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The Two Souls of Democracy

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A review of Tony Benn's 2005 TV programme on democracy.
It points out the democracy has many meanings and can, and
is, used to justify elite rule.

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Big Ideas That Changed the World: Democracy, Tony
Benn, **Channel 5**, 21st June 2005

Channel Five has produced a series of programmes on "**Big Ideas that changed the world.**" Tony Benn presented the one of "democracy." As would be expected, Benn came across well. The programme was interesting and, rightly, did not dwell purely on political democracy. He rightly noted that democracy means "*people power*" (democracy comes from the Greek for "*strength of the people*" rather than demarchy which would be "*rule by the people*"). As such, he rightly broadened his discussion to bring in the trade unions and other popular movements rather dwell on elections, "majority rule" and other aspects of "democracy" so beloved of politicians.

With this essentially correct premise Benn sketched the history of democracy from its roots in ancient Greece to the modern day, via the Magna Charta (rightly dismissed as an elite document with nothing to do with democracy), John Ball and the peasants' revolt, the English Civil War, the Chartists, the suffragettes and the struggle against imperialism. He ended by

examining “globalisation” and how our hard-won democratic freedoms are being taken away by global business. As he reminded us, reforms have never been given from on-high by the elite but rather fought for from below, by the masses using their own organisations and strength. Moreover, the struggle never ends as the ruling elite use their wealth to undermine the advances of the past: *“There is never a final victory for democracy. It is always a struggle in every generation, and you have to take up the cause time and time again.”*

Needless to say, the programme had its flaws. Benn is right, of course, to stress that all change comes “from below” and the pressing need for people to organise themselves. Sadly, he squeezed these truisms into the mould of parliamentarianism and so utterly destroyed their real meaning and potential. This is unsurprising as the term “democracy” has radically different meanings. It has, to coin a phrase, two souls. One is hierarchical, the other egalitarian. One is from the top-down, the other is from the bottom up. One is statist, the other libertarian.

The heart of the difference is to do how democracy is viewed. Benn put the underlying principle of democracy as being equality, the premise that we are all equal. Which is true, but it hides a more fundamental principle: freedom. The real rationale of democracy is that it is impossible to be truly free if others are ruling you. In order to be free, you need a meaningful say in the decisions that affect you. That implies equality. Unlike liberalism, which happily tolerates the rule of the (enlightened) few, democracy states the obvious: there is no freedom for the many if there is inequality.

This, however, exposes the fundamental flaw in what is commonly known as “democracy.” If democracy is based on equality, then why does it tolerate the situation where the many alienate their power to the few by means of election? What equality is there between an electorate who are allowed to vote every few years and the government who exercises authority in the meantime? Simply put, representative democracy is

tal (representative) or self-managed (direct). Is democracy simply the masses picking their rulers or is it genuine management of their own affairs? Sadly, Benn’s “big idea” fatally confuses the two and ends up using the latter to justify the former.

As would be expected, Benn portrayed his social-democratic ideas as the means by which capitalism and the state can be saved from themselves. He ended by saying that without a genuine democratic state, three outcomes were likely: apathy, cynicism and violence. There is another option, the alternative which Benn avoided in his talk — the idea that we build the new world while fighting the current. It simply states that we apply our ideas of a good society today and that our organisations are self-managed, run from the bottom-up and reject giving power to a few leaders within them. We build, in other words, libertarian alternatives as part of the struggle for freedom — strike and community assemblies and committees, unions, co-operatives, and so on — to complement other forms of direct action and solidarity.

This was the idea which inspired the early labour movement across the world, before Marxism (and then, inevitably, reformism) got their grips on it. The first British trade union movement was based on it, arguing that working class people should organise into unions and their congress would replace Parliament. It was only when this radical unionism was crushed in the 1840s that Chartism became a mass movement and the labour movement looked to the state rather than its own strength and self-organisation. A similar process occurred in the First International, where Marx and Bakunin represented these two currents and the two concepts of democracy they express. As before, the statist current won and the labour movement was again side-tracked. In the 1900s, syndicalism again expressed these ideas and made a significant and militant alternative to social democracy before the success of Bolshevism yet again shunted the radicals into the same dead-end.

Now, at the dawn of the 21st century, the question radicals must ask themselves is whether they want to repeat the mistakes of the past or learn from them. Whether they do or not depends on which vision of democracy they hold: governmen-

based on a fundamental inequality of power between the electors and politicians. Rather than represent the people, governments rule it. Democracy in this context becomes little more than the “power” to pick a master and after a few years get to replace them with a new one.

As such, statist forms of democracy are inherently self-contradictory. Hence the anarchist critique of democracy as being undemocratic. Electing a handful of people to govern for you, while a step forward, is hardly democratic nor freedom. Sadly, far too many radicals (including such notable revolutionaries as Marx and Engels) side with Benn and consider such limited forms of democracy as democratic and as expressing the (political) power of the masses when, in reality, it is no such thing. This can be seen from any genuine popular revolution.

Benn failed to mention the French Revolution in his potted history of democracy. As a consequence, he did not mention the classic example of when the two souls of democracy clashed, when representative democracy came into conflict not only with legacy of Absolutism and Aristocracy but also the popular (direct) democracy of the sections created by the revolution itself. This conflict between representative (statist) democracy and direct (libertarian) democracy is a feature of all popular movements and revolutions. Within the trade unions, for example, the rank and file consistently comes into conflict with the officials — the strikers’ assembly is hated as much by the bureaucrats as by the bosses. During the American and French revolutions, the popular assemblies were finally destroyed in favour of representative democracy. During the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks systematically undermined the factory committees and soviet assemblies and concentrated more and more power into the hands of their central committee. More recently, in Argentina, politicians lined up to attack the neighbourhood assemblies as “undemocratic.”

That explains why anarchists tend to use the word “self-management” to describe their ideas on decision making and self-organisation. In other words, “democracy” is a term riddled with ambiguities and can be used to describe many different regimes. Hence we see anti-globalisation protestors proclaiming “this is what democracy looks like” while the likes of Blair denounce them as “undemocratic” and stress their own “democratic” credentials (having been elected by the votes of a quarter and then a fifth of eligible voters!). So when George Bush talks of “democracy” is he really meaning the same thing as Rousseau?

The term “democracy” has become the preferred means of undermining genuine (libertarian) democracy of people making their own decisions. Counter-revolution often stalks the land draped in flag of “democracy” and both the bourgeoisie and Bolsheviks unite in attacking self-management as “undemocratic” and proposing elected hierarchy as genuine democracy. A formal democracy is aimed for where the people vote in elections and then let the ruling elite do as it will, until the next election. Thus democracy is used by right, centre and left to disempower the many and empower the few. Whether this few are the wealthy or the party leadership, it hardly matters to those at the bottom. This, as anarchists have long stressed, is no accident. Democracy, by shifting power from the base to the top, centralising initiative into the hands of elected leaders, was designed by the bourgeoisie to marginalise the people and ensure the continuation of their rule and wealth.

Benn, rightly, attacks the influence of wealth in undermining democracy. He paints a picture of the 1950s to 1970s as a society of increasing equality and democracy. Thatcher and Reagan were the “counter-revolution,” turning back the clock to less democratic, more capitalist, times. Yet these puppets of the rich were democratically elected and attacked strikers and protestors as “undemocratic.” Why is the labour movement (a

minority) and strikers (a minority of a minority) the real bearers of democracy while Parliament is not? Benn did not address the issue. Yet, for anarchists, such direct action is the necessary expression of our ideas on democracy. Direct action is the source of people power, not the ballot, as it is the only means by which those affected by a decision influence it. People act for themselves rather than getting a few leaders/bosses to act for us (it is this which usually produces the necessity for direct action in the first place!).

Neither did Benn mention how the trade union and Labour Party hierarchy (then, as now) came into conflict continually with the rank and file of the unions and the party (never mind the population at large). Labour governments habitually used troops to break strikes while trade union officials betrayed them time and time again. That these officials and politicians may have been “democratically elected” hardly mitigates their repression of real, direct, democracy in the form of strike or union assemblies. Clearly, the issue of democracy within these movements is as important as the issue of democracy in society as a whole. Neither can be solved by the dubious pleasure of alienating your power to a leader who misrules in your name — as the programme’s constant use of pictures of Blair and Bush should remind the viewer.

The limitations of Benn’s account can also be seen from his claim that nationalisation was an extension of democracy, replacing the power of the wallet with the power of the ballot in area after area of the economy. It would be more accurate to say that it simply replaced the power of the wallet with the power of the bureaucrat. The general public had no real say in what these industries did, it was the politicians they elected who laid down general policies which were implemented by the state bureaucracy and the managers it hired. Within the nationalised industries workers were still wage slaves. Capitalism had been replaced by state capitalism. Economic democracy was as non-existent within the latter as in the former.