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A directly democratic critique of Žižek

Anarchist Federation of Scotland

July 2, 2013

For me it's really interesting that celebrity leftists like Žižek, David Harvey and others feel they have to address and argue against direct democracy (and sometimes autonomous or libertarian socialism more broadly). It shows that these ideas are really in the ascendant, being discussed and put into action at least to some extent in assemblies around the world, most recently Turkey, but I'd imagine we'll see the same in Brazil.

Of course, I disagree with Žižek. He's a philosopher who has called for a 'Thatcher of the left', fashionably denounces social democracy and in the same breath more-or-less urges us to return to it. His call to have Syriza leader, Alexis Tsipras, given power repeatedly Stalin-style, with Tsipras chuckling opposite him is galling but also quite troubling. Why? Because what's being ridiculed and shut down as worthy of any further comment is that 'ordinary' people, working class folk, can genuinely participate in and decide on the most important decisions of their lives, their work and wider society.

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I think this idea is worth fighting for, and it's one that's unavoidably revolutionary and anti-capitalist. It argues that we shouldn't accept the control of capital or profit, that decisions about a community should be made by that community, and control of work in the hands of workers themselves. Direct democracy means breaking down the division between the economic and political, and challenging state power which is never neutral but defends capital and is dominating in itself. It goes back to the great aim of the labour movement: workers' control of industry and society.

But this is a million miles away from greater 'accountability' or proportionality in representative democracy and questions the meaning of self-determination.

There are of course examples of movements in which direct democracy was central that have existed for 'more than two months' as Zizek put it. Even the example he mentions, the Zapatistas, has existed for many years now effectively outside of Mexican state power. In fact, since he's been to South America and 'knows what he's talking about', he should realise that there have been and are several mass movements like the Piqueteros of Argentina, the Landless Workers' Movement of Brazil, the wave of self-management in factories have lasted for long periods of time and have had a deep influence on many people's lives. I would also argue against what he said about Bolivia. But this is just South America.

Can we develop a society where direct democracy is universalised with large-scale structures, I think so but no-one can say for certain. The point is the process and the movement to get there. Is it worth it? Absolutely. How far can we go? Let's see.