

Beyond Democracy?

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Contents

What could there possibly be beyond democracy?	3
Every little child can grow up to be President.	3
The tyranny of the majority	3
“The Rule of Law”	4
It’s no coincidence “freedom” is not on the ballot.	4
“Look, a ballot box—democracy!!”	5
Representative democracy is a contradiction in terms.	5
Consensus	6
Autonomy	6
Direct Action	7
Topless Federations	7
How to solve disagreements without calling “the authorities”	7
Living without permission	8

What could there possibly be beyond democracy?

text courtesy of special agent Rolf Nadir

Nowadays, “democracy” rules the world. Communism has fallen, elections are happening more and more in those poor underdeveloped third world nations you see on television, and world leaders are meeting to plan the “global community” that we hear so much about. So why isn’t everybody happy, finally? For that matter—why do less than half of the eligible voters in the United States, the world’s flagship democracy, even bother to vote at all?

Could it be that “democracy,” long the catch-word of every revolution and resistance, is simply not democratic enough? What could be more democratic?

Every little child can grow up to be President.

No they can’t. Being president means holding a hierarchical position of power, just like being a billionaire: for every one president, there have to be millions of people with less power. And just as it is for billionaires, it is for presidents: it’s not any coincidence that the two types tend to rub shoulders, since they both come from a privileged world off limits to the rest of us. Our economy isn’t democratic, either, you know: resources are distributed in absurdly unequal proportions, and you certainly do have to start with resources to become President, or even to get your hands on more resources.

Even if it was true that anyone *could* grow up to be President, that wouldn’t help the millions of us who inevitably don’t, who must still live in the shadow of that power. This is an intrinsic structural difficulty in representative democracy, and it occurs on the local level as much as at the top. For example: the town council, consisting of professional politicians, can meet, discuss municipal affairs, and pass ordinances all day, without consulting the citizens of the town, who have to be at work; when one of those ordinances inconveniences or angers some of the citizens, they have to go to great lengths to use their free time to contest it, and then they’re gone again the next time the town council meets. The citizens can elect a different town council from the available pool of politicians and would-be politicians, but the interests and powers of the class of politicians as a whole will still be in conflict with their own—and anyway, party loyalties and similar superstitions usually prevent them from taking even this step.

If there was no President, our “democracy” would still be less than democratic. Corruption, privilege, and hierarchy aside, our system purports to operate by majority rule, with the rights of the minorities protected by a system of checks and balances—and this method of government has inherent flaws of its own.

The tyranny of the majority

If you ever happened to end up in a vastly outnumbered minority group, and the majority voted that you must give up something as necessary to your life as water and air, would you comply? When it comes down to it, does anyone really believe in recognizing the authority of a group simply because they outnumber everyone else? We accept majority rule because we do not believe it will threaten *us*—and those it does threaten are already silenced before we can hear their misgivings.

No “average citizen” considers himself threatened by majority rule, because each one thinks of himself as having the power and righteous “moral authority” of the majority: if not in fact (by being so-called “normal” or “moderate”), then in theory, because his ideas are “right” (that is, he believes that everyone would be convinced of the truth of his arguments, if only they would listen sincerely). Majority-rule democracy has always rested on the conviction that if all the facts were clear, everyone could be made to see that there is only one right course of action—without this belief, it amounts to nothing more than the dictatorship of the herd. But such is not always the case—even if “the facts” could be made equally clear to everyone, which is obviously impossible, some things simply can’t be agreed upon, for there *is* more than one truth. We need a democracy that takes these situations into account, in which we are free from the mob rule of the majority as well as the ascendancy of the privileged class...

“The Rule of Law”

...and the protection afforded by the “checks and balances” of our legal institution is *not* sufficient to establish it. The “rule of just and equal law,” as fetishized today by those whose interests it protects (the stockbrokers and landlords, for example), does not protect anyone from chaos or injustice; it simply creates another arena of specialization, in which the power of our communities is ceded to the jurisdiction of expensive lawyers and pompous judges. The rights of the *minorities* are the very last thing to be protected by these checks and balances, since power is already reserved for those with the privilege to seize it, and then for the lumpen majority after them. Under these conditions, a minority group is only able to use the courts to obtain its rights when it is able to bring sufficient force upon them in the form of financial clout, guileful rhetoric, etc.

There is no way to establish justice in a society through the mere drawing up and enforcement of laws: such laws can only institutionalize what is already the rule in that society. Common sense and compassion are always preferable to adherence to a strict and antiquated table of law, anyway, and where the law is the private province of a curator elite, these inevitably end up in conflict; what we really need is a social system which fosters such qualities in its members, and rewards them in practice. To create such a thing, we must leave representative “democracy” for fully *participatory* democracy.

It’s no coincidence “freedom” is not on the ballot.

Freedom is *not* a condition—it is something closer to a sensation. It’s not a concept to pledge allegiance to, a cause to serve, or a standard to march under; it is an experience you must live every day, or else it will escape you. It is not freedom in action when the flags are flying and the bombs are dropping to “make the world safe for democracy,” no matter what color the flags are (even black!); freedom cannot be caught and held in any state system or philosophical doctrine, and it certainly cannot be enforced or “given” to others—the most you can hope is to free others from forces preventing them from finding it themselves. It appears in fragile moments: in the make-believe of young children, the cooperation of friends on a camping trip, the workers who refuse to follow the union’s orders and instead organize their own strike without leaders. If we are to be real freedom fighters, we must begin by pledging ourselves to chase and cherish

these moments and seek to expand them, rather than getting caught up in serving some party or ideology.

Real freedom cannot be held on a voting ballot. Freedom doesn't mean simply being able to choose between options—it means actively participating in shaping the options in the first place, creating and re-creating the environments in which options exist. Without this, we have nothing, for given the same options in the same situations over and over, we'll always make the same pre-determined decisions. If the context is out of our hands, so is the choice itself. And when it comes to taking power over the circumstances of our lives, no one can “represent” us—it's something we have to do ourselves.

“Look, a ballot box—democracy!!”

If the freedom so many generations have fought and died for is best exemplified by a man in a voting booth, who checks a box on the ballot before returning to work in an environment no more under his control than it was an hour before, then the heritage our emancipating forefathers and suffragette grandmothers have left us is nothing but a sham substitute for the true liberty they lusted after.

For a better illustration of real freedom in action, look at the musician in the act of improvising with her companions: in joyous, seemingly effortless cooperation, they actively create the sonic and emotional environment in which they exist, participating thus in the transformation of the world which in turn transforms them. Take this model and extend it to every one of our interactions with each other, and you would have something qualitatively different from our present system: a harmony in human relationships and activity, a real democracy. To get there, we have to dispense with voting as the archetypal expression of freedom and participation.

Representative democracy is a contradiction in terms.

No one can represent your power and interests for you—you can only have power by acting, and you can only know what your interests are by being involved. Politicians have made careers out of claiming to represent others, as if freedom and political power could be held by proxy. Now, inevitably, they have become a priest caste that answers only to itself—as politician classes have always been, and will always be.

Voting is an expression of our powerlessness: it is an admission that we can only approach the resources and capabilities of our own society through the mediation of that priest caste. When we let them prefabricate our options for us, we relinquish control of our communities to these politicians in the same way that we leave technology to scientists, health to doctors, living environments to city planners and private real estate developers; we end up living in a world that is alien to us, even though our labor has built it, for we have acted like sleepwalkers hypnotized by the monopoly our leaders and specialists hold on setting the possibilities.

The fact is we don't have to simply choose between presidential candidates, soft drink brands, competing activist organizations, television shows, news magazines, political ideologies. We can make our own decisions as individuals and communities, we can make our own delicious beverages and action coalitions and magazines and entertainment, we can create our own individual approaches to life that leave our unique perspectives intact. Here's how.

What are the democratic alternatives to democracy?

Consensus

Radically participatory democracy, also known as consensus democracy, is already well-known and practiced across the globe, from indigenous communities in Latin America to postmodern political action cells (“affinity groups”) in the United States and organic farming cooperatives in Australia. In contrast to representative democracy, consensus democracy is direct democracy: the participants get to share in the decision-making process on a daily basis, and through decentralization of knowledge and authority they are able to exercise real control over their daily lives. Unlike majority-rule democracy, consensus democracy values the needs and concerns of each individual equally; if one person is unhappy with a resolution, then it is everyone’s responsibility to find a new solution that is acceptable to all. Consensus democracy does not demand that any person accept the power of others over her life, though it does require that everybody be willing to consider the needs of everyone else; thus what it loses in efficiency, it gains tenfold in both freedom and goodwill. Consensus democracy does not ask that people follow a leader or standardize themselves under some common cause; rather, its aim is to integrate all into a working whole while allowing each to retain her own goals and ways of doing things.

Autonomy

In order for direct democracy to be meaningful, people must have control over their immediate surroundings and the basic matters of their lives. Autonomy is simply the idea that no one is more qualified than you are to decide how you live, that no one should be able to vote on what you do with your time and your potential—or for that matter how the environment you live in is constructed. It is not to be confused with so-called “independence”—in actuality, *no* one is independent, since our lives all depend on each other (“Western man fills his closet with groceries, and call himself self-sufficient”)—that’s just an individualist myth that keeps us collectively at odds. The glamorization of “self-sufficiency” in the present cutthroat-competitive society really constitutes an attack on those who will not exploit others to “take care of themselves,” and thus functions as an obstacle to community building.¹ In contrast to this Western mirage, autonomy is a free *interdependence* between those with whom you share a consensus, with whom you act freely (i.e. without waiting for permission or instructions from anyone else) in order to cooperatively establish self-management of the whole of life.

Autonomy is the antithesis of bureaucracy. For autonomy to be possible, every aspect of the community from technology to history must be organized in such a way that it is accessible to everyone; and for it to work, everyone must make use of this access.

Autonomous groups can be formed without necessarily establishing a clear agenda, so long as they offer the members ways to benefit from each others’ participation: the CrimethInc. Collective, the Dada movement, and knitting circles of the past and present all offer evidence of this. Such groups can even contain contradictions, just as each of us does individually, and still serve their purpose. The days of marching under a single flag are over.

¹ The politicians’ myth of “welfare mothers” snatching the hardworking citizen’s rightful earnings from him, for example, divides individuals who might otherwise unite to form cooperative groups with no use for those politicians.

Autonomous groups have a stake in defending themselves against the encroachments of others who do not believe in the rights of individuals to govern themselves, and expanding the territory of autonomy and consensus by doing everything in their power to both destroy the structures of coercive societies (including those of representative “democracy”) and replace them with more radically democratic structures. For example, it’s not enough just to block or destroy highways that are creating noise and air pollution; you also have to provide free transportation by means such as communal bicycles and community repair centers, if you want to help others replace the competitive/authoritarian relations of car dependency with cooperative/autonomous means of transportation.

Direct Action

Autonomy means direct action, not waiting for requests to pass through the “established channels” only to bog down in paperwork and endless negotiations. Establish your own channels. If you want hungry people to eat, don’t just give money to some high-handed charity bureaucracy; find out where food is going to waste, collect it, and feed them. If you want affordable housing, don’t try to get the town council to pass a bill—that will take years, while people sleep outside every night; take over abandoned buildings and share them, and organize groups to defend them when the thugs of the absentee landlords show up. If you want corporations to have less power, don’t petition the politicians they bought to put limits on their own masters; find ways to work with others to simply take the power from them: don’t buy their products, don’t work for them, sabotage their billboards and buildings, prevent their meetings from taking place and their merchandise from being delivered. They use similar tactics to exert their power over you; it only looks valid because they bought the laws and social customs, too.

Don’t wait for permission or organization from some outside authority, don’t beg some higher power to organize your life for you. Act.

Topless Federations

Independent autonomous groups can work together in federations without any particular group holding authority. Such a social structure sounds utopian, but it can actually be quite practical and efficient. International mail and railroad travel both currently work on this system, to name two examples: while the individual postal and transportation systems are internally hierarchical, they all cooperate together to get mail or rail passengers from one nation to another, without an ultimate authority being necessary at any point in the process. Similarly, individuals who cannot agree on enough issues to be able to work together within one collective should still be able to see the importance of being able to coexist with other groups. For such a thing to work in the long run, of course, we need to instill values of cooperation, consideration, and tolerance in the coming generations—but that is exactly what we are proposing.

How to solve disagreements without calling “the authorities”

In a social arrangement which is truly in the best interest of each participating individual, exclusion from the community should be threat enough to discourage violent or destructive behavior.

It is certainly a more humanitarian approach than authoritarian means such as prisons and executions, which corrupt the judges as much as they embitter the criminals. Those who refuse to integrate themselves into any community and reject the assistance and generosity of others may find themselves banished from human interaction; but that is still better than exile in the mental ward, or on death row, two of the options which await such men today. Violence should only be used by communities in defense, not with the smug entitlement of post-divine judgment with which it is applied by our present injustice system. This applies as well to the interactions of autonomous/consensus groups with the “outside world” which does not yet abide by cooperative or tolerant values.

Serious disagreements within communities can be solved in many cases by reorganizing or dividing the groups. Often individuals who can't get along in one social configuration will have much more success cooperating in another setting, or as members of parallel communities. If consensus cannot be met within a group, that group should split into smaller groups who can achieve it internally—such a thing may be inconvenient and frustrating, but it is better than group decisions ultimately being made by force by those who have the most power and ruthlessness at their disposal. All the independent communities will still have it in their best interest to coexist peacefully, and must somehow negotiate ways to achieve this...

Living without permission

...that's the most difficult part, of course. But we're not talking about just another social system here, we're talking about a total revolution of human relations—for that is what it will take to solve the problems our species faces today. Let's not kid ourselves—until we can achieve this, the violence and strife inherent in non-consensus relations will continue, and *no* law or system will be able to protect us. The best reason to transcend representative democracy is simply that in consensus democracy there are no fake solutions, no easy ways of suppressing conflict without resolving it, and thus those who participate in it *must* learn to coexist without coercion and submission and all those other nasty habits we are so tired of in our present society.

The first precious grains of this new world can be found in your friendships and love affairs, when they are free from power relations and cooperation occurs naturally. Take this model, and expand it to the whole of society— that is the world “beyond democracy” for which the heart cries out today.

It seems a challenging prospect to get there from here... but the wonderful thing about consensus/autonomy is that you don't have to wait for the government to vote for them to apply these concepts—you can practice them right now with the people around you, and benefit immediately. Once put into practice, the virtues of this way of living will be clear to others; they need no pointing out once one is experiencing them firsthand. Form your own autonomous group, answering to no power but your own, and create an environment in which you chase down freedom and fulfillment for yourselves, if your representatives will not do it for you—since they *cannot* do it “for” you. From such seeds, the real democracy of the future will grow.

Next time we state our demands and grievances and they refuse to acknowledge them, saying “just be thankful you live in a democracy,” we'll be ready to respond: *That's not enough!* ...and know clearly what we want instead, from our own experience.

Whoever they vote for, we are ungovernable!

20,000 channels is not enough.

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