English translation, that phrase is necessarily a bit puzzling, because John Beverley Robinson chose to translate the French *anarchie* as "anarchy" only part of the time, generally when it referred to a non-governmental society, choosing a variety of other terms when it referred to political disorder, the "anarchy of the market," etc. But when we return to the original text, it becomes clear that democracy is "anarchy" in the sense that it represents the final disarray of government and the opening to political violence, that this fragmentation of political authority is related to the emergence of the capitalist "anarchy of the market," and that it is really only in a negative sense, and perhaps only in the case of *a more refined anarchy*, that

democracy and non-governmental society are linked. It is the disorganization of government, but also its manifestation in more and more sites, and not its refinement, that comes with democracy. If the last term of the series "demonstrates irrevocably its truth or error," Proudhon has perhaps suggested that, while delivering the judgment against the whole governmental series, that final term also suggests an alternative—another face of anarchy.

This would in fact be a classic Fourierist device, a *pivot*, marking a transition and the beginning of a new series. And the notion of an *anarchic series*, composed of various order combinations of the various kinds of anarchy, might turn out to be very useful to us.

As for our philosophical constructions, the distinction between anarchy and democracy seems both defensible and useful to anarchists, provided we can clarify, *at the level of principles*, this notion of "rule" or *archy*, which serves to distinguish all the forms of government from the forms of anarchy. Here, Proudhon is once again useful, particularly since his critiques of capitalism and of governmentalism are ultimately two aspects of a single critique of *authority* and the *exploitation* that almost always characterizes and supports it in social relations.

In this context ("*archy* or *anarchy*, no middle ground"), it is likely that anarchy is the easier of the two terms to define, and in *Justice in the Revolution and in the Church* Proudhon did indeed give a brief definition of anarchy as a "social system:"

> *"Voilà tout le système social : une équation, et par suite une puissance de collectivité."*
>
> *(That is the whole social system: an equation, and consequently a power of collectivity.)*

And the understanding is that the emergence of collective force does not itself threaten the basic relations of equality. Relations remain strictly horizontal. The development of collectivities only increases the variety of individuals, without in any way subordinating any of them. As an ideal and principle, at least, this seems clear enough, even if the practical details demand a good deal of innovative thinking on our part. But those practical difficulties should also be apparent, and it is when confronted with those practical complications that anarchists most often turn back towards democracy (and sometimes hierarchy, authority, the absolute, etc.) as elements that must somehow be carried over into anarchistic societies.

Practical Constraints

If anti-state capitalists are constantly called to wrestle with the question of "who will build the roads," anarchists are faced with constant questions about decision-making practices: *Who will break the ties? How will you resolve the conflicts?* Even plenty of self-identified anarchists feel the need to leave some room for the "legitimate" or "justified" coercion of minorities. But these constructions just involve a sort of stuttering displacement of the same problem. "Legitimate authority" is just authority that has been authorized. "Justified hierarchy" is just hierarchy that is sanctioned by whatever it is that we imagine sanctions hierarchy. The reigning principle does not change, while the condition for anarchy seems to be precisely a change of principle.

That doesn't make the practical difficulties any less real, but, again, these are not questions that have been ignored by anarchists. Both Proudhon and Bakunin left open the space for one sort of "law," *inevitability*, since we clearly must do what we cannot not do, but this bit of rhetorical play changes nothing about every other potential sort of legal order. The middle ground denied

by Proudhon isn't going to emerge from this sort of rhetorical slippage. As much as we might shuffle the words around, the two principles of *anarchy* and *authority* seem to remain distinct.

The thing that distinguishes inevitability from every other "law" is obviously its independence from any principle. So perhaps the thing that unites the governmental series and the anarchic series is precisely the continuing reign of that one "law." Certainly, we can't be indifferent to the real constraints on any particular instance of anarchy. We are not, after all, idealists, believing that even a complete revolution in the realm of principles would be enough to establish an anarchist utopia, within which all relations could always be structured according to our ideals. And this is arguably what Bakunin was addressing in the long aside in "God and the State," where, in what might seem like a sudden reversal of his anti-authoritarian argument, he made room for "the authority of the bootmaker." It is also almost certainly what Proudhon was addressing all through the works of the 1860s, and our tendency to read works like *The Principle of Federation* as a break with his anarchist thought probably says more about our own appreciation of the difficulties of our project than it does about his theoretical consistency.

If we look the difficulties square in the face we are confronted with the likelihood that we might continue to have recourse to *practices* that we think of as "democratic." It is difficult to imagine a society in which we are not at times forced to subordinate some interests to others, to engage in conflicts from which not everyone can emerge winners, and, in those instances, to engage in practices like voting. That seems unquestionable. But that doesn't tell us how we should feel about the obvious mismatch between those imposed practices and our principles. And, again, the very thing that inevitability lacks is a connected principle.

We don't treat the survival of some members of the Donner party as an argument in favor of the principle of cannibalism. We're much more likely to treat their experience as a cautionary tale about poor planning or simply as an example of the untenable situations that are sometimes forced on us. If we're following the logic of anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin, it isn't clear to me why we should treat democracy much differently.

It seems clear to me that nearly all of the arguments for attempting to incorporate democracy into anarchy involve some confusion of principles, or a confusion of principles and practices. And, unfortunately, those confusions often look a lot like those used in the attempt to prove that anarchy is itself impossible, such as Engels' attempt to dismiss anti-authoritarians by conflating authority and force. It is less clear to me why so many people who presumably have some investment in the notion of anarchism struggle so mightily to fully embrace anarchy, but that's not because the challenges inherent in anarchy are not absolutely apparent. Instead, I'm just not sure why anyone would embrace anarchism if they had serious doubts about the possibility or desirability of anarchy.

In any event, it's not hard for me to suggest one place that democracy can quite consistently take within anarchist relations. Wherever democracy seems to suggest itself as *necessary* (in the strong sense of that term), where it seems that the best we can do is to take turns imposing on one another, then we should understand that either we have failed or that we have been backed into that corner by inescapable circumstances. Democracy, understood from this anarchistic point of view, would appear primarily as an indicator of poor planning or *force majeure*—and certainly as an indication that there are lesson still to learn.

I can understand the reluctance of some people to think of their project in terms that will necessarily confront them with *failure* on a pretty regular basis, particularly in the long and difficult transition from a fundamentally authoritarian, governmentalist society to one that begins

to resemble, in practical terms, our political ideals. But I'm not sure what the alternative is, if we acknowledge that our ideals are really revolutionary. The one truly untenable alternative seems to me to be modifying our ideals and retaining some "pure" form of democracy.

Progress and the Anarchic Series

If we understand democracy in Proudhon's terms, as the distribution of authority onto the greatest number of heads, then the notion of "pure democracy" almost has to appear as a sort of ultimate anarchist nightmare: the pure hegemony of the principle of authority, so dispersed in its manifestations as to be impossible to come to grips with; the final incorporation of the belief in the impossibility of anarchy in our common sense; *self-government* in the most insidious of forms, based on the internalization of hierarchy as essential to the self. That worst-case scenario is just that, but it isn't entirely alien to what we experience in societies that have long been governed by the principle of authority.

One of the reasons that the anarchist struggle in so difficult is precisely because authority is ubiquitous, or very nearly so, in our social relations, in our education, and therefore it is at least never entirely divorced from the critical perspectives that we try to bring to bear against it. Hegemony does not mean entire domination, of course, and authority is far from the only principle at work in our societies or our thought processes. So we have a good deal of opportunity and power to resist, particularly if we focus our energies and go about our work with care.

I don't mention the present hegemony of authority as a discouragement, but in order to suggest a way around the temptation to cling to democracy. After all, if we have not conceived of anarchy simply as the absence of the principle of authority, and of the institutions explicitly based on it, but as the focus of a new series of experiments, through which we might progress towards a more complete fulfillment of our ideal, then we can perhaps imagine a different sort of society, within which it is anarchy that is the hegemonic principle. Long before we have eliminated all the authoritarian remnants from our thinking, and before we have fully reorganized our institutions along anarchistic lines, we ought to experience a general shift in incentives, as the radical changes we have been able to make facilitate more of the same. We can probably expect a very different sort of stability to emerge—no Weberian "iron cage," certainly—but it seems likely that confronting our interdependence squarely, without allowing ourselves the tools of hierarchy and "legitimate" imposition," will indeed lead us beyond the heady early days of an anarchist revolution, when nearly everything we attempt will be fraught with previously unexamined difficulties, toward some new sort of status quo, however fluid in may seem in present terms.

But it's hard to imagine how we would even begin to shift those basic structures of incentives while clinging to any of the central concepts of the present order. And those for whom "democracy" still remains an essential anarchist keyword seem either to be clinging to those concepts or to be clinging to the language currently associated with them, engaging in rhetorical strategies that perhaps our tradition has demonstrated obscure more than they clarify.

Note: For those interested in the details of Proudhon's analysis of authority and the justification of the divide between authority and anarchy, my essay "Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: Self-Government and the Citizen-State" may provide some clarification.

6. On Democracy as a Necessary Anarchist Value (Kevin Carson)

June 12th, 2017

As a working definition of democracy, I think about the best we can do is this description of anarchy in Pyotr Kropotkin's 1911 Britannica article on anarchism — the attainment of harmony:

> *"...not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free arrangements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being."*

To elaborate on this working definition, I would add that a democracy, understood in this way, attempts to maximize the agency of individual people, and their degree of perceived control over the decisions that affect their daily lives. In keeping with the principle of equal liberty, democracy seeks to maximize the individual's control over the forces shaping her life, to the extent that such a control is compatible with a like degree of control by others over their own lives.

This means a social decision-making process that is permissionless, or stigmergic, insofar as this is possible. The ultimate in democracy, in the sense of a positive-sum maximization of individual agency and control over their lives to the greatest extent possible short of anyone's agency infringing on anyone else's, is universal consent of the governed. And in this sense, a permissionless, stigmergic organization, in which all individual activity is self-chosen, is the ultimate in democracy.

In some areas, however, agreement on a common policy for a unitary social body may be necessary. In this case, the next best thing to unanimous consent is that all individuals involved in the decision encounter each other as equals, and seek the closest approximation possible to a unanimous consensus, with no one in a position to use force to impose their will on anyone else.

Viewing democracy in these terms will rid us of some negative habits that usually creep in when considering democracy in conventional terms. For example, it's common for conventional treatments of democracy to frame it as some kind of institution created by especially gifted people at a few outstanding points in history.

But in reality "democracy" isn't something that was invented by a bunch of oversized brains in the Athenian agora, or Philadelphia in 1787. It's something that ordinary people have been doing everywhere throughout history, and long before the beginning of recorded history, whenever they met one another as equals to solve a common problem through discussion and cooperation. In anthropologist David Graeber's words:

> *"In this sense democracy is as old as history, as human intelligence itself. No one could possibly own it. I suppose...one could argue it emerged the moment hominids ceased merely trying to bully one another and developed the communication skills to work out a common problem collectively. But such speculation is idle; the point is that democratic assemblies can be attested in all times and places, from Balinese seka to Bolivian ayllu, employing an endless variety of formal procedures, and will always crop up wherever a large group of people sat down together to make a collective decision on the principle that all taking part should have an equal say.*[6]

[6] David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (Spiegel & Grau, 2013), p. 184.

> *We are usually told that democracy originated in ancient Athens—like science, or philosophy, it was a Greek invention. It's never entirely clear what this is supposed to mean. Are we supposed to believe that before the Athenians, it never really occurred to anyone, anywhere, to gather all the members of their community in order to make joint decisions in a way that gave everyone equal say? That would be ridiculous. Clearly there have been plenty of egalitarian societies in history— many far more egalitarian than Athens, many that must have existed before 500 BCE—and obviously, they must have had some kind of procedure for coming to decisions for matters of collective importance. Yet somehow, it is always assumed that these procedures, whatever they might have been, could not have been, properly speaking, "democratic."*[7]

The real reason for the unwillingness of most scholars to see a Sulawezi or Tallensi village council as "democratic"—well, aside from simple racist reluctance to admit anyone Westerners slaughtered with such relative impunity was quite on the level of Pericles—is that they do not vote. Now, admittedly, this is an interesting fact. Why not? If we accept the idea that a show of hands, or having everyone who supports a proposition stand on one side of the plaza and everyone against stand on the other, are not really such incredibly sophisticated ideas that they never would have occurred to anyone until some ancient genius "invented" them, then why are they so rarely employed? Again, we seem to have an example of explicit rejection. Over and over, across the world, from Australia to Siberia, egalitarian communities have preferred some variation on consensus process. Why?

The explanation I would propose is this; it is much easier, in a face-to-face community, to figure out what most members of that community want to do, than to figure out how to convince those who do not to go along with it. Consensus decision-making is typical of societies where there would be no way to compel a minority to agree with a majority decision, either because there is no state with a monopoly of coercive force, or because the state has nothing to do with local decision-making. If there is no way to compel those who find a majority decision distasteful to go along with it, then the last thing one would want to do is to hold a vote: a public contest which someone will be seen to lose. Voting would be the most likely means to guarantee humiliations, resentments, hatreds, and in the end, the destruction of communities. What is seen as an elaborate and difficult process of finding consensus is, in fact, a long process of making sure no one walks away feeling that their views have been totally ignored.

Majority democracy, we might say, can only emerge when two factors coincide:

1. A feeling that people should have equal say in making group decisions, and

2. A coercive apparatus capable of enforcing those decisions.

For most of human history, it has been extremely unusual to have both at the same time. Where egalitarian societies exist, it is also usually considered wrong to impose systematic coercion. Where a machinery of coercion did exist, it did not even occur to those wielding it that they were enforcing any sort of popular will.[8]

Another harmful tendency, especially prevalent on the libertarian right, is to take the democratic pretensions of the modern state at face value, and accordingly frame "democracy" in terms

[7] Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), p. 87.
[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

of reactionary cliches like "tyranny of the majority," "mob rule," and so forth. "Two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner" is a particularly egregious example.

Formally "democratic" states and "representative democracies" are not, in fact, democratic or representative. To the extent that popular majorities exert any control over states at all, it is largely as a check imposed by popular pressure from the outside to limit or counteract the normal class tendencies of the state.

The idea of a limited, laissez-faire state being succeeded by a mass-democratic state, through which the popular majority looted the public treasury and the property of the rich to fund redistributive programs, is utter nonsense. State robbery and looting–on behalf of the propertied classes–has been integral to capitalism since its origins in the early modern era. And 20th century social welfare programs have been passed largely at the instigation of the propertied classes' representatives themselves, in order to redistribute downward a small fraction–just enough to stave off depression or revolution–of what the state had previously distributed upward to those same propertied classes. And insofar as social welfare programs have actually been, in part, a response to mass pressure, they have amounted at most to a partial offset of the larger-scale state intervention on behalf of the rich.

And finally, to the extent that government can be pushed to become more democratic in nature, particularly at the local level, to that same extent it is also pushed to become less state-like, as in Michel Bauwens's Partner State model.[9] To that extent, the governance functions of government will be characterized the old Saint-Simonian cliche of transition from "legislation over human beings to administration of things," and take on the character of a support platform. Whether this can be done is debatable, although I think it is worth trying.

At the very least the new citizen coalitions, offshoots of the M15 movement, that have taken over local governments in Spain like Barcelona and Madrid, and attempted to implement a commons-based political agenda, are pushing things in the right direction. How far they can take it remains to be seen.

But the idea that anything remotely resembling genuine democracy can be achieved through the government of a nation-state of tens or hundreds of millions of people is beyond the bounds of credulity. At best, the nation-state will be a class state whose aid to ruling class rent extraction is limited and partially offset by mass pressure.

There is some hope, in my opinion, that the nation-state may be be bypassed by horizontal linkages between commons-based local polities, and that such confederalism can serve as a platform for resistance to the nation-state: especially as traditional nation-states fall under the sway of authoritarian political movements.

Parallel to this cluster of values centered on unanimous consent and permissionlessness is another value: equal right of access to things which are rightfully governed as a commons, like land and natural resources, aquifers, culture, and information. To the extent that such common goods are replacing large quantities of accumulated physical capital as the main productive forces in society, commons governance means equal access to the commons as a productive asset by all members of society, and the ability to meet a growing share of subsistence needs outside the capitalist wage system.

Going back to our discussion above of the Partner State and commons-based local political agendas, I would suggest a concrete program based on:

[9] "Partner State," P2P Foundation Wiki <http://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Partner_State> (accessed April 26, 2017).

- the transfer of all publicly owned lands, including municipal property, into perpetual community land trusts (and most municipalities have enormous real estate holdings as investments against future revenue shortfalls, not even counting properties seized for delinquent taxes);
- the provision of cheap, high-speed Internet using the spare capacity of local government and public utilities' fibre-optic infrastructure;
- the exclusive use of free and open-source software by all local government agencies and public universities, the mandatory open-sourcing of all research funded by local governments or public universities, and the reliance as much as possible on free and open-source textbooks and curricula by public schools;
- the organization of utilities and other public services as stakeholder cooperatives directly responsible to their users; and
- municipal codes as friendly as possible to a genuine sharing economy based on p2p, user-governed alternatives to Uber and Airbnb, coupled with removal of regulatory barriers to micro-enterprises based on spare capacity of ordinary household goods (home bakeries, sewing shops, daycare centers, etc.).

Taken together, all of these things would amount cumulatively to the kernel of a commons-based economy providing independent access to a major share of people's livelihoods on a post-scarcity basis.

So ultimately the concept of democracy makes sense as something that ordinary people have actually done, and continue to do when they can create spaces of possibility in which they can act as equals to solve their common problems. The vast range of institutions that people have created for themselves throughout history, when able to carve out such free spaces outside the authority of states and ruling classes–folkmotes, governance bodies for natural resource commons, guilds, friendly societies and bodies for mutual aid, radical unions, networks for commons-based peer production–are all examples of democracy.

If we understand democracy in this way, it is not only indispensable to anarchy: it *is* anarchy.

7. The Regime of Liberty (Gabriel Amadej)

June 13th, 2017

The relationship between democracy and anarchism is undoubtedly a contentious one.

In his work *The Principle of Federation*[10], Pierre-Joseph Proudhon makes it clear that democracy has an important legacy to respect. Because Proudhon declared that Universal Suffrage was above The Republic, he had to evaluate the character of democracy in ideal terms. Proudhon categorized democracy as a "regime of liberty" related to its evolutionary successor — anarchy:

> *"We know the two fundamental and antithetical principles of all governments: authority and liberty.*

[10] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, The Principle of Federation.

Regime of Authority:

A) Government of all by one — monarchy or patriarchy;

B) Government of all by all — panarchy or communism.

The essential feature of this regime, in both its varieties, is the non-division of power.

Regime of Liberty:

A) Government of all by each — democracy;

B) Government of each by each — an-archy or self-government.

The essential feature of this regime, in both its varieties, is the division of power."[11]

Oppression comes in all forms. Any exercise of liberty can, in certain conditions, succumb to tyranny. Even if we, as anarchists, stand in opposition to democracy, it would be a mistake to consider it tyrannical in its own right. Compared to monarchy and communism, democracy stands firmly on the side of liberty. Proudhon was keen to emphasize this point. Far from advocating democracy, however, he held his ground and asserted the principles of anarchy. While anarchy and democracy share important characteristics, Proudhon was careful not to reduce anarchy to democracy.

For Proudhon, democracy was a tool "…to dissolve, submerge, and cause to disappear the political or governmental system in the economic system, by reducing, simplifying, decentralizing, and suppressing, one after another, all the wheels of this great machine, which is called the Government or the State."[12]

This was the basis upon which Proudhon justified his entry into government. In his time, the democratic republic was a new, untested system. He saw untapped potential in the constitutional division of powers, and sought to extend its logic to anarchy.

Two hundred years later, we have a different perspective on democracy. To modern anarchists, Proudhon's attempts at reform may seem obviously absurd and doomed to fail. But that is a lesson we have learned over the centuries. What cannot be denied is that although democracy is not anarchy, democracy *spawned the very idea of anarchy.*

If there is any relationship between democracy and anarchy, it is a causal relationship. We owe our entire tradition to democracy: an important history that should not be ignored.

Some of our fellow travellers have taken this principle in a different direction. Communists, for instance, would like to institute a direct democracy: a system where people get to participate in a consolidated decisionmaking process. They grasp Proudhon's criticism of representative democracy, but ultimately confuse the stars reflected in the pond for the night's sky. Proudhon made his definition of democracy clear: government of all by each. Clearly, he considered direct democracy to be its purest form.

Proudhon's critique of democracy requires effort to unravel. It is woven within his theory of property, and it is through understanding this theory that we can understand his opposition to democracy.

[11] *Ibid.,* Chapter Two.

[12] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, A General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century: Fifth Study.

When Property Is Theft, and When Property Is Liberty

In the spirit of Proudhon, anarchists are confronted with the problem of property, and we have to ask ourselves some fundamental questions. To what degree should society be divided into parcels of private property, and how much of it should be put into the hands of the community? Should private property exist at all? What about public property? These are central questions with which Proudhon spent his life wrestling. He sought to balance the interests of community and property such that their spheres of influence overlapped, but neither took precedence over the other.

Democracy disrupts this balance and places society under the unaccountable domain of community. An individual's means of survival thus came to depend entirely on one's reputation with one's neighbours. It is, as Proudhon said, the rule of all by all, which includes every individual involved in that sum.

It is under this condition that Proudhon proclaimed that community, too, is theft. Yet never, in any of his works, did he declare that community is liberty. This is despite the fact that, just as he famously declared that property is theft, he also declared property to be liberty. Community was just as much of a problem—an enigma—as property itself.

"Property is theft" when it is privileged. When we divvy up all the returns on the factors of production, we essentially make a calculation error. The joint-operation of production (or what Proudhon called "the unity-collectivity" of workers) is not accounted for when workers are paid an individual wage. This is similar to Marx's theory of surplus value, and the interplay between the two ideas is striking. One principle unites the two: if property is allowed to be dominant, the regime of liberty suffers.

"Property is liberty" when labour controls its own product and individuals are sovereign over their means of survival. This is a counterbalance to the absolutist domain of community. If this dimension of property becomes a totalizing force, the regime of liberty suffers again.

We can say that pure democracy threatens to make the domain of community universal, while capitalism likewise threatens to make the domain of property universal. Under both regimes, liberty suffers. Anarchy is neither capitalism nor communism. It is self-government; the absolute sovereignty of the individual.

We should not desire a society where every good is bought and sold under the cash nexus. Neither should we desire a society where one's access to resources is determined by one's neighbour's good will.

This dichotomy needs a resolution, and that resolution is Proudhonian mutualism.

An Antidote to the Problem of Democracy

The traditional enemy of anarchists is the governmental state: an all-encompassing monolith holding a privileged monopoly on power and violence over its subjects. As anarchists, it is therefore only natural to see its demise as our absolute goal and objective.

While this is admirable, it ignores the underlying social dynamics that create institutions like the state. We should instead focus our attention towards the deeper issue: that of authority in general. This means that we have to address the problem of social capital: the power that an individual or group commands by means of charisma, reputation, manipulation, and overall excellency at maneuvering within social games of power. This means that anarchists are just as

concerned about the high school bully as we are about the State, and abolishing the State is not the definition of our politics but its incidental conclusion.

We can scale this analysis to the problem of democracy. When we ignore the underlying power dynamics that create monoliths like the State, we place anarchy at risk. If power is a projection—a shadow on the wall—then it is a distinctly social one. It's a kind of posture, and it requires the right know-how, the ability to pull the right strings to manipulate the right people. We might call those who excel at these activities "sociopaths." If that is true, then we have to ask a hard question: who excels in democracy? The rough-around-the-edges entrepreneur with creative ideas or the charismatic sociopath who works around the clock to bend his peers to his will?

When we reduce anarchism to democracy—when we settle for direct democracy as something just *good enough*—we ferment the conditions for higher-level structures of authority. Acquire enough social capital, and you can make a populace do anything; you can reinstate slavery, feudalism, capitalism, or whatever flavour of oppression you desire.

Every anarchist society has unlimited democratic power in reserve, but it only remains anarchist based on its *refusal* to use this democratic power. Anarchy leads to democracy, but democracy does not lead to anarchy. This presents a peculiar problem: what social force could minimize the democratic power of an anarchist society? Isn't consensus-based decisionmaking the inevitable outcome of people coming together to solve problems?

We have other tools at our disposal, and they are important to consider. We hold in our arsenal the mechanisms of markets.

The market carries with it a liberatory potential that remains largely untapped by any society to date. If democracy is unity-in-collectivity, then the market is a unity-in-difference. A person can build a reputation and refine their craft on merits above and beyond their pre-existing holdings of social capital.

It is admittedly true that markets can fall into a similar crisis: having the wrong kind of reputation will ruin your enterprise. However, markets provide mechanisms beyond social posturing for people to forge their own lives; they offer opportunities for people to prove themselves to society based on the quality of their work. Markets give people the right of economic exit from the absolutist domain of community, just as the community gives people the right of exit from the cash nexus.

Critical to the survival of anarchy is mutualism: the balance of property and community. The market cannot be free without the commons, and the commons cannot be free without the market.

Let anarchy, not democracy, be the principle of society lest our revolutionary joy turn to ashes in our mouths.

8. Demolish the Demos (Grayson English)

June 14th, 2017

There has long been a certain kind of democratic *spirit* in anarchism. Of course when we bring forth the imagery of statist and authoritarian injustice, we feel the rhetorical pull to illustrate it as a *collective* issue: one that is relevant and applicable to *all* and as such in the interest of *all* to take to heart. When we wish to persuade people that the interests of the elites are distinct and separate

from theirs, we talk of general violations of, and opposition to, popular visions and desires. And of course we must do this, because to speak about anarchism *publicly* requires speaking to *public* interests, and calling for the severance of society from the state in public language fits most naturally with calls for democracy, the independent self-government of society.

It is probably easy to understand, then, why so eminent an anarchist thinker as David Graeber would content himself with the conclusion that "anarchism and democracy are—or should be—largely identical (Possibilities, 330)." If we wish to maintain society without the state, isn't self-organization and self-governance the obvious solution?

Such an approach might be sensible if equality of authority were our only demand. However, while we say that all must be equal in authority, what we actually mean is that all should be equal in having *no authority* over anyone but themselves, and absolute authority over themselves—individual sovereignty. We do not wish for a world in which all are slaves, but a world in which all are kings. For this reason, even the constitution of a *demos* is a problem, for it involves, in some sense, the establishment of a center of gravity outside of individuals, which pulls them in toward collective identity and lifeway.

In fact, the *demos* is the original enemy for an anarchist. It is no coincidence that once *a People* have formed, there must emerge mediations of their interests and projects—representation becomes necessary. Many thinkers have located representation in many places, from dictators to committees and even more diffuse bodies, and it's no coincidence that they use democratic language to justify those systems. Since, in the last analysis, it presupposes the annihilation of the individual in the collective, and since it is a public-oriented politics, it follows that there are many potentially popular governmental systems.

Once confronted with this antagonism—between individual sovereignty and democracy—one might note that for all our talk, humans are social beings and "a life apart" seems either inconceivable or miserable. Democracy might be an indispensable part of an ongoing dialectic between the individual and the social. But this, I think, mistakes the nature of our aim. What we should seek is not compromise. Equality of authority at zero differs fundamentally from equality of authority at some positive point. The social should exist, ultimately, as the facilitator of individuality, and not as a force to be respected in itself. Our lives are intractably social, that much is true; but the social should exist to make room for the individual, and not vice versa. Societies should not be free, societies should not be considered as interested partners to individuals.

This is because, metaphysically, individuals and collectives are not on equal footing. Individuals act, and individuals embody a dialectical, reflexive spirit. Collectives do not act, do not reflect. This is why we can say that we are against all nations, that we are ungovernable, that our aim is anarchy. Anarchy is not defined procedurally—it's not just consensus or majority—and it's not defined pluralistically. Anarchy is incompatible, for instance, with even stateless nationalism because the only collectivity we accept is one which is, root and branch, characterized by individuation, the facilitation of individual self-definition. The society we want is one that continually dissolves itself into individuals, and only exists as a springboard for unique individuals to interface with each other to gain ever greater access to technologies for self-creation.

We're too ambitious to settle for a world in which individuals remain mechanistic representatives of collective spirits, even if we're also realists about our human need for connection and transcendent identification. We reject popular rule and local "self-organization" in favor of a social individuality. The cosmopolitan citizen of anarchy is an insider-outsider, a collaborative self-creator.

9. Anarchism as Radical Liberalism: Radicalizing Markets, Radicalizing Democracy (Nathan Goodman)

June 16th, 2017

Classical liberalism emerged as a radical ideology, challenging the status quo of monarchy, mercantilism, religious tyranny, and the ancien regime. The liberals promoted two ideals, markets and democracy, as alternatives to the old despotisms.

Yet markets and democracy seemed to be at odds, leaving liberals advocating a middle of the road compromise between the two. Left-liberals favored a broader role for democracy and a narrower role for markets, while right-liberals (more often called conservatives or libertarians) favored a broader role for markets and a narrower role for democracy. Across the spectrum, they agreed that democracy and markets were at odds to at least some extent.

This left an opening for radicals to propose radicalizing the commitment to one liberal ideal by abolishing the other. Most famously, socialists proposed abolishing the market and replacing it with radical democratic control over the economy. Anarchists joined in as well. Many anarcho-communists joined the call to embrace radical democracy by jettisoning markets. On the opposite extreme, many anarcho-capitalists proposed radicalizing our commitment to markets by abolishing democracy.

Tell me what democracy looks like

Economist Don Lavoie, in his essay "Democracy, Markets, and the Legal Order"[13], proposes a different way of defining democracy and markets, so that they are complementary rather than at odds.

The tension between democracy and markets stems from viewing democracy as involving votes on either how a coercive government will be run or direct votes on social outcomes (such as resource distributions). When activities operate through the market, they are to some degree immunized from interference by democratic states, and they do not have their outcomes determined directly through votes by community members. Lavoie proposes an alternative definition, in which democracy is characterized by *openness*. Moreover, Lavoie proposes an approach that does not treat democracy as a centralized process. "Our politics needs to move beyond the model of the exercise of some kind of unified, conscious democratic will and understand democratic processes as distributed throughout the political culture," he explains.

He argues that this definition more closely describes the celebrated features of glasnost that liberalized the Soviet Union towards the end of its reign. Pro-democracy activists in that context were not primarily fighting for electoral participation, but for openness. Lavoie writes:

> *"What I think we should mean by democracy is the distinctive kind of openness in society which the Soviet system crushed, and which began to recover under the banner of glasnost. Glasnost is the making public of things. The Russian word translates better into "openness" than it does into "democracy." Some Western defenders of democratic governments have complained about the common translation into "democracy" on the grounds that openness is not the same thing as the holding of periodic elections, so that*

[13] Lavoie, Don. "Democracy, Markets, and the Legal Order: Notes on the Nature of Politics in a Radically Liberal Society." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 10, no. 2 (July 1993): 103–20. doi:10.1017/S0265052500004167.

the glasnost movement should not be called a democratic movement at all. I suspect, on the contrary, that the movement captures the underlying essence of democracy better than our Western democratic institutions do."

In a move that evokes the best of both F.A. Hayek and the Ostroms, Lavoie then argues that "Like the market, a democratic polity exhibits a kind of distributed intelligence, not representable by any single organization which may claim to act on society's behalf." The distinctive features of democracy are not embodied in "the conscious will of a representative organization that has been legitimated by the public," but are instead characterized by "the discursive process of the distributed wills of the public itself."

In Lavoie's framework, democracy is not something expressed through a state with a monopoly on the use of force, or through elections to decide what such a state will do. Instead, democracy occurs through open discourse, debate, contestation, and interaction among citizens. To borrow a concept from the Ostroms, democracy rightly understood is *polycentric* rather than *monocentric*.

At protest marches, leftist activists often chant "Tell me what democracy looks like!" to which their comrades respond "This is what democracy looks like!" In a sense, they are right. Protests reflect people with various views expressing their opinions in the open. They reflect a society in which contestation is possible to at least some degree. And it is telling that even formally democratic states send police officers to bludgeon, beat, and otherwise violently repress protesters and the journalists who report on them.

If democracy is characterized by openness, then the ballot box is not the epitome of democracy. Instead, democracy is defined by those who, from the bottom up, contribute to an open society. People who film police and expose their crimes do this. Journalists who investigate powerful people, debate ideas, and keep the free press alive embody democracy. Tell me what democracy looks like? It looks like whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, John Kiriakou, and Daniel Ellsberg making the state's previously secret crimes public.

Political Culture and Anarchism

Lavoie applied his understanding of democracy as openness to shed new light on the work of anarcho-capitalist theorists such as Murray Rothbard, David Friedman, and Bruce Benson. While these thinkers are correct to note that markets and other non-state institutions can provide law, the question of what sort of law will be provided depends upon the political culture. Questions of political culture have all too often been ignored by our fellow radical libertarians. As Lavoie writes:

"Liberals cannot resolve the issue of whether a legal system could be supplied by a free market because the issue depends on what is happening in the political culture, in the ongoing discourses about mutual rights and obligations, which individualist liberalism, in both limited-government and anarchist versions, utterly ignores. Radical liberals have been so intent on establishing a universal system of individual rights that they have failed to address the cultural conditions in which socialized individuals would demand this or that kind of legal services.

To say we should leave everything to be "decided by markets" does not, as radical liberals suppose, relieve liberalism of the need to deal with the whole realm of politics. And

to severely limit or even abolish government does not necessarily remove the need for democratic processes in nongovernmental institutions."

Lavoie makes an excellent point here, and one that underscores the need for what Charles W. Johnson has called "thick libertarianism"[14]. As Johnson notes, the thin core of libertarianism tells us something important: namely that aggression is wrong, and that force is only justified in defense of persons or property. But there are related "thick" commitments that are important for instantiating the non-aggression principle in the real world. Lavoie's work shows us that some of these thick commitments are likely to relate to openness and political culture.

The anarchism I advocate entails abolishing the state. But that is not all it entails. Instead, my anarchism is a radicalization of liberalism: both liberalism's commitment to markets and its commitment to democracy. Markets enable individuals to freely associate, provide incentives that align our self-interest with the interests of others, and coordinate social cooperation among diverse individuals with dispersed knowledge. Democracy, or a society characterized by openness, empowers individuals to debate, share their knowledge, persuade one another, and learn from one another. As Lavoie shows us, democracy and markets do not need to be at odds. Instead, they can represent two sides of the same coin, two mechanisms for a society to engage in decentralized processes of experimentation and error correction. Anarchism is democracy radicalized, not in the sense of direct democracy, federated worker cooperatives, or council communism, but in the sense of an open society freed from the shackles of the state.

10. Politics and Anarchist Ideals (Jessica Flanagan)

June 18th, 2017

A fundamental difference between anarchism and statism is that anarchists do not assume that public officials are any more morally entitled to use force or to threaten people with violence than anyone else.[15] Anarchists therefore argue that officials are not entitled to enforce borders that prevent people with different birthplaces from associating with each other, for example. Or that officials are not entitled to force everyone to participate in a particular collective project that some may reject. In this sense, as Grayson English notes in this symposium, anarchism and democracy have a similar spirit, to the extent that democracy also denies that certain people have a greater entitlement to participate in political rule than others.

Another fundamental difference between anarchism and statism is that anarchists generally think that it is very difficult to justify the violation of a non-liable person's natural rights, such as rights against force and coercion. For this reason, anarchists think that all people are equally required to refrain from using violence or coercing their compatriots. It is on this point that democrats and anarchists part ways. Democrats think that all people are equally entitled to determine how political acts of violence will be used and whether and when they and their compatriots will be coerced.

In response to the debates that have unfolded in this symposium, I find that democracy is no friend to anarchism, but that it may be an ally. A just society is one where people's natural rights

[14] Johnson, Charles. "Libertarianism Through Thick and Thin." *Foundation for Economic Education*, July 1, 2008. https://fee.org/articles/libertarianism-through-thick-and-thin/.

[15] Michael Huemer, *The Problem of Political Authority: An Examination of the Right to Coerce and the Duty to Obey* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

are respected, and for this reason it requires the consent of those who are subject to any laws that go beyond enforcing protections for people's natural rights. Without people's consent, a law or political order is unjust. People do not consent to a law or political order just by having a vote over it, though one may preemptively consent to whatever law or order is favored by a vote. But people generally also do not preemptively consent to the laws and political orders that emerge from a vote of their compatriots either. Therefore, to the extent that democratic institutions enforce laws that go beyond the protection of people's natural rights, and use violence and threats of violence to enforce those laws, democratic institutions themselves violate people's natural rights and are therefore unjust as a matter of principle.

In practice, democracy is even more troublesome for those who are committed to nonviolence and respect for natural rights, such as bodily rights. Actual voters are biased, often racist, and likely to enforce policies that are hostile to minorities and which violate the rights of vulnerable people.[16] The tyranny of the majority is seemingly inevitable. And because democracies also require assemblies and regular elections, they also perpetuate the expansion of government as each generation has political incentives to do more than the last: even on a small scale.

On the other hand, as Shawn Wilbur writes, in some cases, people who live together must make some collective decisions, and it is not always possible to ensure consent or consensus. For example, questions about the distribution of the duty to care for children, or the distribution of natural resources, may not be resolved through non-violence and voluntarism alone. Yet as William Gillis's inspiring discussion of the psychopathologies of collective decision-making highlights, it can be extremely difficult to maintain a society of free and independent people when groupish and co-dependent people insist on full participation or consensus. Even if consensus were to pass for consent, like democracy, consensus can evolve into its own form of domination.

In ideal theory, collective decisions should be made in ways that minimize the domination of all people and promote openness and human freedom. The question is whether any available institutional mechanisms for collective decision-making could ever approach that ideal. Nathan Goodman proposes that something like democracy or markets could, to an extent, approach the ideal of openness that anarchists seek. But like democracy, markets also fall short of the ideal to the extent that some property rules persist through conventions, and the enforcement of these conventions can also violate non-liable people's natural rights.

For these reasons, I don't know how anarchist ideals, like moral equality and respect for rights, could translate into institutions that approximate these ideals while also enabling people to engage in collective decision-making when collective decision-making is necessary for the protection of those ideals. This strikes me as an essential challenge for anarchist thinkers. To close, I will offer two tentative responses to this challenge. First, anarchist ideals can be valuable for informing our moral assessments of laws and institutions, even if it is practically (or even necessarily) infeasible for any existing political community to fully live by those ideals. And by informing our moral assessments of laws and institutions, the ideals are nevertheless themselves practically useful.

Second, though markets and democratic institutions may not fit seamlessly with anarchist ideals, with those ideals in mind they may have the potential to bring states closer to those ideals than the status quo. In this way, the means to a more peaceful and voluntary society may necessarily fall short of peace and voluntarism. The hazard is that proponents of democracy or

[16] Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

a market society often come to talk as if these institutions of compromise are themselves just institutions. Approaching democracy (or markets) instrumentally may be justified to the extent that these institutions make society less violent and more free.[17] Mistaking democracy itself for a free and just society is not.

11. Response to Goodman (William Gillis)

June 26th, 2017

Nathan Goodman brings an interesting definition of "democracy" to the conversation — and one that I didn't preemptively critique — *openness*. Seeking to bridge the oft-stated dichotomy of markets and democracy, Nathan cites Don Lavoie's conception which essentially posits markets as the truest expression of democracy:

> *"In Lavoie's framework, democracy is not something expressed through a state with a monopoly on the use of force, or through elections to decide what such a state will do. Instead, democracy occurs through open discourse, debate, contestation, and interaction among citizens. To borrow a concept from the Ostroms, democracy rightly understood is polycentric rather than monocentric. … If democracy is characterized by openness, then the ballot box is not the epitome of democracy. Instead, democracy is defined by those who, from the bottom up, contribute to an open society. People who film police and expose their crimes do this. Journalists who investigate powerful people, debate ideas, and keep the free press alive embody democracy."*

It's worth underlining, of course, that Lavoie's conception of "democracy" as reconcilable with markets obliges an expansion of our consideration from the thinnest economic reductionism, obliging a wider culture of liberty, openness, discourse, and engagement. Nathan is right to crow that this lines up perfectly with the position of "thick libertarianism," first introduced by Charles Johnson. For too long, too many libertarians have insisted that liberation can be achieved through the narrowest certification of voluntary transactions, with everything else rendered superfluous to securing a libertarian society. Of course, sadly, most contemporary right-libertarians have dropped their self-proclaimed "thin libertarian" act and endorsed a wild array of supposed cultural preconditions for freedom: often supporting extreme authoritarianism as a means to institute such cultural conditions. This position is almost identical to Marxism's pretenses of being a path to anarchy. These "libertarians" — who think that a stultifying reactionary culture of traditional authoritarianism is necessary for liberation — are now too busy marching with neo-Nazis in intimidation rallies to bother attempting to justify such twists.

I have to say though, I love this concept that Nathan cites of Lavoie's. But it's almost impossible for me to square such truly decentralized discussion with almost any common usage of "democracy," even among radicals and anarchists.

Nathan distinguishes the "democracy" of open engagement he wants from the centralizations and power relations found in direct democracy, federated worker cooperatives, and council communism, which is all well and good. But how many proponents of democracy mean neither those

[17] Richard J. Arneson, "Defending the Purely Instrumental Account of Democratic Legitimacy," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (2003): 122–132.

things nor the absurd majoritarian totalitarianism found in statist discourse? The number appears to be Nathan and Don Lavoie alone, and maybe a few dozen Ostromite libertarians that might be receptive.

If most of society were to suddenly switch overnight to this definition of democracy, I'd happily give up my complaints that etymology strongly suggests a "Rule Of All Over All," but I doubt that's going to happen. It seems weird to assume that those who presently support "democracy" in its current guises of majoritarianism and centralized collectivism would be open to switching their allegiance to openness. Part of the reason "democracy" has such widespread positive associations, I would argue, is that people often *like* the horrors that democracy presently refers to — not because there's some inner lurking idealism of openness that is being mischanneled.

People *like* getting to vote on their neighbors' lives. They like the sense of belonging and power that comes with participation in collective domination. There might be slight inclinations towards some aspects of the ideal of openness, but for the most part people are driven by a hunger for participatory tyranny. Scratch your local "grassroots" politician or democratic activist and you'll find someone who'd be a busybody in any context. The causes they latch onto may sometimes be just and even heartfelt, but underneath remains an intense need to have a say in the lives of other people. Were the big evil they're campaigning against removed, most of them would find new evils in the length of their neighbor's lawn.

There are obviously certain cultural prerequisites for a libertarian or anarchist society. Empathy and compassion, a commitment to respecting autonomy, a libertine let-live attitude towards cultural mutation and miscegenation, and — yes — definitely an ideal of open engagement. We need to build and spread such norms and values if we're ever to see liberation, but this also involves overthrowing many of the existing values that have led to and sustained statism. Democracy, I would argue, is one such poisonous tradition.

Perhaps many who pray to the god of democracy *also* share anarchist values, even bundling them in their minds with the negatives of democracy. But the negatives remain and must be rooted out. Identifying democracy not as a positive that needs purification but as a creeping negative that needs distinguishing appears to me to be the best way to do that.

12. Embracing the Antinomies (Shawn P. Wilbur)

June 26th, 2017

It should be clear that one of the key conflicts in these debates about anarchy and democracy is a struggle over the nature of *anarchism*. And it is probably safe to say that nearly all anarchists wrestle with the difficulties of defining that term. Part of the difficulty is that anarchism is simultaneously a kind of *system* and a matter of *tradition*. It is at once a political—or anti-political—ideology, a social-scientific approach, and a body of practices that have emerged within—and sometimes against—a particular set of social movements. It is no surprise, then, when our discussions of anarchist theory and practice oscillate between, on the one hand, attempts to show logical consistency between given practices and established principles and, on the other, appeals to the practices of certain pioneers.

When anarchist thought is vital, we should expect the two aspects to work together, since ideally anarchism should never become either simply a theoretical construction or a matter of merely copying past practices. At its best, anarchist thought uses elements of tradition to increase

freedom in the present, while new contexts in the present cast new light on the insights of the past. But we should probably be honest and admit that we do not always know quite how to achieve that mix.

Looking back over this exchange, it seems to me Gabriel Amadej's short contribution "The Regime of Liberty" is a good example of how to at least begin to achieve that balance—and one that works with a particularly difficult body of thought. The attempt to propose a market anarchism "in the spirit of Proudhon" is provocative—I assume intentionally so, given familiar arguments about the place of "the market" in Proudhon's thought—and the claim that he "held his ground and asserted the principles of anarchy" in late works such as *The Principle of Federation* simply ups the ante, given the tendency to treat those works as some kind of departure from the spirit of works like *What is Property?*

As one of those who has pretty consistently advised caution in linking Proudhon and market anarchism, I want to explain a few of the reasons for my reticence in that regard, and also talk a bit about the difficulties involved with attaching Proudhon, and especially his mature works, to any of our projects, but then I would like to briefly explore how we might move at least a few more steps down a path at least similar to the one Amadej has indicated. "*Sancta sanctis*," wrote Proudhon in *The Theory of Property*. "Everything becomes just for the just man; everything can be justified between the just." And let's take that as a challenge that it is up to us to determine whether "the market" can find its place among the key institutions of an anarchist society.

First, however, we have to confront the fact that, as Amadej puts it, "Oppression comes in all forms. Any exercise of liberty can, in certain conditions, succumb to tyranny." Let's underline the possibility that "all forms" really means *ALL forms*, including some that we might consider anarchic. There's nothing very unorthodox in this possibility. After all, we have figures like Bakunin claiming that even *science*—a true understanding of the world—would have to be rejected should it be coupled with the ability to command. And we have the fact, which so many people have found so perplexing, that Proudhon and Bakunin never stopped describing disorder and even tyranny with that same word, *anarchy*, that they used to describe non-governmental society. And we know (although it is obscured in the translation of *The General Idea of the Revolution*) that one of the other senses of *anarchy* was the capitalistic "anarchy of the market." So we are forced, even in these early works, to distinguish between senses and forms of anarchy, and perhaps, as I have already suggested, to imagine a series of anarchies much like the series that Proudhon described as running from absolutism to "anarchy in all its senses."

Obviously, as soon as we attempt to address this possible *series of anarchies* things get complicated. But it seems to me that the major objection to the principle-driven position of the anti-democratic anarchists is precisely that *things are complicated*, so presumably no one should object to attempts to clarify the nature of the complication. And maybe we don't have to go too far down this particular rabbit hole to get a sense of the difficulties likely to be faced in the attempt to elaborate a market anarchism "in the spirit of Proudhon." Let's start by examining the possibility of what we might call *absolutist anarchy* or *exploitative anarchy*.

In the first case, we might successfully navigate all of the theoretical difficulties involved in positing anarchy as a principle, but then treat the resulting concept as the basis for a *rule*, to be applied much like any other sort of law or deontological principle. There are a couple of potential problems here. First, of course, there is the obvious break with the spirit of anarchy involved in imposing the practice of anarchic relations as a duty. But there is also potentially a misunderstanding about the path to anarchy. If, for example, we simply take the four-quadrant

model from *The Principle of Federation* as a kind of guide, then we might think of the path from any of the other quadrants to anarchy as a relatively simple one: increase the division of power within society while individualizing or simply eliminating authority. But we know that the model was not intended as a map of the real world, but as an *a priori* construction, a *simplism* appealing to "logic and good faith," and that, as Proudhon put it, "therein, precisely, lies the trap."

The thing that we learn from the rest of the discussion in *The Principle of Federation* is that none of these *a priori* forms appear in reality in fully realized form. They remain "perpetual *desiderata*." This is one of the reasons that some have claimed that Proudhon distanced himself from anarchy in his later works. But I think that Amadej is correct in saying that Proudhon "held his ground and asserted the principles of anarchy." It is just not the *simplist* form of anarchy that he ultimately asserts. Rather than an *a priori* principle, anarchy becomes something like an *active principle*, achieved, as Amadej rightly observes, though various kinds of balance.

If we skip ahead to Chapter VI of *The Principle of Federation*, we find Proudhon in fine form, taking obvious pleasure in the twists and turns of his argument: "If the reader has followed the above account with some care, human society should appear to him as a fantastic creation, full of surprises and mysteries." But his claims are fairly straightforward, beginning with the assertion that "Political order rests upon two complementary, opposed, and irreducible principles: authority and liberty." There should be absolutely no surprises here for anyone who has encountered the argument that "property is theft," that the first forms of justice were force and fraud, that the key to abolishing property-theft was in universalizing it, etc., or who has worked through any of the exposition of the "economic contradictions."

There is really a good deal of consistency in Proudhon's treatment of irreducible oppositions in his work, but certainly in any of the works written after 1858 we can say with certainty that we are dealing with a worldview in which the *antinomy* is the dominant form. As a result, there are no neat syntheses to wipe old problems off the table and resolutions generally come in the form of some balancing of forces.

That means, for example—and for better or worse—that property is never *just* "theft" or *just* "liberty." We should probably be very cautious, in any event, in attempting to map the concept of property onto real-world institutions, but the key to understanding Proudhon's conceptual analysis of property (and this might be true as early as 1842 and the *Explanations Presented to the Public Prosecutor concerning the Right of Property*) is that he never relented in his critique of "the idea in itself" or backed down on the question of its "incompatibility with all the known systems." Property always remained "theft," at least when considered in simple isolation, and always would, at least until human beings intervened with the intention of striking a balance and making the essentially unjust just among themselves. In *The Theory of Property*, he argues that:

> *"There is only one point of view from which property can be accepted: it is the one that, recognizing that man possesses Justice, within himself, making him sovereign and upholder of justice [justicier], consequently awards him property, and knows no possible political order but federation. (Ms. 2847, p. 36.)*

And again:

> *"Thus, on this great question, our critique remains at base the same, and our conclusions are always the same: we want equality, more and more fully approximated, of conditions*

> *and fortunes, as we want, more and more, the equalization of responsibilities. We reject, along with governmentalism, communism in all its forms; we want the definition of official functions and individual functions; of public services and of free services. There is only one thing new for us in our thesis: it is that that same property, the contradictory and abusive principle of which has raised our disapproval, we today accept entirely, along with its equally contradictory qualification: Dominium est just utendi et abutendi re suâ, quatenus juris ratio patur. We have understood finally that the opposition of two absolutes—one of which, alone, would be unpardonably reprehensive, and both of which, together, would be rejected, if they worked separately—is the very cornerstone of social economy and public right: but it falls to us to govern it and to make it act according to the laws of logic."*

So here we have an "opposition" that is at the same time a "cornerstone" of society. Whatever might remain uncertain about the approach described here—and I certainly still have plenty of questions about its practical application—I think we can say that the method of moving from one general political form to another is not necessarily going to follow any very straight and narrow course, and that it is likely to involve a lot of experimental limiting and balancing of a wide variety of social forces, with nothing more than our growing understanding of social dynamics to guide us.

And every reservation we might have about attempt to apply anarchy as a *rule* should probably apply to attempts to embody it in a *system*. Building on a "cornerstone" of irreducible opposition obviously imposes a particular character on the edifice, so when we think of federation as a "political order"—or as the principle of a form of political order—we have to keep that character in mind. What seems to be true of anarchy and federation as principles is that they authorize nothing. Because they are fundamentally *principles of relation*, they address the elements and institutions of society only indirectly, focusing instead on their interactions and what Proudhon called their "resultant forces."

All of this undoubtedly sounds a bit vague and perhaps alien to conventional anarchist discourse. In large part, that is because works like *The Principle of Federation* and *The Theory of Property* are just the tip of a rather formidable iceberg. What is becoming clear about Proudhon's work, now that the Besançon manuscripts have been available online for a few years, is that pretty much everything he wrote from 1859 on is part of one large, sprawling, unfinished study, in the course of which he developed some of his most interesting social-scientific theory, with the later works that are available to us in English (partial translations of *The Principle of Federation* and *Literary Majorats*, plus my draft translation of *The Theory of Property* and a few other odds and ends) giving only the most fragmentary glimpses of the larger work. *The Theory of Property*, for example, was intended to be the final chapter of a work on "the birth and death of nations," where it was titled "Guarantism—Theory of Property," and there are some indications that *The Principle of Federation* grew out of material intended to serve as its final section. So, in each of the published versions, we seem to have the conclusions of other studies, but with nearly all traces of those other studies erased. Among the earlier works, The General Idea of the Revolution has a similar relationship to the manuscripts on "Economy." So it is perhaps unsurprising if we've struggled to make good sense of the works at hand.

This is the context in which my personal reluctance to talk about mutualism as a "market anarchism" has to be understood and, I think, the context within which any attempt at a market

anarchism "in the spirit of Proudhon" has to succeed or fail. Every time we attempt to start this conversation—and I can only applaud the attempt by Amadej—we find ourselves in remarkably deep waters. And it shouldn't be lost on us that many of the most elusive aspects of Proudhon's theory remain those most necessary to an adequate account of "the market." It's not just that there are untranslated works (like the *Manuel du spéculateur à la Bourse*) and works lacking important contexts (like *The Theory of Property*), but that key works remain available only in the forms of scans of handwritten manuscripts (*Economie*, *La propriété vaincue*, the other *Solution du problème social*, the unused chapters of *Système des Contradictions économiques*, plus various scattered fragments) or perhaps no longer exist at all (*Suite du Spéculateur à la Bourse, nouveau Manuel.*) I'm finally deep enough into these studies to begin to see some of the possibilities, but the difficulties are really considerable—and I think the texts that we have ready access to testify to those difficulties. Indeed, if we've really understood why "property is theft" in the early works and explored the consequences of the theory of *collective force*, particularly as it might apply to our more socially complex and technologically advanced context, none of the emerging complications should surprise us too much.

I'm happy to encourage anyone willing to wade into those deep waters with a relatively open mind, but I'm also happy to encourage anyone who is not prepared to have a lot of their basic ideas challenged to save themselves the time and stress and find another point of reference. I'm just not sure that there is much room for anything in between immersion and rejection—or at least anything that will stand up to much scrutiny. But if one chooses immersion, then the arc of the analysis is likely to be very similar to that involved in the critique of democracy, and my educated guess on the matter is that we might well find ourselves in a similar position with regard to the tension between principles and practices.

13. Formality, Collectivity and Anarchy (Derek Wittorff)

June 27th, 2017

I found William Gillis' essay "The Abolition of Rulership Or The Rule Of All Over All" to be a very interesting read. It covered many of the same points as my essay without much disagreement, and in a much less compressed manner. However, there was one notable difference, and a couple of slight disagreements. Addressing these points of departure will hopefully help contribute to the ongoing dialogue.

William's definition of democracy as the "rule of all over all" actually paralleled my definition of communism. His definition of democracy is appears to be slightly more broad, ranging from the "rule of the majority" to the unanimity of consensus. This essentially gives democracy a little bit more room for compatibility with anarchy (in a very limited space, i.e. extremely informal, small, ad hoc forms of consensus). Although I do not define consensus as a form of democracy, we find ourselves both agreeing that consensus has some limited overlap with anarchism. It appears the disagreement is over how far that overlap extends, or whether formal organizations using consensus have any anarchist applications at all.

Quoting from the section "Democracy as Consensus":

> *"There's a massive difference between consensus that's arrived at through free association, and consensus that's arrived because people are locked into some collective body to some degree. Often what passes for "consensus" within anarchist activist projects is*

merely consensus within the prison of a reified organization. Modern anarchists are still quite bad at embracing the fluidity of truly free association, we cling to familiar edifices. Our organizations reassure us insofar as they function like the state, simplistic monoliths that exist outside of time and beyond the changing desires and relations of their constituent members…

…for consensus to be truly anarchistic we must be willing to consense upon autonomy, to shed off our reactionary hunger for established perpetual collective entities. Otherwise consensus will erode back in the direction of majority rules, individuals feeling obliged to tolerate decisions lest they break the uniformity of the established collective."

While I agree that the consensus of informal groups with limited size and structure involves much fluidity and respect for autonomy, I'm not convinced that autonomy cannot be respected in formal organizations. I understand that in many cases — in today's society — large organizations are reified beyond the relations and interactions of their constituent members. The State in any territory is probably the most outstanding example of such reification, including the corporate organizations made artificially large and hierarchical by means of government subsidies. Nonetheless, if there's a clear understanding of the complexity of relations necessary to produce a specific good, such as a finished product requiring highly skilled laborers and a complex division of labor, and there's obviously going to be some level of structural capital necessary, people agreeing to participate in such a collective endeavor are only going to sacrifice as much autonomy as is necessary to complete the goal. They may not be engaging in a reification organization; rather, they could be engaging in something they know is very complex, not easily analyzed, and not reducible to their small individual contribution. Some people aren't disempowered by meetings, discussions, or a lack of obviously perceivable impact from their own individual participation, etc. While we prefer agency to structure, we cannot deny that some level of structure (even if it is only informal and ad hoc) is necessary to produce agency. For some, agency might be translated from formal structures. If someone is passionate about the work they do, and find agency in performing the work, but requires a formal structure and long meetings to self-manage the division of labor, we can't say it's going to come at the cost of that person's agency since it's a matter of subjectivity.

In the section, "Democracy as Collective Decision Making", William goes on:

"Many leftists are scarred by the alienating social dynamics of our society and seek meetings as a kind of structured socializing time to make friends and conjure a sense of belonging to a community, but this is absolutely not the same thing as engendering a sense of altruism or empathy. If anything collective meetings are horrible draining experiences that scar everyone involved and only partially satiate the most isolated and socially desperate. Like a starving person eating grass the nutrition is never good enough and so the activist becomes trapped in endless performative communities, going to endless group meetings to imperfectly reassure base psychological needs rather than efficaciously change the world for the better. (I say such cutting words with all the love and sympathy of someone who's nevertheless persisted as an activist and organizer attempting to do shit for almost two decades.) Collective decision-making itself is no balm or salve to the horrors that plague this world.

But that's not even the worst of it. Collective decision-making is itself fundamentally constraining, it frequently makes situations worse to attempt to make decisions as a collective rather than autonomously as networked individuals."

I agree that making friends and conjuring a sense of belonging to a community isn't a means of spreading anarchy outside the anarchist community, but providing "altruism and empathy" within that community is useful. Meetings and structured socializing time are definitely not best the way to do this. Regardless, in terms of expanding anarchy outside our immediate groups, in order to have the greatest altruistic impact, sometimes collective goals that are decidedly not just collaborative networks of individuals are necessary when the need is particularly unique or demanding. Collective direct action isn't always characterized by collaborative networks. I'll go into more depth after this next quote:

"The processing of information is the most important dynamic to how our societies are structured. A boss in a large firm for example appoints middle managers to filter and process information because a raw stream of reports from the shop floor would be too overwhelming for his brain to analyze. There are many ways in which aspects of the flow of information constrain social organizations, but when it comes to collective decision-making the most relevant thing is the vast difference between the complexity our brains are capable of holding and the small trickle of that we can express in language. As a rule individuals are better off with the autonomy to just act in pursuit of their desires rather than trying to convey them in their full unknowable complexity. But when communication is called for it's far, far more efficient to speak in pairs one-on-one, and let conclusions percolate organically into generality. "Collective" decision-making almost always assumes a discussion with more than two people — a collective — an often incredibly inefficient arrangement where everyone has to put their internal life in stasis and listen to piles of other people speak one at a time. The information theoretic constraints are profound.

If collective decision-making is supposed to provide us with the positive freedoms possible through collaboration it offers only the tiniest fraction of what is usually actually possible. That there are occasionally situations so shitty that collective decision-making is requisite does not mean anarchists should worship or applaud it. And one would be hard-pressed to classify something far more general like collaboration *itself as 'democracy'."*

We could definitely imagine a society in which there is a robust digital commons, and all productive needs supplied by a collaborative p2p network of individual producers, but many currently do not have the means. At the same time we all have short-term needs that must be satisfied. This may come at the cost of maintaining structural capital, and listening to "piles of other people speak one at a time," while still having a horizontal structure or network between such collectives. Think of it as a trade-off: not one sacrificing sociological principles, but definitely costing something in terms of economics. If it's more than a short-term need, but some idealistic desire, the cost of maintaining the structural capital of a formal organization may be an option. Producing the components or the finished product of some kind of experimental propulsion system that could revolutionize how we travel may not be effectively coordinated through

p2p collaboration. It may require a definite, formal, and large organization (somewhere along the structure of production from raw materials to finished product) to produce.

If this is too abstract, let me try a more contemporary example in movement building. If there's a union shop of thirty workers that want to join and collaborate with a general network that characterizes a general strike, that union shop itself isn't going to operate by informal decisionmaking. They're going to need a form of collective decisionmaking on what resources to request, how best to participate etc.

Individuals could defect and join the strike without that group, which is a definite possibility, but sometimes there's benefits to collective direct action. The union shop might have more resources made accessible by connection to the larger organization. This is all hypothetical, and surely syndicalism might be the target of some criticism here, but it can't be criticized on the basis of not attempting to do community outreach. Ironically, and more often than not, it seems that informal groups are the ones that fail to extend beyond their own community. Informal groups may have more fluid information mechanisms, and they may internally aggregate capital faster, but they don't necessarily aggregate capital any better if time-preference isn't the only standard, which means they can just as effectively commit to community outreach.

It should also be understood that even in contexts of collective decisionmaking — consensus-based or not — there are layers of collaborative networks that are going to exist. People are going to have issues, often between each other in small isolated incidents, that can be resolved without going through formal channels. If two people cannot collaborate, and formal channels become an option for resolution, we're talking about a sort of hierarchy where people outside the problem, but inside the larger group, determine the resolution. That's a problem, but one I think individuals are capable of resolving through collaboration on their own, especially if we believe anarchism is practical. Let's say I work in a kitchen, and a nearby workstation is disorganized, making my work more difficult. It doesn't need to be made an issue or proposal for the whole group unless maybe it might actually improve cooperation between everyone, but that would be up to everyone to decide, and since it's subject to personal preference, it really isn't a collective issue. There is a way to draw the line between personal issues and collective issues without undermining the existence of either.

Point being, is there an unresolvable tension between collaborative networks and collective decisionmaking in principle? I don't think so: not unless we want to simplify either the structure of such networks or consensus models. In any case, I think our disagreement is a matter of degree and not principle. We definitely both oppose collective action for the sake of collective action. I agree it's also important to classify the difference between collaborative networks and collective decisionmaking, and make distinctly different approaches depending on the necessities at hand. However, to think there isn't some kind of practical overlap between the two might be misguided.

14. Response to Wittorff (William Gillis)

June 27th, 2017

I should clarify for Derek Wittorff that I wasn't embracing, for example, calling all collective decisionmaking "democracy." Rather, I was entertaining the more extreme definitions out there. I was attempting to point out how some kernel of "the rule of all over all" lies within each of these

alternative definitions — or at the very least how they conflict or risk deviating from anarchism — not to endorse those definitions.

I should also clarify that I have nothing against unanimity, indeed it is often a desirable end. My point was that the way we presently handle consensus process overemphasizes the value of affiliation in a persistent collective organization at the cost of a truer emphasis on freedom of association. Consensus process (done right) encourages people to disassociate and reassociate fluidly. Consensus should ideally be a test applied that dissolves associations and discourages persistent groups just as much as it facilitates the discovery of affinities or detentes.

Unfortunately, the left-liberal concept of consensus has largely won out in activist spaces over the anarchist concept of consensus.

I agree, of course, that we can expect people in a free world to sacrifice some level of agency for the reassurances of persistent structures. And there are certainly problems of economies of scale and externalities in our immediate world that will require all manner of trade-offs, as I openly admitted in my opening essay. There will certainly be situations where accomplishing a task is only possible if people stick together. My point here is that people should *consciously* decide whether that is the case, and whether the task is worth it. The default right now is almost always to assume that every undertaking requires sticking together in some group, and that such a course of action is worth it. I think we need a much stronger skepticism about the necessity of sticking together, much less in persistent organizations. We must get over our deep-seated fear of disassociation for anarchy to ever flourish.

Where Derek starts to lose me is in treating "agency" like an emotional affect subjective to each person. While the quantification of agency in particular cases is truly forbidding, we can nevertheless speak with some substance of it. An agent locked in a small room from which no information or causal influence escapes clearly has a maximum limit to their agency. And we can clearly say that an agent locked in a bigger box, all other things being equal, has more possible agency. They *can do more things*. They have more choices and more of the universe is contingent upon their thoughts. (As anarchists we obviously want to go much further than longer chains. We want *no* chains — the ultimate end of infinite freedom.) Similarly, an agent with 1 bit of information about their world and what choices are available to them has less agency than an agent with 2 bits of information about the same.

It is in this sense that we can say that *everyone* is disempowered by meetings, regardless of whether they recognize it or not. This is because the meeting form is poorly structured and deeply inefficient at processing information.

I think that Wittorff misrepresents my advocacy of fluid networks when he starts talking about "informal groups." Firstly, my whole post-leftist point here is one about being deeply critical of groups themselves. But secondly, the associations he invokes with "informal" are those of things like friendship groups. Informality may sometimes offer a certain fluidity but it isn't the path to fluidity I'm advocating. Informal groups are often just everything wrong with groups themselves with the added benefit of being opaque. Similarly to how informal power structures are often just everything wrong with power structures *plus* an increased resilience against liberation.

I am not advocating informality (nor rejecting it per se) here, I'm advocating fluidity. It's a tragedy that explicitness has become so deeply associated with rigidity today. Indeed, the promise of consensus process for anarchists is that it can offer a way to be explicit about our fluid associations.

15. Individualist Anarchism vs. Social Anarchism (Wayne Price)

June 28th, 2017

This C4SS discussion about anarchism and democracy has been intriguing—even though I am one of only two writers who have regarded them as compatible concepts. The brief essay by Grayson, "Demolish the Demos," is especially useful. It clarifies what is at the root of the disagreement among anarchists about democracy. The basic issue, I believe, is not what we mean by "democracy" but what we mean by "anarchism." It is the commitment to an "individualist" interpretation of anarchism which lead to a rejection of radical democracy. I believe that this leads, contrary to anyone's intentions, in an authoritarian direction.

Social Philosophy

Grayson writes:

> *"…All should be equal in having…absolute authority over themselves.…We…wish for a world…in which all are kings.…The demos is the original enemy for an anarchist.…It presupposes the annihilation of the individual in the collective.…This antagonism [is] between individual sovereignty and democracy.…The social should make room for the individual and not vice versa.…Individuals act…Collectives do not act.…The society we want is one that continually dissolves itself into individuals and only exists as a spring-board for unique individuals to interface with each other…"*

Of course, Grayson does not deny the existence of society or societies, large or small. But he regards them as secondary to individuals: something to be tolerated and used as little as possible, until they can be (periodically?) dissolved. (I do not know whether Grayson is a disciple of Stirner or other individualist anarchists, but he clearly fits this category.)

As a description of reality, this is false. There are and can be no individuals without society. Grayson could not think without using language—a social product. A child's sense of self is developed through his or her interaction with others, from infancy onwards. Grayson's vision is like saying that a waterfall does not really exist because it is composed of water drops: the drops do the falling, but supposedly not the river's water. He says that only individuals act, but not collectives. But take the famous example of a group of men moving a piano. *Who is moving the piano?* If each one acts completely autonomously, will the piano be moved? This is a model for any sort of productive activity from hunter-gathering on to today, no matter how decentralized or crafts-like an anarchist technology would be.

Compare Grayson's views with those of Bakunin (passages quoted in Brian Morris, *Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom*, 1993):

> *"…Natural society [is] the real starting point of all human civilization and the only medium in which the personality and liberty of man can really be born and grow.…Man…only realizes his individual liberty or personality by integration with all the individuals around him and virtue of the collective power of society.…Man in isolation can have no awareness of his liberty. Being free for man means being acknowledged, considered and treated as such by another man and by all the men*

around him. Liberty is therefore a feature not of isolation but of interaction, not of exclusion but rather of connection…"

(pp. 88—89; note use of "man" to mean "humanity")

I will not quote from Kropotkin on mutual aid/cooperation as the foundation of his vision of anarchism. You get the idea. This is the basis of social anarchism, of anarchist-socialism. It is quite distinct from individualist anarchism.

Actual Politics

Grayson agrees that the collective does exist, even under anarchism, in between its dissolving into isolated individuals, when serving as a "springboard" for human atoms. Therefore it is reasonable to ask him, how will the collective be organized during these periods? How will individuals control how these (unfortunately necessary if temporary) collectives function? Down through the millennia, hunter-gatherer groups, villages, clans, and other associations have often used communal discussions, consensus, voting, choosing specialists by lot or group decision, or similar methods—democracy. But Grayson rejects democracy. What then?

He does not tell us what he would do. He does say he rejects democracy and wants "kings" and that he regards the "demos" (the collective people) as "the enemy." Of course he does not advocate dictatorship. But what then? If no one can tell me what to do, not even the most radically-democratic socialist people, then I must be the king. It is the logical conclusion of rejecting democracy, even if it contradicts the very goals which Grayson wants to achieve.

In brief, Grayson comes up against the same problem that all the other anarchists who reject democracy (leaving aside the many who advocate democratic procedures but do not use the term "democracy") encounter. Given that people do live in society, that cooperation is a necessary part of living, that production and consumption of necessary goods requires group activities—then there has to be some way of organizing these procedures that provides the maximum of individual freedom and control from below. Those anarchists who reject democracy generally remain on a high and abstract level of philosophy. They do not say what they would actually do! What could this be but some sort of radical democracy?

16. Comments on the Other Lead Essays (Kevin Carson)

June 28th, 2017

In "The Regime of Liberty," Gabriel Amadej advocates the Proudhonian ideal – reflected in the dictum "property is liberty" – of some individual sphere of last resort where means of subsistence are secure from the will of the majority:

"Democracy disrupts this balance and places society under the unaccountable domain of community. An individual's means of survival thus came to depend entirely on one's reputation with one's neighbours. It is, as Proudhon said, the rule of all by all, which includes every individual involved in that sum.

It is under this condition that Proudhon proclaimed that community, too, is theft. Yet never, in any of his works, did he declare that community is liberty. Despite the fact

that, just as he famously declared that property is theft, he also declared property to be liberty. Community was just much a problem, an enigma, as property itself.…

"Property is liberty" when labour controls its own product and individuals are sovereign over their means of survival. This is a counterbalance to the absolutist domain of community. If this dimension of property becomes a totalizing force, the regime of liberty suffers again.

We can say that pure democracy threatens to make the domain of community universal, while capitalism likewise threatens to make the domain of property universal. Under both regimes, liberty suffers. Anarchy is neither capitalism nor communism. It is self-government; the absolute sovereignty of the individual.

We should not desire a society where every good is bought and sold under the cash nexus. Neither should we desire a society where one's access to resources is determined by one's neighbour's good will.

This dichotomy needs a resolution, and that resolution is Proudhonian mutualism.…

Critical to the survival of anarchy is mutualism: the balance of property and community. The market cannot be free without the commons, and the commons cannot be free without the market."

The commons, in my opinion, is itself an institution for synthesizing community with liberty. It is a sort of platform, outside the realm of state politics. Unconditional equal access rights to the commons amount to inalienable control over one's livelihood.

It may be objected that one's right of access to the commons depends on the goodwill of one's neighbors. But by that standard, there is no form of possession or property right that does not depend on the willingness of neighbors to recognize and enforce. Any form of organization in an anarchist society ultimately assumes that a majority of the community are of good will and good faith, and willing to adhere to agreed-upon rules. In fact the philosophy of anarchism itself juxtaposes certain assumptions about human nature – the ability of human beings to organize society around peaceful agreement – against the Hobbesian assumption that a state is necessary to impose peace and order.

I think that what Gabriel wants to avoid is "politics" in the sense of one's rights and livelihood being constantly imperiled by majoritarian politics. We can achieve this by substituting another kind of democracy – organized around the commons, and the transformation of the state into a networked platform – that amounts to the neutral and routinized "administration of things." Such commons governance is arguably at least as automatic and apolitical as routinized enforcement of property claims in a court system.

In "Democracy, Anarchism, & Freedom," Wayne Price argues that "anarchism is democracy without the state"; i.e., that "anarchism is the most extreme, radical, form of democracy":

"I see both "democracy" and "anarchism" as requiring decision-making by the people, from the bottom-up, through cooperation, clashes of opinion, social experimentation, and group intelligence.

But "democracy" means collective decision-making. It does not apply to matters which are of individual or minority concern only, such as individual sexual orientation, religion, or artistic taste. Free choice should rule here, whatever the majority thinks."

And unlike bourgeois or capitalist democracy, those like Wayne who see anarchism as the ultimate in democracy advocate democratic control over the economy ("[f]or example, a federation of worker-run industries, consumer co-ops, and collective communes").

He also notes that even professed "anti-democratic" anarchists nevertheless:

> *"…advocate "self-rule," "self-governing," and "self-management." These terms are no different than "direct democracy" and "participatory democracy."*
>
> *If everyone is involved in governing (participatory democracy), then there is no government—no special institution over society which rules people. Anarchists are not against all social coordination, community decision-making, and protection of the people. They are generally for some sort of association of workplace committees and neighborhood assemblies. They are for the replacement of the police and military by an armed people (a democratic militia, so long as that is necessary). This is the self-organization of the people—of the former working class and oppressed population, until the heritage of class divisions and oppression has been dissolved into a united population."*

So those of us who see anarchism as the ultimate in democracy, as I do, define "democracy" in terms of non-coercive governance – a value shared even by most anarchists who dislike the word "democracy" as such.

Wayne uses the example of a community decision on whether or not to build a road to examine the question of whether non-state democratic governance entails domination of some sort.

> *"Does this radical democracy still mean the coercion or domination of some people by others? Let us imagine an industrial-agricultural commune under anarchism. Some member proposes that it build a new road. People have differing opinions. A decision will have to be made; either the road will be built or it won't (this is coercion by reality, not by the police). Suppose a majority of the assembly decides in favor of road-building. A minority disagrees. Perhaps it is outvoted (under majority rule). Or perhaps it decides to "stand aside" so as not to "block consensus" (under a consensus system).*
>
> *Is the minority coerced? Its members have participated fully in the community discussions which led up to the decision. They have been free to argue for their viewpoint. They have been able to organize themselves (in a caucus or "party") to fight against building the road. In the end, the minority members retain full rights. They may be in the majority on the next issue. (Of course, dissatisfied members may leave the community and go elsewhere. But other communities also have to decide whether to build roads.)*
>
> *The minority may be said to have been coerced on this road-building issue, but I do not see this situation as one of domination. It is not like a white majority consistently dominating its African-American minority. In a state-less system of direct democracy, all participate in decision-making, even if all individuals are not always satisfied with the outcome. In any case, the aim of anarchism is not to end absolutely all coercion, but to reduce coercion to the barest minimum possible. Institutions of domination must be abolished and replaced by bottom-up democratic-libertarian organization. But there will never be a perfect society. This is why I began by defining "anarchism" as a society without the state, capitalism, or other institutions of domination."*

Now this contention that anarchism is about minimizing coercion, and not eliminating it altogether, is likely to be challenged by many anarchists. But if we break down the issues here, we may find that even what at first appears to be a minimal level of coercion may be a phantom.

A lot of it hinges, first of all, on the material effect of the majority decision on the minority, after the vote is taken. Is the road to be built on an existing right of way that is common property, or on a route that doesn't encroach on someone's existing possessions? Is it to be built with natural resources that are a democratically governed commons? Is the labor to be contributed by willing participants, with no conscription of labor from the unwilling or levies of food and other material means of support from the unwilling?

Second, what is the nature of the social unit making the decision, and what is the relationship of the majority and minority voters to it? As I noted in my own initial contribution to this symposium, when an indivisible asset or resource is being discussed, or a simple up-or-down decision that can't be broken down into smaller parts, and when a unitary body is making the decision – when some decision is necessary, and it will of necessity affect everyone in an indivisible decision-making unit – the outcome is generally not regarded as coercive. For example, when the roommates sharing an apartment adhere to a majority decision on how to set the thermostat in the living room, the minority who consider the resulting temperature too cold or too hot have not been coerced.

So depending on the answers to all these questions, it is quite possible to address governance issues (like whether to build a road) by majority decision without anyone being subject to coercion.

The second question I raised above may have at least some bearing on the distinction Shawn Wilbur raises in his contribution, "Anarchy and Democracy: Examining the Divide," between the realm of authority and the realm characterized by the anarchic principle. That is, whether a social unit can be governed democratically and still be characterized by "social relations free from hierarchy, claims of authority and the various types of exploitation that seem to inevitably arise from them" depends in large part on the nature of the social unit itself, and its members' relationships with it.

If the members are viewed primarily as atomistic individuals in an amorphous, unstructured larger social body, in which any agreement between members of society is on an ad hoc, issue-by-issue basis, then a decision taken may be viewed as a coercive imposition on them. On the other hand if the members are viewed as members of a common enterprise, or going concern, with internal bylaws, things take on a different character. For example in a medieval European open-field village, in which the land is treated as a common unit and the village as a corporate body, the allocation of furlong strips between families on a year-to-year basis is not an act of coercion (as opposed to an action by the state against property held on a fee simple basis, in a system operating on Lockean assumptions). The question of what is "coercive" or "authoritarian" can only be answered by resorting to the question of what are the fundamental component social units of the society.

If social functions can be organized through some combination of commons governance within corporate bodies (for example land and natural resources), self-selected collectives or stigmergic networks, and market exchange, then we may have a state of affairs where "society" as such comes to bear on the individual only insofar as she is co-owner of a democratically-governed common resource, or some self-selected cooperative body, and in no case operates directly on

her through any sort of claimed police power for initiating force. It is a virtually pure expression of "collective force" in which "relations remain strictly horizontal."

And if the only institutional structure co-extensive with society as a whole, or overlapping with most of it, is something along the lines of Orsini's and Bauwens's Partner State – to recur to that concept once again – that functions as a support platform, coordinated by the various resource commons and voluntary associations that choose to participate in maintaining it, then it follows that its only relationship to the individual is mediated by the natural resource commons or voluntary collectivities to which she belongs.

I confess to finding myself generally at odds with William Gillis's approach, in "The Abolition Of Rulership Or The Rule Of All Over All," of argument by definition. His argument seems to hinge on a dogmatic assertion, based largely on etymology, that democracy "really means" majoritarian tyranny. From this it follows that anarchists who emphasize the liberatory strands within the historical composite of "democracy" are guilty of "orwellianism" or pandering.

I've long objected, for similar reasons (arbitrary argumentation from definition) to "post-Left anarchism." It's a circular argument that starts out by defining "Left" in terms of the most objectionable characteristics of the stereotypical Old Left – workerism, focus on organizational coordination and mass, etc. – and then defining anything out of it, like decentralist or anti-authoritarian strands of the Left, that's inconsistent with that stereotype. So anything that doesn't smack of vanguardism and trudging masses in overalls isn't "really Left."

This strikes me as being nearly as fruitless as the Bircher argument that the United States is "a republic not a democracy" based on dogmatic, essentialist definitions of "republic" and "democracy."

Referring to other conceptions of democracy as "an uphill battle to redefine" it is begging the question. "Democracy" has connotated face-to-face participation by equals in governance where a common decision is necessary, and the right to a say in matters affecting oneself, since the beginning. Focusing on those aspects of the term in considering its relation to anarchy is not "redefining it."

In fact I agree with William in celebrating liberatory technologies like weapons that shift the advantage to the defense, networked communications, and the emergence of a detente (like left-libertarian, possession-based property norms) from the mutual veto power of individuals. But for me, these things are the ultimate in genuine democracy. And the society I've described at various points, of an overlapping series of natural resource commons, self-selected stigmergic networks, voluntary production collectives, etc., horizontally cooperating to maintain a "Partner State" as a non-coercive mutual infrastructure, is the ultimate in William's "consensus society… comprised of autonomous realms." And the various opt-in affiliations in such a society are perfectly described by William's "collectivity" that is "organic and ad hoc," with "an unterrified attitude about dissolution and reformation."

This, I think, is what many anarchists have long meant by "democracy," and recognizing that as a legitimate sense of the term requires no "redefinition" nor violence to its meaning.

I also agree entirely with William's caveat against fetishizing collective decisionmaking itself. There are indeed "many pragmatic contexts" that require it under some circumstances – mostly natural monopolies like sharing the same groundwater or other resource which must be commonly governed – I have always enthusiastically promoted stigmergic, permissionless organization wherever it is feasible, and celebrated technologies which facilitate stigmergic organization and reduce the need for institutional coordination. My current book project is a critique of Old

Left organizational models that lionize large, hierarchical institutions and emphasize the need to get everybody on the same page to do anything.

I've also long objected to the mindset that equates meetings and slogan-shouting crowds with "activism"; this is basically a cargo cult approach that takes the incidents of activism as its essentials, without regard to their functional significance or their relevance to a given situation. My enthusiastic support for Occupy was based on the fact – for which it was uniformly criticized by the verticalist usual suspects – of not centrally formulating demands and appointing spokespersons. Occupy was so effective precisely because it was a stigmergic support platform, or toolkit, which could be used in a permissionless manner by the wide variety of nodes participating in it. It functioned in the same "bazaar" model as open-source software, the file-sharing movement, Wikipedia and Al Qaeda – any innovation developed by any node immediately became part of the entire network's toolkit, available to be used by any other node or not entirely at its discretion.

Organizations built on this model have what strategist John Boyd called "short OODA loops": they are able to assess feedback from the results of their own previous actions, act on it, assess the feedback from that, and so forth, many times faster than hierarchies that require consensus. The result is that they innovate with the speed of replicating yeast, and run circles around the dinosaur hierarchies they contend with.

As for the idea of "democracy as a say in the things that affect you," I think it's a distortion to frame it as a positive right to actions by others that benefit you (e.g. a date with your crush, your social group's decision re snapchat, etc.). It's far more charitable (and consistent with actual historic usage), in my opinion, to use it in a sense similar to William's mutual veto power and resulting detente.

Regarding Graeber's purported equation of democracy to the "rabble" or "mob," I'm totally at a loss. I've read *The Democracy Project*, as well as a considerable amount of his other corpus that touch on the subject, and I can't recall seeing anything remotely like this. To the extent that he discusses democracy as a historic phenomenon, it's always in a concrete, situationally embedded context comparable to Kropotkin's folkmotes and Colin Ward's building societies, or Ostrom's common pool resource governance – about as far as you can get from mass democracy.

Derek Wittorff, in "Democracy: Self-Government or Systemic Powerlessness?" likewise starts by arguing from a definition of democracy as majoritarianism, and proposing consensus in its stead. This strikes me as ironic, given that David Graeber treated consensus as his favored model of democracy throughout *The Democracy Project*, and William previously tarred Graeber with "mobocracy."

I'm not going to address Derek's definitional issues; to a large extent it would be revisiting ground I already covered. Suffice it to say I see consensus within self-selected nodes as very much a form of democracy.

What's more interesting is that Derek mates consensus decision-making with a network-node model of federalism, with consensus taking place only at the smallest level at which agreement and collective action are actually necessary, and mostly within nodes which are self-selected collectives. I agree with this approach.

Nathan Goodman's approach of democracy as openness, in "Anarchism as Radical Liberalism," seems similar in spirit to mine. The Partner State approach of Orsini and Bauwens has also been described as "open source government." The description Goodman quotes from Don Lavoie – "a kind of distributed intelligence, not representable by any single organization which may claim

to act on society's behalf" – also coincides closely with the Partner State model (at least as I have developed it in this forum).

In Lavoie's framework, democracy is not something expressed through a state with a monopoly on the use of force, or through elections to decide what such a state will do. Instead, democracy occurs through open discourse, debate, contestation, and interaction among citizens. To borrow a concept from the Ostroms, democracy rightly understood is *polycentric* rather than *monocentric*.

As an anarchist without adjectives, and therefore reticent about promoting any single organizational model as the schema for an anarchist society, I would take it a step beyond celebrating the stigmergic character or openness of markets in particular. There is an almost infinite variety of means by which individuals can constitute horizontal relationships within nodes, and nodes can constitute horizontal relationships in a larger society, and Nathan's comments regarding openness apply to all of them as well as to markets.

My differences with Grayson English ("Demolish the *Demos*") cover much of the same ground I've already covered above in critiquing William's argument from definition, so I'll limit myself to what's unique to Grayson's argument. Getting from Graeber's treatment of "self-organization and self-governance" to the constitution of a *demos* or People – let alone "the annihilation of the individual in the collective" – seems to leave out a lot of intermediate steps, with no indication that Graeber himself had any intention of following that path.

In my reading, Graeber's model of consensus democracy at the local level is fully compatible with Toni Negri's and Michael Hardt's "multitude," which they directly oppose to unitary or monolithic conceptions like "the People," "the masses," or "the proletariat." The defining characteristic of multitude is its internal heterogeneity, its status as a "legion" composed by a near infinite number of individuals and nodes horizontally related to each other. And Negri and Hardt (although *Multitude* predated the Occupy movement) explicitly pointed to stigmergic, networked movements like the post-Seattle movement as examples of the multitude.

Jessica Flanagan, in her lead essay, also takes an approach of arguing from definition; in her case, by defining democracy as the equal right of everyone in society "to determine how political acts of violence will be used and whether and when they and their compatriots will be coerced."

But as I have already argued, "equal authority" set at a common value of zero, resulting in the kinds of mutual vetoes and detente that William describes, are fully compatible with the spirit of democracy.

Democracy, as such, does not at all necessarily entail a political "tyranny of the majority" through majority control over a coercive state. It can be expressed through self-governance in the wide range of self-constituted bodies and associations discussed above.

Jessica writes: "In ideal theory, collective decisions should be made in ways that minimize the domination of all people and promote openness and human freedom." I fully agree with her that the need for collective decisions should be minimized, and relegated to those situations (like the governance of shared natural resources) where a single policy is required. The great bulk of social organization should be permissionless and opt-in. For me that maximizes the value of consent, which – as I stated in my lead essay – is the central value of democracy as I understand it.

Jessica goes on to express skepticism as to whether mechanisms for collective decision-making without domination are even possible. She considers markets as equally problematic with the state insofar as they require a social consensus on property conventions. In that regard I don't think the dependence of property rights on consensus can ever be escaped, because

there is no particular property rights regime that can be directly or self-evidently deduced from natural rights without the intermediation of custom, convention, and expediency.

17. Response to Carson (William Gillis)

June 29th, 2017

Kevin objects to my focus on the etymology of "democracy" and brings up the post-left distancing from "the left" as something he finds similarly arbitrary.

This is not a symposium on the post-left and certainly that term of self-identification has been increasingly appropriated by reactionaries, but it's important to note that the original post-left argument for anarchists to distance ourselves from "the left" was the opposite of some kind of etymological argument that appealed to relatively fixed underlying meanings. One doesn't have to positively assert that "the left" is any single thing to urge anarchists to avoid identifying with it. Certainly there are bespoke definitions of "the left" out there that anarchism is reconcilable with if not synonymous with — the point however is that "the left" has no fixed center of mass; it's an incredibly arbitrary and amorphous category that gets assigned to any manner of things. "The left" is defined solely by its associations — and for a significant fraction of the world those associations are bureaucracy, totalitarianism, centralism, collectivism, paternalism, and Luddism. Over a century of slaughter and repression, authoritarians have thoroughly poisoned the well of "the left" and there is no clear reason why we should continue fighting for the term.

This is in stark contrast with "anarchism" which contains an etymological center of mass: a very clear definition that it's almost impossible for the term to shake. Certainly the associations of "anarchy" in the general public are quite negative, but the tension between the core etymology of "without rulership" and the general associations of "dog-eat-dog" constitutes an Orwellianism that has had a huge impact upon our world's language and discourse. The definition of "anarchy" *must* be challenged if we are to have any hope of being able to speak of a world without rulership without people immediately transmuting that into a world of fractured rulership.

Anarchists have always played with words and definitions. Proudhon's "anarchy is order" was at least as provocative as "the left is authoritarianism" or "democracy is the rule of all over all," however there were reasons that Proudhon chose that linguistic fight. Clear etymology holds a different and often stronger kind of weight than looser political or social associations.

But even if you write off the etymology of democracy entirely (while clinging onto the etymology of anarchy), it's generally good practice to assign our most basic words to the most basic concepts. "The rule of all over all" is a very basic concept — useful and distinct — whereas "face-to-face participation by equals in governance where a common decision is necessary, and the right to a say in matters affecting oneself" is a much more complex, arbitrary, and also indistinct concept. I also object to Kevin's claim that such a definition has been true since the beginning — "democracy" has much more wildly varying connotations and definitions across time, some of which are quite negative.

I also want to reiterate yet again that "the right to a say in matters affecting oneself" is often a bad thing. There are plenty of matters that affect you that you should have no say over. Even the barest consideration should make this blindingly apparent. You shouldn't get a say in whether scientific knowledge that will change the world is released by the discoverer. You shouldn't get a say in whether your crush chooses to date someone else. Kevin wants to split things up between

the shitty versions of "a say in matters affecting oneself" and the more positive versions, but my whole point is that I think that distinction is a hard one to make without the clear underlying conceptual distinction of rulership versus the absence of rulership. I think the value of "anarchy" helps us navigate that complex boundary, whereas stitching in that boundary on top of the labored, complicated definition of democracy Kevin gave only makes the term more arbitrary.

Kevin optimistically claims that my call for "an unterrified attitude about dissolution and reformation" is what anarchists have long meant by democracy, but this flies utterly in the face of my near two decades of experience as an activist and organizer. Almost *no* anarchist project or organization I've ever been a part of has had anything but absolute terror and repulsion towards the prospect of dissolution. Almost every organization or group longs to perpetuate itself, even those ostensibly post-leftist projects often worship a singular notion of the project or group above a responsive attention to the agency of the individuals involved.

I generally run with mainstream insurrectionary anarchists who consider the sort of majoritarianism found with, say, the IWW to be horrifying and embarrassing, and yet while they use consensus instead, they still almost without exception fall into the same static ruts.

Would that Occupy had truly been "a stigmergic support platform, or toolkit, which could be used in a permissionless manner by the wide variety of nodes participating in it." That's the lovely promise of anarchist notions of consensus! But it's a promise repeatedly betrayed and murdered by the misaligned values propagated by "democracy".

18. Reply to Kevin Carson and William Gillis (Derek Wittorff)

June 29th, 2017

It seems to me as though there's been two prevailing and conflicting ideas about democracy in this symposium. The first idea is that democracy is irreconcilable with anarchy in principle. The second idea is that democracy can — ironically because of practical concerns — be compatible with anarchy. I've made my own position clear.

What's interesting enough about this division is how those who think that democracy and anarchy are very compatible also believe that consensus is the equivalent to democracy. I've heard this before, and I'm sure there's a history to explain this, but the structural forms are quite different. That alone makes it a pressing and important definitional issue. Kevin Carson raised this definitional issue about my piece, but ultimately went on to agree with my "networked-mode of federalism" that involves consensus-based collectives forming each node. To me, it is a type of federalism that could be practiced by individualist anarchists, but also a federalism that isn't (yet should be) commonly recognized by social anarchists who prefer the old 19th century delegate model which practices a sort of nested hierarchy. It's what he proposed, with far more examples, in his initial essay "Democracy as a Necessary Anarchist Value".

However, I simply cannot get behind David Graeber's equivocation of consensus and democracy, or his treatment of democracy as this populist and metaphysical "base-line communism/egalitarianism" when there are so many examples of it being used as a concept to justify anything from Western military incursions in the Middle East, to liberal democratic States, or even direct democracy of the old left. It's even a label slapped on "democratic republican" dictatorships in Africa, and the political process of "democratic centralism" in the old USSR. The concept can be

traced back and hashed out to obviously refer to better systems of government, but by then it is too broad, abstract, and reified to really have anything to do with a 21st century radicalism.

Although William Gillis and I share a very similar narrative, I do commend his rather extreme application of freedom of association within a given collective. It's a rather coherent application of individualism with a social mindset. The idea of maximizing fluidity *within* an association is very important to forming consensus, and is largely why I initially rejected majoritarianism as a decision-making process.

However, he considers my proposed model of "formal values-based consensus" to be "liberal." I'll agree, according to his criticism, that it is a more rigid than necessary for smaller groups. At the same time, it rules out the rigidity of structural hierarchy that I would think characterizes it as being "liberal." He points to the rigidity of the model — the formal channels not allowing fluid communication and association between individuals and subgroups that are eventually supposed to form a larger consensus — but as I've stated I do believe there are collaborative networks that underlie the formal channels that ultimately limit the rigidity of the model. You're surely allowed to talk to others about the operations of a collective outside of the formal meetings. And in regard to those meetings, while there is indeed an intersubjective commonality when it comes to freedom or agency, and spending anymore than needed on meetings is constraining, a "values-based" process is designed precisely to limit the time of the meetings by ensuring a clear understanding of procedure and goals.

In ultimatum, while anarchy and freedom are intimately related concepts, the principled basis of my criticism of democracy as an anarchist revolves around the problems of hierarchy, not rigidity per se. Eliminating the hierarchy of majoritarian democracy eliminates a vast amount of the rigidity that I'm concerned with. We want to maximize freedom, but not dream of some utopia of absolute freedom. My aim was not to value unanimity of an association over fluidity, or rather structure over agency, but I do want to hold unanimity as a value equal to fluidity. I don't want people valuing persistency of collective decisionmaking over what that is supposed to accrue for every individual. If the scale is too great, and meetings do take up too much time, that again is really up to the individual to decide. There is no point in holding a value of scale above freedom unless we are talking about accumulating social capital. Either way, I'm not seeing any sort of coercion, or forced association, when we talk about this "formal consensus" model because it's non-hierarchical.

19. Further Response on Democratic Anarchism (Wayne Price)

July 1st, 2017

Having already written three essays on the topic of anarchism's relation to democracy, I will only present a few comments. These are generally in response to the interesting remarks of other writers in this series.

I do not think that any of the other writers have answered my challenge about how an agro-industrial commune would decide whether or not to build a road. If not by democracy, then how? They tend to write as if people had a choice about whether or not to make collective decisions (especially true of William Gillis). But we live in a world of interconnected industries and technologies, in small and large communities. Anarchists wish to decentralize those communities and technologies and to redevelop them for human scale and the self-management of the work-

ing people. But we cannot hope for a totally non-centralized, individualized, society, each on his or her own. It wouldn't work. This means that there must be some sort of collective, cooperative, decisionmaking mechanisms. (Of course, as I said, there are all sorts of issues which are outside of collective decision-making: choice of religion, sexual practices, taste in art, etc. These are the decisions of individuals or small groups. Anarchists have always defended them against majorities.)

Since some form of collectivity is necessary in many areas, then what form of (necessary) decision-making is most consistent with freedom? Surely it can only be democratic processes, especially small-group, direct, face-to-face democracy, organized into decentralized federations.

Does this mean that the majority will "dominate," "coerce," or "rule" over the minority, as the other writers insist? No. The traditional definition of democracy is "majority rule, with respect for the rights of the minority." If everyone does not get to hear every view, including the views of those who end up in the minority, then the majority cannot be said to really have made a free decision, that is, to *really be* a democratic majority. *This is precisely the situation under bourgeois democracy,* where radical views are excluded from the public discussion, denied the ability to reach the mass of people. (The problem with bourgeois democracy is not that the majority "rules," but that the majority is duped into supporting a minority—the ruling capitalist class.)

More to the point: during a discussion (let us say, on whether to build a road or whether the workers in a shop will produce a new type of shoe) *everyone gets to participate.* At the start, there is no set "majority" or "minority." Everyone participates. Every opinion is heard. People are able to argue for their positions, to write papers, and to organize a caucus (or "party") for their opinion. Over time (long or short), opinions crystalize. A majority (most people) forms in favor of one decision. A minority (a few people) may remain unhappy with the decision. But they are not persecuted or lose any rights. On the next discussion, they may be in the majority!

Under anarchist direct democracy, this whole notion of a majority ruling over and oppressing a minority is a meaningless abstraction. Sure, those in the minority on this issue may feel coerced—on this one issue. But they fully participated in the democratic process. *They are not oppressed as a minority,* as African-Americans are under white supremacy.

Shawn Wilbur postulates an ideal vision of anarchy where no one coerces anyone else in even the most indirect way. No one tells anyone else what to do. This he counterposes to even the most radically democratic decentralized socialism. On the other hand, he apparently recognizes that such a completely individualized society would not work in some (many? most?) cases, at least not for a lengthy "transitional" period of increasing freedom. Therefore, he seems to say, in practice it will be necessary to use democratic methods, including voting. I do not agree with this sort of sharp division between the ideal and practice. But *in practice,* what would he do that is different from what I would do? A difference which makes no difference *is no* difference.

It is possible to find statements against democracy by many anarchists (although the same ones often use "self-management," "self-government," or similar terms which are synonymous with democracy). I first learned my anarchism from reading Paul Goodman, probably the most influential anarchist of the sixties. He repeatedly presented his anarchism as consistent with the ideal of democracy, including the democratic tradition from Thomas Jefferson to John Dewey.

My concept of anarchy does not start with total individualism. It starts with total opposition to the state—the bureaucratic-military socially-alienated organization which stands over and above the rest of society. As well as opposition to capitalism, patriarchy, and all other institutions of oppression. Recently I have been reading histories of the First International. The conflict between

Marx and Bakunin (and their co-thinkers) focused on the state as an institution. This was over strategic issues (should workers build parties to run in elections with the aim of taking over the state?) and issues of vision and goals (should their aim be the reorganization of the state or the abolition of the state and its replacement by federations of associations and communes?). So I have no problem focusing my anarchism—my vision of anarchy—on the overthrow of the state and the institutions it supports.

20. Social, but Still Not Democratic (Shawn P. Wilbur)

July 2nd, 2017

As long as there has been something called "anarchism," anarchists have been struggling to define it—and, as often as not, they have been in struggle against other self-identified anarchists. At this point in our history, this seems both hard to deny and pointless to regret. These are not battles that can be won "once and for all," since the struggle over meaning is just essentially the process by which meaning is made. That means that there is an element of futility to this sort of debate, but not the sort that would ever let us withdraw from the fight.

It's extremely easy for these debates to simply become focused on words, or even just parts of words, whether it is a matter of the etymological quibbling so familiar in online debate or the rhetorical wars of position that tend to follow every more significant engagement in the struggle. In order to really come to grips with either the concepts behind the words or with our antagonists in debate requires some combination of clarity in our expression and consciousness of the vagaries of various contexts. So, in our case, effectiveness seems to call for being clear about our own conceptions of "anarchy" and "democracy," but also being sensitive to the way these terms are being used elsewhere in the broad conversation about the defining characteristics of anarchism.

There have undoubtedly been moments in the history of anarchism when recourse to the language of "democracy" created more or less potential confusion than it does at present, just as there have been times when "anarchy" was more or less valued as an ideal among self-proclaimed anarchists. Our assessment of those contexts, together with the details of our own theories of anarchism, will determine how important we consider the debate. For some of us, this is not the hill we'll pick to die on, while for others of us something vital to the anarchist project is at stake.

I don't think there is anything I've said here that can't be illustrated with examples from our present exchange, but I'll leave it to others to apply the analysis.

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In my lead essay of "Anarchy and Democracy," I tried to be fairly careful not to take too much for granted, starting with the question of whether it was possible to draw a clear line between the two concepts in question. Having convinced myself that this was indeed possible, using a familiar concept (absence or presence of *rule*) to mark the divide, but also using "classical" sources to suggest the possibility of a potentially wide range of *anarchies* (the *anarchic series*), I examined a couple of different possible relationships between democracy and anarchy. I then (I think) stated fairly clearly the sort of account that would be required to convince me that the most important distinction in all of this was the one that appears to fall between the purest of democracies and the most rudimentary of anarchies.

None of this seems to have made much an impression on Wayne Price, who thinks none of that matters if sometimes someone has no choice but to take a vote. He characterizes my argument in this way:

> *"Shawn Wilbur postulates an ideal vision of anarchy where no one coerces anyone else in even the most indirect way. No one tells anyone else what to do. This he counterposes to even the most radically democratic decentralized socialism. On the other hand, he apparently recognizes that such a completely individualized society would not work in some (many? most?) cases, at least not for a lengthy "transitional" period of increasing freedom. Therefore, he seems to say, in practice it will be necessary to use democratic methods, including voting. I do not agree with this sort of sharp division between the ideal and practice. But in practice, what would he do that is different from what I would do? A difference which makes no difference is no difference."*

There is a lot here that is, willfully or not, simply misrepresentation. The attempt to couple my "ideal vision of anarchy" and "a completely individualized society" is mind-boggling, except for the fact that Price seems to equate the rejection of democracy with a particularly atomistic sort of "individualism." (More on that later.) It's clear that Price fundamentally misunderstands my "ideal vision of anarchy," and I think that he does so *because* he simply refuses not just any "sharp division between the ideal and practice," but also the distinction that I underlined in my first essay between *actions* and *the authority to act*. If you paint a picture of that "ideal vision" in terms of a society in which "no one coerces anyone else in even the most indirect way," then I suppose that sounds unlikely, if not downright silly. But I'm pretty sure I've never suggested such a society, and the key to the vision I've expressed here is that nobody has a *right* to coerce anyone else—to which I will happily add "in even the most indirect way." In the context of such a society, as I've said, recourse to certain "democratic" practices might be forced on anarchists by material constraints, but such recourse would have to be treated as a *failure*, to be avoided, if possible, in the future.

It's hard to know what Price really rejects in my account. Does he believe that we will have a decisive revolution, after which the most glowing promises of anarchist thought will suddenly become fully realizable? If not, then there is a necessary place for the distinction between principles and practices. Does he believe that *practice*—or the *praxis* that he has invoked elsewhere—cannot be subjected to judgments about success and failure with regard to predetermined goals or principles? Does he imagine that the fact of a practice taking place, no matter the circumstances or the assessment of those engaged in it, can act as a sort of substitute for principles? None of these possibilities seem likely.

It seems to me that Price has made his own position clear. He envisions a democracy in which minorities will, in fact, be subject to the decisions of majorities. The silver lining he offers is that the minorities will not be static, so we will not see the same sort of oppression we see in more conventionally hierarchical societies. He seems to see this relationship as just and legitimate, although it is not clear whether he believes there is a political duty to assent to some "will of the people" or whether he believes that there is some more utilitarian justification. What seems clear enough, however, is that this majority rule is *not* a failure in his mind. Given that apparent fact, it does not seem out of line to attribute to Price some sort of (still not precisely clarified) *democratic principle*—and one that occupies a place on the political map awfully close to the one I assigned it in my own account.

This ought to mean that Price and I have enough in common to have a useful conversation about anarchy and democracy, and that we could start with something very close to a shared political language. That we obviously have not had a useful conversation requires some explaining, and the key is almost certainly related to this accusation of "individualism."

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In his reply to Grayson English, Price makes a bold claim:

> *"The basic issue, I believe, is not what we mean by "democracy" but what we mean by "anarchism." It is the commitment to an "individualist" interpretation of anarchism which lead to a rejection of radical democracy. I believe that this leads, contrary to anyone's intentions, in an authoritarian direction."*

This, perhaps, is progress, in the sense that it acknowledges that we are not, in fact, disagreeing about what Price intends, but that a wide variety of different kinds of anarchist thinkers simply do not accept the rational because we are, despite our differences, all in some sense too "individualist" to accept the "social anarchist" rationale for democratic rule. And, Price believes, this threatens to lead us, willy-nilly, "in an authoritarian direction," although it appears that the "individualist" positions differ from his own precisely by *rejecting democratic authority*.

I'll leave it to English to make a full response to Price's characterization of his position, but I don't find it much more faithful than his characterization of mine. I do, however, have to address the question of collective actors. Invoking "the famous example of a group of men moving a piano," he asks:

> *"Who is moving the piano? If each one acts completely autonomously, will the piano be moved? This is a model for any sort of productive activity from hunter-gathering on to today, no matter how decentralized or crafts-like an anarchist technology would be."*

But he doesn't quite answer the question. Presumably he believes that it is "the group" that moves the piano, but isn't this a really wonderful example of how associated action and individual autonomy are not necessarily at odds? We can imagine "the group" functioning in a disciplined, self-managed workgroup or we can imagine it as a *union of egoists*, and it seems likely that the piano gets moved in any event. We can also imagine it in authoritarian scenarios, complete with whip-wielding overseers, leaving us with no illusions that collective action is, by itself, anything particularly laudable. In this last instance, it's all too easy to imagine a boss claiming that, despite all appearances, *they moved the piano*, because how else would those things have got organized…?

If we are concerning ourselves about views of the piano-moving collective that might lead us in "authoritarian directions," I guess I am uncertain what seeds of authority there are in an explanation that simply says: *We moved the piano together, as a result of voluntary association and without the sacrifice of any individual sovereignty*. Price's objection is presumably contained in this objection, which he attempts to attribute to English: "If no one can tell me what to do, not even the most radically-democratic socialist people, then I must be the king." English has clarified quite nicely, I think, what he meant by "being a king," but if Price is so opposed to this sort of kingship, does it follow that someone can tell us what to do in his "democratic anarchist" society? That someone must be "the group," but if I had to make the judgment, I would say that *that* is the approach that leads places anarchists should be loathe to go.

***

I've probably lingered on Price's response to English a bit more than I might have, except that, finding myself apparently lumped in with those who reject democracy because of "individualism," I'm at a bit of a loss. After all, as someone inspired by Proudhon and an active proponent of the theory of *collective force*, I could hardly be accused of envisioning, let alone promoting "a completely individualized society." But that is precisely Price's accusation.

I've already scattered quite a bit of Proudhonian social science through my contributions here, perhaps most prominently in my response to Gabriel Amadej, and I'll try to spare everyone too much more of that specialized discourse. I think it is useful to show how the distinction I've made can be logically defended, and that my references to the anarchist tradition will stand up to critical scrutiny. But at this stage of the game all that is really important is that my position, far from being "individualist," assumes that all presumably individual action also has a social component and that, at least in a certain sense, groups do indeed act and even think. Those who have read the entries in the early Mutual Exchange on occupancy-and-use will know that one of my concerns there was that, in the context of complex societies with developed technological bases, the very notion of "the individual" (and thus individual property) is increasingly hard to put to use, despite its real utility in various contexts. But in a follow-up essay, "Property, Individuality and Collective Force," written early in 2016, I actually went quite a bit further.

> *"Let's linger for a moment and consider the implications of this twist on the notion that property is impossible. For Proudhon, the "impossibility" of property arose primarily from the droit d'aubaine ("right of increase") attached to capitalist property rights. That did not necessarily preclude some kind of return to strong, exclusive, individual property rights, provided those rights could be constrained either by principles like those found in Locke's provisos or in a strong egalitarian ethic, such as we find in the "personal property" speculations of even communistic anarchists. After all, between the early works advocating "possession" and the "New Theory" of the 1860s, Proudhon explored both possibilities to at least some degree. But if it is indeed the case that our "individual" interventions and appropriations are no longer in balance with the regenerative capacities of our natural environment, then there are arguably some very interesting, and certainly troubling consequences. First, it raises the possibility that exclusive, individual property rights—even in a radically reimagined form like my "gift economy of property"—may be impossible. But it also raises the possibility that it is not just property rights that are threatened by our current social and technological organization. It may be that property, even in the descriptive sense, is no longer sufficiently individual to support the kind of discussion regarding property that we are accustomed to. That notion may be a bit difficult to come to terms with, but let's at least attempt to give it a try, particularly as a situation in which we could meaningfully say that individuality is impossible would create problems for our presumably non-propertarian options nearly as great as those confronting any new theory of property rights."*

Ultimately, I'm not sure how anyone who understood, even in the most basic terms, the argument behind Proudhon's claim that "property is theft" could be an "individualist" in the broad terms Price's argument demands, but I'm pretty sure there is no way to make the social atom-

ism implied compatible with my own long-stated views. (And old friends and associates may remember that the Whitmanesque questioning of this sort goes back well over a decade.)

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It appears that one can espouse a very social anarchism and still reject democracy. The question remains whether democracy is itself particularly conducive to a social anarchism. Consider Price's account of democratic process:

> *"...during a discussion (let us say, on whether to build a road or whether the workers in a shop will produce a new type of shoe) everyone gets to participate. At the start, there is no set "majority" or "minority." Everyone participates. Every opinion is heard. People are able to argue for their positions, to write papers, and to organize a caucus (or "party") for their opinion. Over time (long or short), opinions crystallize. A majority (most people) forms in favor of one decision. A minority (a few people) may remain unhappy with the decision. But they are not persecuted or lose any rights. On the next discussion, they may be in the majority!*
>
> *Under anarchist direct democracy, this whole notion of a majority ruling over and oppressing a minority is a meaningless abstraction. Sure, those in the minority on this issue may feel coerced—on this one issue. But they fully participated in the democratic process. They are not oppressed as a minority, as are African-Americans under white supremacy."*

If I'm following the argument here, the claim that "this whole notion of a majority ruling over and oppressing a minority is a meaningless abstraction" is based on the presumption that individuals will not always be in the majority or the minority, so the dynamics of this majoritarian democracy will not be like the dynamics of, for example, white supremacy. But the dynamics of this majoritarian democracy will still be exactly those of a majoritarian democracy. Even when we are talking about identity-based systems of oppression, potentially "set" minorities and majorities are always altered in practice by intersecting systems of oppression, by the various mechanisms by which members of subaltern groups are pitted against one another, and by a variety of other factors. In "actual politics," African-Americans differ in gender, sexual orientation, skin tone, income and social status, position within capitalism or the state, etc. We naturally don't pretend that any of these variations make their specific oppression as African-Americans "a meaningless abstraction." Instead we recognize that the basic patterns of oppression and exploitation remain quite real across a variety of contexts. Why we would alter our view for democratic minorities isn't entirely clear.

Price's answer is, at least in part, that these minorities "are not persecuted or lose any rights." As far as "rights" go, yes, the minorities retain the same abstract entitlements that they started with, but the question is whether they started out in a situation that anarchists should reject. And Price has himself provided us, or at least nearly provided us, with some reasons to question whether we can count on their real situation not eroding as a result of their democratic losses.

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There are two points that I think need to be made about the position of majorities and minorities in a majoritarian democracy. The first relates to the experience of participation. Price has emphasized that the losers in any given context don't have anything to complain about. They should presumably feel that their position in society remains the same and that their duties to society have been fulfilled through a graceful retreat before the will of the majority.

But how should the majority feel about "winning"?

Let's recall that one of the strong points of Proudhon's anarchist theory is that it unites the critiques of capitalism and governmentalism in a single critique, which addresses the role of authority in setting the conditions for exploitation. In a society informed by the principle of authority, production is social, and yet the fruits of social production are not just unevenly divided, but are routinely turned back against the subaltern groups. If it is the case, as we would expect, that cultural and technological shifts have dramatically increased the amount of production that we might attribute to collective force, and if we expect this sort of social organization to persist "after the revolution," then individuals in such a society might be said to receive "their share" of the products of social production when they have received a fairly bare subsistence, and that their individual claims on control of the remainder might be considered quite weak.

I think there's a fairly perverse set of incentives likely to emerge here, however, if individuals simply accept that they are entitled to a minimum, but everything above that level is subject, and rightfully so, to the intervention of a majoritarian mechanism. I'm not sure that an anarchist society could survive the sort of general indifference that might emerge among those who find themselves in the minorities. But I'm much more concerned about the effects on the majorities, who find themselves sanctioned in the control of the fruits of collective force, with no clear mandate to safeguard minorities. Endowed with this sort of political privilege, and with perhaps very considerable quantities of wealth and power at their command, could we expect majorities to maintain anarchist principles? Price's vague disdain for "philosophical" questions may not be representative, but I don't think it's hard to imagine quite a variety of reasons why the very material inequalities that might be introduced in such a society might not be so readily acknowledged by those who find themselves beneficiaries.

I suppose one could simply reject all or part of the Proudhonian analysis and, for example, fall back on the Marxian account of exploitation, joined with anarchism imagined as simple antistatism. This is probably not too far from Price's position, based on his contributions here and his published work. But I'm not sure that there is any easy escape from some version of the same problem.

Consider the material from Bakunin's *Knouto-Germanic Empire* that Price has quoted as a contrast to the position he attributes to English. (The heavily edited quotation is drawn from the "continuation" of "God and the State," as translated by Max Nettlau.) The key paragraphs read, in full:

> *"…man becomes man and becomes conscious of and realizes his humanity only in society and only by the collective action of the whole of society. He emancipates himself from the yoke of outside nature, only by collective or social labor, which alone is able to transform the surface of the globe into an abode propitious to human developments. And without this material emancipation there can be no intellectual or moral emancipation for anybody. Man can only emancipate himself from the yoke of his own nature—that is, he can only subordinate the instincts and movements of his own body to the direction of*

his mind, which becomes more and more developed, by education and instruction, both of which are eminently exclusively social matter; for apart from society man would have remained always a wild beast or a saint, both of which expressions mean nearly the same. Finally, the isolated man cannot be conscious of his liberty. To be free for a man, means other men around him. Liberty, then, is not a matter of isolation, but of reciprocity; not of exclusion, but on the contrary, of combination, since the liberty of each individual is nothing other than the reflection of his humanity or of his human right in the consciousness of all free men, of his brother, his compeers.

It is only in the presence of other men, and with regard to other men, that I can call and feel myself free. In presence of any inferior animal, I am neither free nor human, since such an animal is unable to conceive of and hence to recognize my humanity. I am myself human and free in so far as I recognize the freedom and humanity of all men around me. Only in respecting their human character do I respect my own. A cannibal who devours his prisoner, treating him as a wild beast might, is not a man, but a beast. Ignoring the humanity of his slaves he also ignores his own humanity. The whole of ancient society furnishes proof of this: the Greeks, the Romans, did not feel themselves to be free as men; they did not consider themselves to be free by any human right. They believed themselves privileged as Greeks, as Romans, only within their own country, and so long as it remained independent, not subjugated; and they subjugated other countries under the special protection of their national gods. They were not astonished, nor did they feel they had a right and a duty to revolt, when being in their turn also vanquished they became slaves."

This is a powerful statement of the importance of society as a necessary support for the freedom of the individual. It is eminently *social*, but it is also quite clearly reciprocal, in the sense that no human being can be excluded from or subordinated within the relations described without compromising their development out of the animal state and towards full human freedom. Nowhere does there seem to be any rationale for moving from the clearly social state of human beings to the democratic division of society into majorities and minorities.

And there might even be a rather cautionary account right there at the end.

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In the end, I don't suppose I have much hope of convincing anyone wedded to the notion of democracy to strike out into the wilds of the anarchic series. However, given what seem to be real and substantive differences in the conception of anarchism among the participants here, and given the fact that the "democratic anarchism" seems to mingle anarchy and government in ways that seem likely to be detrimental to the progress of anarchism, I hope I have at least provided reasons for those who might be hovering between the two main positions that have been presented to at the very least consider the question very carefully.

21. Reply to Alexander Reid Ross (William Gillis)

July 4th, 2017

It marks a nice contrast from Wayne Price's relatively "aw shucks" disinterest in philosophical critiques of democracy that Alexander Reid Ross brings history and philosophical language to the defense of democracy. Unfortunately, I have a violent allergic reaction to the flavor of philosophical language he adopts.

On the upside, I appreciate that Alexander has injected a certain amount of historical reference to this discussion by mapping some of the ways "democracy" has morphed in its associations over history and in different contexts or discourses. Of course, whether one agrees with the narrative arc Alexander maps with those details is a different story; he certainly excludes the long history of anarchist critiques of democracy, arguably underhandedly painting Malatesta into the 'pro' camp and acting like Bookchin didn't come to realize his politics had always been irreconcilable with the ideal of anarchism. There is, in short, plenty of room for disagreement here, but I find citations of authors largely a distraction. It should matter not if literally every prior anarchist in history was pro-democracy if what is best meant by democracy is discovered to be irreconcilable with what is best meant by anarchism itself. If every heretofore anarchist was patriarchal or nationalistic that should not prove that anarchism is not in fundamental tension with those values.

Where Alexander's essay is the strongest is pointing out that notions of liberty and equality got tied up with democracy in some wings of the enlightenment, and thus anarchy and democracy have grown intertwined in some respects. But of course it is frequently the case that irreconcilable concepts become intertwined in complex ways through the vagaries of history. And the popular political prescriptions that were attached to the Enlightenment are a place where I feel its critics actually have some kick.

Where I think Alexander most distinguishes himself in the anarchist debate over democracy is his bipartite analysis, separating democracy as a principle from democracy as an institutional practice:

> *"If it is democracy on the level of principle that motivates people to revolution, it seems as though democracy on the institutional level that causes their ruination."*

This post-leftist hopes of course that Alexander would extend such to a critique of institutions or organizations themselves. But it still opens up an interesting dichotomy not often heard. Here I wish Alexander would get a little more specific and concrete rather than essentially drifting into talking about historical spirits. Is democracy the ideal of "liberty and equality"? That seems like a plain enough philosophical concept and one that we could interrogate perhaps more fruitfully, although certainly philosophers have picked apart every possible definition of liberty and equality and their various tensions or paths to collaborative reconciliation. Even if I would still find objections to the argument that we should define democracy as "liberty and equality" because of historical associations around the Enlightenment.

Yet Alexander seems unwilling to lock down the supposed principle of "democracy" so clearly and spends the bulk of his essay on a diversion into epistemology that I see as a quagmire.

In particular, he takes the rather shocking approach of defending postmodern claims by appealing to popular opinion: "Most people will agree that the world exists to us insofar as we can perceive it." Obviously when considered in plain language the vast majority of people wouldn't agree with that in the slightest. My mother would because she's a radical idealist who rejects materialism, but such nutty positions are thankfully rare among normal folk. Unless of course we

are to presume that "the world" is nothing more than Alexander's perceptions of the postmodern academia he's embedded in.

Now of course I'm well aware of the redefinition trickery in some parts of continental philosophy where "world" ceases referring to objective material reality and instead gets detached to (at best) refer to the referent to that reality and at worst be left dangling. There does exist a microscopic set of people in this discursive bubble, but they are hardly representative of common uses of "world." Alexander pulls a similar move with "truth" and while this seems like a weird philosophical aside into the philosophical fraud of phenomenology it actually does a good job of situating and framing his argument.

Truth, it seems Alexander presumes from the get go, is essentially itself a democratic product, or should be, thus his attempts to appeal to general opinion. Certainly our perceptions of reality are partially socially constructed, no one's going to disagree with merely that. Yet Alexander goes much further, positing truth as *a way of living a*nd principles as essentially traditions that emerge socially for providential merit:

> *"...truth as a way of living that closest resembles what we understand to be factual, accurate, and of positive consequence to our community."*

I want to be clear here; what an absolutely Orwellian horror!

Never mind whatever shenanigans are no doubt afoot in the residue of what we conventionally think of as truth — now apparently consigned to 'factualness' and 'accuracy' — let us strenuously emphasize that what is "positive consequence" to some "community" is almost always at odds with what is true. (Or, if we are to cede that word to the ravages of Orwellian misuse, "accurate".) It is frequently the case that truth is at odds with what strengthens a "community". Indeed this is one reason that democracy is arguably at odds with truth.

As I've argued, the very premise of discrete organizations, groups, and communities is a denial or suppression of truth. Collectivities exist as self-perpetuating simplistic heuristics that obscure the underlying individual relationships, hiding the full extent of what is possible under the umbrella of The Group. Truth and community are in absolute conflict. Rather it is truth and *empathy* that sync. Love for others is a recognition of the fullness of their reality. But love is something innately between individuals, it's too rich and real to tolerate being applied to simplistic abstractions like "community" or "nation" or other such monster. One can to some degree love the billions of other minds one is analytically aware of, but not as some simplified collective abstraction as "humanity" or whatever. Love refuses and rejects such dishonesty.

The hunger for truth is prior to care about others because it is what *drives* our care about others.

Democracy's focus on majorities, rough consensus, and "the community" is a blunderbuss of violent simplification that deprives individuals of agency and everyone of the full extent of cooperation possible.

So when Alexander talks about "principles" as socially arising traditions the same questions apply. Never mind the injustice such a picture does to the philosophy of ethics, brutally reducing values to mere social traditions rather than objective conceptual attractors that any unsocialized mind like an AI could in theory find. How are these principles or truths socially *reached*?

Is it a consensus arrived at through market means — that is to say emergent from decentralized and stigmergic roots — or is it a "consensus" arrived at through democratic means — that is

to an arbitrary majoritarianism of some kind of arbitrary collective body? I impose my own definitions here, provocatively juxtaposing markets as liberating and democracy as oppressive (contra Nathan Goodman's reconciliation of the two), because I don't know of other framing that lays bare the same tension between emergence *truly from the roots* — from individual to individual relations — versus "emergence" in a manner that sloppily stomps over those individuals — by say collective conversation instead.

Yeah, that's right, I'm literally arguing that conversations that aren't one-on-one are oppressive to some degree. Or, at least in greater risk of constraining the agency of all involved, given the information theoretical constraints of conversation. Expect me to release a line of shirts printed with "Anarchism Is Introversion And Nothing Less" soon.

In contrast to my provocative stances, Alexander studiously purports to frame his argument as one for tolerance and ecumenicalism rather than sectarianism: *"one might negate the theory of democracy and remain an anarchist or whatever; essentialism is useless to discovery and inquiry."*

But I want to note that this is a rather surprising sentiment. Does Alexander think that one can embrace for example nationalism "and remain an anarchist"? Does Alexander think a definition of anarchism "essentialist" enough to be able to reject "national anarchism" as a contradiction would be "sectarian"?

Obviously he does not. And my comparison with the extreme case of literal fascists using the term "anarchist" is not to suggest that anarchist apologists for "democracy" are remotely as objectionable. However annoying some of us find David Graeber and Cindy Milstein's rhetoric of "more democratic than democracy," they're clearly eons apart from Troy Southgate. However my point is that this sort of argument against essentialism cuts too far.

It's not "useless" to speak radically, to attempt to root our words to some kind of concrete definition. Rather such conceptual radicalism is the most useful approach we have.

If anarchism is to not blur out and mean anything and everything it must ultimately mean something in specific. We may not be able to fully reach such an ideal or even fully grasp its consequences, and we can be generous in our recognition of those in orbit of it, if convinced they're orbiting a slightly different point, but that doesn't mean we can't speak of degrees of proximity or point out that someone's motion is taking them around a different concept altogether.

Democracy represents a different concept altogether from anarchy and we should be clear about that.

22. Response to Shawn Wilbur and Gabriel Amadej (Wayne Price)

July 4th, 2017

Shawn Wilbur argues that "anarchy" and "democracy" are completely distinct principles—*philosophically*. Philosophically, there is "no middle ground." However, in actual living, there is "the likelihood that we might continue to have recourse to practices that we think of as 'democratic.' It is difficult to imagine a society in which we are not at times forced to…engage in practices like voting." How often will these times happen? Perhaps a lot during the "transition" from statism to anarchy.

Shawn seems to want to have his cake and eat it too. He fiercely rejects even the most decentralized, direct, participatory, democracy in the name of anarchism (*philosophically).* This is

combined with a willingness to support actual democratic procedures in solving collective problems (*practically*).

Let us leave aside philosophical definitions, as well as considerations of what Proudhon and Bakunin really meant (although Bakunin's anarchist association called itself the Alliance of Socialist *Democracy*). Does Shawn really disagree with me and other democratic anarchists, in *praxis* (integrating theory and practice)? He and I are both for as much freedom as possible, both individual and collective—rejecting the state and any other institution of oppression. We both want collective decisions to be as free and uncoerced as is possible. We both accept that there have to be some conflicts in which everyone is not satisfied with the outcome, conflicts which must be managed through democratic procedures of some sort (even if he compares this to cannibalism!). If we can agree on this much, then I am willing to accept that we have differences in philosophy.

Gabriel Amadej also bases her argument on principles developed by Proudhon. Unlike Shawn Wilbur, her solution to collective decisionmaking is not through democratic procedures but through "the market." But our societies are so intertwined and interconnected, economically and otherwise, that even decentralization will not end the need for working and living together collectively—and making collective decisions in our workplaces and communities—democracy.

23. Anarchism Without Anarchy (Shawn P. Wilbur)

July 17th, 2017

> *The rampant dictatorial governments in Italy, Spain and Russia, which arouse such envy and longing among the more reactionary and timid parties across the world, are supplying dispossessed 'democracy' with a sort of new virginity. Thus we see the creatures of the old regimes, well-accustomed to the wicked art of politics, responsible for repression and massacres of working people, re-emerging – where they do not lack the courage – and presenting themselves as men of progress, seeking to capture the near future in the name of liberation. And, given the situation, they could even succeed.*—Errico Malatesta, "Democracy and Anarchy" (March, 1924)

In my lead essay, I approached our topic as if it was a foregone conclusion that *anarchism* should be understood in terms of *the pursuit of anarchy*, however lengthy or perhaps even interminable that pursuit might be. But for those who champion a "pure," "true" or "direct" democracy as the political goal of anarchists, thorny problems are sometimes "solved" by simply setting the concept of *anarchy* aside and defining *anarchism* in terms of a certain number of practical reforms to be achieved and a certain range of existing institutions to be abolished.

Obviously, for an anarchism without anarchy, the considerations would be very different from those I addressed in my opening comments, but could such a construction of anarchism really be considered a revolutionary alternative? I want to consider some of what is at stake here.

There are, I suppose, precedents for considering anarchy and anarchism as fundamentally separable concepts. After all, anarchists went for something like thirty-five years without a widespread concept of anarch-*ism* or even much in the way of shared assumptions or terminology, beyond the affirmation of anarchy. The word "anarchism" may actually be first attributable

to the lexicographers, who, perhaps assuming that every *–ist* needs an *–ism*, seem to have included the term in their dictionaries before any anarchist thought to coin it. Joseph Déjacque appears to have been the first anarchist to use the term anarchism, in 1859—six years after it appeared in the *Dictionnaire universel*—but it wasn't until the 1870s that the term caught on widely.

This means that pioneers like Proudhon and Bakunin really lived, as *anarchists*—active proponents of *anarchy*—in a *world without anarchism* (at least in any explicit sense.) That's a striking fact, in the context of a period where constructions of that sort were nearly as plentiful as social theorists—or more plentiful, if we count the mass of similar terms coined by figures like Charles Fourier or Stephen Pearl Andrews.

Indeed, there are details here that it might be helpful to pursue, if only to underline the qualities of that pursuit of anarchy before anarchism, but, without belaboring the point any more, let's just recognize that the separability of the two concepts is not just a theoretical possibility, but that it was the reality for an important period in the development of what we now think of as anarchism. But I think we also have to recognize that it is a very different matter for anarchism to go without anarchy, as sometimes seems to be the case in the present, than it was for anarchists to go without any form of anarchism in their pursuit of anarchy.

The question then, is whether or not this notion of an anarchism without anarchy really describes the position of the "democratic anarchists." Certainly, in Wayne Price's three essays on the question of *anarchism* and democracy—and now his response to my initial essay—anarchy is strikingly absent. It is not just absent as a part of Price's own approach to the question, but it is almost entirely absent, appearing in quotations from me or from Malatesta. My impression is that this is also not simply an accident or oversight.

Price's initial contribution to the exchange, "Democracy, Anarchism, & Freedom," champions democracy as the "rule of the commoners" and defines anarchism as "democracy without the state." So we are left with an anarchism defined as "stateless rule." He correctly observes that some of us object to the notion of any form of "rule," *tout court*—and I will be happy to count myself among those who reject even the sort of "no rulers, but not no rules" formula that we sometimes encounter in anarchist circles. But perhaps the most striking bit of the essay is Price's claim that "the aim of anarchism is not to end absolutely all coercion, but to reduce coercion to the barest minimum possible."

I suppose that this is an attempt on his part to avoid defining anarchism in terms of impossible, utopian goals. He follows this claim with the observation that "there will never be a perfect society." But it isn't clear how the question of a "perfect" society really relates to anarchist aspirations. Presumably, in context, this is a claim about the possibility of ending all coercion, but, if the goal of anarchism is "to reduce coercion to the barest minimum possible," how would we distinguish, in principle, between the overwhelming majority of coercions, which it is indeed within the aims of anarchism to eliminate, and that "barest minimum" of presumably "democratic" coercions which it is not the aim of anarchism to eliminate? The difference between a barest minimum and zero seems to be negligible, and it isn't clear why that tiny remainder is not simply attributable to the fact that the world doesn't always cooperate with even the best of our principles.

It would seem to me that there really is no way to make aiming for the "barest minimum" a consistent principle, and that imagining we would only have an aim—or *ideal*, a word that Price is happy to use in the context of democracy—that was always achievable in all regards seems at least a matter of setting our sights a bit low.

No—honestly—it seems like setting those sights inexplicably, impossibly low. I quite simply find the conception of anarchism as a form of rule impossible to wrap my head around. It seems to me that the (presumably practical) argument here has to be that a non-governmental society is impossible—that *anarchy is impossible*. But because the rationale for *aiming* short of anarchy—explicitly as an ideal—seems so uncertain to me, I can only wonder if the other half of the largely unstated argument is that anarchy is also *undesirable*.

It seems to be fairly consistently the case that the defense of democracy is tied to claims like the one Price makes that "[a]narchists are not against all social coordination, community decision-making, and protection of the people." It's not a particularly bold claim, in part because it's fairly vague. You could probably find staunch anarchist individualists who could find a sense in which they fully agree. But it seems likely that the interpretations of the phrase the individualist would find friendly to their beliefs might seem dangerously *un*-coordinated, anti-social—*anarchic*, in the negative sense of the term—to the defender of democracy.

There has always been a faction among the anarchists who wrestled with the terminology of anarchy, whether because it seems to indicate dangerous and undesirable things or because it seems to indicate too many things all at once. And there has probably also always been another that is just a little too comfortable with the simultaneously edgy and protean quality of that terminology. If I had to characterize what seem to me the most powerful sorts of anarchist *praxis* (not a term I'm fond of, but maybe one that is useful in this context), it seems to me that they have remained actively engaged in all that is really *anarchic* about anarchism. But I suspect that a construction like "anarchist democracy" comes from a different place entirely.

I'll admit that I find a position like Price's difficult to engage constructively. As I understand anarchism, it is an ambitious project, involving a revolutionary change in social principles. I believe that there is a meaningful distinction between relations based in *authority* and those grounded in *anarchy*, and that there is a vast range of relations possible within both regimes. I understand that Price's initial essay could not be expected to address those arguments, nor the rigorous approach I've attempted to take towards notions like "self-government," nor to the specific arguments I've drawn from Proudhon's works. But when the direct response comes in the form of a suggestion that we "leave aside" essentially all of that, followed by the question of whether or not I "really" just agree with the anarchist-democrats, well, I would be lying if I said it wasn't all a bit infuriating.

From my perspective, I am not the one who "seems to want to have his cake and eat it too." I have ideals *and* expectations, and a clear enough sense of the difficulties facing the anarchist project that I am not expecting the sudden and complete realization of my principles. As a result, I've quite explicitly said that the anarchist project will "necessarily confront [us] with *failure* on a pretty regular basis, particularly in the long and difficult transition from a fundamentally authoritarian, governmentalist society to one that begins to resemble, in practical terms, our political ideals." That seems more like commitment to the project, even if the cake is a lie, in part because the proposed alternative, "modifying our ideals and retaining some 'pure' form of democracy"—and retaining it precisely as a goal and as if it was not in contradiction with anarchist principles—seems "truly untenable."

I just can't find it in me to consider a system in which we take turns (hopefully) coercing one another as a means of "social coordination, community decision-making, and protection of the people" as the goal of anarchism. Of course, I know the anarchist literature well enough that I could easily pull some quotes to suggest that identification, or something even more authoritar-

ian. Consider this, from Bakunin: "I receive and I give—such is human life. Each is a directing authority and each is directed in his turn." Anarchy *is* ubiquitous authority—or anarchy is *impossible*. Or, perhaps, "considerations of what Proudhon and Bakunin really meant," when addressed with care and consistency, are not easily separable from our discussions.

I think we all know that a discussion like this is necessarily going to be complicated by long histories of complex, sometimes contradictory or even nearly incoherent rhetorical choices. I would hope that most of us would be concerned with reducing the ambiguities as much as possible. But that's difficult, and I think there is a lesson there for those who think of the *language* of democracy as a particularly precious commodity, since it has been the focus of popular aspirations in the past. When we look at works like *What is Property?* and "God and the State," we might be forgiven for thinking that they are powerful works of anarchist theory *despite* the confusing rhetorical flourishes. Of course, for those who do not envision a complete break with the principle of authority, the potential confusions involved with this definition of anarchism as stateless democracy are not so great. But for those of us who do envision such a break, they seem tremendous.

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I want to circle back around to the two essays by Malatesta that Price has discussed in his essay "Anarchism as Extreme Democracy." This is the one place where he does cite Malatesta on anarchy. The context is "Neither Democrats, nor Dictators: Anarchists," an essay from 1926, in which Malatesta argues that "the so-called democratic system can only be a lie, and one which serves to deceive the mass of the people and keep them docile with an outward show of sovereignty…." He discusses various democratic scenarios, the "worst" of which seems to be the rise of the socialists and anarchists to power, and then ends with the two paragraphs that Price cites in part:

> *This is why we are neither for a majority nor for a minority government; neither for democracy not for dictatorship.*
>
> *We are for the abolition of the gendarme. We are for the freedom of all and for free agreement, which will be there for all when no one has the means to force others, and all are involved in the good running of society. We are for anarchy.*

In his essay, Price suggests that Malatesta "mixes up" a critique of "democratic ideology as a rationalization for capitalism and the state" with "a denunciation of the very concept of majority rule." But how much mix-up can there be, when the goal seems to be circumstances where it is not only true that "all are involved in the good running of society," but it is also true that "one has the means to force others"?

In the 1924 essay "Democracy and Anarchy," Malatesta perhaps throws a little additional light on the title of the later piece, arguing that democrats and dictators are locked, and lock the rest of us, in a vicious circle:

> *We are not democrats for, among other reasons, democracy sooner or later leads to war and dictatorship. Just as we are not supporters of dictatorships, among other things, because dictatorship arouses a desire for democracy, provokes a return to democracy, and thus tends to perpetuate a vicious circle in which human society oscillates between open and brutal tyranny and a lying freedom.*

And it is in this context that one should probably read the quote, from this same essay, with which I chose to open this response. When we are attempting to ground these discussions in current events, the warning here seems like one that we should at least serious consider.

And, ultimately, it is serious consideration that emerges as the lesson of Malatesta's essay. He urges "greater precision of language, in the conviction that once the phrases are dissected"—specifically the phrases of the democratic politicians—the comrades "themselves will see how vacuous they are." Then he ends, as I will, with an interesting passage suggesting a rather different relationship, between society and democracy then we usually see in the works of the anarchist democrats:

> *Therefore, those who really want 'government of the people' in the sense that each can assert his or her own will, ideas and needs, must ensure that no-one, majority or minority, can rule over others; in other words, they must abolish government, meaning any coercive organisation, and replace it with the free organisation of those with common interests and aims.*

This would be very simple if every group and individual could live in isolation and on their own, in their own way, supporting themselves independently of the rest, supplying their own material and moral needs.

But this is not possible, and if it were, it would not be desirable because it would mean the decline of humanity into barbarism and savagery.

If they are determined to defend their own autonomy, their own liberty, every individual or group must therefore understand the ties of solidarity that bind them to the rest of humanity, and possess a fairly developed sense of sympathy and love for their fellows, so as to know how voluntarily to make those sacrifices essential to life in a society that brings the greatest possible benefits on every given occasion.

But above all it must be made impossible for some to impose themselves on, and sponge off, the vast majority by material force.

Let us abolish the gendarme, the man armed in the service of the despot, and in one way or another we shall reach free agreement, because without such agreement, free or forced, it is not possible to live.

But even free agreement will always benefit most those who are intellectually and technically prepared. We therefore recommend to our friends and those who truly wish the good of all, to study the most urgent problems, those that will require a practical solution the very day that the people shake off the yoke that oppresses them.

24. Non-Coercive Collective Decision Making: A Quaker Perspective (Robert Kirchner)

July 19th, 2017

In previous articles in this symposium, a sticking-point has emerged, among both pro- and anti-democracy anarchists, concerning the presumed impossibility of a collective decision-making process that doesn't resort to coercion. I believe the anti-democracy camp are rightly hung-up on this point; if collective decision-making is necessarily coercive, such a process

cannot be reconciled with anarchism, where the core tenet is the rejection of coercion. On the other hand, this anti-democratic stance seems to betray a deep pessimism toward the very notion of community and to the possibility of collective action of any sort. Meanwhile, the pro-democracy camp appear to accept (with some discomfort) the necessity of coercion, in the interest of permitting collective decision-making, assuming that such coercion will be relatively minimal and benign in practice. I don't wish to rehash the larger debate here – though I do place myself squarely in the pro-democracy camp. Rather, I challenge the assumption that non-coercive collective decision-making is unfeasible. I belong to a religious group, the Quakers (a.k.a. the Religious Society of Friends), that have been grappling with this issue over the past 350 years. We have developed a non-coercive collective decision-making process that works for us. It does not always work smoothly, and sometimes it operates rather messily, painfully, and slowly. However, as I will explain, it does work, and often quite miraculously. In this article I present my personal understanding and experience of the Quaker "business" process, as we call it. My broader goal is to defend a vision of anarchism that allows for vigorous community and powerful collective action, without squelching the autonomy of individuals.

The Quaker business process has a strong formal resemblance to the consensus decision-making processes used by many "horizontal" activist groups. There is a historical reason for this: Quakers have been involved in many activist movements over the past fifty years, and we've had a corresponding influence on the structure of these groups. I know that consensus decision-making can be truly *awful*. As has been pointed out by other contributors to this symposium, when practiced badly it can be mind-numbingly boring or otherwise deeply off-putting. It can also mask various forms of covert power, resulting in serious group dysfunction. The same could be said, even more strongly, of Robert's Rules or more overtly hierarchical decision-making processes. But there are significant differences between consensus decision-making as it has percolated through activist communities and the original Quaker process that inspired it.

But before examining Quaker process, it is necessary to give some background on what Quakerism is about. First, we have a rather distinctive method of worship, based on silence: we sit together in an attitude of 'expectant waiting,' in which we seek to come nearer to God and each other.[18] There are no programmed hymns, prayers, recitations, readings, or other liturgy. There is no clergy. During silent worship, anyone who feels a deep inner prompting to do so may give 'vocal ministry:' a message, reflection or prayer, usually quite brief.

Quakerism began in the late 1640's in the aftermath of the English Civil War, a period of great social and religious upheaval as a reaction against both the authoritarian, high-church Anglicanism of King Charles I and the dour, Bible-thumping Puritanism of those who overthrew him. Quakerism thus arose out of a Protestant English milieu, as a radical expression of Christianity. But today, there is a great diversity within Quaker meetings on how we think of God and our relation to Christianity, and we use different kinds of language to describe our religious experiences. Some Quakers have a conception of God that is close to that of mainstream Protestant Christianity and would describe their beliefs using similar language. Others are happy to use God-centered language, but they conceive of God in very different terms from the Christian trinity. Some use feminist language. Others are influenced by Buddhism. Some identify as non-theists and describe

[18] This describes unprogrammed Quaker meetings, the predominant form of Quakerism in North America and Europe. In Africa and South America, it is more common to find programmed meetings, which are more evangelical in their theology, with a worship style more like a low-church Protestant service.

their experiences without using the word 'God' at all. Quaker faith is built on experience, and Quakers generally hold that it is the spiritual experience which is central to Quaker worship, not the use of any particular form of words (whether that be 'God' or anything else). Nevertheless, our method of worship itself presupposes certain working assumptions. These are:

- That there is, within us and among us, a Divine Presence or Higher Power (however we may conceive of and name it) that is bigger, deeper, more powerful, more complete and more timeless than our individual egos.
- That this Presence is directly accessible to everyone who seeks it.

Quakers therefore say, 'There is that of God in everyone.' We often refer to this sense of Divine Presence as 'the Light.' Some of our spiritual insights, which we call our 'Testimonies', spring from this deep experience and have been reaffirmed by successive generations of Quakers. These Testimonies include:

- *Simplicity*: We avoid encumbering ourselves with material possessions, addictions, and lifestyles that keep us from following the leadings of our inner Light
- *Peace*: We favor conscientious objection to war; for some Quakers a commitment to complete Gandhian non-violence, including abolition of police and prison systems.
- *Integrity*: We strive to speak and act in accordance with Truth, as fully as we are able to perceive it, under all circumstances
- *Community*: Our 'leadings' and personal experience of the Light must be tested and lived out in relationships with others.
- *Equality*: All people are of equal worth; some would extend this to all living creatures.
- *Sustainability*: We must live within the ecological constraints of our bioregion, fostering biodiversity rather than degrading it.

With this background, we are now in a position to examine Quaker business process. Once a month (typically), each local congregation (styled as a 'monthly meeting') meets 'for worship with attention to business,' generally after the rise of our regular worship meeting, facilitated by a clerk. Anyone who is part of the meeting may attend and participate. Decisions are made without voting. Rather, the participants may each speak to the matter at hand (preferably only once), and listen to one another for a sense of spiritual unity on the issue. We try to maintain an attitude of worship, the silently prayerful 'gathered stillness,' throughout the process. Once everyone has had an opportunity to speak, the clerk attempts to draft a 'minute' that expresses the 'sense of the meeting' on the issue. They then ask if the minute is acceptable to the meeting. If there are no objections or proposed changes, the minute is recorded. Otherwise, the discernment process may continue until unity is reached, if time permits, or be held over for 'seasoning' and taken up again at a subsequent business meeting.

Higher-level Quaker bodies, encompassing regional groupings of monthly meetings, meet less frequently and may transact business as well. My home monthly meeting of Edmonton, Alberta, for example, belongs to Western Half-Yearly Meeting, covering Saskatchewan, Alberta and

British Columbia, and Canadian Yearly Meeting for all of Canada. Any members or attendees of a monthly meeting may participate in business meetings of the higher-level meetings to which their monthly meeting belongs. The business process is substantively the same at the monthly meeting level and higher levels. Quakers who are not able to attend business meetings are expected to trust those who do attend to follow Quaker process and arrive at good decisions, for both the monthly meeting and higher level meetings.

Formally, there are similarities of the Quaker business process to 'consensus decision-making.' In both processes, a single individual has the power to block a group decision. But, the underlying attitude is quite different. The process is not a debate. We are not trying to reach 'consensus' among ourselves. Rather we seek to discern what the Holy Spirit – that sacred Wisdom deep within us and among us – is leading us to do as a group.[19] Sometimes we go into the meeting thinking our options are either A or B. 'Consensus' would suggest trying to find some middle ground, a compromise position between A and B, that perhaps nobody is entirely happy with. The Quaker discernment process often leads us to realize that there is another option altogether, superior to both A and B, which we can all unite behind. Something about the attitude of worship and detachment from the outcome seems to foster a certain openness of mind and heart that allows these group epiphanies to happen. They feel quite miraculous. Moreover, the goal of reaching a decision is distinctly secondary to the goal of developing the health and vigor of the relationships among the members, thereby creating a stronger, more loving, and more resilient community.

The process is not easy nor is it always comfortable. Spiritual discipline and great patience are required for the process to operate well. There exists within each of us, I believe, a 'shallow self,' a complex of unexamined wants and belief systems, often fraught with defense mechanisms, often heavily shaped by the conventional wisdom of the surrounding culture. This shallow self must be kept out of the driver's seat during business meeting. We must avoid reacting superficially to the words coming out of others' mouths and listen with empathy to the intentions underneath the words and to the deep response of love and truth within our own hearts. That is how we discern what the Spirit is leading us to do. Effective participation (actively and passively) in the Quaker discernment process is a skill that grows with practice. And it cannot be reduced to a set of rules; it depends upon the good-will and openness to the Spirit of the participants.

Sometimes, of course, a difficult conflict will arise within the meeting. But there are some strategies that help to move us through such conflict.

- *Give it time*: Quakers are comfortable taking a long time, if necessary, to reach a good decision. We call this 'seasoning' the matter. For example, Quakers took fifty-some years, in the early eighteenth century, to decide that slaveholding was impermissible, Once they reached unity, Quakers quickly became the most active opponents of slavery outside the African-American community itself.

- *Use this time constructively*: Between meetings, pray about the issue, learn more about it, engage in one-on-one discussions with others in the meeting, particularly those on the other side of the issue to better understand where their perspective.

[19] I admit to cringing somewhat at this traditional Quaker language, as it suggests the necessity of submitting to some sort of divine dictator. In practice, however, I find this process in complete accordance with my anarchism because I don't conceive of the Holy Spirit (or whatever it might be called) as a separate, external being at all. Rather, it is the deepest part of myself; it is the me that is not just me that connects me to you and to the rest of the universe.

- *Take feelings seriously*: The disagreement may be partially rooted in personal conflict between members. Personal feelings should not be suppressed but dealt with honestly and compassionately. This is probably best done off-line, perhaps with someone acting as a mediator. Use the conflict as an opportunity to deepen bonds between members.

There exists a controversial last-resort option. The clerk may propose that 'the sense of the meeting' is to go ahead with some decision, over the objection of a small minority, if the rest of the meeting strongly supports doing so. This move is more likely to be viewed as legitimate by the meeting if the seasoning process, described above, does not seem to be leading towards resolution (e.g if the minority refuse to engage constructively with others in the meeting about the issue), if there is some urgency to the decision, and if the minority's opposition does not appear to be grounded in any principle consistent with the Quaker Testimonies. So a Quaker meeting may, as a last resort and with discomfort, engage in coercion towards a minority. But this state of affairs should be regarded as a breakdown of Quaker process rather than its successful operation. It is a wound to the fabric of the meeting. In the aftermath of such a decision, members will have to work to remain in compassionate dialogue about this issue, to revisit the decision if necessary, if the wound is ever to heal. Most Quaker meetings will therefore go to extraordinary lengths to avoid using this coercive option.

I have heard some Quakers assert that this business process can only be used successfully in the context of Quaker meetings and that it cannot be used by groups with other sorts of beliefs or with a secular agenda. I clearly disagree, or I wouldn't be touting the process in this article addressed to non-Quaker anarchists. There already exists *within* Quaker meetings a wide range of beliefs about God, including non-belief. So it's hard to see how any uniquely Quaker beliefs or traits are necessary to the operation of the process. Many non-Quakers – particularly, I should hope, many anarchists – would also affirm the equality of all people, as a sacred (i.e. deeply valued) principle. Quakers aren't the only folks who have a commitment to some sort of Higher Power, something larger or deeper than themselves, whether they speak of this in terms of religious metaphors or other sorts of metaphors. Quakers aren't the only folks capable of deep patience, compassionate listening, and openness of heart. On the other hand, these spiritually-grounded attitudes, values and behaviors – patience, compassion, openness, etc. – are not optional. Without them, the process degenerates into acrimonious debate, or other dysfunctions. Cultivating these attitudes, values and behaviors is certainly part of the Quaker ethos; but Quakers have no monopoly on them.

As for the supposed inapplicability of the Quaker process to 'secular' matters, the traditional Quaker position is that *all* of life should be experienced as a sacrament; there is no distinct realm of purely secular pursuits to which spiritual values are inapplicable. Consider an affinity group engaged in nonviolent direct action to protect water and oppose oil pipelines. As the Standing Rock Sioux and their allies have recently demonstrated to the world with stunning clarity, this is a deeply spiritual undertaking. There is no inherent reason why a spiritually grounded method like the Quaker business process, perhaps adapted and supplemented to suit the cultural style(s) and preferences of its members, could not be used by such an affinity group. Consider a workers' cooperative business, endeavoring to provide livelihoods to its members while offering some needed products or services to the broader community. This too is a spiritual undertaking. Consider a group of neighbors, endeavoring to build a more inclusive, culturally vibrant, environmentally and economically resilient community. This too is a spiritual undertaking. Indeed, I

cannot conceive of any constructive human pursuit requiring collective action that is unworthy to be called 'spiritual'. Accordingly, the Quaker business process (mutatis mutandis) and the spiritual values and skills underlying it ought to be applicable to all such collective decision-making. It is to be expected that the process might be awkward for those who are unused to it, but skill in the use of this process comes with practice, for Quakers and, I would assume, non-Quakers alike.

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As a postscript, I'd like to offer some thoughts on a related issue: the supposed tension between the needs of the group versus the needs of the individual. I see this as a false dichotomy. I find that I cannot be strong, healthy individual without the support of my community. Likewise, my community cannot be fully strong and healthy if I am being inauthentic as an individual. Communities, like individuals, have shadow sides – aspects of identity that are hidden, repressed and denied – and that can lead us into dysfunctional behavior when the conscious part of the identity (individual or collective) is looking the other way. It is not the normal, healthy operation of a group to oppress and exploit any of its members. Rather, such behavior represents a manifestation of a group's shadow identity. It is incumbent on individual members who see what is going on within such a group to speak up and challenge this shadow behavior. This truth-telling requires courage, for such individuals may encounter rejection and other retribution from the larger group. However, without such individual courage, the group will slide into more and more serious dysfunction. As I see it, this responsibility is an unavoidable part of being human.

25. A Last Response to Shawn Wilbur (Wayne Price)

July 19th, 2017

Shawn Wilbur is correct when he writes, "*Price and I have enough in common to have a useful conversation about anarchy and democracy, and that we could start with something very close to a shared political language.*" Since I have a great deal of respect for Shawn as an interpreter of Proudhon, let me try to state what may be common in our views:

Our vision or goal is a cooperative and free society without coercion, oppression, or exploitation. In such a society, or at least on the road to such a society (in its transition from post-capitalism to the full realization of anarchy), there will at times be an inability to be absolutely noncoercive. At times it will be necessary to make collective decisions using democratic procedures, such as voting.

I think this covers what Shawn has written as well as my point of view, at least in a "shared common political language." I hope Shawn would agree with me on this.

I won't go over my argument about the individualist nature of the anti-democracy opinion. It was written immediately in response to the statement of Grayson English's piece, "Demolish the Demos." How it applies to Shawn, who is not a Stirnerite but an interpreter of Proudhon, would require an extensive discussion. I can say that I do not understand why he thinks that if a majority forms around one issue (my example of road-building in a commune) then it will exploit and oppress a minority in a general way.

Shawn describes being "not too far from Price's position," an acceptance of "the Marxian account of exploitation, joined with anarchism imagined as simple anti-statism." I do oppose exploitation as well as the state, and also all other forms of oppression and authoritarianism. It

is unclear to me whether Shawn is saying that this means that I am not a real anarchist. If so, I wonder if that applies to every anarchist who also claims to support radical democracy, including Kevin Carson, David Graeber, Cindy Milstein, and Paul Goodman. This is probably not what he means, since he begins by noting that "self-identified anarchists" have long been struggling to define "anarchism" and that this struggle over its meaning "is just essentially the process by which meaning is made." I completely agree. This also applies to the struggle over the meaning of "democracy."

26. Antinomies of Democracy (Shawn P. Wilbur)

July 20th, 2017

I thought I had pretty well had my say on the subject of *democracy and anarchy*, but comparing the material I've written to the contributions I've submitted, I see a couple of responses languishing among the drafts. I also find that the real impasse in my exchanges with Wayne Price leaves me considerably less than satisfied. So I want to take a final opportunity to respond to what seems most and least promising in the arguments for "anarchist democracy" and then, in the hopes of making my original position a bit clearer, I want to attempt a Proudhonian defense of what seems defensible in "democratic practices."

I.—Principles and Rhetoric in Defense of "Democracy"

Several contributors to the exchange have made a point of talking about the dangers of overreacting to the *language* of "democracy" or leaning too heavily on etymology. Those are obviously useful cautions. Most of us are familiar with the quibbles by which authoritarians of various sorts attempt to use etymology against anarchism and expand the envelope of "anarchy" to include their pet *archisms*. Precisely because those rhetorical maneuvers are so familiar, it doesn't seem unreasonable to expect a bit of precision and theoretical substance from the advocates of "anarchist democracy." And those of us who see "democracy," as we understand it, across a very important divide from *anarchy,* may perhaps be forgiven for a certain degree of caution and skepticism.

Clarity in the exchange requires dealing with both matters of principle and matters of rhetoric. If "democracy" and "anarchy" are to represent compatible projects, then it has to be clear how that works—and then it seems necessary to explain why retaining the language of "democracy" to describe anarchic relations is useful. I think that the exchange has demonstrated that it is not particularly easy to do both.

In "Anarchism as Radical Liberalism," Nathan Goodman makes an interesting appeal for political and economic systems characterized by "openness." Using the work of Don Lavoie, he makes a brief but intriguing case for *glasnost* as the defining quality of a "radicalized democracy." As I understand what is proposed, it seems this is a path to anarchy of the sort I have rejected in my initial essay, but it seems to be a good-faith proposal. Also the path from "openness" to anarchy seems to have fewer clear obstacles than other nominally "democratic" options. This seems to be a principled position with possibilities worth exploring, but its "democratic" character seems in large part to be an accident of the Cold War context. Goodman even quotes Lavoie as saying: "The Russian word translates better into 'openness' than it does into 'democracy.'"

I think Kevin Carson ends up in a similar place, though by a somewhat different path. In his lead essay, "On Democracy as a Necessary Anarchist Value," he quickly dispatches the question of opposing principles by simply equating "democracy" and "anarchy," going on to emphasize the goal of maximizing human agency. I can certainly agree that at least one of the goals of anarchists should be to maximize individual agency (although, given my emphasis on Proudhon's theory of collective force, it's not hard to anticipate the complications I expect), but, even with Carson's lengthy explanation, I have a hard time making any sense of the impulse to call anarchy "democracy."

With his references to David Graeber's work, I think that Carson provides various pieces of an inclusive narrative according to which "democracy" stands for *something* that is "as old as history, as human intelligence itself"—and perhaps that something is even somewhat anarchistic in its character. I understand the impulse behind Graeber's defense of a "democracy" that is not narrowly defined by a Western philosophical canon. But, honestly, Graeber's rhetoric is not reassuring. When he claims that that "democratic assemblies can be attested in all times and places," or that "all social systems, even economic systems like capitalism, have always been built on top of a bedrock of actually-existing communism," I can't help but think that the keywords have been stretched close to the point of meaninglessness. And it's not because I think any particular political tradition has a monopoly on useful political concepts and principles. It is rather because my experience is that there are very few well-defined concepts or well-wrought principles that are unchanging over time (let alone stable through translation) and clear without substantial contextualization and unitary in application. The *socialism* of 1834 and the *socialism* of 1848, to take one example, were worlds apart. The *mutualism* of 1865 and the *mutualism* of 1881 were perhaps just as distinct. But *la démocratie* in France in 1848 and *la Démocratie* in the same time and place were also distinct, the various organizations and institutions that invoked the name of one or both were diverse in their values, and the norms of a new chapter of political discourse were being worked out on the fly, often in very close connection with the rapidly changing fortunes of the Second Republic. I don't know many political terms that have not represented substantially different practices over relatively short periods of time, and it seems to me that the twists and turns of Graeber's argument testify to the difficulties of claiming "democracy" for this perennial (and possibly anarchistic) *something*.

Perhaps because it has not, in general, been thought of as something that one practiced, anarchy seems bright, shiny and clearly defined in contrast with virtually all of these other potential keywords. If there is as much confusion about anarchy in many circles as there is about democracy (or any number of other political concepts), the source of the uncertainty seems different. After all, even the theoretically sophisticated treatments of anarchy tend to differentiate the concept from its popular connotations of chaos and uncertainty by attempting to show what has been considered chaotic and uncertain in a different light. Anarchist thinkers as diverse as Proudhon, Bellegarrigue, Kropotkin and Labadie have all played with the relationships between "anarchy" and "order," most often suggesting that existing conceptions might be flipped. But a reversal is different from an uncoupling of the two notions and when we say that "anarchy is order" it is order, and not anarchy, that we are asking people to redefine. So it is likely that when we talk about anarchy, most people really know what we're talking about, but lack our positive feelings about the notion—and our critique of the alternatives—and our optimistic sense of where it all might lead. That poses a particular set of problems for those of us who want to promote anarchy as a

political ideal, which I am happy to take on, but I'm not sure what advantage is gained by adding the different set of problems posed by this vague, ubiquitous reconstruction of "democracy."

In both of these cases however, while I disagree with the rhetorical framing, I am at least sympathetic to the stated goals. I expect that the societies envisioned are, in both cases, rather distant from my own ideal, but both involve healthy progress in a decidedly libertarian direction. If "democracy" is the best we can do—and even the sorts of democracy proposed here seem pretty far removed at the moment—then these are proposals that seem to glean what is best from democratic tradition (broadly defined).

I wish I could say the same about my other democratic interlocutor, Wayne Price, but his "Last Response" is not the sort of thing that inspires confidence. I might seem ungrateful to take exception to its agreeable tone. Price begins with what seems to be a mix of conciliation and praise:

Shawn Wilbur is correct, I think, when he writes, "*Price and I have enough in common to have a useful conversation about anarchy and democracy, and that we could start with something very close to a shared political language.*" Since I have a great deal of respect for Shawn as an interpreter of Proudhon, let me try to state what may be common in our views:

Unfortunately, what I actually said was this:

> *This ought to mean that Price and I have enough in common to have a useful conversation about anarchy and democracy, and that we could start with something very close to a shared political language. That we obviously have not had a useful conversation requires some explaining…*

And that paragraph was immediately preceded by this one, which explains the "shared political language" in rather different terms than Price's attempt:

> *It seems to me that Price has made his own position clear. He envisions a democracy in which minorities will, in fact, be subject to the decisions of majorities. The silver lining he offers is that the minorities will not be static, so we will not see the same sort of oppression we see in more conventionally hierarchical societies. He seems to see this relationship as just and legitimate, although it is not clear whether he believes there is a political duty to assent to some "will of the people" or whether he believes that there is some more utilitarian justification. What seems clear enough, however, is that this majority rule is not a failure in his mind. Given that apparent fact, it does not seem out of line to attribute to Price some sort of (still not precisely clarified) democratic principle—and one that occupies a place on the political map awfully close to the one I assigned it in my own account.*

It's hard to know what to make of the rest of Price's response. He spends a third of it speculating about "whether Shawn is saying that this means that I am not a real anarchist," lumping himself together with a group of people for whom "radical democracy" does not seem to have a uniform meaning, but not actually responding to my characterization of his position.

Looking back over his contributions, however, it seems to me that my characterization is fair enough and that, rather than shifting the language of "democracy" onto relations governed by other relations (openness, glasnost, maximizing agency, etc.), Price seems intent on applying the

language of "anarchy" to relations that are hierarchical and governmentalist in principle. He is correct, of course, that we both believe that "[a]t times it will be necessary to make collective decisions using democratic procedures," at least in the short run. But the nature of his response—the mangled quotation, the failure to clarify, etc.—make that "democratic" eventuality seem even more dire to me. This is not, to be just a bit blunt, the sort of interaction you want to have with someone whose pitch is basically "we'll take turns oppressing each other a little."

But let's not leave things there.

II.—"Self-Government" and the Principle of Federation

Let's acknowledge that the points of agreement and disagreement among the contributors here are complicated. For example, the "democratic practices" that Price seems to approve, and I anticipate with some dread, do not seem to be the characteristic practices of Graeber's perennial and ubiquitous "democracy," and it might not be too great a stretch to associate them, in that context, with "failure" in the sense that I have done in my contributions. As the market advocates among us are almost certainly aware, it is a common trope among Graeber-inspired anarchists that people only turn to counting and calculation as a means of organizing themselves when society (characterized in this view by a basis in communism and informal democracy) begins to break down. And that reading seems generally faithful to Graeber's variety of *social anarchism*, at the core of which is a faith that people can work things out without recourse to mechanisms like market valuation or vote-taking.

When we shift our focus away from the questions of vocabulary and rhetoric, our divisions look different. In order to wrap up my contributions to this exchange, I would like to redraw the lines between us in a way that accepts—within clearly defined limits—Wayne Price's contention that we are in agreement about the practical side of things. Having proposed this new divide, I then want to undertake a limited defense of *democratic practices*, including voting, in a way that draws on Proudhon's later works and, in a sense, completes the argument against the *democratic principle*. This move is not just consistent with the Proudhonian analysis I've been making, but is probably required by any very serious application.

I want to avoid getting too bogged down in the details of Proudhon's final works, where we can find his own unfinished attempts to reimagine institutions like universal suffrage and constitutionalism in anarchistic terms. Those who are familiar with the approach in *Theory of Property* will recognize that the recuperation of democracy is the logical complement to the recuperation of property. For those unfamiliar with that work, here is a key passage:

> *We have finally understood that the opposition of two absolutes [property, the governmental State]—one of which, alone, would be unpardonably reprehensible and both of which, together, would be rejected, if they worked separately—is the very cornerstone of social economy and public right: but it falls to us to govern it and to make it act according to the laws of logic.*

The "New Theory" of property depends on the recognition "that the reasons [*motifs*, motives, impetus, justification] for property, and thus its legitimacy, must be sought, not in its principle or its origin, but in its aims." On the basis of principle, property remains "theft," absolutist and "unpardonably reprehensible." But as early as 1842, in the *Arguments Presented to the Public*

Prosecutor Regarding the Right of Property, Proudhon had been exploring the possibility that the equalization of property and the limitation of its scope might allow its effects to be generally neutralized. As he embraced the notion of *antimony,* and it became clear that this sort of counterbalancing was perhaps the most promising means of at least neutralizing authority, the doors were thrown wide open for the consideration of what other institutions might serve as social counterweights. And it should be no surprise that *universal suffrage*, *constitutionalism* and other existing democratic practices were subject to similar attempts at recuperation in Proudhon's final works.

But in what sense could such a theory be *anarchic* or *anarchistic?* Obviously, this is not the simple anarchy, identified as a *perpetual desideratum* in *The Principle of Federation*, but if the effect is indeed to balance and thus *neutralize* the authoritarian or absolutist elements in various institutions—all of them still considered suspect *in principle*—then perhaps we have anarchy as a *resultant*. It may not be immediately obvious how a "governed" opposition becomes the "very cornerstone of social economy and public right," but it should be very easy for us to identify anarchy with the combined effects of various opposing forces or tendencies. The *principle of anarchy* is not compromised by the fact that anarchy is inseparable from conflict. Like the *principle of authority*, it is a response to that fact.

If any of this seems unfamiliar or outlandish, consider that what Proudhon proposed for "property" was not significantly different from Bakunin's treatment of "authority" in "God and the State." In the context of his quite thorough rejection of the principle of authority, the way to avoiding "spurning every [individual] authority" is to treat expertise as a matter of difference between individuals and not of social hierarchy, and then to neutralize the potentially authoritarian effects of that difference by balancing expertise against expertise.

It would be easy, at this point, to expand the analysis of Proudhon's final works and trace his own work towards the recuperation of at least certain democratic practices, which we should probably understand as complementary to the recuperation of property. But that would be a long and convoluted tale. Instead, I would simply like to pick out one aspect of Proudhon's theory—his frequent use of the English term *self-government* among the synonyms for anarchy—and propose the bare outline how anarchic self-government might function in practice.

Let's figure out how we might build a road, or undertake similar projects, using the principle of federation and the sociology of collective force. Readers can then determine whether the distinctions that I have been proposing do or do not actually make a difference. I'll structure the sketch around four basic observations about social organization:

1. *The importance of specific decision-making mechanisms or organizational structures to the organization of a free society is almost certainly overestimated*. If we are considering building a road, then there are all sorts of technical questions to be answered. We need to know about potential users, routes, construction methods, ecological impacts, etc.—and the answers to all of these questions will significantly narrow the range of possible proposals. We need to make sure that the plans which seem to serve specific local needs can be met with local resources, which will further narrow the possibilities. And in a non-governmental society, there can be no *right* to coerce individuals in the name of "the People," nor can there be any obligation for individuals to give way to the will of the majority—and this absence of democratic rights and duties must, I think, be recognized, if the society is to be considered

even vaguely anarchistic—so new limitations are likely to appear when individuals feel that their interests are not represented by proposals.

The simplest sort of self-government, where individuals simply pursue a combination of their own interests—including, of course, their interests as members of various social collectivities—and the knowledge necessary to serve them, will either lead to proposals that are acceptable to all the interested parties or they will encounter some obstacle that this sort of simple self-government appears unable to overcome. This second case is presumably the point at which a vote and the imposition of the will of the majority might seem useful. But what is obvious is that such a resolution does not solve the problem facing this particular polity. This sort of democracy is what happens when the simplest sort of self-government—which is probably not worth calling *government* at all—breaks down, and it involves relations that seem difficult to reconcile with the notion of *self-government*.

But perhaps this very simple self-government revolves around the wrong sort of *self*.

2. *The "self" in anarchic* self-government *is neither simply the human individual, nor "the People," understood abstractly, but some real social collectivity*. The vast majority of Proudhon's sociological writings actually relate to the analysis of how *unity-collectivities*, organized social groups with a unified character, emerge and dissolve in society, but what is key for us to note here is that we are not talking about abstract notions like "the People." Instead, if we are talking about a sort of *social self-government*, it would seem that the avoidance of exploitation and oppression is going to depend on carefully identifying real collectivities to which various interested parties belong. While "the People" may find their mutual dependence a rather abstract matter, the more precisely we can identify and clarify the workings of specific collectivities, the less chance there should be that purely individual interests undercut negotiations among the members of those collectivities.

One of the important elements of Proudhon's sociology is his recognition that collectivities may have different interests than the strictly individual interests of the persons of which they are composed. That means that individuals may find themselves forced to recognize their own interests as complex and perhaps in conflicts, depending on the scale and focus of analysis. This may mean, for example, that there will be hard choices between the direct satisfaction of individual desires and various indirect, social satisfactions. But it should also mean that the more strictly individual sorts of satisfaction cannot be neglected when members are thinking about the health and success of the group. To the extent that real collectivities can be identified, and decisions regarding them limited to the members of those collectivities, negotiations can be structured quite explicitly around the likely trade-offs. To the extent that the health and success of the collectivity depends on lively forms of conflict among the members (and Proudhon made complexity and intensity of internal relations one of the markers of the health—and the *freedom*—of these entities), then the more conscious all members must be of the need to maintain balance without resorting to some winner-take-all scenario.

It will, of course, not always be possible to resolve conflict by bringing together a single collectivity. There will be issues that can be resolved through additional fact-finding or compromises within the group, but there will be others that call for the identification of other groups of interested parties, whether in parallel with the existing groups, addressing different sorts of shared

interests, at a smaller scale, addressing interests that can be addressed separately from the present context, or on a larger scale, addressing issues shared by the given group and other groups as well. We can already see how this analysis leads to federalism as an organizing principle, but perhaps it is not quite clear how and why these various groups might be constituted.

3. *The "nucleus" of every unity-collectivity is likely to be a conflict, problem or convergence of interests.* One of the consequences of breaking with the governmental principle ought to be the abandonment of the worldview that sees society always present as "the People," a fundamentally governmental collectivity always present to intervene in the affairs of individual persons. While there might be a few institutions of self-government that enjoy a perpetual existence, anarchists should almost certainly break with the notion that that each individual is obliged to stand as a citizen of some general polity whenever called to account for themselves.

Instead, the principle of voluntary association and careful attention to real relations of interdependence ought to be our guides. And the rich sort of self-interest we've been exploring here ought to serve us well in that regard. To abandon the assumptions of governmentalism and take on the task of self-government is going to be extremely demanding in some cases, so we might expect that individuals will desire to keep their relations simple where they can, coming together to form explicit associations only when circumstances demand it—and then dissolving those association when circumstances allow.

Where existing relations seem inadequate to meet our needs and desires, then some new form of association is always an option—and with practice hopefully we will learn to take on the complex responsibilities involved. Where existing relations seem to bind us in ways that stand in the way of our needs and desires, we'll learn to distinguish between those existing associations which simply do not serve and those of a more fundamental, inescapable sort—and hopefully we will grow into those large-scale responsibilities from which we cannot extricate ourselves. Conventions for the use of property, the distribution of revenue and products, the mechanics of exchange, etc. can probably be approached in much the same way we would approach the formation of a new workgroup, the extension of a roadway, the establishment of sustainable waste or stormwater disposal, etc.

4. *Organization, according to the federative principle, is a process by which we identify—or extricate—specific social "selves," on the one hand, or establish their involvement in larger-scale collectivities, on the other, and establish the narrow confines within which various "democratic" practices might come into play.* If we are organized in anarchistic federations, then we can expect that organization to be not just bottom-up, but very specifically up from the problems, up from the local needs and desires, up from the material constraints, with the larger-scale collectivities only emerging on the basis of converging interests. Beyond the comparatively temporary nature of the federated collectivities, we should probably specify that we are talking about a largely *consultative* federalism, within which individuals strive to avoid circumstances in which decision among options is likely to become a clear loss for any of the interested parties. If we are forced by circumstances to resort to mechanisms like a majority vote, then we will want to contain the damage as much as possible. But I suspect we will often find that the local decisions that are both sufficiently collective and

divisive to require something worth calling "democratic practices," but also sufficiently serious to push us to confrontations within local groups may find solutions through consultation with other, similar groups. Alternately, if the urgency is not simply local—if, for example, ecological concerns are a factor—they may find themselves "solved," not by local desires at all, but by consideration of the effects elsewhere.

Taking these various observations together, it should be clear that I do indeed believe that sometimes we will be required to fall back on familiar sorts of democratic practices, but I hope it is also clear why, in very practical terms, I believe that this will constitute a failure within an anarchist society.

III.—A Note on Guarantism

I would be remiss if I did not very briefly return to Proudhon's *Theory of Property* and the proposal there, according to which "the opposition of two absolutes," each objectionable on principle, becomes "the very cornerstone of social economy and public right." In the previous section I have obviously been attempting to sketch out a federated society in which the balances struck would be between less objectionable and absolute elements, suggesting a fairly well developed sort of anarchy, in the context of which, a complex sort of consensus is the ideal. But, as I've suggested, this is a demanding standard and other sorts of balances might be struck. The clues in Proudhon's late work suggest that perhaps his recuperation of *universal suffrage* would have functioned in a similar way to his recuperation of *domain*, and perhaps that it is not simply the anarchistic "citizen-state" that would have functioned as a counterweight to property. My reservations about Proudhon's late theory of property arise from the fact that domain is potentially a very formidable power within society, but it is at least presented in those works as a largely defensive element. My reservations about democratic practices is that they are much more likely to be invasive and that, in the presence of that potentially invasive power, various defensive counterweights would likely have to be strengthened, if a real balance was to be struck.

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