Myths About Anarchism, Democracy, and Decision-Making

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> *"I have often read writings that attempt to discredit my ideas, but which merely repeat, using different terminology, what I myself have argued and argue. Likewise, I have often seen ideas being attributed to comrades who scorn them, for the easy pleasure of refuting them afterwards" – Errico Malatesta 1911* (Malatesta 2023, 316).

In 2022 I wrote an essay called *Anarchism and Democracy* which summarised what members of the historical anarchist movement thought about democracy and how they made collective decisions (Baker 2022). This essay was subsequently completely misunderstood by both pro-democracy and anti-democracy anarchists as saying things it does not say and which I have never said. Over the subsequent years these distortions and misinterpretations have taken on a life of their own and altered how people read and remember my essay. In parallel to these developments both old and new myths about historical anarchist views on democracy and collective decision-making have continued to spread. In this essay I shall go through these myths one by one and debunk them. Through doing so I shall expand on topics that my previous essay only briefly touched on.

Myth One: historical anarchists only rejected representative democracy.

This is extremely wrong. Anarchism is against all forms of democratic government and authority. Historical anarchists typically described really existing governments as institutions that (i) perform the function of reproducing the power of the economic ruling classes; (ii) are hierarchically and centrally organised; and (iii) are wielded by a minority political ruling class who sit at the top of the government hierarchy and possess the authority to make laws and issue commands at a societal level that others must obey due to the threat or exercise of institutionalised force, such as the police, prisons, army, and legal system (Baker 2023, 74-78). It is nonetheless logically possible for a government to be ruled by the majority of the population. If such a genuinely democratic government existed then anarchists would oppose it. In 1890 Charlotte Wilson published an article called "Democracy or Anarchism" in which she rejected "Democracy" in the sense of "the rule or government of the many" (Wilson 2000, 66). Decades later in 1927 Malatesta wrote that, "anarchists do not accept majority government (*democracy*)" (Malatesta 2014, 488). The exact same point was made by other major anarchist theorists, including Carlo Cafiero (Cafiero 2012, 50), Emma Goldman (Goldman 1996, 110), Voltairine De Cleyre (de Cleyre 2005, 57-58, 92-93), and Ricardo Mella (Mella 2015). It can also be found in less well known sources like Louisa Sarah Bevington's 1895 *Anarchist Manifesto* (Bevington 1895, 9).

This perspective was grounded in the anarchist opposition to any hierarchical social structure in which a ruler wields authority and so the institutionalised power to dominate others. They were against both the rule of the minority and the rule of the majority (A. Parsons 2003, 94; L. Parsons 2004, 96; Galleani 2012, 42; Grave 1899, chapter VII; Wilson 2000, 54-55). To quote Malatesta,

> Authoritarian organization, which is to say the type in which some command and others obey, derives from the arrogance of those who finds themselves, in some way, in a more advantageous situation than others, as well as from the submissiveness and apathy of the masses, who, unwilling and unable to manage for themselves, let

> themselves be dominated by someone who sets them to work in his place, with the pretext, or perhaps the sincere intention, of doing good for them. In an authoritarian organization the rulers are always, in practice, a very small number of individuals; but even if they accounted for the numerical majority of the organized, their domination would not be any less unfair and fecund with corruption and woes of every kind for the rulers and the ruled alike (Malatesta 2019, 130).

The anarchist rejection of democracy as a system of government applied to both direct democracies and representative democracies. This is for the obvious reason that all democratic governments, whether direct or representative, are governments and so incompatible with anarchism's goal of a stateless classless society without authority. Despite this fact, it is extremely rare to find any historical anarchists discussing direct democracy explicitly. Most anarchist critiques of democracy either make claims about the idea of majority government/majority rule in general or focus specifically on representative democracy (Bakunin 1990, 13; Berkman 2003, 71-73, 103; Kropotkin 2022, 101-27). For example, in 1926 the Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad released *The Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists (Draft)*. It featured a section titled "the Negation of Democracy" that only mentioned bourgeois parliamentary democracy (The Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad 2002a, 198).

This is a reflection of the context that anarchists were writing in. For most of European history there was no distinction between direct and representative democracy. The ancient Greek word dēmokratía literally meant the power or rule (kratos) of the people (dēmos). It referred to a specific constitution that a kind of government called a polis could have (Carey 2017, 1-3). The word polis simultaneously referred to (i) an urban centre in the sense of a settlement with more than 1,000 inhabitants in which administrative and judicial functions are based; (ii) the territory controlled by that urban centre, which typically includes various other settlements; and (iii) the political community that resides in both the urban centre and its surrounding territory (Hansen and Nielson 2004, 32-48; Hall 2013, 9). A polis was a democracy if it was ruled by all of its male citizens or at least the majority of its male citizens. The consequence of this is that poleis with fundamentally different systems of political decision-making could all be regarded as democracies if they were based on the rule of the dēmos (Raekstad 2020). Orators of the period typically added to this basic definition various political ideals, such as the notion that the polis was governed by laws that applied equally to all citizens, rather than the whims of a tyrant (Carey 2010, 25, 167-68). For the philosopher Aristotle, democracy necessarily involved the rule of a majority of citizens who were also poor in the sense of not owning substantial amounts of property (Aristotle 1995, 100-2, 139-41). The most famous example of ancient Greek democracy is 5th century BC Athens. All major political decisions were made by a simple majority vote of adult male citizens in a formal assembly called the ecclesia. These decisions were referred to as laws or decrees. Key polis officials were selected at random by lot. The actual majority of the population – women, slaves, children and foreigners – were excluded and lacked decision-making power in the assembly (Hansen 1991, 304-20). In less famous ancient Greek democracies male citizens merely elected government officials who wielded decision-making power and then held these government officials to account (ibid, 3; Aristotle 1995, 235-36). In total roughly half of ancient Greek poleis were democracies and these were usually what we call direct democracies like Athens (Hansen 2016, 49; Hansen and Nielson 2004, 1338-42).

During the American and French revolutions of the 18th century republics governed by elected representatives were founded. These governments claimed to be expressions of the will of the people. The rulers of this new system of government felt the need to distinguish it from ancient Athens. To this end, in 1788, the founding father and slave owner James Madison contrasted "a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person" with "a republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place". For Madison, "the two great points of difference between a democracy and a republic are: first, the delegation of the government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest; secondly, the greater number of citizens, and greater sphere of country, over which the latter may be extended" (Hamilton et al 2009, 50-51). In 1794 the French revolutionary Maximilien Robespierre collapsed this distinction and argued that republics governed by representatives were democracies (Robespierre 1970, 34). This notion took decades to catch on and did not become a standard position until the 1830s and 1840s (Costopoulos and Rosanvallon 1995; Hansen 2016, 37). This can be seen by contrasting dictionaries. The 1828 edition of Webster's dictionary only mentioned "government by the people" like "Athens", in which "the supreme power is lodged in the hands of the people collectively, or in which the people exercise the powers of legislation" (Webster 1828). The 1890 edition, in comparison, specifically included both "government by the people" and "government by popular representation". In the first form of democracy the people exercise power "directly" and in the second "indirectly" (Porter 1890, 388).

Occasionally anarchists critiqued direct legislation, which in the 19th and early 20th centuries referred to the rights of initiative and referendum. This meant that citizens were able to propose laws if they formed a sufficiently large number and vote 'yes' or 'no' to a policy being made law (Bakunin 1964, 219-220, 292; Kropotkin 2014, 164, 618, 621; Malatesta 2019, 98-103). During the early 1850s a few socialists, including Victor Considerant and Moritz Rittinghausen, intervened in political debates about France's Second Republic by advocating the abolition of representative democracy in favour of "real democracy", which was a government where the people ruled through "direct legislation" alone (Chambost 2018; Rubinelli 2024). They imagined that France could be divided into sections of a thousand citizens, who would meet and deliberate in local assemblies. These assemblies would either draft a new law or propose an amendment to an existing law. Once a proposed law or amendment had received a majority of votes at the sectional level, it would be sent to an administrative body called a ministry. The ministry would then ask all the other sectional assemblies to discuss and vote on the proposed law or amendment. Through this mechanism they believed it possible to scale face-to-face direct democracy up to the level of a large country (ibid, 794).[1] This directly democratic version of direct legislation did not become

[1] The mutualist Pierre Joseph Proudhon, who was the first person to self-identify as an anarchist, critiqued these ideas in 1851. He insisted that "Considerant" and "Rittinghausen" were wrong to advocate "Direct Government and Direct Legislation", which he regarded as "the two biggest blunders in the annals of politics and of philosophy" (Proudhon 1969, 103-104). Proudhon later claimed that due to popular revolts "the principle of authority is forced to retire: it retires step by step, by a series of concessions, each one more insufficient than the other, of which the last, pure democracy, or direct government, ends in the impossible and the absurd" (ibid, 128). This contrasts with the ideas of Joseph Déjacque, who was the first person to self-identify as a libertarian and proponent of anarchism. He thought that during the period of transition prior to the achievement of anarchy, there should be "the most democratic form of government". He envisioned this as a republic that was broken down into self-governing communes of 50,000 people, which were in turn "divided into as many sections as is necessary for the ease of meetings and deliberations". At each level of this republic the people ruled themselves through "direct legislation" and passed laws via "a majority plus one

popular and only gained a few adherents like James Sullivan, who endorsed "pure democracy" in 1892 (Sullivan 1896, 5-7, 119-120). By the time that the anarchist movement had emerged, the mainstream advocates of direct legislation, which included state socialists and populists, framed it as a complement to the election of representatives into government and did not endorse pure democracy (Ellis 2023; Rubinelli 2024, 804. For primary sources see Liebknecht 1899, 6, 27; People's Party 1970, 105-106; Taber 2021, 75; White 1910). This context is why Michael Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, and Malatesta rejected direct legislation as part of a discussion of amendments to representative democracy, rather than proposals for direct democracy.

In the late 19th century the main example of direct legislation within a representative democracy was Switzerland. The government was a bicameral parliament composed of a lower house, an upper house, and an executive. In this respect it was a typical representative democracy. What was very unusual is that the country was also a federal republic composed of largely sovereign cantons with universal male suffrage. In addition to this the 1874 constitution stipulated that 50,000 male citizens could demand a revision to the constitution, which would then be decided by a national referendum. In a similar fashion 30,000 male citizens or eight cantons could demand that federal legislation be submitted to a national referendum (Grob 1875. See specifically articles 74, 89, and 120). One of the first Swiss cantons to implement an expansive version of direct legislation was Zurich in 1869. Its constitution not only gave citizens the power to initiate laws and constitutional amendments, but also required that laws passed by elected representatives in the legislature had to then be voted on in a referendum of male citizens. Two of the main creators of this constitution were the state socialists Karl Bürkli and Friedrich Albert Lange (Ellis 2023, 150). Lange regarded it as the "first attempt in history to install democracy on a more rational basis than by popular assemblies or parliaments" (Quoted in ibid, 150-151). It should therefore not be confused with the assembly based direct democracy of ancient Greece.

In September 1869 a few Swiss and German delegates, which included Bürkli and Rittinghausen, unsuccessfully attempted to persuade the Basel congress of the International Working Men's Association to support direct legislation (ibid, 151; Bakunin 1973, 234-35). This led to anarchists explicitly rejecting the Zurich canton's system of government. The Swiss anarchist James Guillaume regarded "direct legislation" as an attempt "to put the proletariat to sleep in order to distract it from revolutionary action" (Quoted in Chambost 2018, 114-115). In 1870 his comrade Bakunin argued that in Switzerland, where representatives were elected via universal male suffrage, "it is the bourgeoisie that governs, and it is the people, the workers, peasants included, who obey the laws made by the bourgeoisie" (Bakunin 1964, 218). He was not convinced that the implementation of referendums at a national level would fundamentally change this situation. He explained at length,

> the Radical-Democrats of the Zurich canton devised and put into practice a new political system—the *referendum*, or direct legislation by the people. But the *referendum* itself is only a palliative, a new illusion, a falsehood. In order to vote, with full knowledge of the issue in question and with the full freedom required for it, upon laws proposed to the people or which the people themselves are induced to propose, it is necessary that the people have the time and the education needed to study those

of the voters" (Déjacque 2012). A detailed examination of the ideas of such proto-anarchists lies outside the scope of this essay, which is only concerned with the ideas of the anarchist movement.

> proposals, to reflect upon them, to discuss them. The people must become a vast Parliament holding its sessions in the open fields.
>
> But this is rarely possible, and only upon grand occasions when the proposed laws arouse the attention and affect the interests of everyone. Most of the time the proposed laws are of such a specialized nature that one has to accustom oneself to political and juridical abstractions to grasp their real implications. Naturally they escape the attention and comprehension of the people, who vote for them blindly, believing implicitly their favorite orators. Taken separately, every one of those laws appears too insignificant to be of much interest to the masses, but in their totality they form a net which enmeshes them. Thus, in spite of the *referendum*, the so-called sovereign people remain the instrument and the very humble servant of the bourgeoisie.
>
> We can well see then that in the representative system, even when improved upon with the aid of the *referendum*, popular control does not exist, and since no serious liberty is possible for the people without this control, we are driven to the conclusion that popular liberty and self-government are falsehoods (ibid, 219-220).

Anarchists continued to make this negative evaluation after Switzerland's 1874 constitution was passed into law. Malatesta wrote in 1884 that, "there's a republic in Switzerland, yet there is poverty, the Protestant and Catholic clergy rule the roost, and one cannot live in a city without a residence permit, and the free citizens of Switzerland trade their votes for a few glasses of beer!" (Malatesta 2014, 19). He observed in 1902 that "whether we are talking about feudal, monarchist Spain, or about France, Switzerland, or America—republican, democratic countries—always and everywhere the government massacres strikers" (ibid, 321. Also see Kropotkin 2014, 120-21; Malatesta 2016, 268; Malatesta 2023, 146; Spies 1886).

The anarchist objection to direct legislation did not only apply to bourgeois republics. In 1899 Malatesta rejected the goal of creating a socialist society in which there is a democratic government with "the revocability of the mandate and the referendum, meaning that voters are always free to remove their elected representative and nominate another, and that the laws passed by deputies are not valid until they have been approved by the people in a direct vote" (Malatesta 2019, 98). This is because the decisions made by such a government would be laws that are imposed on everyone within a society by institutionalised means of coercion, like the police, prisons, army, and legal system. The result is that people would be subject to the arbitrary power of an abstraction called 'the general interest', which in practice meant that "every liberty is stifled, and each person's interests are sacrificed to the interests—political or otherwise—of those who are in power" (ibid, 101).

Nor were anarchists only against nation states that rule over an entire country. In 1891 Malatesta wrote that it was wrong for others to "think that Anarchists wish merely for a territorial decentralization, leaving the principle of government intact, and thus confounding Anarchy with cantonal or communal government" (Malatesta 2014, 112). This is why Kropotkin praised the 1871 Paris Commune for revolting against the French nation state, whilst also critiquing it for establishing a local representative government (Kropotkin 2014, 441-42, 445-46, 451-54). For Kropotkin "the failure of representative government within the Commune itself proved that self-government and self-administration must be carried further than in a merely territorial sense; to be effective they must also be carried into the various functions of life within

the free community—representative government being as deficient in a city as it is in a nation" (Kropotkin 2019, 38). Kropotkin's friend Élisée Reclus, who was a survivor of the Commune, lamented in 1880 that it had been insurrectional below, but governmental above (Fleming 1979, 109).

A similar critique was made by Malatesta, who described the Commune as "a government like all the rest" which produced "a great deal of declarations of principles, very advanced but never implemented" (Malatesta 2019, 242-43). In this respect Malatesta was correct. The Commune's government was a converted municipal council composed of around sixty-five male delegates who had been elected via universal male suffrage. These delegates, unlike those in an anarchist organisation, wielded decision-making power and their decrees were enforced by a miniature coercive apparatus composed of mayors, police, and national guardsmen (Merriman 2014, 54-57; Tombs 1999, 73-75, 80-83, 86). This police force functioned like any other, despite the fact that the Blanquists in charge of it rebranded the Prefecture of Police as the Ex-Prefecture. In theory police officers would, like all public officials, be elected by male citizens and recalled if they did not perform their duties. In practice police commissioners were appointed by the Ex-Prefecture and not elected. The Commune's Council issued a decree that banned prostitution and this led to the police arresting 270 sex workers. Other governmental measures included bans on begging, gambling, and serving alcohol to people who were already drunk. Such a law did not apply to the head of the police who was well known for his love of wine (Merriman 2014, 72-75, 83; Tombs 1999, 88-89).

So far it has been established that anarchist frequently critiqued the many different permutations of representative democracy. This included the proposal that direct legislation via the rights of referendum and initiative should be added to representative government in order to make it more democratic. It is much harder to find anarchists explicitly arguing against direct democratic governments that are ruled by a citizen assembly. In the 19th century the main example of this system of government that someone could be familiar with was ancient Athens. It is nonetheless very rare to even find anarchists discussing the topic. This is not because they were unfamiliar with classical antiquity. In 1867 Bakunin casually name-dropped the sixth century rulers of Lindos and Corinth (Bakunin 1980, 140-41) and noted that within "the republics of antiquity . . . the freedom of their citizens was founded upon the forced labor of slaves" (ibid, 107). Kropotkin read and cited books that discussed ancient Athenian democracy, such as Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* (Kropotkin 2006, 68n7; Morgan 1964, 213, 219). He even devoted an entire chapter of his final book *Ethics: Origin and Development* to ancient Greek views on morality and demonstrated a clear familiarity with the works of Plato and Aristotle (Kropotkin 1924, 84-113). As part of doing so he briefly mentioned the existence of ancient Greek democracies, "under which science, art, and philosophy reached a high stage of development" (ibid, 116. Also see Kropotkin 2018, 250, 253, 276). The same point was made by the anarchist geographer Reclus, who covered the history of ancient Greece in the second volume of his magnum opus *Humanity and the Earth* (Clark 2013, 61-62; Reclus 1905, 334).

There are two likely reasons why historical anarchist critiques of direct democracies in ancient Greece are so rare. Firstly, most anarchist theory was published in short articles and pamphlets that were read by workers. The general goal of this theory was to persuade workers to become anarchists and revolt against the ruling classes. Anarchist authors choose to explain why currently existing social structures should be abolished, rather than critiquing a system of government that was from thousands of years ago and no longer existed. This is no different

to the fact that anarchists wrote numerous critiques of capitalist wage labour, but did not feel the need to write articles attacking the ancient Greek version of slavery. Secondly, anarchism as a social movement developed out of, among other things, radical republicanism, which aimed to abolish monarchies and replace them with democratic republics (Ravindranathan 1988; Pernicone 1993, 35-44). In parallel to these events anarchism also emerged in opposition to the first social democratic political parties, which advocated the creation of a workers' or people's state and the establishment of democracy across the different spheres of society, especially government and the economy (Liebknecht 1899, 3-8, 24, 49-52). This language was a continuation of an old socialist phrase from the 1840s: the universal democratic and social republic (MECW 7, 586; Lehning 1970, 172, 242). As a result, the development of anarchist theory was intertwined with the rejection of certain democratic ideas, including the goal of bourgeois representative democracy, a workers' republic and so on. The need to combat these ideas continued over the following decades because republican and social democratic movements remained the main rivals to anarchism until the 1917 Russian revolution and the spread of various forms of Leninism. This explains why the word 'democracy' regularly appeared in anarchist critiques of republicans or social democrats, rather than articles about other topics.

Although anarchist authors focused on critiquing representative democracies, many of their objections also applied to direct democracies. One of the reasons why Malatesta rejected democracy was because really existing democratic governments are coercive organs through which a minority rules over and dominates the majority. He wrote in 1924 that, "it is easy to understand what has already been proved by universal historical experience: even in the most democratic of democracies it is always a small minority that rules and imposes its will and interests by force" (Malatesta 1995, 78). As a result "democracy is a lie, it is oppression and is in reality, oligarchy; that is, government by the few to the advantage of a privileged class" (ibid, 77). What historical experiences Malatesta probably had in mind can be gleamed from articles he wrote decades earlier. In 1884 he noted that,

> There is a republic in America, and, for all her expanses of free land, for all her superabundant production, there are people starving to death. They have a republic, but despite the freedom and equality written into the constitution, the poor man has no human dignity, and the cavalry uses its clubs or sabres to disperse workers clamoring for bread and jobs. They have their republic, but the native peoples are reduced to desperate straits and hunted down like wild animals… What am I saying? In America, as in Rome and in Greece before her, we have seen that the republic is compatible with slavery! (Malatesta 2014, 18)

This line of thinking was continued in another article that was published a few months later. Malatesta explained that, "in Greece, for instance, in order to deliver the greatest well-being to the people, they sought the best government, or 'the government of the most.' But in the end, it turned out that *government is always government by the few* and not by the best either but by *scoundrels*—whether monarchist, aristocratic, or democratic, it was still despotic or, to use a modern term, *the business of the haves*" (ibid, 23). Directly democratic Athens described itself as the rule of the majority or the people but in reality it was the rule of adult male citizens, who were a minority of the polis' population, over the majority: slaves, foreigners, women, and children. Even within the assembly there were male citizens who had greater degrees of influence and power than others, such as Pericles.

A more detailed analysis of ancient Athenian democracy was made by Rudolf Rocker in his 1937 book *Nationalism and Culture*. He praised Athenian culture at length and claimed that "it was no accident that comedy and the drama reached their highest perfection just when the Athenian democracy was in fullest bloom" (Rocker 1937, 359). He believed that the "spirit of creative activity reached its high state of perfection in every city of Greece with the exception of Sparta, which never freed itself from the domination of the aristocracy, while all the other cities were finding the way to democracy" (ibid, 367). As part of this argument he connected the high quality of Greek architecture with the political form of the polis. He thought that,

> Only in a country where the individual constantly took the liveliest kind of part in public affairs, and could easily keep track of those affairs, could architectonic skill reach such perfection. Among the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Persians and other peoples of antiquity, architecture as an art was limited to the palaces and tombs of the kings and the temples of the gods. Among the Greeks we first find it applied to all the purposes of public life and to personal use (ibid, 360).

These points underpinned his belief that the polis is superior to modern nation states. He argued that,

> Since the area of the Greek municipality extended to only a few square miles every citizen was easily able to keep track of the entire public life and to form his own judgment about everything—a circumstance of great importance, which is utterly inconceivable in our modern state organization with the wide ramifications of its governmental machinery and the complicated gearing of its bureaucratic institutions. Hence the perplexed helplessness of the citizen of the modern state, his exaggerated overvaluation of governmental proclamations and of political leadership, which deprive him of all personal initiative. Since he is, of course, not in a position to keep track of all the fields of activity of the modern state and its internal and external policy, and is, on the other hand, so firmly convinced of the unalterable fixedness of all these functions that he believes he would sink into a bottomless quicksand if the political equilibrium were at all disturbed, his feeling of his own personal unimportance and dependence upon the state becomes strengthened, and his belief in the absolute necessity of political authority—which today is deeper seated in man than his belief in the authority of God—becomes deeper still. So, at best, he dreams only of a change of the persons at the head of the state and does not comprehend that all the inadequacies and evils of the political machine which constantly oppress him depend on the very existence of the state itself and hence always recur in any of the various forms it may assume.
>
> Not so with the Greek. Since he could more easily get a view of the inner workings of the *polis* he was in a better position to pass judgment on the conduct of his leading men. He had their earthbound humanity always before his eyes and was the more interested in his own affairs because his intellectual agility was not crippled by blind faith in authority. In no country were the great men so exposed to the judgment of public opinion as in Greece at the time of its highest cultural development. Even the greatest and most undeniable merit afforded no protection in this regard. Men of the

> stature of a Miltiades, a Themistodes [two Athenian generals], had to experience this in their own persons (ibid, 366-367).

This high praise went alongside the acknowledgment of important negatives features of democratic Athens like slavery, the persecution of certain independent thinkers like Socrates, the corrupting effects of power, and imperialism (ibid, 352, 372-373). Similar criticisms were made by Reclus in his overview of ancient Greek history (Reclus 1905, 334-38).

The anarchist rejection of authoritarian direct democracies like ancient Athens, where male citizens gathered to pass decrees and laws in a formal assembly, should not be interpreted as a rejection of all assemblies. Anarchists were against government, authority, and domination. They were not opposed to people voluntarily meeting as equals in an assembly in order to engage in a collective process of deliberation and decision-making. They in fact advocated this as a form of anarchist organisation. The Spanish anarchist José Llunas Pujols wrote in 1882 that an anarchist association "meets in a general assembly once a week or more often, at which everything pertinent to its operations is decided" (Pujols 2005, 126). Another Spanish anarchist called José Monroy recalled that in the early 1900s at meetings of the local trade union section "we would submit ideas to the assembly, and the bad ideas would be thrown out" (Quoted in Mintz 2004, 27). Decades later the National Confederation of Labour (CNT), which was a Spanish anarcho-syndicalist trade union, proposed in its 1936 Zaragoza congress resolutions that collective decisions in an anarchist society would be made in "general assemblies", "communal assemblies" and "popular assemblies" (Quoted in Peirats 2011, 103, 105, 107).

This language was not unique to Spanish anarchists and can be found across anarchist literature. In 1871 Bakunin praised "popular assemblies" and "general membership meetings" that had been called by construction workers in Geneva (Bakunin 1980, 247-48. For the context see Eckhardt 2016, 11-12). In 1874 Guillaume proposed that during a revolution workers "ought immediately to meet in general assembly" in order to organise the establishment of collective ownership (Guillaume 2005, 251-52). The attendees of Bakunin's funeral in July 1876, which included notable anarchists like Adhémar Schwitzguébel, Guillaume, and Reclus, organised an "assembly" where they formulated and unanimously agreed to a resolution (Guillaume 2001, 51-52). In 1880 the Courtelary district of the Jura Federation proposed that,

> Once trades bodies have been established, the next step is to organize local life. The organ of this local life is to be the federation of trades bodies and it is this local federation which is to constitute the future Commune. Will it be a general assembly of all inhabitants, or delegates from the trades bodies prior to referral to their particular assemblies, who will draw up the Commune's contract? It seems puerile to us to stipulate preference for one arrangement or the other: the two arrangements no doubt will apply, according to the traditions and particular importance of the Communes (Schwitzguébel 2005, 291).

Malatesta claimed in 1884 that within a federation built on anarchist principles, congress resolutions are only binding on sections if "they have been approved by the assemblies of the sections" (Malatesta 2014, 64). In 1922 he predicted that during a revolution the distribution of scarce goods like food "would have to be made through decisions taken at popular assemblies and carried out by groups and individuals who have volunteered or are duly delegated" (Malatesta 2015, 121).

For Kropotkin the anarchist advocacy of assemblies was a continuation of previous forms of organisation that had emerged in popular movements. In his 1909 history of the 18th century French Revolution he wrote that in Paris, "the masses, accustoming themselves to act without receiving orders from the national representatives, were practising what was described later on as Direct Self-Government" (Kropotkin 1989, 183). This was achieved through the formation of, "the Commune of Paris" which "was not to be a governed State, but a people governing itself directly—when possible—without intermediaries, without masters" (ibid, 190). He claimed that "by acting in this way—and the libertarians would no doubt do the same today—the districts of Paris laid the foundations of a new, free, social organisation" (ibid, 186). Within the Commune "it was the General Assembly of the section, and not the elected Communal Council, which was to be the supreme authority for all that concerned the inhabitants of Paris. And if the sections decided to submit to the decision of a majority amongst themselves in general questions, they did not for all that abdicate either their right to federate by means of freely contracted alliances, or that of passing from one section to another for the purpose of influencing their neighbours' decisions, and thus trying by every means to arrive at unanimity" (ibid, 190). From this he concluded that, "the principles of anarchism, expressed some years later in England by W. Godwin, already dated from 1789, and that they had their origin, not in theoretic speculations, but in the *deeds* of the Great French Revolution" (ibid, 184).

In 1913 Kropotkin wrote in *Modern Science and Anarchy* that the sections created by the Parisian masses in the French revolution were part of a tendency throughout history for "popular movements of an anarchist character" to emerge in response to domination by ruling minorities (Kropotkin 2018, 135-36. Also see ibid, 84). From such revolutionary experiments he concluded that,

> Socialism, we have said, in whatever form it may arise during the events leading up to communism will therefore have to find its own form of political relations. It *cannot* utilise the old political forms, [just] as it cannot utilise religious hierarchy and its teachings, or imperial or dictatorial forms and their theories. In one way or another it will have to become *more popular*, closer to the assembly [*forum*], than representative government. It must be less dependent on *representation* and become more *self-government*, more *government of each by themselves*. This is what the proletariat of Paris sought to do in 1871; it is what the Sections of the Paris Commune and many smaller towns attempted to do in 1793–1794 (ibid, 187).

He thought that, "the free Commune—that is the *political* form that the *social* revolution must take" should learn lessons from these previous experiments and, unlike them, reject all systems of government in favour of "the free federation of communes" at a regional level and free "agreement between the different producer, consumer and other groups within the commune" at a local level (ibid, 159).

Myth Two: anarchists never advocated democracy prior to the new left of the 1960s.

The relationship between anarchism and democracy is actually far more complex. One of the main co-founders of the anarchist movement was Bakunin. Before he became an anarchist in

1868, he was a radical democrat for roughly twenty-seven years (Corrêa 2024, 475). In 1842 he came out in support of universal human emancipation, democracy, and a revolution that would overturn the existing order and create a fundamentally new kind of society. He predicted that this coming revolution would be launched by the people, in the sense of the poor and oppressed in general (Bakunin 1973, 39-40, 55-58). In 1843 he made it clear that by democracy he meant "the self-government of the people" (Quoted in Corrêa 2024, 153). In this period Bakunin was a radical republican in the French revolutionary tradition (ibid, 93). From 1845 onwards he added to this a support for national liberation movements within the Russian, Prussian, and Austrian empires and the commitment to creating a federation of Slavic republics (ibid, 163-166, 171-73, 193).

Bakunin was subsequently imprisoned for eight years and then exiled in Siberia for four years due to his participation in the 1848 revolutions and the 1849 Dresden uprising. In late 1861 he managed to escape and travel to London. In February 1862 he published a programme for democratic revolution in Russia, which was influenced by the Narodnik organisation Land and Freedom. It demanded the collective ownership of property, the national liberation of the Slavs, and the self-determination of peoples via autonomous communes (ibid, 186). He called this doctrine "*Slavic socialism*" (Quoted in ibid, 197n29). Its political structure was envisioned as "a peasant democracy . . . based on our self-administered rural community" in which "government, justice, and administration will be ensured by democratically elected officials". These autonomous communes would then federate into provinces and ultimately countries with "an executive power, a judiciary, and the entire administrative hierarchy, with all their members also democratically elected" (Quoted in ibid, 231-232).

In 1866 Bakunin wrote a programme for a secret association known as the International Brotherhood or the International Fraternity. Within it he argued that abolishing the nation state was necessary to achieve democracy. He argued that "*the programme*" of global revolution "*can be none other than that of democratic and social revolution*" (Bakunin 1973, 86). For Bakunin, "*the aim of democratic and social revolution*" included the abolition of capitalism and "the complete emancipation of individuals and associations from the yoke of divine and human authority, the absolute destruction of all compulsory unions and amalgamations of communes into provinces, provinces and conquered lands into the State, and lastly the radical dissolution of the centralist, custodial, authoritarian State, with all its military, bureaucratic, administrative, judicial and civil institutions. In other words, *the restoration of liberty to all—individuals, collective bodies, associations, communes, provinces, regions and nations alike—and mutual safeguard of that liberty through federation*" (ibid, 86. Also see ibid, 65-67, 78-83). Bakunin was nonetheless not yet an anarchist and so still advocated a system of decentralised "government" in which autonomous communes voluntarily federated to form provincial, national, and international parliaments that had accompanying legal and tax systems (ibid, 69-76).

In September 1867 Bakunin attended the founding congress of the League of Peace and Freedom, which aimed to unite supporters of free democracy in order to help prevent war and forge a United States of Europe. It generally adhered to bourgeois, liberal, and republican ideas. Bakunin attempted to intervene in this congress by spreading socialist views, including the goal of abolishing the centralised state and replacing it with the free federation of communes (Carr 1975, 327-31). The congress ended with a banquet, during which Bakunin proposed the following toast: "the League and its future congresses which, by developing its principles and by uniting more

and more closely republicans scattered throughout the world, will hasten the coming of true democracy by federalism, socialism, and anti-theologism" (Quoted in Carr 1975, 332).

In June or July 1868 Bakunin joined the Geneva section of the International Workingmen's Association (Carr 1975, 337). Around the same time he co-founded a Russian-language journal called *Narodnoye Delo* (The Cause of the People). The first issue appeared on 1st September and featured a statement of principles called "Program of Russian Socialist Democracy", which called for the abolition of the state and the establishment of the free association of producers (Bakunin 2016a; Guillaume 2001, 35; McClellan 2022, 12-16). Bakunin forwarded a copy of this programme to the secretariat of the International's Brussels Congress, which was held a few days later (Carr 1975, 338-339). During this period Bakunin was also identifying as an anarchist. He first publicly called himself an "anarchist" in September 1867 in "The Slavic Question," which was printed in the Italian paper *Libertà e Giustizia* (*Freedom and Justice).* He wrote in response to Pan-Slavists that "they are unitarians at all costs, always preferring public order to freedom and I am an anarchist and prefer freedom to public order (Quoted in Eckhardt 2016, 453n47). Whilst preparing *Narodnoye Delo* for publication he wrote to a German friend, "we are Federalists, and, as Proudhon said, Anarchists, and above all Socialists" (Quoted in McClellan 2022, 13).

In late September Bakunin attended the second congress of the League of Peace and Freedom and, once again, attempted to persuade the League to adopt socialist principles. This plan failed and, on the 25th September, he and fourteen other congress participants quit the League. The letter of protest he handed in referred to the signatories as "social democrats" (Carr 1975, 340-44). Bakunin later claimed that he persuaded this group to join the International and form a new organisation in order to maintain their connections with one another. At the meeting there was a disagreement between the French and Italians, who wanted to create a secret and a public organisation, and Bakunin, who only wanted there to be a secret organisation. Bakunin was in the minority and so two organisations were founded, one public and the other secret. At this meeting it was decided that the organisations should be called the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy and a programme was adopted, which was based on a draft written by Bakunin (Eckhardt 2016, 2-3; Lehning 1974, 73). The programme of the secret Alliance advocated the "demolition of all religious, monarchic, aristocratic and bourgeois authorities and powers in Europe" and so the "destruction of all present-day States together with all their political, judicial, bureaucratic and financial institutions" (Bakunin 1973, 173). A much lengthier programme drafted by Bakunin in 1868 described itself as an expansion of "the programme of the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy" that clarified "the questions of woman, the religious and juridical family and the state, in the *Russian social democratic programme*" (Bakunin 1973, 166).

In early 1869 Guillaume asked Bakunin, who he had met for the first time in January, to write for his paper *Le Progrès* (Progress). Bakunin misunderstood this proposal and incorrectly thought Guillaume was suggesting that the paper become the official organ of the Alliance. In his reply Bakunin wrote, "Yes, let *Progrès* become the journal of the Alliance. For the words 'Organ of the Democrats of Le Locle' just substitute 'Organ of Social Democracy' (Quoted in Carr 1975, 358). In June Bakunin endorsed, within an article that was published in *L'Égalité* (Equality), "the party of socialist democracy, the International Working-Men's Association" (Bakunin 1985, 86). He followed this up with another article in July, which described the programme of the International as "the reversal of all bourgeois politics, the point where socialist democracy is absolutely and definitively separated from the exclusively political democracy of the Bourgeois" (ibid, 90). By socialist democracy Bakunin did not mean representative democracy or any system

of government. He was clear that the International "rejected all bourgeois, monarchical, liberal, or even radical democratic politics" and aimed to create "a force able to struggle against and triumph over the coalition of all privileged classes and all States" (ibid, 90, 92). Elsewhere he argued that a democratic state is a contradiction in terms because "where all rule, there are no more ruled, and there is no State" (Bakunin 1964, 223. He repeated this point in 1873. See Bakunin 1990, 178). In October Bakunin wrote a letter to the editors of *Le Réveil* (The Awakening). This letter was envisioned as the first chapter of a planned but never completed book he titled "Profession of Faith of a Russian Socialist Democrat" (Carr 1975, 369; Bakunin 1911, 239). Lastly, in a February 1870 letter to the Alliance member Albert Richards he said that the development of collective power was "the true guarantee for the triumph of democracy" (Bakunin 1980, 385. For an alternative translation see Bakunin 2017).

From the above evidence it is clear that Bakunin, one of the co-founders of the anarchist movement, initially viewed himself as a socialist democrat who advocated the abolition of the state and used this language for at least three years. In response it is sometimes suggested that the only reason why Bakunin labeled the organisation he co-founded in September 1868 the Alliance of Socialist Democracy is because he thought this name would increase the odds of the group being accepted into the International by Marx, who was a member of the general council. This narrative is purely speculative and is not supported by primary sources. The available evidence indicates that: (1) Bakunin advocated the goal of socialist democracy before he personally joined the International in June/July 1868, let alone when the Alliance was founded in late September; (2) he referred to himself as a socialist democrat in public and private contexts that had no connection to Marx; and (3) Bakunin wanted the Alliance to be a secret group, rather than a section of the International. Unfortunately Bakunin's twenty-eight page account of the founding of the Alliance and its initial activity has been lost. As a result, certain questions cannot be answered definitively (Bakunin 2016b, 142-43; Bakunin 1913, 152-53). All the surviving primary sources do nonetheless point in one direction: the main reason why Bakunin adopted the label of socialist democracy is that he was a radical democrat for several decades and then became an anarchist in 1868. The language of democracy carried over and he continued to use it in his earliest anarchist texts.

This was not a unique pattern. In November 1868 a member of the Alliance named Giuseppe Fanelli travelled to Spain and gave a series of talks about socialism to republican workers in Barcelona and Madrid. He also distributed socialist literature, including the rules of the International and several Swiss workers' associations, various Internationalist newspapers, Bakunin's speeches at the League of Peace and Freedom, and the programme of the Alliance. This led to a wave of organising that eventually resulted in the formation of a group of dedicated anarchist militants in April 1870 and the Spanish regional federation of the International in June. The name of the organisation of dedicated militants was borrowed from Bakunin: The Alliance of Socialist Democracy. The Spanish section of the International continued to recruit republicans to socialism over the following months, especially in the aftermath of the Paris Commune (Eckhart 2016, 153-159; Esenwein 1989, 11-21; Garcia-Balañà 2018). These three influences – the International, Bakunin's early rendition of anarchist socialism, and federal republicanism – significantly shaped how ideas were expressed in the Spanish section. This is why the September 1871 congress resolutions of the Valencia Conference declared that,

> Seeing that the true meaning of the word 'Republic' is 'the public thing', that is what belongs to the collectivity and involves the collective property;
>
> That 'democracy' means the free exercise of individual rights, which is not practicable except under Anarchy, that is to say by the abolition of the political and juridical States in the place of which it will be necessary to constitute workers' States the functions of which will be simply economic;
>
> That man's rights cannot be subjected to laws for they are indefeasible and unalienable;
>
> That in consequence the Federation must simply have an economic character;
>
> The Conference of the workers of the Spanish region of the Workers International gathered in Valencia declares: That the true democratic and federal republic is the collective property, Anarchy and the economic Federation, that is to say the free universal federation of free associations of agricultural and industrial workers (Quoted in Leval 1975, 22-23).

To a modern reader these resolutions sound extremely paradoxical and self-contradictory. It should be kept in mind that the people who founded the anarchist movement within the International initially advocated, to quote Bakunin at the 1869 Basel congress, "the destruction of all national and territorial states, and the foundation upon their ruins of the International Working-Men's State" (Bakunin 1985, 132). The free association of producers was called a workers' state because some socialists borrowed a strange definition of the term from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's work in the 1850s and early 1860s (Wilbur 2013). The 1867 Lausanne congress resolutions on collective ownership refer to state ownership, but the state in question is actually just an association of individuals who have no powers superior to the individual and no interests apart from society (Archer 1997, 101). As the anarchist movement fully emerged the goal of collective ownership by the associated producers continued to be advocated but was no longer called a state. Even the words 'anarchist' and 'anarchism' took years to be adopted and co-existed with a wide variety of other labels that have since fallen out of use, such as collectivist, revolutionary socialist, autonomist, social revolutionary, and (lest it be forgotten) socialist democrat (Baker 2023, 24, 29-39). Such democratic language did not catch on among anarchists and by 1872 Bakunin had abandoned it. This can be seen in the fact that when he founded a new organisation, which he viewed as the successor to the original Alliance, he decided to name it the Alliance of Social Revolutionaries. In one source he claimed that this name change occurred in response to German state socialists using the term 'Social Democratic' for the party they formed in 1869 (Bakunin 1990, 235-36n134; Eckhardt 2016, 355).

The language of democracy was used by at least one group affiliated with the Anti-Authoritarian International, which was a majority anarchist organisation that also contained a few state socialists. In 1876 Greek revolutionary socialists founded the "Democratic Club of Patras", which was represented at the Anti-Authoritarian International's Berne congress by the Italian anarchist Andrea Costa (Pomonis 2004, 4-5). After the congress the Democratic Club accepted all the congress resolutions and wrote a letter which claimed "we are persuaded that our ideas and the principles of your program are in total harmony" and desire "to come into closer contact with you, since we believe that our solidarity will result in the triumph of our common ideas" (Quoted in ibid, 5). In 1877 a federation was formed called the Democratic League

of the People, which described itself as "socialist" and an "enemy of all politicians" (Quoted in ibid, 6). On 8th April 1877 the *Bulletin* of the anarchist Jura Federation published an article by Dionysis Ambelicopoulos titled "Study on Socialism in Greece". In the essay Ambelicopoulos, who was a founding member of the Democratic Club, wrote,

> The Greek people have named the regime that in the West is called Republique, Constitution. As far as the constitution goes, we are equally advanced as Switzerland, America or France. Universal suffrage, for instance, has long ago been established in Greece.
>
> We deem it superfluous to remind that universal [suffrage] has not brought about the expected results. On the contrary, corruption was legitimised (despite the fact that there is no aristocracy in our country and despite the fact that the clergy is on our side), because elections take place in the shadow of the bayonets and are decided by the many governmental machinations.
>
> The people are not favorably inclined towards the constitution, it is only the bourgeois who label themselves "constitutionalists", just like in the West they call themselves "republicans". Consequently, the Greek people, politically speaking, grasp the new ideas.
>
> What in the West is called communism or socialism, the Greek people express it using the term Democracy, rule of the People. It is exactly the same thing that Thucydides expressed in the speech he attributed to Athenagoras of Syracuse. Modern Greeks speak exactly the same way (Quoted in ibid, 8-9).

In May 1877 the Patris Democratic Club published the first issue of their paper *Elliniki Dimokratia* (Hellenic Democracy). The programme of the paper endorsed universal human emancipation, economic equality, direct action, and revolution. Their goal was the creation of a "Democratic Regime" in which there was (a) "total decentralisation and perfect self-administration of the Municipalities, i.e. every Municipality to be totally independent and self ruled"; (b) "total freedom of the human being"; and (c) "every authority to be submitted directly to the rule of the people" (Quoted in ibid, 11). The Democratic Club of Patras is typically referred to as the first anarchist group in Greece. It is true that the group was interconnected with international anarchist networks, submitted articles to anarchist publications, and embraced several key anarchist ideas, especially on the topic of strategy. Despite this fact they were not strictly speaking anarchists due to their view that authority should be controlled by the people, rather than abolished. This can be seen by contrasting the language of the Democratic Club with the League of Anarchist Workers of Athens, who in 1900 rejected "anything that could be construed as a government, as authority" (Quoted in ibid, 22). It does nonetheless highlight the extent to which the emergence of anarchism in Greece was intertwined with the history of radical democracy. In this respect it is the same as Spain and Italy.

Over the following decades anarchists used the word democracy to refer to systems of organisation that are incompatible with anarchism: majority government and majority rule. From at least 1917 onwards a minority of authors started using democratic language to refer to old anarchist ideas. This seems to have occurred due to, among other factors, the large impact that the soviets and workers' councils from the Russian and German revolutions had on the anarchist

imagination (Berry 2009, 36-77). In August 1917 the Russian anarchist paper *Golos Truda* (The Voice of Labour) referred to the soviets as "the only possible form of non-party organization of the 'revolutionary democracy'" and the only instruments to achieve the "decentralization and diffusion of power" (Quoted in Avrich 2005, 140). The co-editor of this paper was the anarcho-syndicalist Gregori Maximoff. In 1927 he wrote that "true democracy, developed to its logical extreme, can become a reality only under the conditions of a communal confederation. This democracy is Anarchy" (Maximoff 2015, 38). On another occasion Maximoff declared that "Anarchism is, in the final analysis, nothing but democracy in its purest and most extreme form" (Maximoff 1988, 19). Maximoff was an extremely well-known figure within the anarchist movement. He wrote one of the best known anarchist histories of the Russian revolution, was editor of five anarchist periodicals, and compiled an important Bakunin anthology (Rocker 1964, 26).

Maximoff was not the only influential person to adopt this language. In 1932 the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist Isaac Puente wrote that within a libertarian communist society "organised without the state and without private ownership" workplace and community associations with general assemblies would "run on federal and democratic principles" and "be sovereign in their decision making, without being beholden to any higher body, their only obligation being to federate one with another as dictated by the economic requirement for liaison and communications bodies organised in industrial federations" (Puente 1932).[2] In 1935 Christiaan Cornelissen wrote in the anarchist periodical *Vanguard* that "the libertarian communists favor a democratic order directed from the bottom up, in which each individual maintains his liberty of thought and action" (Cornelissen 1935, 7). A 1937 article in *Vanguard* by the anonymous authors S.M. and R.W. described an anarchist communist society as one in which "democracy is therefore maximised and made an active process" (S.M. and R.W. 1937, 13). Although *Vanguard* is barely remembered today, at the time it was one of the main English language anarchist periodicals in the world. This is demonstrated by the fact that it published contributions by very famous anarchists like Goldman and Rocker, was in print for seven years, and had a peak circulation of 3,000 to 4,000 subscribers (Cornell 2011, 284-289).

In 1936 the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist Diego Abad de Santillán wrote that, "after the Revolution we will have factory, shop or industrial Councils, constituted of workers, clerks, and technicians in representation of the personnel of the enterprise, who will have the right to moderate and revoke their delegates. No one knows better than the workers themselves the capacity of each one in a determined establishment. There, where everybody knows everybody, the practice of democracy is possible" (Santillán 1937).[3] In 1938 the Ukrainian anarchist Ida Mett, who was one of the co-authors of the *Platform*, claimed that "anarchism had an influence on the Kronstadt

[2] On one occasion in the essay Puente says that under libertarian communism "democracy, that is, government of the people by the people, will be a reality". Yet elsewhere in the text he explicitly attacks the state, government, authority, and any top down organisational structure. In 1933 he advocated a society without "rulers" and "legislation" (Puente n.d., 2). In a later text from 1936 he is clear that "el Comunismo libertario es una forma de organización social, en la cual el gobierno de los hombres se sustituye por la administración colectiva de las cosas" [libertarian communism is a form of social organisation in which the government of men is replaced by the collective administration of things] (Puente 2003, 15). Puente cannot therefore be interpreted as a supporter of democratic government. He instead appears to have referred to 'government of the people by the people' for purely rhetorical purposes in order to claim that anarchism will realise the empty promises of bourgeois society.

[3] The English translation I am using refers to executives instead of clerks. I changed this because the Spanish original says "los obreros, los empleados y los técnicos". According to the dictionaries I consulted, the Spanish word 'empleados' can be translated as employees, staff, or clerks. 'Employees' makes little sense in the context of describing

insurrection to the extent that it advocated the idea of proletarian democracy" (Mett 2018, 372). That year the Friends of Durruti Group in Spain proposed that "members of the revolutionary council will be elected by democratic vote in the union organisations" (Friends of Durruti Group 1978, 42).[4] In 1939 Vernon Richards wrote in the British anarchist periodical *Revolt*, which he co-founded and edited, that "true democracy—Free Socialism—can only exist when the workers are strong enough (and we speak internationally) to control their own economic and social lives" (Richards 1939, 1).

The language of democracy was also used by the Indian anarchist M.P.T Archarya. In 1927 he claimed that "Anarchist Socialists" believe "that socialism can only be without rulerships of any kind by a part of mankind—however vast a part that be—over the rest, and therefore the abolition and prevention of every rule by man over man is the first condition of realizing Socialism, equality, democracy, brotherhood, and oneness" (Archarya 2019, 62). A year later he described his vision of a future society based on the principles of "non-violent economics". He advocated "the establishment of locally independent society within which each member will be equal to another member and will represent himself instead of being represented by somebody else and ordered from above. It is only in 'autonomous communes' of this kind that social solidarity and social work is possible and that universal 'democracy' can be ensured and maintained to an equal degree. It is only thus that the energy of all members of the whole society can be liberated and directed into social and international channels—bringing pleasure and prosperity to each and all. All control and government authority of any kind will thus become superfluous" (ibid, 78). In 1948 he wrote that "the anarchists want freedom, democracy, and socialism. But they consider—nay, are convinced, these cannot be obtained or maintained under state protection or direction. The states are therefore the enemies of freedom, democracy, and socialism" (ibid, 195).

From these examples, which probably only scratch the surface of the total number that are scattered across anarchist periodicals, it is clear that several influential anarchists used democratic language to describe a stateless classless society without authority and did so decades prior to the emergence of the new left. In so doing they were not endorsing democracy in the distinct sense of majority government or majority rule and so remained committed to anarchism.[5]

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communism and 'staff' is redundant in a sentence that also mentions workers and technicians. I opted for clerks because elsewhere he refers to "workers, administrators, and technicians" when discussing workers' councils.

[4] The original Spanish version of the text uses the word "junta" to refer to a "national defense council" or committee composed of workers which would perform the functions of "management of the war", "supervision of revolutionary order", "international affairs", and "revolutionary propaganda". Positions within the defense council were to be regularly rotated and "the trade union assemblies will exercise control over the council's activities". The self-management of the economy and daily life would be done via federations of workplace associations (unions) and community associations (free municipalities), which were the standard organs of self-management advocated by Spanish anarchists throughout the 1930s. They strongly opposed collaboration with the bourgeois republic and thought that decentralised organs of self-management "precluded the erection of a new State system" (Friends of Durruti, 1978). In English the term 'junta' has become shorthand for a top down military government of army officers that forcefully takes state power in a coup. I altered the translation to avoid confusion with 'junta' in this very different sense of the term.

[5] It may be argued in response that the Friends of Durriti Group were both pro-democracy and advocated majority government/rule during the transition to anarchy. In order for such an argument to work it needs to be painstakingly established that when they advocated a 'national defence council' of delegates, alongside federations of workplace and community associations, they were (a) going far beyond standard anarchist views on revolutionary violence and the development of working class power and (b) were essentially advocating a workers' government (as defined by anarchist theory). I am not aware of any primary sources which support such an interpretation. A similar sounding proposal had previously been made by Bakunin in 1868. He wrote, "The Commune will be organized by the

Myth Three: anarchists only use consensus decision-making and have always rejected majority voting as a form of majority rule.

This is false. A huge number of anarchists saw no contradiction between their rejection of majority government/majority rule and their use of majority voting within free associations. This is because it was only a mechanism through which a group could voluntarily select a course of action, resolve a dispute, allocate tasks, or record opinions, rather than a form of authority, domination, or rulership. Majority voting is in fact as old an anarchist method of decision-making as the anarchist movement itself. It was used in three main contexts: (1) decisions within a local group; (2) decisions at the congresses or plenums of regional and national federations; and (3) decisions at international congresses, which were either organised by international federations or were loose gatherings of anarchists from different countries.

Within this section I shall provide a brief and condensed history of anarchist majority voting across these three main contexts. Before I do so, it is necessary to clarify that anarchist proponents of majority voting were not a monolith. How majority voting was used and what purposes it served varied according to both the beliefs of the anarchists in question and the situation in which they acted. Anarchists could have different views on the topic depending upon the kind of association (mass organisation composed of workers in general like a trade union, specific anarchist organisation composed exclusively of dedicated anarchist militants, affinity group, intentional community, associations of production and consumption etc); the organisational level the decision was being made at (local, regional, national, international); and what was being decided (direct action like strikes, the construction of a railway, the agenda of a meeting, selection and mandating of delegates, how the association was structured and what its statutes were, congress resolutions etc). When interpreting what a historical anarchist thought about majority voting, it is extremely important to keep in mind which of these domains they are talking about.

Influential co-founders of the anarchist movement, including Bakunin, Jean-Louis Pindy, Schwitzguébel, and Guillaume, participated as delegates in the 1869 Basel congress of the International. They did not (to my knowledge) object to the fact that resolutions were passed via an absolute majority of votes (Graham 2016, 117-124). Bakunin's speech at the congress instead gave reasons for why other delegates should vote as he did (Bakunin 1985, 131-33). Majority voting was also used at local and regional meetings. In May 1869 more than one hundred and fifty members of the International's sections in the Jura region of Switzerland met at a general assembly. Notable participants included Bakunin, Guillaume, Schwitzguébel, and Fritz Heng, who was the secretary of the Alliance. The gathered members adopted a number of resolutions that contained core anarchist ideas, like the rejection of electoral politics (Bakunin 1985, 83; Jura Federation 1873, 58; Eckhardt 2016, 16). These resolutions were mostly "approved unanimously bar three votes" or "bar two votes" (Jura Delegates 2015, 167-68). Bakunin personally thought that within the Alliance members should "consult each other, reaching, as far as possible, unanimous resolutions" (Quoted in Corrêa 2025, 420) If a unanimous agreement could not be reached then, depending on the situation, a decision would be made via majority vote (ibid). In April 1870 a general assembly of the Geneva section of the Alliance, which was attended by

standing federation of the Barricades and by the creation of a Revolutionary Communal Council composed of one or two delegates from each barricade, one to each street or district, vested with plenary but accountable and removable mandates. The Communal Council thus created will have the power to choose executive committees from among its membership, one for each branch of the revolutionary administration of the Commune" (Bakunin 1973, 170-71).

Bakunin, decided that the group would try to attend the congress of the Romance federation and elected a delegate to do so. The minutes state that these two decisions were put "to the vote" and "accepted by the majority". Other decisions were supported unanimously, such as a proposal to collect money for striking workers (The Alliance of Socialist Democracy 2015, 176-77).

The same system of collective decision-making was used by the Spanish section of the International, which was the largest section of the organisation. The location of its founding congress was decided by a majority vote, with 10,030 out of 15,215 ballots choosing Barcelona. The congress was held in June 1870 and attended by 90 delegates representing over 150 sections with a total membership of 40,000 people. It adopted a resolution against electoral politics via majority vote. This report, which was approved by fifty-five out of seventy-four votes, was a key moment in the establishment of the anarchist movement in Spain (Eckhardt 2016, 159-164). Members of the Spanish Alliance claimed that within the Spanish section of the International they had "always discussed at length all its resolutions and that without consultation between the sections and the vote of the majority nothing apart from the common good has been put into practice" (Quoted in ibid, 257). The anarchist delegates who attended the Hague congress of the International on behalf of the Spanish section were selected and mandated via a majority vote involving thousands of workers (ibid, 273).

At the September 1872 Hague congress a series of majority votes passed resolutions that expelled Bakunin and Guillaume from the International, relocated the general council from London to New York, and committed the organisation to the goal of constituting the working class into a political party aimed at the conquest of political power. The majority of delegates who passed these resolutions did not actually represent the opinions of the organisation at large and had been deliberately fabricated by Marx and Engels in order to achieve their goals (Berthier 2015, 73-75; Eckhardt 2016, 283-352; Graham 2015, 187–92). The Hague's resolutions were subsequently rejected by most of the International's sections on the grounds that they had been passed by a fake majority and violated each section's autonomy to determine its own strategy and program (Berthier 2015, 75; Eckhardt 2016, 357–68, 383–97; Graham 2015, 199). In the immediate aftermath of the Hague congress, delegates representing the Spanish, French, Italian, Jura, and American sections of the International met at a congress in Saint-Imier, Switzerland in order to reconstitute the International on its original federalist basis. It is often regarded as the moment that the anarchist movement was founded. One of their chief concerns was ensuring that nothing like a general council could ever again impose its views onto the federation's sections. At the Anti-Authoritarian International's 1873 congress delegates adopted the following statutes which every section was expected to follow. They declared that,

3. Sections and Federations forming the Association preserve their complete autonomy, that is to say their right to organise themselves as they see fit, to administer their own affairs, without any outside interference and to choose for themselves the path they intend to take, to achieve Labour's freedom.

4. A General Congress of the Association shall meet each year, on the first Monday in September.

5. Each section, whatever the number of its members, has the right to send a delegate to the General Congress.

6. The role of Congress is to be a meeting place for workers of various countries to present their aspirations, and through discussion to bring them into harmony. At the opening of congress each Regional Federation shall present a report on the development of the Association in the past year. Except for matters of administration, there will be no recourse to voting; questions of principle cannot be subject to a vote. General Congress decisions are mandatory only for those Federations that accept them.

7. Voting at a General Congress will be by Federation, each Regional Federation having one vote.

8. Each year Congress will give the responsibility for the organisation of the following year's Congress to a Regional Federation. The Federation so mandated will serve as the Federal Bureau of the Association. Any section of federation wishing matters to be placed on the agenda of Congress should address these to it three months in advance so that all Regional Federations are made aware of them. Moreover, the Federal Bureau may serve as an intermediary between federations for matters brought to its attention: general correspondence, statistics and strikes.

9. Congress will itself designate the city where the next congress is to be held. On the date appointed for Congress delegates will come together in regular fashion on the day and place appointed without there being a need for any special notification.

10. In the course of a year, at the initiative of a section or federation, a vote of Regional Federations may change the place and date of a General Congress or convene an Extraordinary Congress, in the light of events.

11. Whenever a new Regional Federation seeks to become a member of the Association, at least three months before the General Congress, it should announce this intention to whatever Federation is acting as the Federal Bureau. The latter will make this known to all Regional Federations and these will have to decide whether or not to accept the new federation, and accordingly it will mandate its delegates to the General Congress, which in the last instance will decide (Anti-Authoritarian International 2015, 185-186).

Anarchists continued to endorse the use of majority voting after the emergence of the anarchist movement. The 1877 statutes of a German anarchist communist group claimed that decisions like the passing of motions, the admission and expulsion of members, and the election of delegates will be made via "a simple majority of the written votes" (Quoted in Carlson 1972, 403). In 1882 an anarchist club was founded in Boston. Its statutes declared that, "the chairperson and secretary will be elected from the members by majority vote" and "all issues before the Club, regarding both matters of business and of principles, will be decided by majority vote" (Quoted in Lipotkin 2019, 277). This perspective was echoed by some of the most influential anarchist theorists. In 1884 Malatesta wrote that in an anarchist society "everything is done to reach unanimity, and when this is impossible, one would vote and do what the majority wanted, or else put the decision in the hands of a third party who would act as arbitrator" (Malatesta n.d., 30).[6] The

[6] It is sometimes claimed that a young and politically immature Malatesta initially advocated democracy/majority rule/majority voting but later rejected it in the 1920s. There is no empirical evidence to support this claim. He

same combination of unanimous agreement and majority voting was advocated by the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist Isaac Puente in 1933 (Puente n.d., 2).

In 1907 Malatesta distinguished between two forms of anarchist majority voting. He argued that,

> The vote that anarchists reject, that they must reject unless they contradict themselves, is the vote by which they renounce their own sovereignty, the vote that gives the majority the right to impose their will upon the minority, the vote that is used to make and justify the law.
>
> But the vote used to record opinions certainly has nothing anti-anarchist about it, just as the vote is not anti-anarchist when it is only a practical and freely accepted means to resolve practical issues that do not allow for multiple solutions at the same time, and when the minority is not obliged to submit to the majority, if this does not suit or please them (Malatesta 2023, 258-259).

A few more concrete examples of these two forms of anarchist majority voting – recording opinions and resolving a practical dispute by choosing a course of action – are as follows. In 1898 the Italian Right to Existence Group held a special meeting to decide who would be the editor of their newspaper *La Questione Sociale* (The Social Question). Eighty members voted to replace the current editor Giuseppe Ciancabilla, who had fundamentally different views to the group as a whole, with Malatesta. Only three members opposed the decision. As a result Malatesta was made editor of the newspaper via a majority vote. Since the group was a free association, the three dissenting members immediately left and founded a new paper (Zimmer 2015, 58-59). In this example majority voting was used to a select a single course of action because it was not possible for everyone's opinion to be implemented at once. At the same time the result of this decision was that a specific task, editing a paper, was allocated by the group to an individual.

One of the main contexts where anarchist decision-making appears in the historical record is anarchist talks that turned into meetings which approved a resolution. For example, it was reported in 1901 that after lectures by Louise Michel and Malatesta, which were attended by 300 people, "the event, spontaneously transformed into a political meeting, unanimously and to clamorous applause approved a resounding protest *agenda*, formulated by the comrades" (Malatesta 2023, 63). On other occasions majority voting was used. In 1899 anarchists organised an anti-war event in the English town of Leeds, during which nine anarchists gave talks. At this event a crowd of 2,000 people adopted a resolution against imperialism via majority vote. Sixteen people voted against it (Quail 1978, 218). Other sources do not stipulate how a proposal was adopted. A

was against democracy, majority government, and majority rule from the moment he abandoned republicanism and became an anarchist in 1871/1872 at the age of 17/18. In his 1884 pamphlet *Between Peasants* a thirty year old Malatesta, who had been an anarchist for approaching half his life, endorsed a combination of unanimous agreement and majority voting. That exact same year he rejected democracy, including directly democratic Athens (Malatesta 2014, 18, 23). His explicit endorsement of majority voting continued throughout the 1890s (Malatesta 2016, 17-19, 41, 391; Malatesta 2019, 74, 133). In 1907, when he was 53, he repeated his long held rejection of majority rule and endorsement of majority voting (Malatesta 2023, 258-59). In 1927 he responded to the *Platform's* idea that congress resolutions passed via majority vote should be binding on all members by rehashing the views on federalism he had believed in and implemented since the days of the International (Malatesta 2014, 486-90). At no point in the essay does he reject the versions of majority voting that he had advocated for decades or indicate that he had changed his mind on this topic. This will be demonstrated in exhaustive detail in a forthcoming essay.

1912 police report noted that "Malatesta and the English anarchist P. E. Tanner proposed, and the assembly approved, a protest agenda, for the immediate liberation of the known Maria Rygier from the Italian prisons" (Malatesta 2023, 355).

The other main context where resolutions were passed was congresses. These generally embodied the federalist principles that anarchists had previously adopted within the Anti-Authoritarian International. In 1907 anarchist delegates attended the International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam, which was a loose gathering of anarchists from different countries. On the first day of the congress there was a disagreement about the agenda. One faction proposed that the topic of anti-militarism should be removed from the agenda and that it should instead be discussed at the separate congress of the International Antimilitarist Association. The other faction disagreed. They argued that the anarchists would have to formulate a position on anti-militarism at their anarchist congress before they attended a distinct congress attended by people who were not anarchists. The first proposal received thirty-three votes and the second thirty-eight votes. As a result, the second position won the vote and the congress made the collective decision to include anti-militarism on its agenda (Antonioli 2009, 36-37; Malatesta 2023, 258). Majority voting was, just like in the Anti-Authoritarian International, used to settle administrative issues.

At the end of the congress a series of resolutions were also adopted by the delegates. In order for a resolution to be passed it had to receive a majority of votes. The proposed resolution on alcohol consumption was opposed by almost every delegate in attendance and so was not adopted by the congress (ibid, 150-52). Majority voting was therefore used to make a collective decision – whether or not to adopt a resolution. The resolutions that passed this threshold in turn functioned as a record of what most of the delegates thought and were not automatically binding on every anarchist in attendance or the groups they represented. As the Dutch delegate Cornelissen explained, "voting is to be condemned only if it binds the minority. This is not the case here, and we are using the vote as an easy means of determining the size of the various opinions that are being confronted" (ibid, 91). In total four slightly different resolutions on syndicalism and the general strike were adopted by the congress. This was possible because they each received a majority of votes. To quote the congress minutes, "*the reader may be rather surprised that these four motions could have all been passed, given the evident contradictions between them. It defies the parliamentary norm, but it is a conscious transgression. In order that the opinion of the majority not suffocate, or seem to suffocate, that of the minority, the majority presented the single motions one by one for vote. All four had a majority of votes for. In consequence, all four were approved*" (ibid, 135).

The largest anarchist organisations in history have been anarcho-syndicalist trade unions. These mass organisations generally made decisions via majority voting. As the anarcho-syndicalist José Peirats explained, within the CNT,

> The unions constitute autonomous units, linked to the ensemble of the Confederation only by the accords of a general nature adopted at national congresses, whether regular or extraordinary. Apart from this commitment, the unions, right up to their technical sections, are free to reach any decision which is not detrimental to the organization as a whole. There are no exceptions to this principle and it can be stated that it is the unions which decide and directly regulate the guidelines of the Confederation.

> At all times, the basis for any local, regional, or national decision is the general assembly of the union, where every member has the right to attend, raise and discuss issues, and vote on proposals. Resolutions are adopted by majority vote attenuated by proportional representation.
>
> Extraordinary congresses are held on the suggestion of the assembled unions. Even the agenda is devised by the assemblies where the items on the agenda are debated and delegates appointed as the executors of their collective will. This federalist procedure, operating from the bottom up, constitutes a precaution against any possible authoritarian degeneration in the representative committees (Peirats 2011, 5).

In 1947 Peirats was himself elected as the general secretary of the CNT in exile by a majority vote (Ealham 2015, 142). The CNT's system of majority voting was explained in more detail within the organisation's constitution, which was printed on the trade union's membership card. It declared that "anarcho-syndicalism and anarchism recognize the validity of majority decisions. The militant has a right to his own point of view and to defend it, but he is obliged to comply with majority decisions, even when they are against his own feelings. . . We recognize the sovereignty of the individual, but we accept and agree to carry out the collective mandate taken by majority decision. Without this there is no organisation" (quoted in Peirats 1974, 19). The use of majority voting was regarded as practically necessary given the requirements of organising effective strikes and the massive size of the CNT. For example, the CNT's December 1919 congress was attended by over 400 delegates, who represented 756,101 workers, of whom 699,369 were affiliated. At this congress a resolution about a rival union was adopted with 325,995 votes in favour and 169,225 votes against. Other delegates choose to abstain. A proposed change to the organisational structure of the CNT was rejected by an overwhelmingly one-sided majority vote, with 651,431 votes against and 14,008 votes in favour (Smith 2007, 313-314).

Spanish anarchists also participated in smaller trade union federations like the Regional Metalworkers' Federation in Catalonia. This anarchist influence led to the federation adopting a resolution that rejected state intervention in industrial disputes and supported direct action at its April 1914 congress. This resolution was passed with a majority vote of ten delegates in favour and four opposed. At the time the organisation had 1,500 members (ibid, 207, 212). The same principles of collective decision making were used in other contexts. Between 30th April and 2nd May 1915 an international peace conference was held in the city of Galicia. At the conference, which was attended by delegates representing both anarchist groups and trade unions that anarchists participated in, a dispute arose between a minority of delegates who called for a spontaneous revolutionary general strike to be launched and a more cautious majority. The result was that the majority of delegates successfully passed a resolution that only called for protest meetings to be held in Spain, whilst also acknowledging that workers should organise a general strike against the war where this was possible (ibid, 273).

The use of majority voting was not unique to Spanish anarcho-syndicalism. In 1911 the Workers' Federation of the Uruguayan Region (FORU) adopted new statutes at its third congress. It was agreed that delegates elected into the association's liaison bureau "wield no authority and may at any time be replaced through a vote of the majority of the federated associations assembled in Congress, or by the determination of the federated associations as expressed through their respective local trades Federations" (FORU 2005, 201). It was also decided that,

> . . . 16. The accords of this Congress, unless rescinded by a majority of associations party to the compact, are to be binding upon all associations currently affiliated and any which may join hereafter.
>
> . . . 18. This solidarity compact can at any time be revised by Congresses or through a majority vote of the Federated Associations; but the Federation entered into is not open for discussion as long as there are two associations left upholding this compact (FORU 2005, 202).

Anarcho-syndicalist trade unions from different countries were federated together within the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA), which was founded at an illegal congress held in Berlin between December 25th 1922 and January 2nd 1923. The congress was attended by over thirty delegates representing an estimated 1.5 to 2 million workers from Europe and South America. The delegates included famous anarchists like Rudolf Rocker, Augustin Souchy, and Alexander Schapiro (Thorpe 1989, 244–56, 313n13). The statutes that were agreed at this congress included the following section on collective decision making:

> the decisions arrived at by the international congresses are binding upon all affiliated organisations, except where these latter reject the decisions by a vote of a national congress, or if the decisions in question are, at the demand of at least three affiliated confederations, submitted by the I.W.M.A. to the ratification by a referendum of all its members.
>
> At the conclusion of national referenda, each affiliated confederation shall have only one vote in the decision of the international referendum.
>
> The method of voting at international congresses of the I.W.M.A. shall be fixed each time by the Congress itself
>
> . . . In order to co-ordinate the international activity of the I.W.M.A., to organise exact information as to the propaganda and the struggle in all countries, to execute and carry out to a successful conclusion the decisions of international congresses, and to direct all the work of the I.W.M.A., the International Congress elects an Administrative Bureau, composed of one member of each national affiliated confederation, with decisive vote; and of one member for every other affiliated organisation of countries not possessing an affiliated confederation (but no more than one representative for each country), with consultative vote (IWMA 2022, 68-69).

Other sources for how anarchists typically made collective decisions at congresses are more indirect. In 1911 Malatesta wrote an article which argued that a planned national congress of anarchists in Italy was a bad idea at the present moment due to a series of divisions within the movement. As part of doing so he assumed that the congress would make "decisions, taken by a numerical majority" (Malatesta 2023, 315). He would not have made this assumption if this was not a standard practice among anarchists in general or, at the very least, the organisers of the congress.

One of the main topics that anarchists debated was what the function of majority voting should be at congresses of specific anarchist organisations. In June 1926 members of the Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad issued *The Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists*

(Draft). One of the main tenets of the *Platform* was that congress resolutions passed by majority vote should be binding on every section of the organisation, rather than only those sections who voted in favour of them. Such a commitment to binding congress resolutions should not be confused with the notion of 'legally binding'. It only meant that implementing majority decisions was a requirement of being a member of the free association. According to the *Platform,*

> Federalism means free agreement of individuals and organizations upon collective endeavour geared towards a common objective.
>
> Now, such agreement and federative union based thereon become realities, rather than fictions and dreams, only if the essential condition is fulfilled that all parties to the agreement and to the Union fully honor the obligations they assume and abide by the decisions reached in common.
>
> In a social undertaking as vast as the federalist basis upon which it is constructed, there can be no rights without obligations, just as there cannot be decisions without implementation thereof.
>
> . . . As a result, the federalist type of anarchist organization, whilst acknowledging every member of the organization's right to independence, to freedom of opinion, initiative and individual liberty, charges each member with specific organizational duties, insisting that these be rigorously performed, and that decisions jointly made be put into effect (The Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad 2002a, 212)

In 1928 Peter Arshinov, who was one of the co-authors of the *Platform* wrote that, "always and everywhere, practical problems among us have been resolved by majority vote. Which is perfectly understandable, for there is no other way of resolving these things in an organization that is determined to act" (Arshinov 2002, 241). A follow up to the *Platform* acknowledged that, even in a specific anarchist organisation that used majority voting and binding congress resolutions, differences of opinion about its programme, tactics and strategy would still emerge. In such situations there were three main potential outcomes. In the case of "insignificant differences" the minority would defer to the majority position in order to maintain "the unity" of the organisation. If "the minority were to consider sacrificing its view point an impossibility" then further "discussion" would occur. This would either culminate in an agreement being formed such that "two divergent opinions and tactics" co-existed with one another or there would be "a split with the minority breaking away from the majority to found a separate organization" (Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad 2002b, 218).

Other anarchists, including Malatesta, strongly disagreed with the idea that congress resolutions passed via majority vote should be binding on every section of the organisation, rather than only those sections who voted in favour of them. He viewed this as a break with the version of federalism that he and other anarchists had first implemented in the International decades previously (Malatesta 2014, 486-90). In 1928 Marie Goldsmith, who was an anarchist scientist and close friend of Kropotkin, argued that "anarchists operate from the principle that decisions taken by one group of individuals cannot be binding upon others, who have not reached them and who are not in agreement with them — and it is of no matter whether they are reached by a majority or by a minority" (Goldsmith 1928). She complained that,

> In their infatuation with organization, our comrades overlook the fact that, instead of strengthening the union, the overruling of the minority will merely give rise to fresh intestinal struggles; instead of working productively, energies will be squandered on winning a majority in congresses, committees, etc. . . .
>
> Although our anarchist movement may be open to reproach on several counts, we have to give it its due: it has always been free of congressional intrigues, electoral chicanery, the artificial cultivation of majorities, etc. And that thanks solely to the principle that has prevailed within it up to now, to wit, that decisions are binding only upon those who have taken them, and may not be imposed upon those unwilling to accept them. The force of such decisions and the commitment given are all the greater for that, in that each individual is more sensible of a decision taken by themselves than of some decision reached without their input and very often contrary to their wishes (ibid).

She thought that at anarchist congresses voting should merely be used to record opinions of delegates, rather than to make binding decisions for the entire organisation. She explained that,

> Contrary to the practice in other parties, where delegates take away from the congress resolutions to which their mandataries have merely to submit, anarchist delegates bring to the congress the resolutions, opinions and tendencies of their respective groups. Congress is free to express an opinion of them — but that is all. The counting of the votes (should that be judged useful) is merely a statistical exercise; it may be interesting to know how many comrades, belonging to which grouping, come down on this side of the other. The importance of congresses is in no way diminished, and their work only grows more serious. Instead of furnishing an arena for gambits designed to win a majority, they can devote themselves to making known the movement's status in different localities, its successes and failures, its different tendencies, etc. The resolutions cannot be anything more than indications, expressions of opinion, for the delegates to impart to their groups, which may adopt or reject them (ibid).

The dispute about the *Platform* led to a series of splits within some specific anarchist organisations. To take one example, in 1927 the French Anarchist Communist Union adopted platformism via a majority vote of delegates. It was decided, among other things, that the organisation would be renamed the Revolutionary Anarchist Communist Union and that majority decisions were now binding on all members. Proponents of synthesist anarchism were unhappy with these changes and this led some of the opposition to leave and form the Association of Anarchist Federalists (AFA). The platformist position was soon defeated at the 1930 congress, where the remaining synthesist delegates won the majority vote by fourteen to seven, regained control of the organisation, and abandoned the above resolutions. In response, the platformists left and formed the Libertarian Communist Federation in 1934, only to rejoin the Anarchist Union two years later in 1936 (Berry 2009, 173–76; Skirda 2002 135–36, 143). This highlights the extent to which anarchist versions of majority decision-making occurred within a system of free association.

A similar split about, among other issues, the role of majority voting happened within the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), which was a specific anarchist organisation composed of

affinity groups. These affinity groups typically had between 4 and 20 members and were linked together at a local and regional level. Members of the FAI initially thought that how collective decisions are made should vary depending upon the organisation in question. Unanimous agreement would, as far as is possible, be aimed for in small anarchist only groups, whilst majority voting was appropriate for trade unions with large memberships composed of workers in general (Casas 1986, 113-114, 217; Guillamón 2014, 28-29). In 1934 the Z and Nervio affinity groups, which included among their members Santillán, pushed for the FAI to adopt binding agreements established through majority voting. The Afinidad affinity group agreed with the necessity of such a system within the CNT, but opposed it being implemented within small specific anarchist organisations or affinity groups. After a confrontational FAI meeting Afinidad left the organisation in protest (Ealham 2015, 77).

At the FAI's July 1937 plenum in Valencia a series of very controversial changes to the organisation were agreed upon. This included: large neighbourhood associations, rather than affinity groups, being the basic building block of the federation; the Peninsular Committee having greater power between congresses; and the position that "resolutions will be applicable to all members equally" (Quoted in Casas, 222). These organisational changes went alongside an endorsement of anarchist collaboration with the republican government during the civil war against fascism (ibid, 220, 223). The proposals were subsequently submitted to a referendum of the regional plenums of groups in Catalonia. It was reported in *Solidaridad Obrera* (Workers' Solidarity) that,

> The restructuring of the F.A.I., which had been approved in Valencia, was discussed: the majority at the plenum accepted the new structure, but a considerable minority was opposed. The disagreements were so great that some of the opposition groups threatened to walk out. In view of the gravity of the problem, which threatened anarchist unity, a committee was appointed to look for a formula of reconciliation that would bring together the different points of view. The committee drafted a report that was approved by all the groups of Catalonia at the plenum. It stated: "After considering very carefully the arguments raised in support of the different opinions by various delegates and considering further the absolute need for cordiality within the anarchist family, we declare: the majority support the decision of the peninsular plenum. However, in recognition of the strong opposition to such an action, to the point of threatening a split, the groups are free to reject the restructuring of the organization and to continue as they have until now, recognizing that the vote of each group at organizational meetings will have the weight of the number of members the group represents. The resolution called upon the Peninsular Committee to call a peninsular congress as quickly as possible because only such a congress has the sovereign right to change the structure and ideology of the organization (Quoted in ibid, 224).

At another plenum for F.A.I groups in Barcelona, a few delegates walked out of the meeting in protest whilst shouting "long live anarchy". This included Peirats, who was a member of the previously mentioned Afinidad affinity group (ibid, 225; Ealham 2015, 59).

Given the above evidence, it is a complete myth that anarchists have only ever used consensus decision-making. It was common in the past for anarchists to advocate and rely upon majority voting. This endorsement of majority voting went alongside important disagreements

about what its function and scope should be. Although it can hard to disentangle these debates from wider organisational and strategic issues, it is clear that anarchist proponents of majority voting disagreed about whether or not congress resolutions passed via majority vote, which went beyond the common programme of the association, should be binding on every section within the association, or only those sections who voted in favour of it. This went alongside another debate about whether or not decision-making procedures should be different in mass organisations composed of workers in general and smaller specific anarchist organisations, which were composed exclusively of dedicated anarchist militants.

Myth Four: all anarchists who advocated federations endorsed majority voting.

This is false. Several influential proponents of federations only endorsed unanimous agreement and were very critical of voting. It is difficult to determine exactly how many other pro-federation anarchists agreed with them. They seem to be in the minority given that very few examples of this idea crop up in both the primary and secondary sources I am familiar with and the largest anarchist organisations in history have been syndicalist unions that generally used majority voting. Examining this minority position is nonetheless interesting since it demonstrates that the historical debate was not between a rigid binary of pro-federation and pro-majority voting anarchists on one side and anti-federation and anti-voting anarchists on the other. The ideological diversity of the anarchist movement was far more complex.

Kropotkin was a proponent of formal organisation, delegates, and federations with huge memberships (Kropotkin 2014, 105, 163, 318, 474-75). Initially he appears to have supported the use of majority voting in certain contexts. In 1877 Kropotkin wrote a letter in which he argued that some Italian members of the International should be expelled from the organisation for allowing themselves to be arrested without firing their guns. In the letter he said, "I propose to vote for their *exclusion* from *the International*" (Quoted in Cahm 1989, 103). Sometime over the following years Kropotkin changed his mind. During the 1890s he was very strongly opposed to voting and endorsed unanimous agreement as an alternative. In 1893 Kropotkin claimed that intentional communities "ought to have no directors, no superintendents, no balloting, no voting whatsoever. . . The Russian peasants live without authority, agree at their meetings for common work, and are intelligent enough not to have authorities or ballots, and to arrive at unanimity in their decisions" (Kropotkin 1893). Two years later he asserted that,

> In the hundreds of histories of communities which I have had the opportunity to read, I always saw that the introduction of any sort of elected authority has always been, without one single exception, the point which the community stranded upon; while, on the other side, those communities enjoyed a partial and sometimes very substantial success, which accepted no authority besides the unanimous decision of the folkmoot, and preferred, as a couple of hundred of millions of Slavonian peasants do, and as the German Communists in America did, to discuss every matter so long as a unanimous decision of the folkmoot could be arrived at. Communists, who are bound to live in a narrow circle of a few individuals, in which circle the petty struggles for dominion are the more acutely felt, ought decidedly to abandon

> the Utopias of elected committees' management and majority rule; they must bend before the reality of practice which is at work for many hundreds of years in hundreds of thousands of village communities — the folkmoot — and they must remember that in these communities, majority rule and elected government have always been synonymous and concomitant with disintegration — never with consolidation (Kropotkin 1895. Also see Kropotkin 2006, 104, 107-108, 117).

Kropotkin's opinions on this matter were known to other anarchists at the time. In 1896 Malatesta conjectured that Kropotkin rejected a request to attend the International Socialist Workers and Trade Union Congress as a delegate because of (among other factors) a deep-seated aversion to voting (Turcato 2012, 139, 141).

In a similar fashion, Wilson advocated federations (Wilson 1888) and believed that each member of an association should have "an equal voice in deciding what is to be done" and reach a "decision by unanimity" (Wilson 2000, 71). She thought this would often involve a minority of dissenters deciding to voluntarily concede their position and agree with the majority such that a unanimous decision is made or, at the very least, step aside and allow others to act. This is reminiscent of some features of modern consensus decision making. She wrote,

> In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred where a number of people are met together to decide upon some common course of conduct, they will all in the end come to some definite decision in favour of one thing; because those who were at one time inclined to dissent, prefer in the end to act with the majority, if the matter is of practical importance; not because they are forced to do so by the majority over-ruling, but because the largest body of opinion has so much weight with them that they choose not to act contrary to it.
>
> We all admit this general fact. It would be quite impossible to take any common action at all if it were not so. But the special theory of democracy is that the general tendency of humanity which becomes so apparent whenever men associate on anything like terms of economic equality, should be made by men into an arbitrary law of human conduct to be enforced not only in the ninety-nine cases where nature enforces it, but by the arbitrary methods of coercion in the hundredth where she doesn't. And for the sake of the hundredth case, for the sake of enforcing this general natural tendency where nature does not enforce it, democrats would have us retain in our political relation that fatal principle of authority of man over man . . . (Wilson 2000, 69-70).

In 1899 the Spanish anarchist collectivist Ricardo Mella advocated both "a federation of free producers" and a society "without voting". He proposed that voluntary associations should only be formed and amended by the unanimous agreement of every member. In such a context people would associate with like-minded people who shared their preferences and views on a set of relevant topics. He believed this would limit the number of collective decisions that needed to be made on a day-to-day basis since the act of setting up an association would settle key points in advance. If a disagreement emerged within an association, and it was not possible for multiple perspectives to co-exist or be put into practice simultaneously, then people would disassociate and form new groups around their distinct positions. Disputes over practical questions, both

within an association and between associations, would typically be resolved through a process of experimentation in which the best answer was determined by trial and error. Yet even Mella conceded that there would be a few occasions where an association would defer to the opinion of the majority as a last resort (Mella 2015). He wrote,

> in the future operational problems will arise that trial and error will not be able to resolve. And then what do we do? Well, quite simply, break up the teams so that each can operate by its own special method; and, were the matter such that there would be no merit in subdivision or if it was necessary for all the personnel to stay together as a body, they would of course all arrange to be guided either by the views of the most intelligent among them or by that of the most practical of their number and – should that fail – ultimately, by the opinion of the majority, because in that assuredly exceptional circumstance, the issue would not rank as a generally mandatory principle or law to be carried out and would carry none of the compulsion we find at present. Besides, it would be merely a transitional arrangement with no implications for the rest of the body of society as long as it did not go beyond private operations or the bailiwick of the specific collective implementing it on a regular basis (ibid).

Mella did not specify how this would concretely happen. Given his other beliefs it is clear that he thought it should occur without voting and that if voting was used to calculate a majority then this represented an unfortunate failure to achieve his ideal society.

Conclusion

Democracy and collective decision-making continue to be contentious issues among the modern anarchist movement. This debate cannot be settled by appeals to history. Old anarchist literature contains many valuable insights, but it should not be treated like holy scripture. We must make our own arguments and not use historical figures as sock puppets for our own distinct views. Nor do the surviving primary sources form a uniform and unchanging canon. Anarchists in the past argued and disagreed with one another as much as anarchists in the present. There was no agreement on (a) how anarchist organisations should be structured or make collective decisions; (b) whether or not anarchists should adopt democratic language to describe societies without government or authority; and (c) whether or not congress resolutions which went beyond the common programme of an organisation should be binding on every section of a federation or only those sections who voted in favour of them. The complexity and diversity of these opinions must not be conveniently ignored or erased in order to lend historical legitimacy to modern ideas or construct political mythologies that are imagined versions of the past. The history of anarchist political thought must instead seek to develop an empirically accurate model that is grounded in the surviving sources, is sensitive to the context they were written in, and avoids anachronistic language as much as possible.

The debate about how we should make collective decisions and structure associations must be disentangled from debates about how to label these ideas. There are historical anarchists like Malatesta who rejected democracy in the sense of majority government and majority rule, whilst also advocating a combination of unanimous agreement and majority voting to record opinions

and select courses of action within a free association. There are modern anarchists who reject majority government and majority rule, advocate democracy in the broad sense of any participatory system of collective decision-making in which everyone involved has an equal say, and think that decisions should only be made via consensus within a free association. The anarcho-syndicalist Maximoff, who described anarchism as a form of democracy, thought that the *Platform,* which rejected democracy, advocated a centralised organisation with a parliament like structure and so broke with anarchist versions of federalism (Maximoff 1988, 19). At the founding congress of the anarcho-syndicalist IWMA German delegates argued that their preferred version of voting was different from the "formal democracy of the centralist trade unions" (Quoted in Thorpe 1989, 256). In short, there is no one to one correspondence (either historically or currently) between what ideas an anarchist holds and whether or not they choose to call these ideas democracy. If a self-described anarchist advocates government or authority, then they are not committed to the programme of anarchist socialism regardless of what language they use. If, however, they actually advocate a society without government or authority then they are committed to the programme of anarchist socialism. In such cases the adoption of democratic language would represent only a variation in how to label anarchist systems of free association and collective decision-making. This is why the same ideas can be regarded as democracy without government by a modern anarchist and free association and free agreement by a historical anti-democratic anarchist. Mere changes in terminology must never be confused for changes in ideas.

This is not to say that terminology does not matter. How we express our ideas shapes how others understand them. The adoption of democratic language is potentially dangerous and should be used with caution. This is because it can lead people to mistake anarchism for the idea that society should be run by an extremely democratic government that makes decisions within general assemblies and then imposes these decisions on everyone via the institutionalised violence of the law, police and prisons. It is therefore very important that pro-democracy anarchists make it explicit that they reject both majority government and majority rule in order to avoid this confusion. Irrespective of what language we choose, the most important thing is that the ideas we propose are ones which, if implemented, would create a system of free association in which (a) there is no domination or exploitation and (b) there is greater amounts of freedom, equality, cooperation, and human flourishing than exists under any society with class divisions, government, and authority. We must envision a world without rulers that is not a mere dream or thought experiment. It must be a viable alternative to the status quo that can be created in the immediate future by imperfect people, function globally, and scale to the current human population of over eight billion.

Although I dream of a society with as few meetings as possible, I acknowledge that any association will have to make collective decisions in order to, say, elect and mandate delegates, co-ordinate their activity, determine how to deploy their limited capacities in pursuit of a shared goal, and so forth. Such decisions will shape not only trivial matters like the name of a band, but also extremely important and complex issues like public health, the education of children, environmental protection, and the participatory planning of an anarchist communist economy. This does not mean that people will vote on every possible question. Nurses do not need to hold a meeting in order to decide how to take blood since this is something they already know how to do from their medical training. Nor does it mean that any decision will be taken by the community at large. Associations instead self-manage their relevant sphere of action and co-ordinate with each other through a system of federations that unites people on the basis of both the area they live in

and the industry they belong to. As a result, day-to-day decisions concerning the organisation of public infrastructure like water supply systems or telecommunication networks will be made by members of the relevant producer association with the appropriate skills and expertise, rather than by everyone in the area. There are, in addition to this, certain topics that should never be put to a vote. For example, whether or not people should be allowed to have abortions or receive trans healthcare. Collective decisions must always occur within a framework that respects the freedom of others and the equality of all human beings.

Freedom of association includes the freedom to disassociate and there will be circumstances in which a majority must impose sanctions on an individual who violates a code of conduct that members of the association have approved and agreed to follow, such as a professor being expelled from a university for sexually harassing students, or a doctor being banned from practicing medicine in the hospitals that a healthcare federation self-manages because they performed experiments on patients without their consent. Even in a society built on a foundation of free association and free agreement, people will find themselves impacted by collective decisions that they disagree with and cannot realistically disassociate from. If everyone else in a community chooses to build a brutalist apartment complex, then someone who hates brutalism will have to live with this decision. In cases like this nobody is being dominated. They are merely experiencing an inevitable feature of living in a society or being a member of any group: other people will disagree with us and things do not always go the way that we would have liked. So long as humans exist there will be the need to balance the conflicting perspectives and interests of people and this balancing act cannot be easily resolved by applying a ready-made formula.

The manner in which necessary moments of collective decision-making are organised should be flexible and vary depending upon the circumstances in question. The constraints and pressures of revolutionary struggle are not the same as the day to day functioning of a post-revolutionary society. The construction of a public transportation system or sewer network has different requirements than organising a chess tournament. Unanimous agreement will be the correct choice in some circumstances, majority voting in others. Sometimes multiple positions can be implemented simultaneously. On other occasions only one decision can be made. If we select majority voting then we must be on guard against it leading to the oppression of minorities. It must also be kept in mind that there are certain situations in which the perspective of a minority should have greater weight than a majority, such as the accessibility requirements of disabled people. If we opt for unanimous agreement then we must ensure that it does not lead to one person misusing the ability to block proposals in order to consistently thwart the actions of the majority such that, for all intents and purposes, it is their individual will which determines what happens and overrules everybody else.

Anarchist organisational structures and collective decision-making procedures are a necessary aspect of creating a horizontal association, but they are not sufficient. This is because an organisation can be formally horizontal and free but not substantively so due to a range of factors. This includes, but is not limited to, racism against people of colour, men doing most of the talking at meetings, women being relegated to support roles and performing the majority of reproductive labour, and an informal hierarchy emerging around a charismatic individual who then uses this informal power to get away with sexually harassing and abusing women. In order to counter-act the emergence of informal hierarchies it is necessary to prefigure a future anarchist society both in the formal structures and procedures of an organisation and also the interpersonal dynamics between the individuals who constitute it. These two forms of prefigura-

tion can feed off each other, such as it being a formal requirement that a certain percentage of delegates are women and this formal requirement leading to women gaining greater confidence when speaking in public. Ultimately, the solution to such complex problems will only emerge through experimentation and figuring out what works in real life, rather than only in the imagination. It is only through engaging in the practice of horizontal association, which includes responding effectively to deviations from it, that we can render ourselves fit to create a society without domination and exploitation.

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