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Democracy, Radical Democracy, and Anarchism—A Discussion

Review of Markus Lundstrom, *Anarchist Critique
of Radical Democracy*

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sixteenth-century Reformation to the modern uprisings of industrial workers and peasants, oppressed peoples have created their own popular forms of community association—potentially, the popular infrastructure of a new society—to replace the repressive states that ruled over them....During the course of the revolutions, these associations took the institutional form of local assemblies, much like town meetings, or representative councils of mandated recallable deputies [based in]...committee networks and assemblies...” (Bookchin 1996; 4-5)

Reviewing the rebellions of France (1968), Chile (1972-3), Portugal (1974-5), Iran (1979), and Poland (1980-1), Colin Barker concludes, “*The democratic workplace strike committee has provided the basic element in every significant working class revolutionary movement of the 20th century...The development of factory committees and inter-enterprise councils conditions the parallel development of all manner of other popular bodies: tenants’ committees, street committees, student organizations, peasant unions, soldiers’ committees, and so on.*” (2002; 228, 230)

While limited, Lundstrom’s short book provides a useful basis for beginning to discuss the relationship between anarchism, democracy, and radical democracy. But from my anarchist-socialist perspective, **it is not enough for democracy to be radical; it must be revolutionary.** In the course of uprisings, riots, rebellions, and revolutions working people, the oppressed and exploited, have created radical democratic structures—and will create them in the future. Only through mass struggle and rebellion can, in Bookchin’s terms, “*the popular infrastructure of an new society*” be created and solidified. This is, in practice, the revolutionary anarchist view of revolutionary democracy.

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While it is conventional to regard “democracy” as supremely good, there is a great deal of unclarity over what it actually means, in theory and in practice. This little book by Markus Lundstrom addresses that topic. It begins with a discussion of “radical democracy.” It ends with a review of “democracy” from the viewpoint of various anarchists. In between it applies radical democratic theory to a 2013 rebellion (“riot”) in a multi-national town in Sweden.

I will call the existing state form in the U.S. and Europe “bourgeois democracy.” (It is also called “representative democracy,” “liberal democracy,” “parliamentary democracy,” and so on.) It functions together with a capitalist, market-based, and completely undemocratic, economy. (The ideological rationalization of the capitalist economy is not a claim to “democracy” but to “freedom.”) Anarchists are in revolutionary opposition to capitalism and to all versions of its state, including bourgeois democracy. The question is what should be raised as an alternative.

Radical Democracy

“Radical democracy” is used by some reformists to mean “extending democracy” in bourgeois democracy. “Democratic socialists” (reformist state socialists) wish to create a more representative and democratic form of the existing semi-democratic state. And they wish to expand “democracy” economically by using this improved state. They suggest nationalizing some industries, regulating others better, promoting worker representation on corporate boards, promoting cooperatives, etc. Lundstrom quotes Chantal Mouffe advocating “*a profound transformation, not a desertion, of existing institutions.*” (80) Whatever the value of such reforms (and whatever the likelihood of achieving them), such a program does not break radically with bourgeois democracy.

Others use “radical democracy” to indicate a vision of an alternate society. This includes workplace councils in socialized industries, popular assemblies in neighborhoods, and self-managed voluntary associations. Everyone participates. Decisions are made through face-to-face direct democracy. Councils and assemblies are associated through networks and federations. It is claimed that modern technology has the potentiality to fit such a council system. In the opinion of myself and others, this conception of radical democracy is entirely consistent with the mainstream of anarchist tradition—and with a view of anarchism as being extreme democracy without a state.

However, Lundstrom bases his conception of radical democracy on his interpretation of Jacques Ranciere (2014). “*Radical democratic theory typically acknowledges the contentious, conflictual nature of democracy...Democratic life, people’s political activity outside the state arena, is recurrently targeted by the democratic state: the police-accompanied decision-makers of municipalities or nation-states... [This is] democratic conflict—the antagonism between governors and governed...*” (Lundstrom 2018; 14) “Democratic life” is the striving of people to mobilize and organize themselves to satisfy their needs and desires—to live their lives as they want. But such self-activity clashes with the “democratic state.” Really a form of “oligarchic government,” this state uses representative democratic forms to co-opt and/or repress the population into passivity and acceptance of its rule.

Lundstrom’s and Ranciere’s approach can be a useful way of looking at “democratic” conflicts. I would describe it as “democracy-from-below” versus “democracy-from-above.” It does not necessarily contradict the vision of councilist direct democracy. That could be postulated as a possible outcome if “democratic life” eventually wins out over the “democratic state.”

However, as an analysis it has a weakness. Although well aware of economic influences on the governing democratic

Revolutionary Democracy

Lundstrom does not discuss how anarchism/direct democracy might be achieved. In his summary of the “Husby riots” in Sweden, he does not mention the conclusions participants drew as to future struggles, nor does he make any suggestions. He makes comments which seem to support a non-revolutionary, gradualist, and reformist approach (which would be consistent with individualist anarchism). In this view, held by many anarchists, such as David Graeber and Colin Ward, alternate institutions should be gradually constructed to replace capitalism and its state, with a minimum of actual confrontation with the ruling class. This ignores the ruling class’ powers of repression and co-optation.

In this view, there may never be a final achievement of anarchy—it is a never-ending effort. “*Abolition of government is a permanent struggle, a continuous impeding of authority growing anew.*” (75) He refers to the views of Gustav Landauer and Richard Day that “*the state—and capitalism—[are] not primarily...structures but...sets of relations.*” (74) That is, the state is not a structure to be overthrown but relationships to be gradually changed. As if social structures were anything but repeating patterns of social relationships! This view denies the existence of a minority with an interest in maintaining these oppressive “sets of relations,” a minority which must be confronted and replaced. He refers favorably to the anarcho-pacifism of Bart de Ligt and Leo Tolstoy, which implies that the police and military forces of the state do not have to be overcome. He misrepresents Errico Malatesta as a reformist, when actually Malatesta was a revolutionary who believed that “gradualism” would be appropriate only after a revolution, not before.

Over centuries, radically democratic forms have repeatedly emerged during popular revolutions. Murray Bookchin summarizes, “*From the largely medieval peasant wars of the*

Lundstrom has a positive coverage of the opposition to democracy of many anarchists. “*Anarchist thought also deliberately concedes to accusations of being anti-democratic.*” This is rooted, he writes, in “*an individualist critique of majority rule.*” (81) He seems to agree with this view, at least in part.

He even adds some extraneous arguments. Basing himself on animal liberation theory (which he confuses with anarcho-primitivism), he claims that human oppression and abuse of non-human animals forecloses democracy. I do not see why this would be the case. Surely better relations between humans and the rest of nature is consistent with thorough-going human democracy. Similarly, he raises the issue of the *Platform* of Makhno and Arshinov, which called for the self-organization of revolutionary class-struggle socialist-anarchists. I am for this and he is against it, but I do not see its connection to whether there should be radical democracy for society.

But then Lundstrom expresses agreement with anarchists who hold to radical democracy. It is not entirely clear (to me, anyway) why he comes to hold this view. “*By recognizing the pluralist and participatory dimensions of democracy...anarchism clearly aligns with open-ended explorations into radical democracy...Anarchist thought also produces an understanding of democracy as a step, however tiny, toward anarchy.*” (81) This last phrase implies that some hold anarchy as an ideal of a totally free, uncoerced, society, which cannot be immediately (if ever) completely achieved. Therefore radical democracy is supported as moving in the direction of this ideal goal, whether or not it ever reaches it. In practice this view is essentially the same as that which holds that **radical democracy is anarchy**, but that it must continually increase its libertarian and self-governing aspects. The aim is to make it impossible for anyone to dominate and exploit the rest of society—a goal which Lundstrom calls “*the impossible argument.*” In any case, I am glad that we finally agree.

state, neither Lundstrom nor Ranciere appear to accept a class analysis of the state. A version of a class analysis of the state was developed by Marx, but anarchists also have their version. Peter Kropotkin wrote, “*The State is an institution which was developed for the very purpose of establishing monopolies in favor of the slave and serf owners, the landed proprietors,...the merchant guilds and the moneylenders,...the ‘noble men,’ and finally, in the nineteenth century, the industrial capitalists....The State organization [has] been the force to which the minorities resorted for establishing and organizing their power over the masses....*” (2014; 187-9)

To be clear: a class theory of the state does not deny that, as an institution, the state, with its personnel, has its own interests. It does not deny that there are other pressures than those of the capitalists which influence state policies. It does not imply that the state simply takes direct orders from businesspeople. A class theory of the state says that, overall, the state serves the interests of the capitalist class and the capitalist system—essentially the drive to accumulate capital by exploiting the working class. The capitalist class needs the surplus value squeezed out of the workers. Without that extra amount of wealth, the capitalist class cannot survive, nor can its institutions, including the state.

The conflict is not only “between governors and governed,” in Lundstrom’s terms, but it is also between exploiters and exploited. Therefore it is not enough to attack society’s political decision-making methods. It is also necessary to end the wage system, the market, and private property in production. It is necessary to expropriate the capitalists and abolish capitalism, along with all supporting forms of oppression (racism, patriarchy, imperialism, etc.), as well as the state. To anarchists (unlike Marxists), the implication is that the state (neither the existing one nor a new one) cannot be used for such fundamental change. The implication is that a new society must be prefig-

ured by a movement of the working class and all oppressed—a movement which is as radically democratic as possible.

Anarchist Views of Democracy

To repeat, all revolutionary anarchists oppose even the most representative and libertarian of bourgeois democratic states. It is true that there is a difference between bourgeois democracies and fascist or Stalinist totalitarianism. It is easier to live and be political in a representative capitalist democracy. Anarchists have fought against fascism and defended the limited legal rights afforded by democratic capitalism. But they continue to be revolutionary opponents of bourgeois democracy, aiming to replace it with socialist anarchism. That is not the issue.

Among anarchists, there has been a wide range of views about democracy, as Lundstrom recognizes. *“The relation between democracy and anarchy is notably diverse and discontinuous....[There is a] variety of ideological strands that compose multifaceted understandings of democracy and anarchy.”* (2018; 28-9) There is no one, orthodox, anarchist opinion of democracy. (I do not know how an “orthodox anarchism” would be defined, and doubt that I would fit the definition.)

Lundstrom divides anarchist history into *“classical anarchism (1840–1939) and post-classical anarchism (1940–2017)”* (2018; 29) The first period, he claims, developed *“an anarchist critique of democracy,”* which was mainly negative toward democracy, while the second worked out *“an anarchist reclamation; notions of direct, participatory democracy became equivalent to, or perceived as a step toward, anarchy.”* (27)

Whether this historical distinction is true (and I think that it is very rough), there have been, and are, many anarchists who have supported direct, participatory, democracy, and many others who have rejected even the most decentralized and

people with varying opinions and interests. The resolution of conflict requires deliberation and persuasion. Reconciliation of differences is aimed for, but what is important is not a unanimous consensus but an on-going discourse, with no one left out. In direct democracy, **“majority rule” is a technical way to make decisions, not overall rule by a majority.**

Sometimes individuals are in the majority and sometimes in the minority. Those in a minority on one issue are not being oppressed. It is childish to imagine that people are coerced and oppressed if they do not always get the group decisions they want. Even in mostly private matters, a person cannot always get what she or he wants; that in itself does not mean that the individual is not free. The only adults who always get what they want, and who cannot be denied anything by others, are dictators—who are not models of free individuals.

The radical-liberal theorist of participatory democracy, John Dewey, wrote that democratic forms *“involve a consultation and discussion which uncover social needs and troubles....Counting of heads compels prior recourse to methods of discussion, consultation, and persuasion....Majority rule, just as majority rule, is as foolish as its critics charge it with being. But it never is merely majority rule....”* *‘The means by which a majority comes to be a majority is the more important thing’: antecedent debates, modification of views to meet the opinions of minorities, the relative satisfaction given the latter by the fact that it has had a chance and that next time it may be successful in becoming a majority....It is true that all valuable...ideas begin with minorities, perhaps a minority of one. The important consideration is that opportunity be given that idea to spread and to become the possession of the multitude.”* (Dewey 1954; 206–8) For Dewey, as for anarchists, this requires decentralized communities and workplaces: *“In its deepest and richest sense, a community must always remain a matter of face-to-face intercourseDemocracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community.”* (211 & 213; see Price 2014)

The basic argument is that, while it is wrong for a minority to rule over the majority, it is also wrong for the majority to rule over a minority. Nor is there any reason to think that the majority is more likely to be right on any question than the minority. Often it is wrong. If no one has the right to rule over others, to dominate others—as anarchists believe—then it is as wrong for the majority as for the minority. Democracy through majority rule is nothing but the “tyranny of the majority.” “Anarchy” means “no rule”; by definition it is inconsistent with “democracy,” the “rule of the people (demos).” So it is argued.

As an aside, let me say that the problem with bourgeois democracy is not majority rule. Bourgeois democracy is a form of minority rule, the domination of a minority class of capitalists and their agents. The ruling minority fools the majority into supporting them. The boss class uses various mechanisms, such as distorted elections, domination of the media, and keeping the working class from hearing the views of anarchists and other radicals. If the majority has not heard the views of dissenting minorities before making up their minds, they are a fraudulent majority.

Some seek to avoid majority rule by using “consensus.” A community should always seek for as much agreement as possible. But often everyone cannot agree—there are majority and minority opinions on what to do. What then? If the minority is allowed to “block consensus,” to veto the majority’s desire, then this is minority rule. If the minority agrees to “stand aside” and not block consensus, then we are back at majority rule. A radical democratic collective may choose to use consensus, but it really does not resolve the issue.

The basic fallacy of opposition to majority rule is its treatment of the “majority” and the “minority” as fixed, stable, groupings. It is if they were talking about the African-American minority oppressed by a white majority under white supremacy. Instead, radical democracy is an encounter among

assembly-based democracy. Of U.S. anarchists in the 20th-21st centuries, advocates of libertarian-socialist democracy include Paul Goodman, Murray Bookchin, David Graeber, Kevin Carson, Cindy Milstein, and Noam Chomsky, despite other differences. (Lundstrom briefly mentions me. See Price 2009; 2016; undated) Since Lundstrom does not really explain why some anarchists support radical democracy, I will present some reasons.

Collective decisions have to be made. If not by democratic procedures, then how? Collective decision-making by free and equal people is what democracy is.

Individualist anarchists sometimes write as if making group decisions was a choice. It is not. People live in groups, in a social matrix, and interact. Social anarchists believe that we are social individuals. Our language, our personalities, our interests, and so much more are created in the productive interaction with others and with non-human nature. Our technology—no matter how decentralized and reorganized it will become—requires cooperation, locally and on an international scale.

The individualist-egotist conception (developed by classical liberalism) portrayed people as atomic, ahistorical, asocial, selfish, essentially prior to interaction with others, and naturally opposed to society. Such individuals primarily pursue private matters in competition with everyone else. In this conception, common interests are few and fragile. This is an elaboration of the capitalist world-view, in which everything and everyone is reduced to exchangeable commodities. This includes people’s ability to work (labor-power) and their capital which can hire other people to work. While recognizing certain insights of the individualist anarchist school (such as its rejection of moralism), social anarchists reject this whole line of thought.

Michael Bakunin wrote, “*Man [including women—WP] completely realizes his individual freedom as well as his personality only through the individuals who surround him, and thanks*

only to the labor and the collective power of society...To be free...means to be acknowledged and treated as such by all his fellowmen....I am truly free only when all human beings, men and women, are equally free. The freedom of other men, far from negating or limiting my freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary premise.... (Bakunin 1980; 236–7) Bakunin called this “*the materialist conception of freedom.*” (238) Bottici argues that Bakunin’s idea of freedom is not so much an aspect of individuals as a relation within a discursive community. “*According to Bakunin, because human beings are so dependent on one another, you cannot be free in isolation, but only through the web of reciprocal interdependence.*” (Bottici 2014; 184)

From the perspective of social transaction, **to counterpose democracy and individual freedom is meaningless.** Since collective decisions have to be made all the time, people’s participation in the decision-making is an essential part of their freedom.

Communes and collective townships must decide on whether to have roads, sewers, bridges, and other infrastructure, and where to put them. Shoemakers’ workshops must decide what footwear to produce, how much, and in what way. Book clubs must decide what they will read. These decisions must be made, one way or another. Dissenting individuals and small groups could decide to leave a particular town, workshop, or club. But other towns will also have to decide about infrastructure, other workshops will have to plan production, other clubs will have to decide their activities. Again I ask: if not by democratic procedures, then how?

However, there are many activities which should not be decided by the whole collectivity, that should be the concern only of individuals or small groups. It is not for the majority, nor a powerful orthodox minority, to tell people what religious views to have, what sexual practices to engage in, or what artistic tastes to cultivate. Anarchists agree with civil libertarians that neither majority nor minority rule applies to such activi-

ties. But even with this exception, there remains a great many areas of cooperative decision-making which must be carried out, one way or another.

Social anarchism does not aim at the complete lack of coordination, cooperation, group decision-making, and dispute-settling. What it aims at is **the complete abolition of the state**—along with capitalism and all other forms of oppression. What is the state? It is a bureaucratic-military socially alienated organization, composed of specialized armed forces, officials, politicians, and agents of the ruling class, who stand over and above the rest of society.

Radical democracy means that the state is replaced by the self-organization of the people. When everyone “governs,” there is no “government.” In the opinion of Brian Morris, “*Such notions as...the ‘democratic state’ are thus, for Bakunin, contradictions in terms. If the term ‘democracy’ denoted government of the people, by the people, for the people, then this would imply no state, and Bakunin could therefore happily call himself a ‘democrat.’*” (1993; 99) He quotes Bakunin, “*Where all rule...there is no state.*” (99)

Anarchist Opposition to Majority Rule

Yet many anarchists reject any concept of democracy, no matter how libertarian. (Actually such anarchists often advocate what others would call radical democracy, but call it by other names than “democracy”, such as “self-management,” “autogestion,” “self-organization,” etc.) Their major argument for rejecting even direct democracy is opposition to “majority rule.” This is rooted in an essentially individualist-egotist aspect of many people’s anarchism. Lundstrom writes, “*The individualist strand of anarchist thought...comprises...an essential component in the anarchist critique of democracy: the opposition to majority rule.*” (46) He cites Errico Malatesta and Emma Goldman.