

Who will Guard the Guardians

Direct Democracy as Suspicion of Authority

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*There no longer are any checks on political life, no sanctions beyond those of the penal code, which, as various “affairs” have shown, functions less and less. At any rate, in such a situation the question is posed, as it always has been: “And why the devil would judge themselves, or their ‘overseers,’ be exempt from the general corruption, and for how long? Who will guard the guardians?”*¹

~Cornelius Castoriadis

For a long time there has been this persistent and deeply entrenched idea that direct democracy, or popular self-management, is impossible to attain on society-wide scale because people are not good enough. One of the earlier expressions of this argument can be found in the works of great Swiss thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He suggests, in his magnum opus *The Social Contract*, that “were there a people of gods, their government would be democratic. So perfect a government is not for men”. Although he is well aware that representative regimes enslave their subjects and are diametrically opposed to democratic systems, since “the moment a people allow itself to be represented, it is no longer free: it no longer exists”, he still believes that a freer, more participatory form of governance is unattainable. One of the reasons for this conclusion can be found in some of the main ideas expressed in Rousseau’s *Emile, or On Education*, where the author suggests that there is an innate human goodness that is being degenerated by civilization, claiming that “everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man”.²

This line of thought, with clear Christian connotations, can be detected in the works of many political thinkers after Rousseau. One of the most notable examples is Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, where the author describes something that has come to be known as “primitive communism” — the idea that humanity lived in equality and everyone cared for each other, before the emergence of agriculture and cities.³ Here too there is a clear

¹ Cornelius Castoriadis: *Democracy and Relativism* (anonymous translation, 2013), p251. [available online: <https://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf>]

² Laurence D. Cooper: *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), pX.

³ aeon.co

distinction between good human nature (much like the Edenic period in Christianity) and the corrupting effects of civilization.

Anthropologists have shown, however, that social relations among pre-agrarian hunter-gatherers varied. There were cases like the Ache people, who lived in Paraguay — they shared food and practiced something pretty close to “primitive communism”.⁴ But there were other cases like the Hiwi tribes of Venezuela, in which when a hunter brought in a prey, he kept the right to share it with whomever he pleased with, and was not obliged to distribute it among the whole of the community.⁵

And as not all hunter-gatherer societies were primitive communists, so not all agrarian and urban ones were unitarily unequal. There are many indications that hierarchy and class separation wasn't all that common of a feature among early cities. One characteristic example is Çatalhöyü, a Stone Age town that was found over 9,000 years ago in Southern Anatolia. It is believed that this proto-city with no palaces or temples, has been home to a remarkably egalitarian society — at least in its earlier stages.⁶

Another example is a city that once stood, some 6,000 years ago, beneath the Ukrainian village of Nebelivka. In this ancient urban settlement built by the Trypillia civilization, scientists haven't discovered any sign of elite rule over the majority of dwellers. Instead, excavations suggest that the site was organized to promote shared rule among groups of equal social standing. Houses were built in approximately similar size, and instead of palaces, researchers have found common buildings that probably were, as they suggest, used as assembly spaces.⁷

Such cases have debunked the theories that seek for innate goodness to have flourished until the emergence of agriculture and urbanization. Instead, there are plenty of examples for ruptures with hierarchy and elite rule that transcend different stages of human development. The separations along hierarchical lines wasn't due to people settling down, but a result of intra-communal power struggles that were in motion long before that. What provided rupture with the centralization of authority was significant sections from a given community getting together and claiming a fairer distribution of power.

This conclusion is helpful as it assists visionary thinking move beyond determinist fallacies. Thus far the search for innate human goodness and the idea that it has been corrupted by civilization plays in the hands of oligarchies and nation-states as it gives theoretical groundings for aristocratic-type of rule: it presents us with a determinist argumentation, suggesting that people have been degraded due to insurmountable developments to such an extent so that they cannot be trusted to manage public affairs on their own, thus the only available option supposedly is seeking the very best ones among society (who have supposedly sustained some of their innate goodness) to take control. And of course, the current system of domination, as George Monbiot suggests, has been doing its fair share of persuading us of our own incapacity to directly govern ourselves.⁸ We have been led to the conclusion that direct democracy may be more just organiza-

⁴ Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis: “Is Equality Passé? Homo Reciprocans and the Future of Egalitarian Politics”, *Boston Review* (November 26, 1999). [available online: <http://www.umass.edu/preferen/gintis/Is%20Inequality%20Passe.pdf>]

⁵ Gurven, Michael, Kim Hill, Hillard Kaplan, Ana Hurtado, and Richard Lyles. “Food Transfers among Hiwi Foragers of Venezuela: Tests of Reciprocity.” *Human Ecology* 28, no. 2 (2000): pp171–218. [available online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4603350>]

⁶ www.nationalgeographic.com

⁷ www.sciencenews.org

⁸ www.theguardian.com

tional form in theory than what we currently have, but it supposedly requires god-like qualities that the great majority of people currently lack (and may never achieve).

Historically speaking, however, leaving authority over society in the hands of few individuals, regardless of their personal skills and attributes, has proved as a sure recipe for them exploiting their advantageous position. From 19th century enlightened monarchs, through 20th century revolutionary vanguards, to modern day populist or progressive politicians, the old maxim of “power corrupts” seems to have been the rule rather than the exception.

This trend has been captured in immortal literary works like “The Tale of the Stairs”, written in 1923 by Bulgarian socialist poet Hristo Smirnenski.⁹ It tells the story of a fictional plebeian from the lowest layer of society who decides to take revenge, for the wretched condition of his folk, on the nobles and princes situated at the top of the social ladder. He embarks on climbing the stairs with the words:

I am a plebeian by birth and all ragged folk are my brothers. How terrible the world is, how wretched the people are!

However, on every few sets he is forced to make concessions, so that by the time he reaches the peak, he has become deaf and blind for the screams and raggedness of those at the bottom. Power seems to have opiated his mind, making him even forget from where he came from, exclaiming:

I am a prince by birth and the gods are my brothers. How beautiful the world is and how happy are the people!

Written in the aftermath of the October Revolution, where from the very beginning the Bolsheviks began cementing their grip on power, Smirnenski’s “The Tail of the Stairs” is an allegory of the dead end inherent in strategies that have to do with changing a hierarchical system from within. It is a work that masterfully underlines how even honest and dedicated individuals, when placed in position of authority, will ultimately become corrupted and thus cannot be trusted.

If there are clear historic indications that the concentration of power creates new, or strengthens already existing, power discrepancies, then it is only logical to conclude that it is in the interest of the many that management of public affairs is as decentralized and as prone to popular control as possible. In this sense direct democracy must be seen not as a political system that requires a society consisted predominantly of Nietzschean *übermensch* or of Rousseauian *noble savages*, but as a setting that prevents certain impulses that are part of human nature (but most certainly does not consist all of it). Karl Polanyi, for example, speaks of the impulse to “force one’s will on others and realize one’s self-interest at the cost of others”, but he insists that it constitutes only a little part of the complete person.¹⁰ Cornelius Castoriadis, on a similar note, underlines the human potential to create wonders such as the Parthenon or the Notre-Dame Cathedral, as well as to set up abominations such as Auschwitz or the Gulag.¹¹

Direct democracy is born from this suspicion that no one can be trusted with unchecked power in his or her hands. Castoriadis suggests that “as has been known for a long time,

⁹ www.slovo.bg

¹⁰ Michael Brie & Claus Thomasberger (eds.): *Karl Polanyi’s Vision of a Socialist Transformation* (Black Rose Books: Montreal, 2018), p283.

¹¹ Cornelius Castoriadis: *Rising Tide of Insignificance* (anonymous translation, 2003) [available online: https://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-rising_tide.pdf]

unchecked demagoguery leads to tyranny”.¹² Many insist that such checks are provided by bureaucratic institutions such as those of the Nation-State, but we have seen how one such political setting tends to create layers of bureaucrats who become a class in itself, with common interests, that seeks to maintain its privileged position and expand its influence.

This tendency is masterfully depicted by Franz Kafka in the following passage from his work *The Trial*:

[H]ow could the whole body of official avoid being grossly corrupt? It would not be possible, even the highest judge could not preserve his own integrity. That is why the guards attempt to steal the clothing off the backs of those they arrest, that is why supervisors break into other people's homes, that is why innocent people, instead of being interrogated, are humiliated in front of large assemblies... You are all officials, you are the corrupt gang my speech was aimed at, you have packed this hall as spectators and eavesdroppers, you pretended to form factions... These factions, apparently divided into right and left, all belong together...¹³

This holds not only for unelected officials but for elected representatives as well, since the supposed electoral control that the people get to exercise happens once every couple of years. Because of that Rousseau has suggested that people are unfree, even when living under a regime of elected rulers. In a similar line of thought, much earlier, Aristotle distinguishes democracy from oligarchy by explaining that the former is characterized by sortition (selection by lot), while the latter — by elections.¹⁴ The electoral process gives years of unchecked (by the general population) rule to those who come to form a government.

Adding more bureaucratic institutions with the purpose of monitoring the work of the representatives only adds more officials to the bureaucratic class. This creates fertile ground for the rise of corruption and cynicism, as the various elements within this bureaucracy engage in bribing and blackmailing each other, so that each and every one of them can maintain their privileged position within this distinguished class. And while there are multiple actors in this scheme, unlike totalitarian regimes, they all still consist of a tiny, overwhelmingly privileged, minority that lives off the back of the great majority of the population.

In the private capitalist sphere too, companies and corporations have been creating layers upon layers of positions whose sole goal is checking on the checkers, or making those higher in the corporate ladder feel better and important. These are basically what anthropologist David Graeber has termed *Bullshit jobs* since they don't really contribute to society's wellbeing but instead allow to groups of people to parasite on those who actually do something useful.¹⁵

This is where direct democracy differs from oligarchy. Instead of creating an endless chain of bureaucrats and officials who are to check on each other, while constituting a distinct managerial class with its own interests, democratic politics open the decision-making processes to the whole of the population. In this sense the sessions of the grassroots participatory institutions that consist the backbone of direct democracy, are under constant popular control — every citizen can, in

¹² Cornelius Castoriadis: *Rising Tide of Insignificance* (anonymous translation, 2003), p4. [available online: https://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-rising_tide.pdf]

¹³ Franz Kafka: *The Essential Kafka* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2014), pp33-37.

¹⁴ Aristotle: *The Politics of Aristotle: Books I-V: A Revised Text*

¹⁵ David Graeber: *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), p112.

any given moment, observe and participate in the processes or see the recordings of the sessions. Because of that Castoriadis suggests that responsibility and checking up on one another is part of the *democratic ethos*.¹⁶

When decisions of several such grassroots institutions need to be coordinated, then networked relations are being set up, which includes sending delegates to confederal councils. These delegates, unlike the contemporary political representatives, hold short terms and only transfer decisions taken at their local assemblies, and are held responsible by these grassroots institutions. If a given community deems that its delegates are trying to obtain privileges or authority from their position, then it is in its right to revoke them.

Such revocability is an important part of any meaningful *democratic praxis*. The two most distinguishable examples today of implemented self-management are the autonomous communities of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, and of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (more widely known as Rojava). Both societies are organized, to a different degree, along direct democratic lines, which means that the general population has direct access to the decision-making processes of the system. And key element is that at confederal level, where people *en masse* cannot attend sessions in person, are sent revocable delegates, strictly adhering to their mandate and consulting the grassroots.¹⁷ In this way an attempt is made at the widest and deepest popular control at all organizational levels.

The absence of safeguards, as Castoriadis has suggested, leads to an intensification of the irrationality inherent in the system.¹⁸ The quest of correcting a top-down system that encourages greed and corruption, by adding more bureaucratic layers has proven nothing but a dead end. It is only by opening up institutions and decision-making processes to the whole of the population, that we can create a more just society. This does not derive from some belief in innate human goodness, but in the firm conviction that power must be kept in check.

¹⁶ Cornelius Castoriadis: *Rising Tide of Insignificance* (anonymous translation, 2003), p6.

¹⁷ www.peaceinkurdistancampaign.com & rojavainformationcenter.com

¹⁸ Cornelius Castoriadis: *Democracy and Relativism* (anonymous translation, 2013), p251.

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