

Direct Democracy

Beyond Hierarchy

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We live in dynamic times where a global crisis is slowly penetrating every sphere of our lives. In response to the contemporary state of uncertainty people are rising all across the globe demanding change. There are different proposals as to what direction our society should take.

In between all the alternatives being put on the table there is one word that can be heard almost everywhere – “democracy”. Some are calling it real democracy, others horizontal, direct or participatory democracy. Here I will present a proposal of direct democracy as a project beyond hierarchy, representation and exploitation.

Some might ask: “why do we need alternatives, does not our contemporary system work?” Yes, it unquestionably works, but the question is, in whose interest? The following statistics can give us an idea about that: 1 percent of the richest people in the world own 40 percent of the global wealth, while the richest 10 percent own more than the 85 percent of the world’s assets. The contemporary politico-economic system serves, in the best case, the interests of 10 percent of the population. This situation suppresses the creativity, the abilities and the dignity of the rest of the 90 percent, dooming a small part of them to mediocre and gray life, and the rest (the overwhelming majority) to hunger and misery.

The very logic in which the contemporary organization of social life is being based, is the one of hierarchy and passivity. In its essence, the situation is similar in every sphere of our life, be it in family, politics, economy or culture. All the contemporary structures consist of organizing people’s lives from the outside – in complete absence of the ones whose lives are being organized and often against their very desires and interests. This creates a gap between a thin layer of managerial institutions – bearers of abstract power – and the vast majority of the population, whose role is being reduced to mere implementors of decisions (already taken by the above mentioned institutions). As a result of this, most of the people nowadays feel powerless and alienated from their lives.

According to Karl Polanyi (1), it is not human will, but prices and interest rates that direct the course of society. The only real and functioning objective facts of society are competition, capital, interest, prices and so forth; here, human free will is but a mirage, a fantasy. Treating people, either in the political or economic sphere, as mere tools, systematically ignoring their desires and thoughts, is stripping them of their creativity and imagination. As the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis rightly observed, the whole “official” organization of modern society both ignores

and seeks to suppress people's capacity for self-organization and the individual and collective creativity of the producers. As a result, there is a huge loss of human creativity and capacity.

In the corporate and statist structures, the logic of hierarchy reigns, which grants small managerial elites decision making power while leaving the rest with only the task of following and implementing. However, as the will of this majority is being neglected and even suppressed, they do not really put any effort in the implementation of the orders of the managerial elites. As a result, there is a loss of productivity and quality. In order to counter this effect, the managerial elites invest a huge amount of energy and time into figuring out ways to control the 'implementors'. Eventually, the managerial role of these elites ceases to be their main and only task and they start undertaking more and more repressive forms.

Because of these dynamics, the thin layer of managers cannot perform their tasks properly. The incompatibility of this organizational model and all the loss and suppression of human creativity and capacity constantly create crisis, which will not necessarily lead to the overthrowing of the contemporary system, but it is surely making the lives of all of us more miserable and unpleasant. Thus in order to tackle the current crisis and the ones that have yet to come, it is not enough to just reform the current system, but to completely replace it with another one which will not generate the same problems.

Direct Democracy as Alternative

One alternative system is direct democracy. It dismantles the social separation between executives and implementors and aims at creating institutions which allow each and every member of society to participate directly in the decision making of the political, economic, social, and ecological matters which concern them and to directly participate in their implementation. This gives space for more complete realization of human potential. I have to make it clear that this kind of direct democracy is nothing like the different forms of "democracy" that we know to be implemented at massive state levels and which are based on representative logic – deciding for someone else who then decides for you, which in no way is the same as citizens and communities making their own decisions.

Today's dominant way of thinking rejects the idea that people can manage their own affairs. It is commonly believed that if a group of people grows beyond the number of 150 (Dunbar's Number), then chaos begins. The popular belief is that communities and whole societies are in need of managerial apparatuses to organize the masses, with as little popular participation as possible. However, past and present democratic practices can give us a glimpse of how direct democracy could look like on a larger scale. These practices include the Athenian Polis, the Paris Commune, The Spanish Revolution of 1936–39, as well as some contemporary examples, such as the Zapatistas autonomous caracoles, and Rojava's democratic confederalism.

Main Institutions

Suitable basic political institutions for organizing social life along the principles described above, have similarities to institutions already described by thinkers like Cornelius Castoriadis, Hannah Arendt, and Murray Bookchin.(2) In one such model, the general assembly on the level of neighbourhood or village should always be the highest decision-making body, in which all members of the community have the right to participate. Historically the general assembly has proved its efficiency in communities of a size close to 50,000 people. For example, in Ancient Athens the number of citizens, having the right to participate in the Ekklesia (general assembly), were between 30,000 and 50,000. The general assembly creates a general frame of rules and aims for the community and does not deal with routine questions. It can reject or accept every deci-

sion, taken by other institutions of the same community. For its smooth functioning, the general assembly can assign working groups, which deal with certain issues and everyday questions.

Second comes the popular council, consisting of delegates of a certain location (a neighbourhood for example). The delegates can be chosen among the members of the community through elections or by lot (as were the magistrates in Ancient Athens) and can be revoked at any time. Castoriadis suggests that in communities with a population between 5,000 and 10,000, such councils can consist of 30 to 50 delegates.⁽³⁾ These institutions will be dealing with routine tasks and will be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the decisions taken by the general assembly. Regular rotation of the delegates will prevent the emergence of hierarchy and will allow for broader participation in the council.

In a direct democracy, each community has its autonomy, which is being asserted by institutions like those described above. However, such democratic communities cannot exist completely in isolation from the rest of the world. Thus, various confederalist forms, such as the Zapatista's caracoles and the Rojava's cantons, can link different communities together without stripping them of their autonomy. A suitable form for such coordination are the confederal councils, which consist of delegates assigned by the general assemblies of each community. The delegates should remain revocable at any time by those who have appointed them and should be rotated. For them to be as effective as possible, while at the same time as participatory as possible, these institutions will have to meet the following two requirements: they should not include too many members but enough to enable the broadest possible points of view to be represented.

As regards the economy of a direct-democratic society, it could consist of local economic units such as producers and consumers associations. In these institutions, the consumers in a given area connect with each other and establish consumer associations. These structures create networks with producers' associations (whose management is carried out through workplace assemblies in which all workers-owners can participate). This does not, however, prevent individuals from buying directly from producer organizations without being members of the consumer associations. This freedom of choice creates an agora in the ancient athenian sense of the term, as a meeting space for free citizens to meet and exchange commodities.

In a direct democracy the economy cannot be separated from politics. This implies that the general assemblies at local level and the councils at the regional level, as supreme sources of power, create the common frame for economic development. However this frame should not be mistaken for some kind of deterministic and bureaucratic planning. The only thing these structures do in this case is to determine the general direction of principles and values, according to which the economy should develop and to keep their right to intervene if any of the economic institutions roughly violates the collectively constructed frame of principles.

However, in order to remain truly direct, democracy has to be embedded in every sphere of life. Healthcare, education, energy and even architecture should all be based on a participatory politics through common assemblies and deliberative committees, directly linked with the supreme communal institutions (general assemblies and councils) in order to assert the right of the commons.

Transitional Strategy

The transition towards direct democracy will not happen overnight. To just wait for an upcoming revolution will not lead us far, it can even serve as an excuse for passivity. And even if such a revolution should occur, we cannot expect that society will rush into unknown and untested directions. Quite on the contrary, it can turn desperately towards institutions and struc-

tures which were already created in limited scale and political propositions that, although hidden by the dominant system, have not disappeared completely. This is why it is important to start creating truly democratic infrastructures and political will for participation today.

Democracy does not appear out of thin air. It is being built and sustained through daily practice. The contemporary dominant structures cultivate submission and uncritical acceptance of the hierarchical dogma. This creates a vicious cycle, exit from which is being offered by horizontal structures such as cooperatives, collectives, and neighbourhood assemblies based on equality and direct democracy. Instead of working for a company, dominated by a thin managerial layer, we can start a cooperative, in which all members are co-owners and have the right to participate in collective decision-making. Instead of waiting for local authorities, we can organize local assemblies in our communities in which we can collectively search for solutions to the problems of our neighbourhoods.

Such horizontal structures can act as universities, teaching people the logic of self-organization and self-management through practice. It is important, however, that these structures maintain an anti-systemic character and constantly aim to re-think their practices in order to avoid absorption by the dominant system. Through citizen activity, political consciousness can be created and show that direct democracy is not just some muddy utopia, but a tool for finding and solving problems here and now. As long as these horizontal structures develop and multiply and as long as they remain a part of a wider resistance movement for social change, more and more people will see their usefulness, and we will be getting closer to a direct democracy.

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