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# Direct Democracy

Context, Society, Individuality

Yavor Tarinski

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2019

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## Prologue

by **Eve Olney**<sup>(1)</sup>

In a highly charged time of global civic precarity and activism seeking alternatives to different states of crisis, it is imperative that the words we use to communicate our ideas of equality and democracy are underpinned by actions and behaviors that clarify specific sets of shared values. Social projects and movements that are driven by “human-led values” now appear to have the additional burden of exposing more self-serving causes that are currently being offered as “alternatives” to surviving within advanced capitalism. Yavor Tarinski firmly situates the radical project of direct democracy within the critical tension of this current global, highly complex set of social conditions, with its opaque, shape-shifting power structures mediating a normalized idea of what constitutes a universal crisis. This book is not merely another critique of capitalism or neoliberalism but crucially includes a critique of alternative radical projects and historical ideologies in terms of how they respond to the “real world”. That, in turn, demands a vital examination of what kinds of agencies and value systems are driving ubiquitously used “active” terms such as equality, solidarity, autonomy and democracy. Indeed, Tarinski lists an additional objective of the book as “clearing certain misconceptions regarding direct democracy.”

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This book explicitly places itself in terms of what is at stake in the here and now. The current “real world” is a precarious space where we are made increasingly aware of our duties and responsibilities as human subjects as well as our uncomfortable positioning between the social and ecological. In what he terms a “provocation for action”, Tarinski initially calls for a collective response to the question, “Who gets to institute our societies?” What follows is a contextualized critical mapping of what pursuing such a proposition through Direct Democracy might look like. Tarinski’s framing of direct democracy is recognizably drawn from political/philosophical thinkers such as Cornelius Castoriadis and Murray Bookchin in its determination to move beyond a Marxist rhetorical focus on economic modes of production. Tarinski instead argues “for a more holistic approach to our collective efforts at radically altering the organizational basis of our society”. To refine the notion of struggle or social change to work/economic production alone excludes whole sectors of society and can only result in alternative hierarchical power structures yet again assuming the expert role of organizing the rest of society. This book asserts the need to engage in all sets of social relations and reformulate the power structures that define us not just as “workers” but as the social beings that we are and all that encompasses.

This radical concept of direct democracy involves a “self-management of society without any top-down hierarchical mechanisms”. Such a society will still operate through institutions. The difference is that it is not the government but the people themselves *re-insti-tuting* according to the specific needs of their society. Tarinski is interested in this approach to social organization because it makes the autonomy of the individual entirely dependent on the autonomy of society and vice versa. There exists a mutual duty between them and one cannot exist without the other. Everyone participates in constructing and cultivating “the political, the economic, the social and the ecological spheres” required for running

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society. Therefore, it is a social framework where the value that the individual intrinsically bestows upon herself is deeply embedded within the society she is part of. But, as this book identifies, first we must move beyond ideological “dogmas and identities” and instead focus “on the mutual benefits of contextuality”, that in turn “implies the creation of a broader citizen culture of autonomous individuals”. There is not one ideologically driven model of society but direct democracy can operate within specific socio-cultural contexts of any society. As is often argued in community development, in order to create relatable, inclusive social structures there must be a mutual interpretation of “equality” with respect to *all* participants. Additionally, there needs to be a rejection of an ideologically “expert-driven” mode of social organization. People learn collectively how to function as an autonomous community. Gradually, through praxis, people begin to “disidentify with their position in the dominant economic and political configuration”<sup>1</sup> as they continue to develop as political subjects within the contexts of the needs of their community. Of course, this will not be a fluid and unproblematic process but Tarinski argues, “What political militants and activists can do is to locate such processes, try to deepen their democratic character, and link them with similar activities taking place elsewhere.” He substantiates this reasoning with the examples of the direct democratic societies of “the Zapatistas and the democratic confederation of Rojava”. The timing of Tarinski’s book is vital in terms of the need to draw very clear distinctions regarding the sets of value systems directing our actions of contestation and how the language we use to define such acts is commensurate with those values. Here, I am echoing Marcelo Lopes de Souza’s cautionary

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<sup>1</sup> García-Lamarca, Melissa: “Creating Political Subjects: collective knowledge and action to enact housing rights in Spain”, *Community Development Journal*, Vol 52 No 3 July 2017, Oxford University Press. p. 421

argument regarding the “major gaps” between philosophical understanding of terms like “autonomy” and how such terms are understood within activism “on the ground”<sup>2</sup>. I often experience this disparity between language and values within my own work due to being part of a group attempting to introduce the first non-profit direct democratic commons in Ireland, The Living Commons<sup>3</sup>. When situating such concepts as *autonomy* and *commoning* within our actual work we are battling against the widespread neoliberalist appropriation of such terms within other existing self-serving enterprises. At a recent conference on cooperative housing it became very apparent how our “commoning” value-led interpretation of terms like “inclusive”, “equality”, “conflict resolution” and “autonomy” vastly contrasted with other projects that were represented in practice at the conference. But it is within organizing around common issues such as precarious living and housing that the seeds of more — much-needed — radical changes might be gradually embedded through ongoing engagements and discussions. As a further provocation Tarinski lists some of the vital institutions that society functions within but presents brief descriptions regarding how these might be reimaged/reinstituted through a human-led value system. As Tarinski is suggesting, an alternative social imaginary will not occur through hypothesis and ideological thinking alone but through the praxis of the “interrelationship between social activism and structural social re-organization”. It is within this nexus of organization of change that terms such as direct democracy and autonomy can become intelligible as being led “by a common human value-led *ethos*”.

In *Direct Democracy: Context, Society, Individuality*, Tarinski moves us beyond exhausted critiques of the current world or-

<sup>2</sup> Souza, M. L. De (2017) “What is ‘autonomy’ and how can we make it possible? Reflecting on concrete experiences from Latin America”, *Community Development Journal*, Vol 52 No 3 July 2017, Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.spareroomproject.ie/living-commons>

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rect democracy do exist. That it is not an utopia. What is most important is that it can be implemented in the here and now.

der and instead opens up a new practice-based discursive field where the possibilities of realizing an alternative can be legitimately explored, in reality, within our *existing* social conditions.

# Introduction

Today we are witnessing the rise of multiple crises encompassing our society, our individual experience of life, and the very nature that is keeping us alive. The question of what is to be done is of ever growing importance. Particularly as it seems the conventional solutions are no longer realizable.

If representative democracy was in crisis before, we can now claim with growing certainty that it is currently on its knees. Popular confidence in electoral politics is constantly diminishing due to its inability to respond to social needs and demands, as well as its complicity within the crises provoked by capitalism. Growing mistrust is further made evident by high abstention during elections and the rising popularity of far-right politicians calling for a return to authoritarian forms of government.

The real problem behind the collective crises we are facing today — economic, ecological, cultural etc. — is the question of power, or more precisely, the blatant imbalance of power between the ruling elites and the vast majority of the human population. In response to this, there have been eruptions of popular dissatisfaction in the last decade, such as the Indigna-

American Free Trade Agreement. They started organizing autonomous communities, based on indigenous traditions and democratic self-management<sup>18</sup>. The local assemblies of each settlement, a basic decision-making institution, send delegates to the regional councils, who decide on production, redistribution etc<sup>19</sup>. The delegates rotate regularly and hold office for short periods of time in order to prevent formal or informal hierarchies from emerging. For more than 25 years now that the Zapatistas have self-managed their communities, the standard of life has risen significantly<sup>20</sup>. Nowadays the indigenous people living there have access to things they didn't before such as healthcare, education and electricity<sup>21</sup>.

All these examples are presented within the conclusion of this argument as proof that another way of social, political and economic organizing is possible. Variations of it were and continue to be implemented in practice in different parts of the world. All of them, though different in many respects, share one thing in common: namely, the belief that the people themselves should be masters of their own destiny. Their mere replication from one place to another would be a mistake, since the forms in the above mentioned examples are suited to specific cultural, anthropological, geopolitical and other specificities. But they can serve as a source of inspiration and ideas to guide us in our efforts to establish our own institutions and practices that correspond to the specificities of our local context. And above all, they give us confidence that different forms of di-

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<sup>18</sup> Neema Pathak and Erica Taraporewala (2008): *Towards self-rule and forest conservation in Mendha-Lekha Village, Gadchiroli*. ([http://www.iccaconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/images/media/grd/mendha\\_india\\_report\\_icca\\_grassroots\\_discussions.pdf](http://www.iccaconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/images/media/grd/mendha_india_report_icca_grassroots_discussions.pdf)) p 6

<sup>19</sup> <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Panchayat-Act-helps-villagersregain-control-over-resources/articleshow/8002860.cms>

<sup>20</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebel\\_Zapatista\\_Autonomous\\_Municipalities#Function](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebel_Zapatista_Autonomous_Municipalities#Function)

<sup>21</sup> [www.elkilombo.org/the-classmates-iii-thosewho-were-not-are-notand-will-not-be-invited/](http://www.elkilombo.org/the-classmates-iii-thosewho-were-not-are-notand-will-not-be-invited/)

who are responsible for the deforestation of the region. In the course of their resistance, the locals have developed a system based on direct democracy. Nowadays, the highest decision making body of the settlement is the village assembly, consisting of at least two adults of every household (at least one man and woman)<sup>14</sup>. However, everybody can attend the assemblies, regardless of his/her age or sex. The assembly is held once a month and decisions are taken after consensus has been reached. The assembly also resolves conflicts on a local level. For large scale matters, a congress of delegates from each the 32 villages of the area is held. Around 1,500 villages across India have been taking similar steps<sup>15</sup>.

In Rojava a direct-democratic system is also being put into practice. At its core are the communes<sup>16</sup> (general assemblies), consisting of neighbourhoods with populations of around 300 people each. The communes appoint co-presidents to participate in the Canton administration<sup>17</sup>. Five or six different committees function in each commune. The communes work in two ways. First, they resolve problems quickly – for example technical and social issues. Secondly, the communes allow everyone from the society to participate directly in the decision-making. The coordination between communes is done on a couple of levels by confederal structures such as regional and city councils and cantons.

The final contemporary example I wish to present here briefly are the Zapatista communities, located in the mountains and jungles of Chiapas, Mexico. The Zapatistas revolted in 1994, when the Mexican government introduced the North

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<sup>14</sup> [www.biehlonbookchin.com/rojavas-communesand-councils/](http://www.biehlonbookchin.com/rojavas-communesand-councils/)

<sup>15</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zapatista\\_Army\\_of\\_National\\_Liberation#Ideology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zapatista_Army_of_National_Liberation#Ideology)

<sup>16</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/#Organizational\\_structure](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/#Organizational_structure)

<sup>17</sup> Singh, Supriya: *Participatory Forest Management in Mendha Lekha, India*. ([www.ceecec.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Mendha-Lekha-Using-SelfGovernance1.pdf](http://www.ceecec.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Mendha-Lekha-Using-SelfGovernance1.pdf)). p 8

dos<sup>1</sup>, Occupy<sup>2</sup>, Nuit Debout<sup>3</sup> and the Yellow Vests<sup>4</sup>, who are organizing under an exclusive democratic form and challenging the status quo in the way they are addressing political decentralization. The question of who gets to institute our societies is the central question and we must respond collectively before it's too late.

In Chapter One I attempt to sketch out some important elements of a socially transformative struggle that could be adopted, or at least taken under consideration, by activist and social movements. This is a call for a more holistic approach to our collective efforts at radically altering the organizational basis of our society. The most essential aspects of this proposal are the contextualization and democratization of the struggles for social change. In Chapters Two and Three I engage with direct democracy in a more abstract and theoretical manner, striving to demonstrate its distinctiveness from the current pseudo-democratic parliamentary regime, as well as from the capitalist paradigm. In the former, I attempt to retrieve a more authentic understanding of democracy as a power being equally distributed and exercised directly by all members of society, and implemented in ways as to remain relevant. Chapter Three directs an emphasis towards the anthropological type that will enable direct-democratic societies to function and

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<sup>1</sup> Anti-austerity movement in Spain, also referred to as the 15-M Movement that emerged in 2011. It was based on the occupation of public spaces and initiation of popular assemblies there.

<sup>2</sup> Protest movement from the USA in 2011, in Zuccotti Park, located in New York City's Wall Street financial district, against economic inequality. Thousands of people occupied the park, setting up popular assembly and a self-organized camp.

<sup>3</sup> French social movement from 2016, that arose out of protests against proposed labor reforms. It was also based on the creation of popular assemblies in public spaces.

<sup>4</sup> Grassroots political movement for economic justice that began in France in the end of 2018, expanding well into 2019. Over time it adopted a horizontal confederalist structure, with an assembly of assemblies coordinating the activities of each of the movement's cells.

expands on this notion in relation to individuality. Chapter Four is dedicated to a more specific critical mapping of how a direct democratic social order might be instituted. Various forms of grassroots participatory institutions are proposed for different fields of public life. In its essence, this chapter is not a program but a loose model based on the theoretical works of socio-political thinkers like Cornelius Castoriadis, Murray Bookchin and Hannah Arendt. Vitaly, this field of thinking is critically qualified with the practical organizing of horizontal communities from the past and present, such as the Ancient Athenian *polis* and the democratic confederalism of contemporary Northern Syria.

In the concluding chapter, I elaborate further on the lived experiences of direct democracy. Not because these are cases which must be copied or glorified, but because there is much to be learned from these democratic laboratories and their experimentation with different forms of emancipatory politics.

The objective of the accumulative chapters is a provocation for grassroots action aimed at implementing genuine social change, as well as clearing certain misconceptions regarding direct democracy. This latter point is imperative and urgent because mere reforms are insufficient to provide an alternative to the current crisis-ridden system. This is globally evident as despite socially inclusive referendums, there is still a huge rise in xenophobia and racism. The central thesis of this book therefore argues that only by getting rid of the current conditions of domination and oppression and replacing them with democratic participation and equality in all fields of social life can we hope for a more humane and ecological future.

ple<sup>10</sup>. They live on 50 small islands, part of the archipelagos Comarca Kuna Yala, located in the Pacific Ocean between Colombia and Panama. They achieved their autonomy after bloody resistance against the colonial police in 1925. Today 70,000 Kunas manage their daily affairs through complicated systems based on direct democracy, which federates 500 autonomous communities, who participate in the common congress of Kuna. This congress takes place once every six months. Each community has its own internal rules and laws and is completely autonomous from the rest; the only condition is that each community must send four delegates to the common congress in order to coordinate and make decisions that concern all in the region.

The Landless Worker's Movement<sup>11</sup> (Movimiento Sem Tierra or MST) is another contemporary example. Located in Brazil, this movement has around<sup>12</sup> 5 million members. One of its main activities is the occupation of land. The way it operates is based on a system of direct democracy. MST is a leaderless horizontal movement, based on dialogue and consensus. The main decision making bodies are the assemblies of every 10–15 families<sup>76</sup> living in a MST settlement. Each one of them appoints one man and one woman to attend regional coordinational meetings. It is important to note that every family member, as part of MST, has the right to participate in assembly.

The self-managed village Mendha is located in the Indian state of Maharashtra. Its autonomy is rooted in the resistance of the locals against the Ballarpur Paper Mills<sup>13</sup> corporation,

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<sup>10</sup> In the books *Homage to Catalonia*(1938) by George Orwell and *Social Reconstruction in Spain: Spain and the World* (1938) by Gaston Leval.

<sup>11</sup> Notes from Nowhere. (2003) *We are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism*. ([http://artactivism.members.gn.apc.org/allpdfs/107-\[essay\]Autonomy.pdf](http://artactivism.members.gn.apc.org/allpdfs/107-[essay]Autonomy.pdf)). pp 113–4.

<sup>12</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landless\\_Workers%27\\_Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landless_Workers%27_Movement)

<sup>13</sup> <http://new-compass.net/articles/revolution-rojava>

tion. These assemblies were appointing delegates<sup>6</sup> (revocable at any time) to participate in councils, forming confederations, through which they effectively coordinated production and redistribution.

A century later, in 1980, in the city of Kwanju, South Korea, the people rose up in the so-called Kwanju's people revolt<sup>7</sup>. The preconditions for this were the authoritarian government and the widespread poverty of this time compounded by the brutality of paramilitary groups towards protesters. The people of Kwanju revolted, driving the military forces out of the city. The revolt lasted only three weeks but during this short period neighbourhood assemblies emerged, giving voice to the common people. Connecting with one another, these basic institutions of the direct democracy maintained order and organized redistribution in the city. The revolt was crushed by government forces on May 27<sup>th</sup> — the same date as the fall of the Paris Commune.

Other historic examples are the practices that emerged during the Spanish Civil War in the period 1936–39. In this period the inhabitants of the anarchist-controlled areas, Aragón and Catalonia, managed to push the authorities out and an experiment in self-management began<sup>8</sup>. Workers and peasants collectivised the land and industry and set up councils through which production, distribution and all public services were coordinated. For three years this area was managed on the basis of popular direct democracy and solidarity. The success of this model has been written about by authors such as George Orwell and Gaston Leval<sup>9</sup>.

One contemporary example of a society whose organization is based on democratic participation are the Kuna peo-

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<sup>6</sup> <http://new-compass.net/articles/popular-assembliesrevolts-and-revolutions>

<sup>7</sup> Marx, Karl (1871) "The Paris Commune". *The Civil War in France*

<sup>8</sup> [www.eroeffect.com/articles/Paris%20Gwangju.pdf](http://www.eroeffect.com/articles/Paris%20Gwangju.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish\\_Civil\\_War#Social\\_revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Civil_War#Social_revolution)

## Chapter I: Initiating Social Change

*Half of politics is 'image-making', the other half is the art of making people believe the image.*

~Hannah Arendt. *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics*

Achieving significant social change through a direct democratic mode of governance requires that social movements overcome one of the main components of the revolutionary thinking of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is the idea that revolution should be the work of certain social strata, most often defined by their economic role. This is problematic in the sense that it indicates the influence capitalist economism has had over traditional radical ideologies. According to libertarian theorist Bookchin<sup>1</sup>: [...] *workers have always been more than mere proletarians. Much as they have been concerned about factory issues, workers are also parents who are concerned about the future of their children, men and women who are concerned about their dignity, autonomy, and growth as human beings, neighbours who are concerned about their community, and empathetic people who were concerned with social justice, civic rights, and freedom. Today, in addition to these very noneconomic issues, they have every reason to be concerned about ecological problems, the rights of minorities and women, their own loss of political and social power, and the*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.libcom.org/library/ghost-anarcho-syndicalismmurray-bookchin](http://www.libcom.org/library/ghost-anarcho-syndicalismmurray-bookchin)

*growth of the centralized state — problems that are not specific to a particular class and that cannot be resolved within the walls of factories.*

Democracy is framed here as a holistic political project that encompasses all fields of life, and as such it requires the transformation of society to take place in all spheres of human interaction. Thus the struggle for a democratic and sustainable future requires radical changes in the field of labour and production, but also of consumption, leisure, healthcare, treatment of nature etc. In other words, it requires transforming everyday life by subordinating the economy and all other spheres of social organization to politics (politics not as parliamentary procedures but as popular deliberation beyond hierarchical stratification).

The struggle for direct democracy is evident through various social movements like those led by students, prisoners, workers, ecologists, etc. It is imperative that it does not end with their immediate or long-term demands, but instead is cultivated through the practices and social relations that emerge in the midst of each one of these struggles. To accept the opposite outcome of temporary or isolated social reforms means to accept that the radical reorganization of our society is impossible. On the contrary, the fact that such diverse gamma of popular struggles simultaneously takes place in all fields of social life means that people are still willing to fight for their communities and themselves. Therefore, it is up to organized activist groups that intervene with such “minoritarian” movements to try to help participants reveal the real source of their problems — namely, their political disempowerment by the system — and link this commonality with other ongoing struggles that involve other fields of social life.

With that said, it is important to bear in mind that militants alone cannot initiate social change. As Castoriadis sug-

as deciding to go to war or granting citizenship to a foreigner); it elected some officials; it legislated; and it tried political crimes. As the system evolved, the last function was shifted to the courts. The second institution that played a main role in the political life of Ancient Athens was the Boule (*boulē*), a council, dealing with the administration of everyday life of the city. After the reforms made by Cleisthenes<sup>3</sup> the number of its members grew to 500, chosen by lot amongst all citizens of the *polis*.

Then, in the Middle Ages (between the ninth and the fifteenth century), people in many Italian cities threw off the authority of prince, king, or emperor<sup>4</sup>. In their place, a system of governance was created through interlocking and balanced councils. Large deliberative assemblies, comprising of hundreds of adult males, elected or chosen by lot, debated and created laws. Executive committees, often six to a dozen men elected for two to six months, put the laws into action. Short terms in office and rules against self-succession made it possible for several hundred or more adult males to participate in government within a few years. The system of balanced and diffused power ensured that no individual or family could control the city. It was a government of balanced power and mutual suspicion.

The Paris Commune is one of the most significant examples of an existing model of direct democracy. Although the popular uprising was crushed on May 27, 1871 by the French state’s army, for a couple of months the city of Paris was being managed by its citizens. The communards, through neighbourhood assemblies<sup>5</sup>, took care of the important local administra-

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boule\\_\(ancient\\_Greece\)#The\\_Reforms\\_of\\_Cleisthenes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boule_(ancient_Greece)#The_Reforms_of_Cleisthenes)

<sup>4</sup> Grendler, Paul F. “Renaissance” Europe, 1450 to 1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World. 2004.

<sup>5</sup> *Encyclopedia.com* (May 21, 2015). [www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3404900963.html](http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3404900963.html)

## Instead of Conclusion: Direct Democracy in Practice

*There are moments, and even eras, when individuals have taken a passionate interest in common affairs. They went into the streets, they demanded things, and they imposed a certain number of them.*

~Castoriadis, Cornelius. (2010) "The project of Autonomy is not Utopia." *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificance, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today.*

While some of the cases presented below have been mentioned in previous chapters, I will further examine their organizational structures so as to provide practical examples of how forms of direct democracy have actually functioned or are still functioning. Such a task is necessary since providing concrete examples is very important when proposing radical social change.

The very concept of democracy emerged in Ancient Athens<sup>1</sup> approximately 2,500 years ago. In Greek, *demos* means community, the people, while *kratos* means the power to decide and to manage. Therefore *demos-kratia* means the power of people to make decisions. The main decisions in the Athenian *polis* were made by all citizens (around 30,000) on a general assembly (*ekklésia*)<sup>2</sup>. The assembly had four main functions: it made executive pronouncements (decrees, such

<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian\\_democracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian_democracy)

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesia\\_\(ancient\\_Athens\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesia_(ancient_Athens))

gests<sup>2</sup>, "the activity of revolutionary militants has no privilege; it is one component of a historical movement that must outstrip it — to an infinite degree." The anti-democratic logic of political vanguardism has led many groups and organizations to oppose the self-organized and participatory character in many social movements from the past, either dismantling them from within or making them their enemy. Either way, much transformative potential is being lost. In every society, no matter how oppressive, processes and cracks that contain germs of direct democracy are appearing. Heteronomous systems are constantly trying to suppress such events. What political militants and activists can do is to locate such processes, try to deepen their democratic character, and link them with similar activities taking place elsewhere. As The Symbiosis Research Collective suggests<sup>3</sup>: "Ordinary people are far from perfect. But it's ordinary people, with all their differences and shortcomings, with whom we build a more perfect world. It's only through lived experience that any of us can learn that we share common ground with others. When we, as organisers, go to where people are, offer the resources they need, build bridges across racial and class differences, and make decisions together, we slowly build the foundations of a new society".

### Social transformation and contextuality

Radical social transformation goes beyond the concept of the political manifesto or party programs. This, however, does not mean that there is no place for development of revolutionary strategies, but only that the essence of such acts differs significantly from traditional vanguardist thinking. Such

<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Castoriadis Reader*. Oxford Blackwell Publishers 1997, p29.

<sup>3</sup> [www.theecologist.org/2018/jun/26/dark-municipalism-dangers-local-politics](http://www.theecologist.org/2018/jun/26/dark-municipalism-dangers-local-politics)

strategizing would mean taking into account the specific socio-historical context of each and every community. There cannot be one and the same strategy for social liberation all around the world, since such logic would not bring democratic emancipation but impose new bureaucratic forms. Societies from antiquity until our times have changed significantly. Enormous differences can be observed between communities from different parts of the world today. This means that there cannot be one single revolutionary program or approach. Each society is influenced to a certain degree by various conditions, whose composition can be viewed, more or less, as unique. This means that the conditions for the initiation of processes of self-instituting will vary from one place to another. Indicative examples are the autonomous communities of the Zapatistas and the democratic confederation of Rojava, where emancipatory germs rooted in local customs and traditions were used to encourage people to undertake the creation of direct-democratic societies. This contextual thinking is expressed clearly by Mary Dietz when she concludes<sup>4</sup> that “*we are indeed conditioned by the contexts in which we live, but we are also the creators of our political and social constructions and we can change them if we are so determined*”.

This contextual logic contradicts the traditional concept of the Revolution (with capital “R”) that must take place in a certain moment and on a global scale in order to avoid co-option. This follows the bureaucratic tradition of heteronomy, believing that a new global ideological hegemony must emerge by new revolutionary caste to homogenize (and thus supposedly to unite) humanity under its flag. The contextual approach to radical social change, on the other hand, views local struggles and social movements not necessarily as isolated cases that can improve temporarily the living conditions of the locals but as

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<sup>4</sup> Chantal Mouffe: *Dimensions of Radical Democracy* London Verso 1995, p79.

Switzerland, where professional soldiers constitute about 5% of the military and the rest are conscripts or volunteers by the age of 19 to 34 (in some cases up to 50)<sup>22</sup>.

The citizens of a certain community constitute non-permanent, territorially-based units and each council is responsible for the defence of its territory. The regional confederations integrate these local units into larger armed forces.

In case of an armed conflict, the general assemblies can create a military headquarters, whose members are elected through voting by all citizens. Here, the electoral element is necessary because leading an army requires experience, knowledge, and a level of expertise that not everyone possesses. The members of the military headquarters remain revocable at any time. This institution is then dismantled when armed conflict is resolved. If the members of the military headquarters attempt to seize the power, it is up to the communities to revoke them or resist.

This is similar to the military structure of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). It is the communal assemblies (not military ones) that elect the military leadership, with the latter remaining under the control of their communities. Therefore, as Milt Shapiro suggests, all decisions emanate directly from the indigenous communities themselves, as did the decision to proceed with the armed uprising on January 1, 1994, within which the Zapatista uprising began<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military\\_of\\_Switzerland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_of_Switzerland)

<sup>23</sup> Milt Shapiro: *The Origins of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN)* (Committee of Indigenous Solidarity – Washington DC (CIS-DC), 2000)



## Architecture and Urban Planning

As I have mentioned in the beginning, in order for direct democracy to be truly direct it has to be established in every sphere of social life, which means that it must extend out also to architecture and urban planning. Historically, according to architectural theorist Christopher Alexander, “almost everything in human history that surrounds us is invented by amateurs. A number of the most amazing places in the world ... are not designed by architects”.<sup>20</sup> In the free city-states of medieval Italy the citizens, through citizen committees, were participating in urban planning. Alexander concludes, “During his service in the Florentine Committee, Dante participates in the preparation and planning of the widening of the street San Procolo.”<sup>21</sup>

In practice, such interactive architecture can be realized through citizen committees dealing with urban and village planning in which every citizen can participate. In order for the democratic character to be maintained, each decision can be abrogated by the general assembly as a highest authority. Furthermore, the architectural practice as a social process can allow direct citizen interaction. For example, street lights can be turned on and off by citizens that are in close proximity to them, fridges for common use in the entrances to housing, etc. This can then profoundly change the citizen’s relationship with their immediate and local environment.

## Defence

With regard to the defence of a democratic society, the professionalized military forces should be replaced by the armed populace as was the case in Ancient Athens and modern

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<sup>20</sup> Christopher Alexander, *The Oregon Experiment* (Oxford University Press, 1975): 45, 46.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

potentially transformative and global in scope. As Castoriadis suggests<sup>5</sup>, there is a “positive side” to the refusals against certain policies that take place in one area or another, which not only contest capitalism, but contain the germs of another mode of making politics. When workers refuse to continue working in miserable conditions and for bare economic minimum, students resist neoliberal educational reforms, or neighbours fight against the construction of another parking lot on top of a park in their urban space, there is potential of the emergence of democratic forms amidst these collective actions of resistance. And this potential is what can connect such seemingly diverse and different struggles on a wider scale.

There undoubtedly are issues that concern humanity on a global scale, like climate change, but their immense character should not lead us to bewilderment (and thus to inaction). While they must be answered globally, the development of such answers cannot but begin on a local level, with collaborative networking between different localities around the world. In direct democracy decisions are being developed and taken at the bottom of society — in cities, towns, neighbourhoods and villages — and are gradually being moved to heterogeneous confederal levels, where they can be implemented on a wider scale<sup>6</sup>. This is the exact opposite of the current ruling model, in which the elite few at the top of the social hierarchy (whose decisions affect huge areas and even the whole planet) are directed at those “below”, who are least responsible for the current crises due to their political powerlessness. Many are sceptical that such direct democratic decision-making is even possible. This is due to the current imaginary of political representation, an oxymoron, in terms of the larger the scale the bigger the need of organizational centralization.

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<sup>5</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Castoriadis Reader*. Oxford Blackwell Publishers 1997, p30.

<sup>6</sup> Later on I will dwell into the forms such confederal structure can obtain.

The very imaginary existence of another, confederal form of decentralized politics in fact makes the project of democracy possible.

## Education as *paideia*

Education has a crucial role in widening the scope of possibilities for radical social transformation based on democratic self-institution. Education here should not be understood in terms of the current educational system that only spans through the early years of individuals and aims at preparing them to serve a certain type of society. Instead, it is useful to relate to the Ancient Greek concept of *paideia*, where an individual's learning is understood as a never-ending process throughout the life of a person and is directly related to politics in correlation with a constant philosophical interrogation. This concept is demonstrated clearly by the famous saying "I shall gladly grow old, learning new things", expressed by the Ancient Athenian lawmaker Solon<sup>7</sup>. This quotation upholds a similar educational character to the aforementioned social movements, local and transnational struggles, and the democratic structures and practices that emerge amidst them.

In Ancient Athens education was structured and organised very differently from today. In the fifth and the fourth centuries B.C. the Athenians created a political project of direct democracy that was new for their time. This indicated a move beyond social organizing based on kinship and tribal ties towards a democratic system in which all citizens had the right to participate as equals in the self-instituting of their city, without formal hierarchies between them. The concept of *paideia* was of crucial importance for the Athenians within this social system. Education began in the *oikos* (the household) and was de-

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<sup>7</sup> Plato, Laches, in *The dialogues of Plato*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, New York: Random House, 1937, Vol. 1, p64.

## Healthcare

In a direct-democratic society the people who work in the healthcare institutions will organize how they function within a horizontal manner. The main principles should be self-management and solidarity. The main decision-making bodies suitable for the above mentioned principles can look like *faculty assemblies* and the *common assembly* of the institution. For example, doctors will organize the specific processes typical for their type of work in one assembly, nurses in another, and so on. The matters that concern the conditions and functioning of the institution as a whole will be dealt within a common assembly where everyone that works within it in one way or another (doctors, nurses, sanitarians, janitors, etc.) will have the right to participate.

The opinions of outside people participating in one way or another in the health care system (patients for example) must not be neglected in a direct-democratic society. The medical personnel and the health care strategy can be appointed by health committees<sup>19</sup>, functioning as working groups of the council. The resources needed for sustaining and developing the health care institutions will be provided by the very communities that are using their services. In practice it can look something like this: The common assembly of one medical institution prepares a report detailing the resources needed for its proper functioning and presents it to the general assembly of the community that is using its services. In this way, public services are becoming truly public and not statist or corporate, where the decisions are coming from "above".

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<sup>19</sup> As the ones, created by the Zapatistas: [http://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/resources/csdh\\_media/autonomy\\_mexico\\_2007\\_en.pdf](http://www.who.int/social_determinants/resources/csdh_media/autonomy_mexico_2007_en.pdf)

objectively and giving voice to all points of view. In fact, contemporary mainstream media primarily represents the opinion of a small group of political and economically privileged elites.

In a direct-democratic society the media will have to allow the people to express their opinions as a society, as well as autonomous individuals.

On an individual basis this means that every person can be publishing, alone or in collaboration with a group of associates, newspapers, brochures, radio and TV shows, etc. Freedom of speech is important for one political society since, in the words of Arendt, “*speech is what makes man a political being*”. The internet can contribute greatly to this. It allows millions of people all over the planet to express their thoughts, opinions and ideas publicly through blogs and websites that can be created freely, without bureaucratic intermediates. That is why the internet will be an indispensable tool for self-expression in a truly democratic society.

Within the social sphere this means that social media is controlled and managed by the communities it is serving. In practice, this can be realized through the general assembly, which can appoint a team of editors and technicians whose role is to create and manage radio stations and TV channels, newspapers, etc. As with all other programs each member of this team can be revoked at any moment by the general assembly. One of the tasks of media will also involve live streaming the sessions of the general assembly and the council. Another undertaking will be the promulgation of problems and matters of public interest. This can be realized through gathering a certain amount of signatures (predetermined by the general assembly) in order for new programs to be promulgated by social media.

veloped in the schools and the academies but did not end there. Rather it extended to all spheres of social life until the end of one’s life. A special field of *paideia* was known as the public assembly (*ekkliseia*), in which citizens deepened their rhetorical skills and general knowledge within the heated debates that informed political decision-making.

This understanding of education correlates closely with the above critical framing of the importance of contextuality within social transformation. As *paideia* is a holistic process that encompasses all spheres of social life with an emphasis on politics, it is thus also contextual in character, encouraging creativity and diversity. These are the two values that are of crucial importance for a truly democratic emancipatory project. This stands in stark contrast with the contemporary educational systems based on national statecraft, that strive at homogenizing large populations, neglecting their cultural, social and other idiosyncrasies. The aim of the latter is the strengthening of the paradigm of the Nation-State and capitalism, while the former encourages social and individual autonomy.

## On revolutionary praxis and organizing

Perhaps then it is time that modern radical organizations striving for social emancipation adopt new ways of thinking and acting. There are at least three strategic forms of organizing that are arguably more adequate to current reality: a) mapping and strengthening social counter-powers; b) adopting a de-ideologised narrative; c) addressing the difficult question of managing power in a non-hierarchical manner.

**a) Mapping and strengthening social counter-powers:** A modern radical organization, whilst continuing to resist unjust policies, would also need to place an emphasis on creating and locating autonomously-led structures that emerge

within society and nurturing their direct-democratic character, solidarity and creativity. Furthermore, it could connect these to other popular initiatives (like communal solidarity groups, social movements, collectives etc.) to prevent them from being crushed in a wider environment of harsh social cannibalism. This kind of tactical practice significantly broadens the field of solidarity while simultaneously building coherent counter-powers. With the establishment of such networks of communally managed structures, a growing number of human needs could be addressed and met. Additionally, their radical democratic character and solidarity-based logic would be safeguarded by the support of a well-organized political movement.

Progressively, this interrelationship between social activism and structural social re-organization might radically transform the work time/practices of the participants, blurring the borders between work and political participation. This is a reference to the practical models of work practices that exist in projects like worker owned cooperatives or self-organized communal centres, where work and political activism are intersected by a common human value-led ethos.

This stands in stark contrast with the structures created and managed by current ideologically charged traditional organizations, who view society as unenlightened and themselves as “would-be” teachers, thus reproducing the existing hierarchical imbalance between the “expert” and the passive “non-expert”.

**b) Adopting a de-ideologised narrative:** Due to their ideological character, traditional radical organizations tend to adopt their own narratives which are incompatible and often even quite hostile towards the rest of society. As I have argued elsewhere<sup>8</sup>, this results in the establishment of a non-contextual way of thinking and acting. This didactic manner of operating prevents or at least obstructs radical

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<sup>8</sup> [www.respublica.gr/2015/08/column/beyond-ideology/](http://www.respublica.gr/2015/08/column/beyond-ideology/)

circumstances the councils of both settlements appoint a common energy committee and each of them can revoke the members it has appointed.

As Andrew Flood suggested in 1995, “*In a society where we democratically control production we will decide not to pollute, or to limit pollution to a level that can be absorbed*”.<sup>17</sup> We can assume that nobody will be willing to dump dangerous and toxic waste on the ground they live on. Even more so, the direct management of the energy sources requires decentralization, which demands small-scale energy sources capable of satisfying the needs of the community, such as renewable sources. This automatically excludes large-scale projects like nuclear power plants and also massive solar and wind fields, which although renewable stem from the same centralized and non-ecological<sup>18</sup> basis.

## Media

The role of the media in society should never be underestimated. It has the strength to shape public opinion and to direct, albeit in a subconscious way, the behaviour of people. This is clearly expressed in contemporary society where media moguls cast a huge influence on the political processes and political parties are highly dependable on their help in getting into power.

Nowadays, there are two main types of media — statist and private. Both, however, refract the information they transmit through the prism of the state machinery or their own business interests. Public opinion can hardly reach the surface of mainstream media, despite claims that the media are transmitting

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without external assistance or interference with the rest of the world.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Flood in *Anarchism and the Environmental movement* (1995) available online at: [http://struggle.ws/talks/envir\\_anarchism.html](http://struggle.ws/talks/envir_anarchism.html)

<sup>18</sup> [www.ucsusa.org/clean\\_energy/our-energychoices/renewable-energy/environmental-impacts-of.html#.VUTv5vmqkko](http://www.ucsusa.org/clean_energy/our-energychoices/renewable-energy/environmental-impacts-of.html#.VUTv5vmqkko)

should be provided by the communities that are being served by them. Each school and university draws a report on its current state and its needs through common assembly, in which the participants include all those involved in some way with its functioning (i.e. janitors, gardeners, teachers, students, parents, technicians etc.). This report is presented to the general assembly or to the confederal council depending on the size of the region being served by the educational institution. Through these practices and institutions, education becomes a truly democratic affair, a product of those directly involved in it, with constant feedback and input from the community.

## Energy

The management of energy is obviously of key importance for society. Almost all spheres and processes of our lives are dependent on it and its regulation plays a prominent role within the sustainability of a political system. A truly democratic society requires two mutually complementary principles — decentralization and environmentalism — to be embedded within any social governance of energy.

All settlements should strive towards energy autarky<sup>16</sup> in order for the people to be able to manage their energy sources directly. For example, each local council can appoint an energy committee that can sustain and manage the energy sources of the community. These types of committees can include as equal participants those who are energy experts, (appointed through voting) and other citizens/volunteers (appointed through sortition). Each decision made by the energy committee can be repealed by the general assembly of the settlement and each of its members revoked.

In the case that energy autarky is not possible for one settlement, it can share the energy sources of another one. In such

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<sup>16</sup> Condition in which an entity can survive or continue its activities

political organizations' interactions with the general public and can lead to the organisation's sectarianization. To avoid this, a new approach is needed that moves beyond ideology (i.e. beyond dogmas and identities), and instead focuses on the mutual benefits of contextuality. This implies the creation of a broader citizen culture of autonomous individuals who are, above all else, speakers of words and doers of deeds. Such a broad concept, as proposed by Mary Dietz<sup>9</sup>, is based upon the virtue of mutual respect and the principle of "positive liberty" of self-governance (and not simply the "negative liberty" of non-interference). The attitude of contextuality within this approach will keep the anti-authoritarian spirit while allowing for interaction with large sections of the society and the implementation in practice of democratic ideas within different contexts.

This could be useful in a two ways. On the one hand, it would allow radical organizations to interact with wider sections of society. On the other, it would enable a better understanding of the modern world, as traditional ideologies were based on simplistic "subject-object" determinations (proletariat-communism or bourgeois-capitalism), which don't correspond to the complexities of our time. As Kristin Ross suggests<sup>10</sup>: "*a strategic position based on non-alignment, one that implies a slavish commitment to neither anarchism nor Marxism, and an association over sectarianism, may well be worth reconsidering today, and there are many indications that this has indeed become the case*".

**c) Addressing the difficult question of managing power in a non-hierarchical manner:** An additional ele-

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Dietz, *Context is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship*. in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*. Edited by Chantall Mouffe. Verso Books. 1992. p75.

<sup>10</sup> Kristin Ross: *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. London, Verso Books 2016, p111.

ment that has to be taken into consideration by contemporary radical organizations is the role of power.

Unlike traditional radical movements, that tend to address this issue in oversimplified ways, revolutionary praxis today should tackle the question of power on both a theoretical and practical level. On the one hand, contemporary groups should strive for self-instituting, changing their structures and processes with institutional characteristics. For example, decision-making bodies like general assemblies should have a role within institutions, through which the group expresses its collective will in the form of practical power, and not just as a loose, semi-formal coordination device between volunteers. Simultaneously, the question of power should also be interrogated on a more theoretical level in order to critically reflect upon strategies employed in solving contemporary issues of crucial importance. This could also lead to radical organizations overcoming their ideological abstractivism in order to develop more concrete, on-going and up-to-date proposals. For example, concerns such as keeping polluting fossil fuels in the ground, require something more than voluntary consent and wishful thinking. Thus, a difficult challenge for contemporary radical organizations is to formulate proposals that will prevent individuals or groups from deliberately violating agreements reached by the majority of society. Such programs would need to be carefully initiated and managed in order not to threaten the participatory element and individual autonomy that is protected by this particular mode of social organization and prevent a gradual descent into totalitarianism.

Side-stepping the politico-historic context of our times arguably renders the popular efforts at radical social transformation ineffectual. Traditional ideologies have managed to sterilize many political activists and organizations, driving them towards political inaction through ideological purity. Neither will the bureaucratic imaginary of the revolutionary vanguard take us far. Many on the Left are still not ready to leave this

*learn if something is different. That, from my point of view is at the core of what we call democratic education.”<sup>13</sup>*

This paradigm shift is reflected by the very structure of the educational institutions of direct democracy. Under democratic conditions education should be truly autonomous, free from outside pressure. Each university and school, should draw its own curriculum and teaching methods, independently from other educational institutions. This can be done through a general assembly<sup>14</sup> in which teachers and students collectively discuss and determine the direction and content of the educational process. These type of assemblies by themselves also possess an educational character, as expressed by A.S. Neill, because they teach the students critical thinking, citizenship, responsibility and creativity. For Neill, self-governance is “the most valuable asset in education and life” and the general assembly is “more important than all the textbooks in the world”.<sup>15</sup> In this way education becomes a constant process instigated from the bottom up, includes those who are directly participating in it and is not a tool for indoctrination, serving the state or business needs.

The fact that each educational institution is autonomously cultivating its own educational processes and program must not be an obstacle to networking and the exchange of practices and experience between different schools and universities. Such sets of relations are of key importance for the enrichment and development of educational institutions.

The resources necessary for the optimal functioning of the educational institutions, as with other public institutions,

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/future-of-education-georgheshaddad-and-yaacov-hechtat-world-forum-for-d/>

<sup>14</sup> See for example the institution of “General meeting”, adopted by the libertarian school Summerhill in England: <http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/downloads/Policy-statementcommunity-life-2014.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Bailey 2013, p. 131.

of the area to hold office for short periods of time (for example one year) and revocability in case of suspicion of corruption, etc.

The objective of these citizen juries is to review decisions taken by the general assemblies and the councils. In the instance of detecting violations, they will have the right to demand that the contested decision be re-debated and re-voted by the decision-making bodies that made them in first place. If the proposal passes for the second time it will be up to the juries to raise awareness amongst the members of the community and petition for its further revision.

With regard to physical punishment and the prison system, which places offenders in isolation from the world, there is no place for such thing in a self-managed society, where the highest value is the communication and solidarity between the people. Direct democratic justice aims at rehabilitation and the re-education of offenders and their reintegration in the social environment. Imprisonment can be done only in cases where a given individual poses an immediate threat to others and in these cases there is not a need of prisons but of another type of institution that incorporates more pedagogical and medical characteristics.

## Education

Unlike the dominant educational paradigm of today, democratic education does not encourage competition and uniformity but diversity and creativity. Israeli educator Yaacov Hecht suggests that *“the old traditional hierarchy is always trying to find out who is the best among us... and I think this is a bad idea. It is not the best, the greatest, but different that is beautiful. I don't want to see if someone is better or not better than me: I want to*

logic behind, constantly trying (mostly in vain) to reinvent the political leadership through new electoral projects that are being wrapped in democratic terminology but actually contain the germs of statecraft. We should focus instead on nurturing those traits of direct democracy and social emancipation that sporadically emerge from within our society. In recognizing and engaging with such social programs we can remind ourselves that, despite the globalization and totalitarian control of the current system, all is not lost. As Raoul Vaneigem states, *“From now on, no revolution will be worthy of the name if it does not involve, at the very least, the radical elimination of all hierarchy.”*<sup>11</sup> Hierarchy, within the context of this argument, manifests as the dominant ideologies that are currently excluding the will and needs of society at large.

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<sup>11</sup> Raoul Vaneigem: *The Revolution of Everyday Life: Impossible Communication or Power as Universal Mediation*. The Anarchist Library, 2009, p38.

## Chapter II: Democratic Society

*[T]he recovery of an authentic politics and citizenship is not only a precondition for a free society. It is also a precondition for our survival as a species.*

~Murray Bookchin. *Urbanization without Cities*  
Montreal, Black Rose Books, 1992, p 288

The establishment of a truly democratic society requires the abolition of any kind of separated/extra-social authority — bureaucrats, monarchs, gods, historical determinism etc. Instead, power must be spread equally among all people, thus allowing for genuine self-institution to take place. The meaning of democracy has been repeatedly misinterpreted, often in hierarchical self-serving ways that are upheld by traditional concepts and ideological paralysis. Authoritarian tendencies, both on the Right and on the Left, have been more than willing to equate it with negative understandings of freedom (an oxymoron in itself) in which political participation is appropriated and replaced with an acute requirement for personal growth and security. In this way democracy is being stripped from its participatory essence, becoming instead the cradle of the caricatured “citizen” — privatized individual, disconnected from the rest of society and interested only in sustaining his/her material wealth and lifestyle.

But there are many that strive to reinvent democracy in its authentic, most participatory form, in order to offer a revolutionary alternative to heteronomy (in all its capitalist and

and bureaucratic planning. The only thing these social structures do within this context is determine the general direction of principles and values according to which the economy should develop. They can also practice their right to intervene if any of its units and structures grossly violate the collectively constructed framing of principles.

### Justice

Direct democracy requires autonomy<sup>10</sup>, thus each community, through its decision-making bodies creates its rules and constitution. On a confederal level, communities are determining the so-called human rights, to be respected by all.

The adherence to these juridical frames is being observed by direct-democratic institutions. As proposed<sup>11</sup> by Castoriadis, “each council might act as a ‘lower court’ in relation to ‘offences’ committed in its area”, as well as each individual having the right to raise an objection to the confederal council (or other institution on this level) within his/her community’s jurisdiction.

The protection of minority rights (ethical, ideological, etc.) can be secured by *citizen juries*, as proposed<sup>12</sup> by Stephen R. Shalom in his political model, called ParPolity. These juridical bodies are established in each community and function in parallel with the general assemblies and the councils. In order for the democratic character of this institution to be ensured, there is a need to embed in it certain democratic mechanisms such as the appointment of members by sortition amongst all citizens

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<sup>10</sup> Most, if not all, examples for functioning direct democracy include local structures like the polity or the canton, which allow the communities, without outside interference, to determine their local organizational conditions, legislation, etc.

<sup>11</sup> [www.marxists.org/archive/castoriadis/1972/workers-councils.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/castoriadis/1972/workers-councils.htm)

<sup>12</sup> <https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/parpolity-politicalvision-for-a-good-society-by-stephen1-shalom/>



This logic corresponds to the participatory character of direct democracy since people have direct control over the efforts invested and sacrifice made at their workplaces and not over their physical advantages, better tools or other favourable conditions.

As aforementioned, the economy of a direct-democratic society consists of local economic units, such as producer and consumer associations. Production is undertaken by associations, consisting of producers' cooperatives, in which the workers are also the owners. The management of such types of cooperatives is carried out by workplace assemblies in which all workers-owners can participate. This implies abolition of the corporate hierarchy, so typical of the state and private enterprises. Consumers from a given area can also connect with each other, establishing consumer associations. These structures create networks with producers' associations, with the aim of satisfying the needs of consumers without the involvement of intermediaries. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility of single individuals, outside of consumer associations, linking themselves with producer organisations to order directly from them. This freedom of choice creates *agora* in the ancient Athenian sense of the term, as a meeting space for free citizens to meet and exchange.

Of course, in a political project such as direct democracy, the concept of the economy cannot be separated from politics.<sup>9</sup> This involves general assemblies on a local level and the councils on a regional level, as supreme sources of power, creating the common frame for economic development. In other words, the role of the citizen exceeds those of the consumer and the producer, as it is much wider in scope and it involves direct grassroots deliberation. However, this framing of the economy should not be mistaken for the current idea of deterministic

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<sup>9</sup> [www.geonewsletter.org/story/solidarity-economypolitical-economy](http://www.geonewsletter.org/story/solidarity-economypolitical-economy)

statist forms). For this to fully succeed, society must get rid of the dead weight of traditional ideologies. Direct democracy might once again be linked to a collective, conscious creation of alternative social structures that give meaning to people's lives. Initiating and implementing these social structures cannot but shift the current *status quo* beyond ideological dogmas. This creates the conditions for — and simultaneously stems from — human creativity, imagination and a passionate engagement in genuine politics. Additionally, direct democracy affords the creation of authentic public space that organically links individuals to their fellow humans, thus laying the foundations of vibrant communities that can be federated within an autonomous society. As the political scientist Giovanni Sartori argues,<sup>1</sup> “*If understood to the letter, a Democracy must be a stateless society. Power belongs to the people insofar as the people exercise it themselves.*” For this reason, direct democracy is essentially antithetical to the current capitalist alienation and authoritarian statecraft that strive to fragment societies into controllable atomized units.

## On the centrality of politics

It is important to note that direct democracy is essentially a political project. As discussed earlier, the political field is where the management of public affairs takes place. It is where the institutionalization of a society takes place. Politics, or the absence of it, determines how our communities, economic relations and experiences of everyday life are shaped, as well as our treatment of the natural environment. It is within the current age of capitalist modernity that the deliberative essence of politics is degraded by its artificial markets and bureaucracies that have seized all power within the social.

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<sup>1</sup> Amadeo Bertolo: *Democracy and Beyond* in “Democracy and Nature” Vol.5, No.1, 1993.

According to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, “politics is a noble activity in which men decide the rules they will live by and the goals they will collectively pursue”<sup>2</sup>. If we closely consider his definition, we discover how tightly it relates to direct democracy and freedom. By describing it as a noble act, Aristotle underlines politics as one of the highest among human activities. He continues by presenting its inherently democratic character. For Aristotle, as for most of his fellow citizens from Ancient Athens, politics were all about people collectively deciding upon and pursuing the goals of their community. It was noble because it aimed to achieve social and individual freedom by genuine self-instituting. Politics was understood not as a science but as a democratic deliberation of which all human beings are capable. Aristotle supports this claim further by arguing that, “*the political instinct is implanted in all men by nature*”<sup>3</sup>.

In short, the political is deeply embedded within the concept of emancipation and is inherently intertwined with direct democracy. As Hannah Arendt suggests<sup>4</sup>, “*the cause of freedom versus tyranny has determined the very existence of politics*”.

## Ecology

One characteristic trait of direct democracy is its tendency towards the reconciliation of humanity with nature. Capitalism and statecraft view the environment as separate from society and thus as a subject that should be conquered and dominated. This implication is what Castoriadis calls “*pseudo-mastery*”, a feeling of superiority that justifies the exploitation of nature by mankind. The term “pseudo” indi-

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<sup>2</sup> Sam Atkinson, Rebecca Warren & Kate Johnsen: *The Politics Book: Big Ideas Simply Explained*, New York DK 2013 Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics vol. 2 (notes)* Oxford, Clarendon Press 1885, Book I

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution* London. Penguin Books 2006. p1.

direct democracy, efficiency should be measured according to how it satisfies the human needs of society.

The introduction of direct democracy in the economic sphere requires all economic decisions, regarding the functioning of the economy as a whole (production, consumption, investments, etc.), to be made not by governments and business people, but collectively by all citizens, for example, through confederations of local democratic economic units such as producer and consumer associations.

For self-management to be sustained, no institutionalized economic structure should have more power than any other. This requires the means of production and distribution to be collectively owned and directly controlled by the communities that create them and attribute them to workers’ cooperatives. This does not necessarily mean that everyone should earn the same salaries for their labour. Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, creators of the democratic economic model Parecon, argue that the remuneration should be based on the effort and sacrifice invested by the workers in the workplace: “*Remuneration according to effort and sacrifice (and in some cases need) is rather different than the usual left precept — which is remuneration according to contribution to the social product. The latter pays a large person and a small person cutting cane by the size of the piles they accumulate. The former pays a large person and a small person cutting cane by (assuming/establishing they are both working comparably hard) for the amount of time they are working. This also goes for a person who has learned how to cut better and one who doesn’t have the same competence — for the same hardship and effort even with different size piles cut, you get the same pay. Our claim is that this is equitable — pay depends only on hardship to the payee, which is what should be the case.*”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://zcomm.org/qaremun-2/>

If a confederal institution exceeds its power or is in conflict with the will of the local institutions, it will be up to these local bodies to undertake the necessary steps, starting with revoking their delegates. The confederal bodies cannot preserve themselves implementing unacceptable practices, since they don't really have any authority of their own and their delegates are revocable at any given moment. But if the communities allow their delegates to exceed their powers — nothing can be done. The people can self-manage themselves only if they want to. If an external power forces them to do so then any trace of direct democracy will be lost, since from the very beginning. It requires people's consent. "A society can be run by direct democracy only if most of the people want to decide policies themselves" (Aki Orr, 2005).

## Economy

Direct democracy in the economy aims at satisfying the needs of all people — which requires all decisions regarding economic matters to be taken democratically.<sup>6</sup> However, it does not exclude the freedom of choice. Every person has control over his/her personal matters (where to work, what to consume, etc.). In short, the aim of direct democracy in the economic sphere is not constant economic growth but the qualitative satisfaction of people's needs.

The main criteria in the direct-democratic economy is not efficiency, defined today by technocratic economists as satisfying the needs of profit margins.<sup>7</sup> In a society managed through

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<sup>6</sup> [www.inclusivedemocracy.org/fotopoulos/english/brbooks/inclusive\\_entry.htm](http://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/fotopoulos/english/brbooks/inclusive_entry.htm)

<sup>7</sup> "What comes first in capitalism is not human development but privately accumulated profits by a tiny minority of the population. When there is a conflict between profits and human development, profits take precedence" Michael A. Libowitz, from *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development* (2010).

cates the failure of such a notion as, although people can alter their natural environment, they are existentially dependent on fragile planetary conditions. Allowing the human lifestyle to consistently rupture this equilibrium, as we are now witnessing, can summon deadly consequences. For this reason, societies should act cautiously and unanimously regarding nature, which means acknowledging that democratic deliberation is morally and ethically connected to ecology. It should be noted that this is in stark difference to the notion of environmental consciousness being enforced by an eco-fascist state. An authoritarian approach to the ecological problem will merely continue to alienate society from nature. Only the participatory politics of direct democracy, simultaneously local in practice but transnational in character, can create a harmonious relationship without domination between the two. In fact, we have seen many times in recent history that it is local grassroots communities that function on a relatively democratic basis that are at the forefront of current ecological struggles.

## Information and knowledge

In short, at the core of a truly direct democratic society is the abolition of domination in all its forms and the self-institution of possibilities for equal political participation by all members of society. Complete transparency is implied in all institutions, such as in all committees, councils and assemblies. Unlike contemporary institutions, in which certain technocrats, experts and lobbyists meet behind closed doors and take decisions that affect the whole of society, the democratic self-instituting being argued here allows the direct participation of all concerned, thus opening the decision-making and law-making processes to all. It thus makes essential information available to the public, something

that goes beyond the contemporary distracting digital flow of useless advertisements, information and commercial garbage. By allowing citizens to directly participate in the creation of laws and institutions through which their society will be managed, direct democracy creates the preconditions for people to obtain holistic knowledge of the working of basic and essential social processes. This is in stark contrast to the contemporary paradigm of political expertise and technocracy.

This is in no way advocating the disappearance of specialized knowledge, but is about bringing politics back to where it once emerged from – the grassroots. There will still be much data and research for each and every person to comprehend, but the participatory processes will allow the essence of “expert knowledge” to be widely understood. When all people enter the political arena to collectively manage all spheres of social life, knowledge and information becomes, to a certain degree, de-professionalised and accessible to everyone. This is the only way for every member of a society to be able to obtain true freedom.

## Representatives and delegates

In a direct democratic society there is no place for political representation, since the former presupposes that citizens will participate directly – without intermediates – in the management of public affairs. This means that contemporary institutions that are falsely linked to democracy – such as political parties and other tools for public intermediacy – do not fit in the project discussed here. The so-called “representative democracy” reduces people to passive voters whose political participation has been narrowed to choosing who will rule over them. Castoriadis calls this type of regime “a parody of democracy”<sup>5</sup>. Even when such regimes use supposedly “partic-

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<sup>5</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis: *Political and Social Writings Vol.2*, Minneapolis,

Such an institution will deal with routine tasks and will be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the decisions taken by the *general assembly*. The councils should hold their meetings as often as necessary (for example twice a week). The regular rotation of delegates (once every two to three months or more) will prevent the emergence of a hierarchy and will allow broader participation in the council.

Each community is autonomous within a direct democracy that is asserted by such institutions as the ones described above. However, such communities cannot exist completely in isolation from the rest of the world, neither I believe is such thing even desirable. Therefore there exist different confederalist forms, such as the Zapatista’s caracoles<sup>4</sup> and the Rojava’s cantons<sup>5</sup>, that can link different communities without stripping their autonomy from them. Such institutional forms can look something like this:

3. *Confederal councils* consisting of delegates assigned by the *general assemblies* of each community. Such delegates should remain revocable at any given moment by those that have appointed them. The meetings of this type of council will be held regularly. After each meeting the delegates will report back to their *general assemblies* regarding what has been carried out. For it to be both as productive and as participatory as possible such institutions will have to meet the requirement: not to include too many members but to allow the participation of enough of them in order for the broadest possible number of points of view to be represented. This can be done by appointing, for example, one delegate per every 10–20,000 people and rotating the delegates on regular basis so as to allow broader participation and to prevent the emergence of strict political roles.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://roarmag.org/2013/08/escuelitazapatista-10-year-autonomy>

<sup>5</sup> <http://new-compass.net/articles/rojavascommunes-and-councils>

ones already described<sup>1</sup> by libertarian thinkers like Castoriadis, Arendt and Bookchin:

1. *General assembly* on the level of neighbourhood, village etc. where all members of a certain community have the right of participation. Historically, the general assembly has proven its efficiency in group sizes of close to 50,000 people. For example, in Ancient Athens the citizens who had the right to participate in the *Ekkle-sia* (general assembly) numbered 30–50,000<sup>2</sup>. In a direct-democratic system, “*the general assembly should always be the highest decision-making body*” (Reyes and Harnecker, 2013). Differences and conflicts between different parts of society should be resolved on this floor. The general assembly will have to create a frame of rules and aims for its community and not have to deal with routine questions. It can reject or accept every decision taken by other communal institutions of the same community. For its smooth functioning, the general assembly can assign working groups that can deal with certain issues and everyday questions. These type of assemblies would be held regularly — weekly, monthly, etc. In addition, a procedure should exist to call an urgent assembly if needed, initiated by a certain amount of people from the community.

2. *The Council* consists of delegates from certain locations (neighbourhoods for example). They can be chosen among the members of the community through elections or by lot (as were the magistrates in Ancient Athens), and remain revocable at any time. In a community with a population between 5,000 to 10,000 people, such councils can consist of 30–50 delegates<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Participatory political institutions are being discussed in influential works like *Worker’s Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society* (Castoriadis, 1972), *On Revolution* (Hannah Arendt, 1963) and *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy* (Murray Bookchin, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian\\_democracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian_democracy)

<sup>3</sup> [www.marxists.org/archive/castoriadis/1972/workers-councils.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/castoriadis/1972/workers-councils.htm)

ipatory” tools like referendums or plebiscite, people can still only vote for one of the options that have been predetermined. They shape neither the question nor the choices. They do not have access to all available information, since it is being concealed or twisted by capitalist media or political parties. Most often voting — either for representatives or on a certain plebiscite — is reduced to a farce or a spectacle, with backstage tricks, PR campaigns and manipulations, while the outcome is always under question since its implementation is in the hands of the ruling elites.

These weaknesses of “representative democracy” have long been pointed out by those with authoritarian tendencies, among them fascists and Stalinists. They tend to criticize the inefficiency of liberal politics and the often useless practice of voting for representatives, who are often reduced to puppets of the economic elites in capitalist regimes. Although this kind of criticism certainly holds some ground, it nonetheless stems from a place of deep cynicism as their authoritarianism abolishes the political sphere altogether, thus destroying the possibility of freedom. It is clear that we should not return to the totalitarian nightmare of the past, but nor can we hope to reform and improve the current liberal oligarchic order. As one of the founders of the radical French journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Claude Lefort, writes<sup>6</sup>: “*Democracy is not perverted by the existence of bad organizational rules. It is so on account of the very existence of the party. Democracy cannot be achieved within it because it is not itself a democratic body — that is a body representative of the social classes on whose behalf it claims to be acting*”.

While direct democracy is incompatible with political representation, it yet incorporates the appointment of delegates (chosen either by means of voting or by lot) when deciding

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University of Minneapolis Press, 1988. p98.

<sup>6</sup> *Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology*: 315–316.

who should work between the regional democratic bodies and thus help coordinate confederal activities. There is a major difference between the two notions. Political representatives are elected for a certain period, in which they have all the political power in their hands. The people that have elected them are unable to control them in any way but to threaten to not vote for them in the next elections. However, governing politicians can heavily influence elections due to their privileged position. Delegates within a direct democratic model, on the other hand, take certain positions for a short period of time and are constantly revocable by their appointers. Furthermore, their task is not to take decisions on their own, but to be the voice of the local assemblies and councils that have appointed them, on regional, continental or even global level. It is these localized decision-making bodies that determine the policies that their delegates will follow and not the other way around as is the case with representative politics.

## Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy is a characteristic trait of statecraft — in fact it is its backbone. It is an extra-social structure whose aim is to regulate social and individual life. Once established, it takes a life of its own and leads, as American writer William S. Burroughs suggests<sup>7</sup>, a parasitic existence: “*A bureau takes root anywhere in the state [...] and grows and grows, always reproducing more of its own kind, until it chokes the host if not controlled or excised. Bureaus cannot live without a host, being true parasitic organisms. [...] Bureaucracy is wrong as a cancer, a turning away from the human evolutionary direction of infinite potentials and differentiation and independent spontaneous action to the complete parasitism of a virus. [...] Bureaus die when the*

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<sup>7</sup> Alison Pullen & Carl Rhodes: *Bits of Organization*, Copenhagen, Copenhagen Business School Press 148.

## Chapter IV: What Would the Institutions of a Democratic Society Look Like?

*Opposing oppression and exploitation without proposing alternative political system leaves the ruling system intact. The system acts, the opposition reacts. Those who struggle against evils of a political system but do not offer an alternative to that system are politically impotent.*

~Aki Orr in [www.autonarchy.org.il](http://www.autonarchy.org.il)

In a direct democratic society the political, the economic, the social and the ecological spheres should be organized on the basis of self-management and non-hierarchy. Direct democracy has to be embedded in every sphere in order to remain truly direct. For example, if it's being implemented only in the so-called economic sphere, but not in any other (as many orthodox Marxists suggest), in which relations remain the same as before (exploitative and unequal), this will sooner or later reflect on the former.

### Political institutions

Suitable basic political institutions for the organisation of social life on the principles described above are similar to the

and their replacement by self-limitation and the possibility of putting the laws into question are all characteristics that, if being internalized by people, will give way to the creation of personalities that cherish freedom and responsibility.

*structure of the state collapse. They are as helpless and unfit for independent existence as a displaced tapeworm, or a virus that has killed the host.”*

Bookchin also noted the parasitic nature of bureaucracy and criticized those who believed that it could be kept in a limited/minimal form: “*The real problem is that ‘limited government’ invariably leads to unlimited government. If history is to be any guide and current experience is to be any guide, we in the United States 200 years ago started out with the notion of limited government — virtually no government interference — and we now have a massive quasi-totalitarian government. I think that people who believe in limited government would benefit greatly by studying the logic in government itself and the role of power as a corruptive mechanism in leading finally to unlimited government.*”<sup>8</sup>

Although presented as a tool for the rational organization of society, it actually most often produces chaos, with bureaucrats from different departments outsourcing their problems to other departments so as to avoid taking responsibility. The dysfunctionality of bureaucracy is masterfully depicted by Alexander Berkman in his semi-biographic account of the early years of the October Revolution *The Bolshevik Myth: Diary 1920–22*. He illustrates how being a bureaucrat becomes a privilege instead of a burden. Bureaucrats become a managerial elite, whose role elevates them above society and thus degrades any notion of politics.

Within direct democracy, on the other hand, as Jean Jacques Rousseau suggests<sup>9</sup>, “Magistracy isn’t a benefit — it’s a burdensome responsibility”. It is not that there will be no administrative mechanism that will coordinate decisions taken by the democratic institutions but that it will not hold authority.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://reason.com/archives/1979/10/01/interviewwith-murray-bookchin/>

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *The Social Contract*, Jonathan Bennett 2017. p57

Those that shall be appointed on such positions are either being chosen by lot or elected by vote (according to the required skills and experience), are constantly revocable by the main grassroots decision-making bodies, and rotated in short periods of time. All these mechanisms aim to prevent the emergence of managerial elites that hold actual political power, instead of just performing routine tasks that follow democratic decisions. As Bookchin puts it<sup>10</sup>:

*Without a democratically formulated and approved institutional framework whose members and leaders can be held accountable, clearly articulated standards of responsibility cease to exist. Indeed, it is precisely when a membership is no longer responsible to its constitutional and regulatory provisions that authoritarianism develops and eventually leads to the movement's immolation.*

## Political decentralization and confederalism

Political decentralization is the cornerstone of direct democracy. As Castoriadis points out in *On the Content of Socialism*, “To decide means to decide for oneself”<sup>11</sup>, which implies that democratic politics are situated at the grassroots of society. In other words, the basic decision-making institutions in a truly democratic system are based on local social collectivities. The municipal and neighbourhood level provides one such locality. It offers a shared cultural environment and common ground on which organic communities can be formed. On this level people can become active citizens that are familiar with the public affairs of their habitat and can responsibly and directly undertake its management.

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<sup>10</sup> Harbinger Vol. 3 No. 1 — The Communalist Project.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/castoriadis/1957/socialism-2.htm>

exemplifies this in the following manner: “*Can I say that I posit my own law when I am living, necessarily, under the law of society? Yes, if and only if I can say, reflectively and lucidly, that this law is also mine. To be able to say this, I need not approve of it; it is sufficient that I have had the effective possibility of participating actively in the formation and the implementation of the law. If I accept the idea of autonomy as such (and not only because ‘it is good for me’) — and this, obviously, no proof can force me to do, no more than any proof can force me to square my words with my deeds — then the existence of an indefinite plurality of individuals belonging to society entails immediately the idea of democracy defined as the effective possibility of equal participation of all in instituting activities as well as in explicit power.*”<sup>9</sup>

In other words, everybody in a direct-democratic setting can participate in the evolution of institutions like language, family, customs, etc.

Such radical transformation will alter social but also individual temporality. Every institution within society operates according to certain history. It projects itself into a specific past and an uncertain future, which also influences the way individuals position themselves in time. We can see how nationalist societies influence the individual psyche by altering the personal history of their subjects, awaking in them feelings of hatred, mistrust and fear. In the same way a direct democratic society will nurture creativity, curiosity and philosophy. Although arguably these were the results democracy had on the individuals that practiced it in different historic moments, there are no guarantees that this will always be the outcome. But there are surely plausible indications that this is the logical tendency of direct-democratic instituted society. The notion of *paideia* as constant social process, the absence of predetermined truths

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<sup>9</sup> <https://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12-73/in-what-sense-can-anindividual-be-autonomous/>



drives (motivations, instincts etc.) and as Castoriadis writes, it is “*unmasterable in its actuality, unmasterable by thought*”<sup>7</sup>, i.e. it is therefore impossible for a regime to entirely shape it according to its needs. Each individual’s history is accumulated through his/ her whole life and produces its reflectiveness and lucidity. These two components, according to Castoriadis<sup>8</sup>, shape human individuality.

Unlike authoritarian regimes which strive at shaping individuality and ultimately result in its creative death direct democracy aims at liberating it. Democratic relations on this level nurture critical reflection on psychical instances, as well as on the connection between past and present, which makes the individual what it is. Thus individuals can influence their development and desires. In this way the individual is not just a passive product of his/her subconscious and past. Instead, the instauration of democratic and deliberative social settings allows personalities to attain individual freedom through the liberation of their radical imagination, since in direct democracy there are no predetermined truths and meanings and there is the possibility of the choice of significations not dictated in advance.

But such individual freedom cannot emerge unless a critical field is opened up that allows for people to be able to question everything about the current sets of conditions that they live within. For the individuals to have the psychical capacity to interrogate the institutions, traditions, cultures etc. on which their society is built, the very nature of the social order should allow alteration — a kind of self-alteration, since it is being driven by all. This would mean redefining what we mean by “law” and “institution” from something imposed and unchangeable into something collective and fluid. Castoriadis

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<sup>7</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Imaginary Institution of Society* Massachusetts, The MIT Press 1987. p316.

<sup>8</sup> [www.chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12-73/in-what-sense-can-an-individual-be-autonomous/](http://www.chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12-73/in-what-sense-can-an-individual-be-autonomous/)

The very term politics derives from the democratic tradition of Ancient Athens. It comes from the Greek word *polis*, which meant a city that belongs to its citizens, thus indicating the inherently grassroots nature of the concept.

Democracy’s direct essence indicates the need for people being physically present within the decision-making bodies during the decision-making process. This does not mean that assembly meetings cannot be broadcast by technological means for those that for some reason cannot attend, but that generally citizens will have to actually deliberate in person with their fellow citizens the fate of their city. Since in direct democracy there is no extra-social authority that deals with public affairs but the citizenry as a whole, it is up to all members of society to collectively find solutions to their problems and then to implement them. While digital platforms and other technological tools can be placed within the service of democracy, they can never completely replace the face-to-face political deliberation, since the democratic system is based on active citizens that vibrantly interact with each other and experience everyday life collectively. This is in contrast to the atomized vote-casting consumer of capitalist modernity. It is within this line of thought that Rousseau’s famous saying can be placed, “...[i]t is in a democratic system above all that the citizen should arm himself with strength and constancy”<sup>12</sup>

It is also important to point out that the fact that direct democracy implies self-institution of localities does not mean it implies isolationism. On the contrary, as each local community self-manages its affairs, it organically finds it necessary to interfere with other surrounding social collectives. Many supporters of statecraft claim that there is need of states to prevent conflicts in such cases, but there are numerous examples from history that challenge this position. In various

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *The Social Contract*, Jonathan Bennett 2017. P34

historic periods autonomous cities and towns collaborated by forming democratic confederations, thus maintaining their independence and self-administration while helping each other. Such confederal formations frequently appeared in the ancient Hellenic world, in Medieval times, among indigenous communities (e.g. the Iroquois Confederacy) as well as during the American revolution, the Spanish civil war, and within recent times the Zapatista caracols and the Kurdish cantons. All these examples prove that democratic cooperation can exist on a large scale, with power remaining at the grassroots.

Often there is confusion surrounding the way such confederacies are actually managed. People that have spent their lives within our oligarchic societies tend to see the contours of statecraft everywhere, even in the most participatory experiments. And while in democratic confederations there are regional councils, their objectives have nothing to do with the functions of parliaments. The basic reason for this is the fact that the function of the former is to coordinate various self-managing communities without stripping them of their independence, while the latter rules an oligarchic manner (as explained in the previous chapter regarding bureaucracy).

Therefore, democratic confederalism is a suitable response to those like the Chinese political scientist Liu Junning, who argue that direct democracy's "*primary obstacle would be the problem of size*".<sup>13</sup>

## Technology and scale

Technology can be placed in service of direct democracy if there is political will from the grassroots. During popular uprisings of the past, when the people were organizing themselves through town hall meetings, general assemblies and pub-

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<sup>13</sup> [www.swissinfo.ch/eng/directdemocracy/opinion\\_direct-democracy-isn-t-feasiblein-modern-societies-/41557818](http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/directdemocracy/opinion_direct-democracy-isn-t-feasiblein-modern-societies-/41557818)

in his education, not to mention the possibilities it gave him to lead a truly free life. He knew that he had joined the Athenian *polis* voluntarily and had the right to participate in its self-instituting, which made him recognize himself as a part of the social collective, even when disagreeing with some of the collective decisions.

The importance that individuals play in direct democracy is evident from the way ancient Greek historian Thucydides depicts free cities and the way they act. For him the city is always the citizens while its name serves only geographical purposes. When he refers to cities of his time, he says "Athenians" and not "Athens", "Spartians" and not "Sparta". C.L.R. James concludes that, "*the city-state of democracy was unthinkable except as a collection of free individuals*"<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, the modern understanding of certain territories like states and towns as being extra-socially managed and thus distinguishable from those that inhabit them is a feudal conception. It has nothing to do with the democratic tradition, according to which it is the people, the citizens, that have the power to engage their communities in trade relations, conflicts, etc.

The importance of individuals in the Athenian direct democracy is further highlighted by the institution of sortition. When choosing their magistrates by lot, the ancient Athenians demonstrated their belief that every one of their fellow citizens was completely capable of governing. It is one of the most striking examples of civic confidence and trust towards individuality.

## Psyche and democracy

Every person consists of a psyche and his/her own individual history. The former includes the Unconscious and the

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<sup>6</sup> [www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1956/06/every-cook.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1956/06/every-cook.htm)

*every person had a chance to serve. And here we come to one of the great benefits of the system. After a number of years, practically every citizen had had an opportunity to be a member of the administration. So that the body of citizens who formed the public assembly consisted of men who were familiar with the business of government.”*<sup>5</sup>

Responsibility is an important democratic trait since in a self-managing society there will not be extra-social sources of instituting that will clean up after irrational behaviours. For example, it can be argued that the absence of such democracy today is visible within the irresponsible attitude of many individuals regarding their over usage of plastic packages that are very harmful to the environment. However, a democratic anthropological type of citizen can identify with their society’s laws since those citizens are directly involved in instituting these laws, and therefore can more reasonably assert that the laws be respected.

This does not mean that each and every individual will always be in agreement with the decisions taken by the participatory institutions in which they participate. But they should still relate to them as being reasonable because they had the possibility to participate in their making. They should also be dedicated to seeing them respected by others, within the knowledge that these laws do not remain “fixed” but can be altered through the same processes in the future. This kind of organization of political agency entails full and equal participation of all people in all institutions. Such was the case of Socrates in Ancient Athens, when he followed the decision of his fellow citizens to be put to death. He perceived the regulations of the *polis* as his own, and felt obliged to submit to them, even when he strongly disagreed. This attitude derived, to a large degree, from his recognition of and gratitude for the city’s role

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<sup>5</sup> [www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1956/06/every-cook.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1956/06/every-cook.htm)

lic gatherings, the question of scale, (the amount of people that could assemble in the same place) was more or less determined by the physical limitation of the speakers or the distance that an envoy had to cross between several such popular decision-making bodies. Today, because of the development of technology, these limitations have to be reconsidered. In the reality of contemporary technologies, distances are not only reduced — they have practically disappeared. This allows society to create, of its own volition, online platforms in which a broad public participation, beyond the limitations of physical space, is made possible. For example, the internet can establish a connection between a number of assemblies from different communities that could then initiate referendums on larger concerns, in order to avoid bureaucratization. Already, social movements are making attempts in this direction, calling for on-line meetings<sup>14</sup> in an effort to overcome the limitations of space.

In any case, the sessions of various councils can be easily live-streamed. This, in combination with the revocability of delegates and other democratic mechanisms, can strengthen public control over every institution. Such democratization of technology, in combination with the democratic confederalist paradigm described earlier, can make the self-management of society more fluid than ever before.

## Expression

There is a fear of popular decision-making bodies failing to allow attendees to express their opinions. In other words, if a lot of people gather in the same place to deliberate, there is the concern that most of them won’t be able to express themselves. However, this argument often appears to be presented in bad faith since certain sets of rules can be established in order to

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<sup>14</sup> Like these ones: [www.facebook.com/events/170992339630642/](https://www.facebook.com/events/170992339630642/) and [www.facebook.com/realdemocracynowcanada/notes](https://www.facebook.com/realdemocracynowcanada/notes)

allow as many participants as possible to be able to express their opinions. Examples of this would include a time limitation for each speaker (for example three minutes each), choosing speakers from a pool containing the names of everyone who wishes to speak and so on<sup>15</sup>.

In concluding this particular argument, we can again turn to Castoriadis who addresses this point specifically<sup>16</sup>: *“It might be claimed that the problem of numbers remains and that people never would be able to express themselves in a reasonable amount of time. This is not a valid argument. There would rarely be an assembly of over twenty people where everyone would want to speak, for the very good reason that when there is something to be decided upon there are not an infinite number of options or an infinite number of arguments. In unhampered rank-and-file workers’ gatherings (convened, for instance, to decide on a strike) there have never been ‘too many’ speeches. The two or three fundamental opinions having been voiced, and various arguments having been exchanged, a decision is soon reached. (I, 86).”*

## Towards direct democracy

As has been argued in this chapter it is misguided to believe that our contemporary society is too big in comparison with the ones from the past (tens of millions as opposed to tens of thousands) for a direct democracy to be able to function properly. The first step towards addressing this misconception is

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<sup>15</sup> To avoid any misunderstanding I would like to make it clear that when we speak of direct democracy in the radical sense of the term, as self-management of society without any “top-down” hierarchical mechanisms and institutions we are not talking of “lawlessness” and “chaos”. Quite the contrary, in order such thing to work there will be need of a lot of rules and organization, but the difference is who and how will determine them, which is of real importance here.

<sup>16</sup> [www.libcom.org/library/on-the-content-of-socialismii-socialisme-ou-barbarie](http://www.libcom.org/library/on-the-content-of-socialismii-socialisme-ou-barbarie)

*no longer as enemies against whom to be upon his guard, but as brethren whom it becomes him to assist”<sup>4</sup>.*

## Individuality and democracy

Illusions have emerged that Neoliberal capitalism is the regime which gives superiority to individuality, and that its alternative would be exclusively collectivist, to the degree of suppressing individual development. Nothing could be further from the truth since no society is simply a synthesis of a faceless human mass. The creation of a direct-democratic society requires analogous anthropological types, i.e. individuals that are capable and willing to participate in the shaping of their laws and the management of their social institutions.

The emergence of democratic individuals is tightly intertwined with the functioning of participatory popular processes. Humans develop their knowledge and individuality from their birth right up until their last breath, thus having the prevailing social institutions as main sources of education and culture. Their democratic mentality, therefore, cannot be developed only through reformed schools and universities, but through the experience of radically democratized communities, neighbourhoods, associations, production and consumption units, information mediums, leisure, sport etc. All spheres of everyday life must tend to the shaping of an anthropological type whose focus is not to merely autonomously shape its own life, but to be passionate about responsibly participating in the collective shaping of public affairs.

Radical historian C.L.R. James exemplifies this case of education through participation when describing the Ancient Athenian institution of sortition: *“When members had served on the council, they were forbidden to serve a second time. Thus*

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<sup>4</sup> William Godwin: *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2013, p263

The Athenian citizens of the classical period had an imaginary based on the logic of *astynomos orgè*<sup>1</sup>. In Ancient Greek *astynomos* means institution-making and *orgè* means “urge or passion”. The fact that people were willing to walk up to twenty-five kilometers to the general assembly of the city to decide on current affairs is testament to their sociological make-up. It was primarily this dedication that directed the life of the Ancient Athenians, and not slavery or narrow profiteering.

Thus we can agree with William Godwin that, “*one of the sources of our erroneous judgment lies in our taking mankind such as monarchy and aristocracy have made them, and thence judging how fit they are to manage for themselves*”<sup>2</sup>. In other words, we critically frame humanity as it has been shaped by the current system, whilst failing to acknowledge how they could be in completely different sets of conditions. For this reason Godwin warns that, “*nothing can be more unreasonable than to argue from men as we now find them to men as they may hereafter be made*”<sup>3</sup>. Hierarchical regimes tend to undermine the development and vitality of their subject, keeping them in a state of semi-infantilism. Individuals within such societies have internalized implicit faith, blind submission to authority, timid fear, a distrust of popular power and even feelings of insignificance. Democracy, on the other hand, according to Godwin, “*restores to man a consciousness of his value, teaches him, by the removal of authority and oppression, to listen only to the suggestions of reason, gives him confidence to treat all other men with frankness and simplicity, and induces him to regard them*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.athene.antenna.nl/ARCHIEF/NR01-Athene/02-Probl.-e.html](http://www.athene.antenna.nl/ARCHIEF/NR01-Athene/02-Probl.-e.html)

<sup>2</sup> William Godwin: *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Oxford University Press 2013, p263.

<sup>3</sup> William Godwin: *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2013, p263.

to stop confusing “society” and “state”. The basis for such a democracy already exists in the form of neighbourhoods, villages, etc. Direct democracy can be implemented at this level and autonomous democratic communities can then begin networking with each other according to the needs of their residents. In addition, technology can be helpful for the networking between large communities as well as opening channels of communication across great distances. As expressed by The Symbiosis Research Collective, “*At the end of the day, it’s only democracy – all the way down – that can give us any hope of universal emancipation*”<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> [theecologist.org/2018/jun/26/dark-municipalismangers-local-politics](http://theecologist.org/2018/jun/26/dark-municipalismangers-local-politics)

## Chapter III: The Democratic Individual

*I declare that our city is an education to Greece, and I declare that in my opinion each single one of our citizens, in all the manifold aspects of life is able to show himself the rightful lord and owner of his own person, and do this, moreover, with exceptional grace and exceptional versatility.*

~Pericles. Pericles' Funeral Oration. c.490 BCE from Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*

Much of the scepticism that is directed towards the implementation of direct democracy is not necessarily based upon it being organized from the bottom-up, but situated within ingrained negative attitudes concerning human nature itself. People have been convinced by social Darwinist and Hobbesian theories that if left without an authoritarian leash, humans will inevitably clash with each other, destroying every trace of meaningful social bonds and leaving behind only decay.

It could be argued that there is a certain truth to these convictions, but it is not universal in character and should be understood within specific contexts. For example, social conflict may well arise (and often does) in terms of the anthropological type that is created by current bureaucratic state mechanisms and capitalist consumerist culture. Contemporary passive vote-casters and consumers are socially geared towards living through space and time with a strong purpose of consuming. If suddenly uprooted from their communities, without

a sense of purpose or reason, it is understandable that such an anthropological type will not engage overnight in egalitarian communalist relations or political participation. What is understood to matter most to this kind of individual within a competitive capitalist world is his/her own survival in keeping with a short-sighted self-interest and nothing beyond that.

But while this description may fit the anthropological type of capitalist modernity, it cannot be said to correspond to human nature in general. What we have today are human beings that have been shaped by domination which can be traced back to the rise of patriarchy and gerontocracy. The gradual enslavement of the young by the old and of the woman by the man led to major shift in social imaginary: there was a replacement of feminine conceptions of symbiosis within society and with nature by masculine conceptions of strong authority and exploitation. However, there were periods when strikingly different anthropological types from the Westernised contemporary one were present. They could be found in primitive societies, where mutual aid prevailed, as well as in theological societies, where Holy Scriptures determined the meaning of life.

An anthropological type that made direct democracy possible appeared in Ancient Athens. It is important to note here that the Athenian democratic experiment cannot be taken as a ready model to be copied today, due to the exclusion of women and slaves from the citizen body. Direct democracy, as an emancipatory political project, aims to include all sexes and genders in political processes, and thus goes beyond patriarchal and sexist social orders. It can be argued that the ancient Athenians were entrapped in the specificities of the social imaginary of their time and could not completely challenge it. Despite this, we can draw from certain concepts and practices that were developed that can be helpful in our struggle for equality and participation.