

On Direct Democracy

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“The idea of ‘direct democracy’ is a false good idea. It shares with its older sister, democracy, a fetishism of form. It thinks that the way to organize a discussion preexists before the discussion itself, and that its method is useful in all circumstances, at all times, and for all ends.

To defend direct democracy, to oppose it as ‘real democracy’ against the false political democracy of the State, is to believe that our true nature will at least be revealed if we were to finally be freed from the constraints which the system imposes on us: but to free oneself of such constraints supposes a transformation which at end of we would no longer be ourselves, at the very least we would no longer be what we are under the civilization of Capital.”

Léon de Mattis, *Death to Democracy*, p. 74

“This democracy is a ruse!

Alain Finkielkraut, *Libération*, April 17th 2016⁽¹⁾

The movement of squares during the Arab Spring, the different “Occupy”s, the “Indignados” in 2011, Gezi Park in 2013, Nuit Debout in 2016 ...whether it is in France or elsewhere examples of open assemblies abound in social movements. These various assemblies share a desire to affirm, by anonymous citizens, the right to publicly speak, and convey, more or less explicitly, a demand for immediate democracy. But to organize without hierarchy, without spokespeople and without representatives, is this necessarily “direct democracy”? Should we call these assemblies and the anti-authoritarian practices developed during these struggles direct democracy?

This question is not just merely about vocabulary. Organizing involves choices which are also positions which have been taken. Is a general assembly reserved for some – for example the workers in a specific factory, the students of a certain university – or on the contrary open to all? Must this assembly vote? How should it be decided who speaks? Is a general assembly able to make resolutions which then its members take on? Should we consider it “sovereign”?

All these questions are often answered in a self-evident way: the general assemblies are “democratic.” One assigns “facilitators,” one establishes a list of speakers, one invokes a certain number

⁽¹⁾ [TR. NOTE: A FRENCH CONSERVATIVE ‘PHILOSOPHER’ WHO WAS EVICTED FROM THE NUIT DEBOUT

of rules for debate, and one sometimes ends up voting on motions more or less in relation to the current struggle. Nonetheless, this is not so self-evident. While a struggle is waged, it is of course necessary to debate, to come to agreements or even to disagree; but first off, these discussions do not only take place within the great meetings of assemblies: they can also take place in a very informal way during all sorts of occasions, at a café, during an occupation, during a pause in activity. Further, a struggle is not waged by speaking alone. By definition, acts are also needed, which go along with the participation in a demonstration to the organization of a strike, an occupation or a blockade. All of these acts are accompanied by discussion, and all discussion, if possible, must be accompanied by acts, such is the benchmark for a good practice in the struggle, uniting word with deed.

But whereas a blockade, a strike or an occupation requires active and determined participation of persons in the struggle, a vote in the general assembly shows the same passivity seen in a vote during official elections. One can vote for a strike or an occupation, but they only become real by enacting them. And to go on strike or start an occupation, why should we ask for prior authorization? A strike or an occupation is only possible when a significant number of determined persons join in, and so they are, themselves, a way of showing how many of us there are. An assembly could be an important moment to size up our strength and to mutually give each other the courage to pass into action. But what is thus important is not the formalism of the discussion nor its content, which can be secondary. In the assemblies of Occupy, La Puerta del Sol [Spain], Nuit Debout, what was essential was not what was said by those who spoke, but the very fact that they occupied a square to do so.

As far as the procedures of direct democracy, they raise the same snags as those of representative democracy. Professional militants of small or large organizations end up experimenting with the same rigged processes. Whoever has witnessed the conduct of such or such union in coordination meetings or strike assemblies will understand perfectly what I am referring to. Invoking democracy at general assemblies is tantamount to presupposing what should be the form of the collective decision. It is imagined that only the procedures that are similar to state democracy can allow common resolutions to be adopted. We take as intangible data what is only the fruit of a specific social relation. As with the economy, the justification of democracy stems from the naturalization of the realities that are a product of a determined historical period.

The problem highlighted in the lines cited at the beginning of this article is always relevant. Demonstrating that a critique of the State must also extend towards the notion of direct democracy is a theoretical and practical issue for current-day struggles.

This critique is not meant to be carried out in the name of a hierarchical principle, but rather on the contrary. It will not be a question here of doctrines which perfume authority and demands a man at the head of the State. If these types of ideologies can accommodate elections,¹ they will not like the notion of direct democracy because they assume that the leader must show the way. Though one cannot minimize what direct democracy can represent as a symbolic change against these ideologies calling for a chief or *caudillo*. But this question must be set aside, for it is only among those who intend to challenge the principle of authority that this debate will be held.

¹ Patent dictators, like Putin & Erdogan are regularly re-elected in their countries, though it is true this is at the cost of a few liberties which are standards generally admitted by a “constitutional state.”

The question to which democracy is, in principle, an answer, could be formulated as such: how can a large number of individual wills agree on subjects that concern them collectively? It should be pointed out that this question, or a question close to it, does not only concern democracy, but any form of state organization. The only difference is that the demand for equality among particular wills, which is peculiar to democracy, disappears when it comes to an authoritarian state. But the necessity of making decisions on behalf of all is the elementary justification of every State. Democracy simply asserts that these decisions must be made by all members of the community and not by an elite. As for direct democracy, it merely reproaches representative democracy for betraying this promise of equality.

The question thus formulated also applies to organizations which, without being States, share the same problem. This is the case, for example, with parties or unions that elect delegates, organize conferences and appoint leaders. These political organizations have in common with representative democracy the notions of mandate, spokesperson and elected leadership as those who implement the “will” of the majority.

Direct democracy seems to be opposed to the State because direct democracy can only concern self-organized and non-state political forms. But this contrast is but superficial. First there are *forms* of direct state democracy: such is the case of the famous Swiss cantons, which are always given as examples. Secondly, the formalism of direct democracy can be as extensive as that of representative democracy: this is the case with assemblies which choose the rules of deliberation of “codes” published in North America, such as those of Victor Morin or Henry Martin Robert. The link between “direct” and “indirect” democracy is obvious here, since the author’s first objective was to find the ideal way to debate within parliamentary assemblies. Indeed, the questions of principle to be resolved by self-organized general assemblies and parliamentary assemblies are almost the same, except that the elected members of a parliamentary are obliged to the lobbyists that have supported them. Here direct democracy presents itself as the model of which representative democracy is merely the wrong from.

We can thus say that democracy, whether direct or representative, and a certain number of non-state political organizations share in the search of becoming a response to a common problem: the drama of those who seek to escape the authoritarian hold of the State while situating themselves within the same problematic as the State. We should turn our attention not towards the various solutions to this question, but rather focus on this question itself.

This question’s first characteristic is its self-evident appearance. It appears to be impossible to pose the question of how a certain number of people can make decisions in any other way. Since there are billions of us on Earth, we must come to some agreement. Each has their desires, their interests, their particular ideas: finding a way to live together supposes a generalized accord of wills. This way of viewing things is very similar to the “social contract.” The idea behind the social contract is one which views human beings in an isolated “state of nature,” connected to their parents since childhood, which then becomes an adult without any social relations of any kind, whom they seek to found their own new closed family. In the minds of those who theorize the social contract – from Grotius to Hobbes, from Rousseau to Locke – this state of nature does

not represent a historical period which we suspect has never existed. It is simply a matter of figuring out the abstraction of a non-socialized human being in order to question the extent of their rights vis-à-vis society. Nevertheless, the common conception of the individual is reflected by this point of view and this conception can be said to have been the basis of most contemporary political theories.

There are other examples of social forms which appear “natural” but which, by comparison with other societies, have been understood to be the product of history. For example, this is the case with *work*. Considered in a popular way, work seems to be an obvious and eternal fact. We will always have to work because we will always have to eat. But “work” as a specifically productive and identifiable activity, separated from other types of human activity to such an extent that it can be placed in opposition to other human activities, did not appear spontaneously. We know that the first anthropologists who wanted to measure “work time” in hunter-gatherer societies were faced with intractable problems. Should the rites performed before the hunt be considered as part of the hunt or an added ornament? Undoubtedly, hunter-gatherers spend a certain amount of time in their day devoted to gathering food, clothing themselves, etc. But recognizing this time by differentiating it from time devoted to social, ritual or other difficult-to-classify occupations has proved to be an arduous and partly arbitrary task.

For the the notion of work to become so familiar so as to become self-evident, everything except a “natural” state is necessary. On the contrary, a long-held custom anchored in history, is necessary. “Indifference towards any specific kind of labour presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labour, of which no single one is any longer predominant. (...) Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference.”² This category, so simple and general, that it seems to be eternal, could only truly flourish in a society where labor is at the foundation of social relations.

In the same way, the need for a permanent form of organization to deal with what is common, can only arise as a result of a historical process already at work in Antiquity. At the height of this process, the notion of autonomy of the individual flourished; a notion which grew with the rise of bourgeois society and then triumphed with the development of industrial capitalism. Not that such an idea would be impossible to express in any other sort of epoch: but for it to become so obvious, it takes the long history of a society marked by the separation between producers and their products. It is necessary that this custom, profoundly anchored in morays and consciences, to find the necessary elements for everyday life by exchanging its work for money, and then exchanging this money for commodities. In other words, to bear a strict vision of things produced and consumed, individualized and separated, without allowing an overall perspective to take hold on the why and how of such and such production and consumption. It this relation, separated from access to the things necessary for everyday life, which fortifies this segmented vision of the individual and their relationship with society. Certainly, it is possible to think differently in this society: after all, this text is an example of that. But here we are talking about what is massively and predominantly imposed on our consciences, of which we can only call into question with reasoning as long to develop as those shown here. Of all the ways of conceiving the relation between the individual and the collective, the one that seems to best correspond to our immediate experience takes on a self-evident form for many of us.

² K. Marx, Grundrisse, Introduction, The method of political economy, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/>

It is therefore in a society like ours, in which every moment of our life in common appears to be disconnected from one another, in which the supposed necessity to bring our wills into agreement supposes a particular form of organization. This mode of organization, and the way of conceiving it, has a name: it is *politics*. The very idea of “politics” presupposes that that which concerns life in common is posed in a specific way in relation to the life of the individual. Certain everyday events, however social as others, do not fall within the sphere of “politics” but within the sphere of private life, while others are part of public and political life.

This view which sees society as a collection of individuals, and thus views collective decisions as the sum of individual decisions added-up, although superficially adequate for life under capitalism, is ultimately a distorted view. Collective decisions are never just the sum of individual decisions, just as life in society is not the reproduction, on an enlarged scale, of individual life. It is well-known that voters’ choices are not subject to any particular fancy. There exists an electoral science that explains why, through multiple historical and sociological factors, some vote in such and such way in a given region or social category. If we stick to an individual level, of course, varied and fanciful exceptions continuously occur. One can be born out of such-and-such milieu, have had such-and-such experience, and not act like others who share the same situation. But we are not talking about this level. One if one remains at such a scale, that of great numbers, then such social determinisms are absolutely incontestable.

There is a science to describe these determinisms and even a science for manipulating them: for example, marketing and political communication, techniques destined to sell commodities and politicians to consumer-voters. But the question here is not to list them, let alone to comment on various sociological aspects. It is simply a question of pointing out that everything these social sciences show us, day after day, go against the idea that democracy allows for us to make “choices” and represent the “will” of voters.

One could also intuitively understand how little the “choices” expressed in elections are not really choices at all. More often than not we vote to eliminate a politician we do not want rather than vote for a politician in line with our wishes. When the ballot that slides into the ballot box only seeks to block a reactionary populist and when it is known that the one for whom we vote does not our condition, where is the choice? It is in this way, however, that the elections in the present period present themselves. The sequence inaugurated by the second round of presidential elections in 2002 [in France] is not set to close-up yet.

And more generally, faced with a political set obsessed with their own conquest of power and a media which hijacks any public voice, how can we speak of “will of the people”? Where we often are fooled is in the order of causality of all of this. It is not because this political set is hungry for power, and that the media practices censorship, that democracy does not represent “the will of people.” It is rather because there does not exist at all any “will of the people” other than the one fashioned by the democratic system. The greed of politicians and the baseness of journalists are undeniable. But this greed and baseness are not the cause of the corruption of the entire system. Rather, they are its consequences.³

Moreover, if politicians are always saying expressions like “voters’ choice” or the “the will of the French people,” we know that these are only formulaic phrases that do not lend themselves

works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm

³ This is not a question of exonerating politicians of their responsibilities. From Le Pen to Mélenchon, from Chávez to Ocalan, from Lenin to Che Guevara, from Trump to Bernie Sanders, they’re all the same. But what we emphasize here is that replacing one for another will fundamentally change nothing when it comes to this question.

to much effect. The theoreticians of representative democracy explicitly recognize that the election is not about letting the people decide policy pursued by the government. As a professor of political science rightly states in an article in *Le Monde*: “Voting principally aims at producing legitimacy and create consent for authority.”⁴ We must remember how universal suffrage was gradually established in a country like France. It is with gradual and careful widening (or enlargement) of tax-based voting system and simultaneous production of the appropriate « citizen » that a representative democracy was introduced here. Intelligent conservatives have done the most work in this regard – like the Tocquevilles and the Thiers – as they clearly illustrate the formula put into the mouth of one of Tomasi de Lampedusa’s characters: “Everything must change so that nothing may change.” It was a matter of making sure that the powers granted to the voters would not upset any hierarchies and social relations: the Republic would, from this point of view, have entirely reassured these conservatives. It is because the democratic system is not based on an “agreement of wills,” but rather on the passive approval of citizens at the bottom rung of the ladder, for the acts done by the elites which govern them.⁵

This is why proponents of direct democracy are a bit in the camp of the village idiots: they are those who believe hard and fast in the fable which others merely adhere to. In a world where the alienated morays of capitalist civilization reign, it is selfishness, bitterness and socio-pathology that expresses itself when everyone is allowed to voice their opinion. What would a “direct democracy” be that could take on the task of assuming what a contemporary modern state organizes today? An indescribable chaos of divergent opinions and thoughts where nothing would come out of it, except that a certain point it would be necessary to choose the few leaders who would eventually make the necessary decisions...

We would then be wrong to believe that the defects of representative democracy could be corrected by “real democracy.” Its evil is deeper than that and the solution much more complex. “Direct democracy” is not the solution for the defects of representative democracy: we could not squeeze out of it more “choice.” And even within parliamentary democracy, it is not just the voters who are deprived of power. In 2005, the rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty during the French and Irish referendum led to a vote on a revised text, very similar to the original. People cried out that there was a denial of democracy, since the political elite made it so that they could continue with the liberal direction they desired for the European constitution. But people commented very little on another grand “denial of democracy” which concerns the elected representatives themselves. In 2008, the intervention of the American Federal State was indispensable in saving the world financial system. Some [American] conservative senators were not able to so quickly resolve themselves to toss into the wastebin the ultra-liberal credo, so professed for so many years by American politicians. The bank bailout plan, named “Paulson” after the American treasury secretary, was rejected by the [American] Senate. Things had to be arranged so that this Senate could vote for a second plan, a clone of the first, to avoid a debacle, so that the few recalcitrant senators had no choice but to acquiesce. The necessity of saving the international financial system so seized the State that could not be opposed, not even by the elected representatives of the parliament of the most powerful State in the world.

“The will of the people,” no matter how you phrase it, can only desire what is made possible to desire. Coercion is to be found at the very core of social relations.

⁴ Editorial published Oct. 12th, 2016 and entitled “Does a Left-voter have a default choix?”

⁵ At a strictly juridical level, the entirety of the “social contract” should be attacked for its worthlessness, since

Now let us say a few words here on the coercion we have just remarked upon. This is indeed one of the most misunderstood and mischaracterized points of Marx and Engel's theory. It has been too frequently believed that there is here a mechanical relation between two levels, a "cultural" and an "economic" one, where the former is determined by the latter. Thus one makes of Marx and Engel's thought a sort of economic determinism as vulgar as that of the capitalist economists. It goes without saying that this reading is largely biased. Above all, a social relation is a relation between human beings, more precisely it is a relation between groups of human beings. It is not possible here to detail here how necessities for "the production and reproduction of their immediate life" leaves its mark on their bodies and minds. Rather we must simply understand that the conceptual representations of those who act, even of their own "will," which is to say their ends and their conscious choices which they place into their actions, are necessarily inscribed within this general social relation.

Such a determinism must be understood in a fairly fine manner. Firstly, we could not insist enough that it must never be taken as a determinant of very marginal positions. The human imagination is characterized by its chaotic and baroque exuberance: in any given time, much can be conceived and said. But regardless of the interest that can be brought to the margins, the fact remains that what is decisive for an ideal representation to become predominant is its capacity to be adequately in accordance with the most ordinary givens of social life. Let us be clear: "adequately" does not mean "true," in the sense that the dominant ideologies are conditioned by the interests of social domination. But nonetheless these ideologies are nonetheless "true" as far as they express something of the existing social relation, if not they would be able to acquire such strength. In any case, there does not exist a single dominant ideology, but several, contradictory and clashing with the capitalist forces of which they are an expression. Capitalism, logically marked by its origins, by the context of its historical appearance, has remarkably adapted itself for the past two centuries. During this period, it has extended itself to such a degree that it reigns entirely over the whole world. That said, capitalism has subverted the traditional societies which it has penetrated: but it has also been transformed by contact with these societies. It has thus evolved to be as flexible as possible, most notably when it comes to its ideological and existential justifications.

The characteristics of of the circulation of value and the extraction of surplus value have globally remained the same, following the analysis which Marx had made. The relation between Capital and labor have remained identical while the sociological particularities of the capitalist class and of the proletariat have been turned upside-down. The bourgeois ideology of work, technological progress and parliamentarism, so prevalent during the 19th c., that it appeared to be a necessary attribute of this mode of production, is now but a vision among others that are as capitalist as itself. Fascisms and "real socialism"⁶ have already contested the ideological hegemony of liberal capitalism in the 20th c. Presently the worst religious obscurantism can accommodate itself, untroubled, with the whole of capitalist science and technology so long as they permit the satiation of their dreams for domination. The same social relation can be presented in turn as democratic or authoritarian, nationalist or transnationalist, secular or theocratic without its

consent is only ever given by way of a mix of ideological error, state violence and political ruse.

⁶ The "Soviet" and "socialist" regimes after the 1917 revolution are a form of State-monopoly capitalism hidden by the tinsel of Marxism.

functioning being fundamentally affected. All these ideologies are in the service of States, which are in reality subjected to the determinations imposed by the circulation of value: but these determinations are so buried in the morass of clashing ideologies⁷ that they end up unrecognizable. There are business, finance and labor contract laws in Iran, as there are in the United States, Israel, Turkey, China and Brazil. Of course, these laws and the realities that they frame differ in accordance with the country's integration into the world market, the power of its economy and its administration. But the principles are everywhere the same, and the differences are motivated by the same global logic.

In fact, besides the necessities of capitalist social relations as such, many other constraints also come into the mix, arising from the evolution of morals, the weight of religious archaisms and the strength which the clergy still exert on the sighs of this oppressed creature. The determinism of Capital is the deepest form of determinism on which other social and historical necessities pile on top of. In the chaos of historical situations, only solutions compatible with the functioning of the circulation of value can emerge and take flight, in a given context, over the others.

Certainly capitalism can adopt a more expansive political and ideological flexibility than previous modes of production: a flexibility all the more accentuated as we move away from "economic" questions and rise up into the higher spheres of cultural representations. So that it can be decided to legalize same-sex marriage, or refuse to do so, without having either fundamentally affect the exploitation and extraction of surplus value. Since the counter-culture, as a component of the proletarian outbreak during the '60s and '70s, has been definitively recuperated by capitalist civilization, one can now be morally liberal without it changing the central problem of the domination of Capital and the commodity-form. The fact that these questions are the subject of violent confrontations between equally-capitalist ideologies does not change the problem at all.

It is this remarkable social plasticity, associated with the technological might of industrial development, which has allowed for capitalism's incontestable victory across the globe. But this results in a situation where one can believe that all sorts of "societies" exist without seeing that they are all still capitalist societies. They speak to us of a "clash of civilizations" at the very moment where the battle has already been won. There is nothing else left to enter into conflict with capitalist civilization. The only clash which remains, is that of capitalist civilizations among each other. The clash is potentially violent, but it is nonetheless internal to a single system.

Associated with the particular history of capitalism is the illusion that the State can make choices, an illusion born during the centuries of bourgeois revolution. In reality, the constraints of valorization are absolute and cannot be defied. Only the ideological combinations which respect these constraints have a chance in establishing themselves as a durable model. As far as they are concerned, social and historical inheritances founded on the weight of customs, morals, social structures, which come straight from former modes of production, are much more fragile: the constraints of valorization shatter them or recombine them as seen fit. Some disappear completely, but others, because they somehow fit into the new form of exploitation, undergo a form of modernization.

The capitalist social relation is not in itself racist, patriarchal or colonial. Throughout history it has shown itself as capable of being able to integrate itself with these forms of domination

⁷ They really do clash, but capitalism is in every camp, much in the way that proletarians are in wars that are not their own.

and to use them for its benefit. Though it is always possible to successfully struggle against one of these forms of domination and to force it back in a given space or time. But this retreat, on one hand, will mostly be noted among the more wealthy layers of society, since freedom in the capitalist world is always dependent on the capacity to make use of the necessary resources to make that freedom effective, and on the other hand, this freedom will be at the cost of some other form of domination which is destined to replaced the one pushed back: justifying the privileged place of some within the relations of production. Capitalism must incessantly reproduce the moment where the proletariat must sell their labor to Capital, which must have at its disposal, at a reasonable cost, workers at all levels. The assignment of a part of the working population to such and such task thus presupposes a form of domination where its age and its anchoring in minds and social mores allows for its rise in legitimacy. In part, capitalism can make do without a given domination, subsequently replaced by another. It cannot do without domination in general because, as a relation of exploitation, it will always be forced to be a relation of oppressors over the oppressed.

In the face of capitalism, it is necessary to reaffirm the necessity of imagining a social relation which absolutely clashes with these determinations. Within such a social relation, there is no “democracy,” since there is no “politics” as a moment separated from daily life. The abolition of work is not the disappearance of all activity, but rather the abolition of the distinction between work and non-work, since only a society based on exploitation really has the need for such a distinction to be central to it. The abolition of gender is not merely the annihilation of biological categories, but rather it is the abolition of the importance of these characteristics since only a patriarchal society finds it necessary to make of such biological characteristics a marker for social distinction. Further, the abolition of politics is not the disappearance of the need to communally make decisions, but rather it the disappearance of a separate organization which would be dedicated to this task, since only a class society would have the need for social relations to be regulated by such a specific authority.

In a world freed from capitalism, there is no negation of the individual. It is capitalism which negates the individual by giving them a skimpy vision of themselves. If freedom ends where the freedom of another begins, then this would necessarily be a limited freedom, and all the more limited since those who are not you are countless. The richness of life is not measured by the autonomy of individual choices. Choice for the individual under Capital, supposedly independent, is not that at all: these are choices constrained by material needs and ideological imperatives. True freedom can only reside in the expansion of what is possible at the individual and collective level. Such an expansion is achieved through a multiple and differentiated arrangement of social life. If freedom is the multiplication of possibilities, by maximally extending the number of ways of life, then communism is the truly the reign of individual and collective freedom.

This long detour between the relation of so-called political choices and the real needs for collective organization in the capitalist mode of production brings us back to a simply conclusion. Democracy, whether direct or indirect, is a response to a question which is the expression of coercion in a capitalist world and in class relations. It is not the response which we must seek, it is the question which we must abolish.

But “abolishing the question,” which involves abolishing capitalist social relations, is a difficult task: it will be the fruit of revolution, nothing less — nothing more. Such an abolition cannot be performed with the waving of a magic wand. Until then, the individual as we know it remains a capitalist individual. It is thus with this person that the movement against capitalism is built. Is such an abolition possible by viewing direct democracy as a means and not an end? Can a change in the mode of production simply be the consequence of a “choice” expressed by forms of self-organization close to “direct democracy”? Said another way, can a revolution begin with the installment of a form of direct democracy, which without being its own end in itself, be the first step in such a transformation?

To understand why this is impossible, we must understand that a change in social relations cannot be the outcome of a “choice.” If this change cannot be the fruit of “direct democracy,” it is because the system cannot be changed by a given will, whether it is an unanimous or majoritarian expression. No set of social relation is ever born of an accord of wills. “Will” is the fruit of social relations: how could it then be the origin of social relations? Indeed, will has a role within revolution, but it will be a will which can only be expressed at the heart of a social structure already articulated. The will for change or for revolution is itself the product of social relations.

Under capitalism, two poles linked to value, Capital and labor, maintain a conflictual relation, feeding a social relation and at the same time possess the possibility for its abolition. It is only from this conflictual and contradictory frame that a will for change can take shape. Undoubtedly we can meet-up to discuss with many the world which we dream of, but we cannot, at this meeting of dreamers, take any concrete initiative to bring it about. It is in the course of struggles, inscribed in the conflictual relation between Capital and labor, that is possible to glimpse, in a practical way, the concrete elements for change.

Even if this will can abstractly take into consideration the transformation of the whole of social relations, it can only really exercise any influence over the immediate questions of struggles. Said otherwise, we can absolutely desire the abolition of capitalist social relations but we cannot choose to do so. The process by which history gives birth to a new set of social relations is the fruit of a multitude of interwoven factors in which choices are primarily the reflection of immediate needs. Of course there are quite a few ways to respond to a need, and a vision of a possible future undoubtedly plays a role in this process. But it is never the determinant element and summarily a revolution is not an expression of a choice. To pose the question as one of how to express this choice is thus a false one.

To stick to the problems of the mode of political organization, is to limit things to what politics can organize, which is to say the relations between individuals which have acknowledged that this world, this world of Capital, is their unsurpassable horizon. For those who wish to act from a critical-radical perspective of capitalist social relations, it is essential to pose the question of egalitarian activity in a struggle in such a way that does not allow itself to be paralyzed by democratic ideology.

The critique of democracy does not set out to propose a “better” form of organization than that taken on by democracy ideology, but rather to show, that contrary to what this ideology would have us believe, there is no model to be followed. There is thus no need to find a definite answer

to the questions posed at the beginning of this text (who should be involved in an assembly; how it should be decided who speaks; how decisions are made; etc.). The solutions are to be found in the course of the struggle, and the criteria which lead to the adoption or rejection of these solutions shall not be based on the abstract principles of the democratic ideal. These criteria can only come from the content of the struggle itself.

To get more reflective, we must define here what we mean by “social movements” mentioned earlier in the text, and in a general way, what we mean by “struggle.” “Struggle” could be carried out in a variety of modalities and one cannot give it a uniquely formal definition. To understand the question of struggle, we must start from general social relations. The existence of money, the wage and work, along with their central role in all aspects of social life is a testament to the persistence of exploitation and class relations.⁸ Placing struggles in the face-to-face confrontation between the capitalist class and the proletariat offers a criterion for understanding and judging them. Let us say this clearly: the “struggle” at the heart of this text is class struggle.

It does not categorize between “revolutionary” or “reformist.” Struggles often follow the same schema: they start with specific demands and then possibly widen as they meet practical challenges they make possible. On one hand you can say that the struggle is already lost for as long as it does not become revolution. But on the other hand, the later the defeat the less it is a defeat. The stake is the price to be paid by Capital to be able to return things to normal. The more extensive and deep the struggle is, the steeper the price: on the contrary, the more a struggle remains confined to the quantitative and qualitative ordinary frameworks of the reproduction of the categories of Capital, the lower this price will be. Class struggle is bifid. It is a part of class relations and in this sense it renews class relations. But conversely, there exists in the Capital-labor relation a contradiction inherent to the production of surplus value itself, which is translated into class struggle expressing the weakness of this relation. The more the struggle calls into question these categories and presuppositions of Capital, the more it opens up the possibilities for its revolutionary becoming, as well as implying greater concessions from Capital to contain it. We can include in this notion of a “weakness of social relations” everything which leads to opposing that which we are under Capital, thus to be in opposition to the categories which we socially exist in. We are never abstractly “proletarian.” One is always an incomplete proletarian – of such and such gender, origin, socio-professional category, legal status, place on the pay scale, having such amount of “cultural” or “social capital” – and so on into infinity. One of the issues with this struggle is awaiting for it to generalize and deepen to such a degree so that we may attack our own social role within Capital. This means that we would no longer struggle for the category which we are socially situated in, but rather against this category and further we would no longer struggle along with the presuppositions imposed by the capitalist society but rather against them. When the struggle is organized in a syndicalist, pro-citizen or pro-democrat way then the struggle remains contained within its role of renewing capitalist social relations. When it becomes to overcome these categories and imposed presuppositions, it then takes the form which would allow it to call these into question. To critic democracy, whether direct or indirect,

⁸ There are many ways to understand the question of class within capitalist society, but there is also so much segmentation within these classes that no one way of understanding becomes self-evident. Instead of understanding class relations simply by viewing a fractured proletariat in its sociologically diversity, understanding it from the point of view of a relation of exploitation halts us from getting lost in the infinite segmentation of the proletariat, as some so-called radical theories do these days.

is thus necessary for a specific practical reason: the invocation of democracy is a way to constrain a struggle within the acceptable limitations of this capitalist world.

Organizing in an egalitarian way in the struggle is a practical necessity. But it is not a question of starting from an abstract principle of equality. Equality is a necessity if struggle is to stretch out over time, deepen and extend itself since it is indispensable that ordinary social frameworks be broken. To overcome these frameworks is to struggle without representatives, without spokespersons, without a discourse calibrated for the media or for “public opinion.” No advancement in the struggle can be made by way of the mechanisms which serve to establish the domination of the capitalist class: elections, the media, polls, etc. It is necessary to reach the conclusion of this calling into question and admit that the struggle organizes itself in an egalitarian way, but not in a “democratic” way.

Though there is no plan or model to actively negate the categories of Capital, there are, on the other hand, pitfalls to avoid. It is in principle with this that the arm of critical theory can serve. The critique of democracy only serves to critique the presuppositions that the world of Capital imposes us. There exist many ways of imagining an egalitarian and non-democratic form of organization that would allow the struggle against Capital to develop. Above all the objective is to demonstrate that the acceptance of the dictums of democratic ideology reduces social movements to powerlessness and passivity.

In a certain number of cases, the egalitarian organization of the struggle, outside of syndicalist frameworks and categories imposed by Capital, could appear to be rather close to what is known as “direct democracy.” Indeed, it is not out of the question that within the framework of a general assembly that we may vote on some given point, if unanimity appears to be difficult to reach. It is also not out of the question that we may take turns speaking when it becomes difficult to do so. The sole distinction here with democratic ideology is that this must be clearly understood as possible, per the demand of the circumstances, to either vote on something or take turns speaking.

But there are certain places where “direct democracy” and the egalitarian organization of the struggle will quite visibly differ. Let us take this example: under democratic ideology, the question of who will participate in an assembly is entirely determined by the status of the participant, irrespective of their [partisan] position. Within the framework of a student movement, for example, we have seen general assemblies where only students of the university where the assembly was held allowed to participate, excluding students from other universities and further excluding those who were not students at all. On the other hand, even the students of the said university who were against the movement were allowed to participate in the deliberations of the assembly.⁹

In other cases, like the one where an assembly met up in a public place, within democratic ideology it would be certainly be out of the question to restrict access: but then everyone, as a “citizen” and in the name of “freedom of speech,” can come and be a part of the assembly even if their [partisan] position is completely at odds with the struggle going on.

Inversely, equality among participants of the struggle obviously supposes that this equality only concerns those involved. Those who are openly opposed to the struggle have no reason to participate in the assemblies and be a part of the decisions made by the commune. Further, we can go so far as to interrogate the content of the discourse which can be indicative of those who declare themselves part of the struggle. Some types of discourse, because they traffic as sub-

⁹ For example, at Paris III University during the movement against the CPE in 2006.

missive ideology, are not really compatible with real engagement. Among these are obviously reactionary positions close to the Far-Right, which within these confused times, believe themselves to be able to consider themselves rebellious, when they are in fact nothing other than a call to servility. To tolerate these types of interventions in the name of democratic principles is to beforehand condemn oneself.

The assemblies held within the framework of Nuit Debout did not all systematically fall into this pitfall and understood when it was necessary to expel those who had no business there. We could thus not say Alain Finkielkraut was wrong when he denounced the lack of “democracy” at Place de République [Paris]. Neither him, nor his rancid thought has any place in any struggle and no “democratic” principle should ever impede this simple truth from being practically exercised. Everything that brings a struggle to a halt, everything which restores the predefined frameworks of Capital, everything which contributes to the renewal of ordinary social relations should be fought in the same way.

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Léon de Mattis
On Direct Democracy
2017

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[Originally published on the blog of Léon de Mattis, April 26th, 2017 in French. What follows is a translation into English by *ediciones inéditos* which has been reviewed by de Mattis himself.

We found it has much that could illuminate the way forward as we have seen movements which center calls for *Democracy* come and go without calling into question this very way of organizing the struggle for total liberation.] Following an error by the editor, the text entitled

Direct Democracy in the book *Misery of politics*, which appeared this month in éditions Divergences, was not the correct version. The version presented on this blog replaces the version which can be found on pages 59 through 85 of the book.

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