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Democracy Is Direct

Cindy Milstein

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These days, words seem to be thrown around like so much loose change.

“Democracy” is no exception.

We hear demands to democratize everything from international or supranational organizations to certain countries to technology. Many contend that democracy is the standard for good government. Still others allege that “more,” “better,” or even “participatory” democracy is the needed antidote to our woes. At the heart of these well-intentioned but misguided sentiments beats a genuine desire: to gain control over our lives.

This is certainly understandable given the world in which we live. Anonymous, often-distant events and institutions—nearly impossible to describe, much less confront—determine whether we work, drink clean water, or have a roof over our heads. Most people feel that life isn’t what it should be; many go so far as to complain about “the government” or “corporations.” But beyond that, the sources of social misery are so masked they may even look friendly: starting with the Ben & Jerry’s ice cream cone of “caring” capitalism to today’s “green” version, from the “humanitarian” interventions of Western superpowers to a “change we can believe in” presidency.

Since the real causes appear untouchable and incomprehensible, people tend to displace blame onto imaginary targets with a face: individuals rather than institutions, people rather than power. The list of scapegoats is long: from Muslims and blacks and Jews, to immigrants and queers, and so on. It's much easier to lash out at those who, like us, have little or no power. Hatred of the visible "other" replaces social struggle against seemingly invisible systems of oppression. A longing for community—a place where we can take hold of our own life, share it with others, and build something together of our own choosing—is being distorted around the globe into nationalisms, fundamentalisms, separatisms, and the resultant hate crimes, suicide bombings, and genocides. Community no longer implies a rich recognition of the self and society; it translates into a battle unto death between one tiny "us" against another small "them," as the wheels of domination roll over us all. The powerless trample the powerless, while the powerful go largely unscathed.

We are left with a few bad choices, framed for us by the powers that be. Slavoj Žižek termed this "the double blackmail." He used this concept in relation to Yugoslavia in the late 1990s: "if you are against NATO strikes, you are for [Slobodan] Milosevic's proto-fascist régime of ethnic cleansing, and if you are against Milosevic, you support the global capitalist New World Order."¹ But this choiceless choice all too easily applies to many other contemporary crises. Global economic recession seems to necessitate nation-state interventions; human rights violations seem to call for international regulatory bodies. If the right answer, from an ethical point of view, lies outside this picture altogether, what of it? It's all talk when people are dying or the climate is being irreversibly destroyed. At least that's

¹ Slavoj Žižek, "Against the Double Blackmail," *New Left Review* I/234 (March–April 1999): 76–82, available at <http://libcom.org/library/against-the-double-blackmail-zizek>.

versity, cooperation, and respect for human worth—hopefully, the building blocks of a liberatory ethics as we begin to self-manage our communities, the economy, and society in an ever-widening circle of confederated assemblies.

As a practice, direct democracy will have to be learned. As a principle, it will have to undergird all decision making. As an institution, it will have to be fought for. It will not appear magically overnight. It will instead emerge little by little out of struggles to, as Murray Bookchin phrased it, "democratize our republic and radicalize our democracy."¹²

We must infuse all our political activities with politics. It is time to call for a second "American Revolution," but this time, one that breaks the bonds of nation-states, one that knows no borders or masters, and one that draws the potentiality of libertarian self-governance to its limits, fully enfranchising all with the power to act democratically. This begins with reclaiming the word democracy itself—not as a better version of representation but as a radical process to directly remake our world.

¹² Murray Bookchin, "The Greening of Politics: Toward a New Kind of Political Practice," *Green Perspectives* 1 (January 1986), available at http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/bookchin/gp/perspectives1.html.

touching on the very essence of power itself. The problem is not power per se but rather power without limits. Or to press Montesquieu's concept, the problem is power as an end in itself. Power needs to be forever linked to freedom; freedom needs to be the limit placed on power. Tom Paine, for one, brought this home to the American Revolution in *The Rights of Man*: "Government on the old system is an assumption of power for the aggrandizement of itself; on the new, a delegation of power for the common benefit of society."¹¹

If freedom is the social aim, power must be held horizontally. We must all be both rulers and ruled simultaneously, or a system of rulers and subjects is the only alternative. We must all hold power equally in our hands if freedom is to coexist with power. Freedom, in other words, can only be maintained through a sharing of political power, and this sharing happens through political institutions. Rather than being made a monopoly, power should be distributed to us all, thereby allowing all our varied "powers" (of reason, persuasion, decision making, and so on) to blossom. This is the power to create rather than dominate.

Of course, institutionalizing direct democracy assures only the barest bones of a free society. Freedom is never a done deal, nor is it a fixed notion. New forms of domination will probably always rear their ugly heads. Yet minimally, directly democratic institutions open a public space in which everyone, if they so choose, can come together in a deliberative and decision-making body; a space where everyone has the opportunity to persuade and be persuaded; a space where no discussion or decision is ever hidden, and where it can always be returned to for scrutiny, accountability, or rethinking. Embryonic within direct democracy, if only to function as a truly open policymaking mechanism, are values such as equality, di-

¹¹ Thomas Paine, *Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 161.

what common wisdom purports, from government officials to news commentators to the person on the street.

Even much of the Left can see no other "realistic" choices to control an out-of-control world than those that are presented to us from on high. Given this, the leftist horizon narrows to what's allegedly achievable: nongovernmental organization or global South participation in international decision-making bodies, or for that matter, Left-leaning heads of state in the global South or a Barack Obama in the global North; or the rectification and greening of the wrongs of capitalism. These and other such demands are bare minimums within the current system. Still, they are a far cry from any sort of liberatory response. They work with a circumscribed and neutralized notion of democracy, where democracy is neither of the people, by the people, nor for the people, but rather, only in the supposed name of the people. What gets dubbed democracy, then, is mere representation, and the best that progressives and leftists can advocate for within the confines of this prepackaged definition are improved versions of a fundamentally flawed system.

"The instant a People gives itself Representatives, it ceases to be free," famously proclaimed Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *On the Social Contract*.² Freedom, particularly social freedom, is indeed utterly antithetical to a state, even a representative one. At the most basic level, representation "asks" that we give our freedom away to another; it assumes, in essence, that some should have power and many others shouldn't. Without power, equally distributed to all, we renounce our very capacity to join with everyone else in meaningfully shaping our society. We renounce our ability to self-determine, and thus our liberty. And so, no matter how enlightened leaders may be, they are govern-

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 115.

ing as tyrants nonetheless, since we—“the people”—are servile to their decisions.

This is not to say that representative government is comparable with more authoritarian forms of rule. A representative system that fails in its promise of, say, universal human rights is clearly preferable to a government that makes no such pretensions at all. Yet even the kindest of representative systems necessarily entails a loss of liberty. Like capitalism, a grow-or-die imperative is built into the state’s very structure. As Karl Marx explained in *Capital*, capitalism’s aim is—in fact, has to be—“the unceasing movement of profit-making.”³ So, too, is there such an aim underlying the state: the unceasing movement of power making. The drive for profit and the drive for power, respectively, must become ends in themselves. For without these drives, we have neither capitalism nor the state; these “goals” are part of their inherent makeup. Hence, the two frequently interlinked systems of exploitation and domination must do whatever is necessary to sustain themselves, otherwise they are unable to fulfill their unceasing momentum.

Whatever a state does, then, has to be in its own interests. Sometimes, of course, the state’s interests coincide with those of various groups or people; they may even overlap with concepts such as justice or compassion. But these convergences are in no way central or even essential to its smooth functioning. They are merely instrumental stepping-stones as the state continually moves to maintain, solidify, and consolidate its power.

Because, like it or not, all states are forced to strive for a monopoly on power. “The same competition,” wrote Mikhail Bakunin in *Statism and Anarchism*, “which in the economic field annihilates and swallows up small and even medium-sized capital . . . in favor of vast capital . . . is also operative in the

³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 254.

from” those things we don’t like, or more accurately, liberation.

“Liberation and freedom are not the same,” contended Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution*. Certainly, liberation is a basic necessity: people need to be free from harm, hunger, and hatred. But liberation falls far short of freedom. If we are ever to fulfill both our needs and desires, if we are ever to take control of our lives, each and every one of us needs the “freedom to” self-develop—individually, socially, and politically. As Arendt added, “[Liberation] is incapable of even grasping, let alone realizing, the central idea of revolution, which is the foundation of freedom.”⁷

The revolutionary question becomes: Where do decisions that affect society as a whole get made? For this is where power resides. It is time that we rediscover the “lost treasure” that arises spontaneously during all revolutions—the council, in all its imaginative varieties—as the basis for constituting places of power for everyone.⁸ For only when we all have equal and ongoing access to participate in the space where public policy is made—the political sphere—will freedom have a fighting chance to gain a footing.

Montesquieu, one of the most influential theorists for the American revolutionists, tried to wrestle with “the constitution of political freedom” in his monumental *The Spirit of the Laws*.⁹ He came to the conclusion that “power must check power.”¹⁰ In the postrevolutionary United States, this idea eventually made its way into the Constitution as a system of checks and balances. Yet Montesquieu’s notion was much more expansive,

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 22, 121–22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller, and Harold Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 155.

Such values resonate through the history of the U.S. libertarian Left: ranging from late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century experiments in utopian communities and labor organizing; to the civil rights movement starting in the mid-1950s; to the Black Power, American Indian, radical feminist, and queer liberation movements' struggles for social freedom as well as the Students for a Democratic Society's demands for a participatory democracy in the 1960s; to the anarchist-inspired affinity group and spokescouncil organizing of the 1970s' antinuke movement; and then again with the anticapitalist movement's mass direct actions in the 1990s and early 2000s. In both its principles and practices, antiauthoritarian leftists in the United States have been inventive and dynamic, particularly in the postwar era. We've challenged multiple "isms," calling into question old privileges and dangerous exclusions. We've created a culture within our own organizations that nearly mandates, even if it doesn't always work, an internally democratic process. We're pretty good at organizing everything from demonstrations to counterinstitutions.

This is not to romanticize the past or present work of the libertarian Left; rather, it is to point out that we, too, haven't lacked a striving for the values underpinning this country's birth. Then and now, however, one of our biggest mistakes has been to ignore politics *per se*—that is, the need for a guaranteed place for freedom to emerge.

The Clash sang years ago of "rebels dancing on air," and it seems we have modeled our political struggles on this. We may feel free or powerful in the streets or during building occupations, at our infoshops, and within our collective meetings, but this is a momentary and often private sensation. It allows us to be political, as in reacting to, opposing, countering, or even trying to work outside public policy. But it does not let us do politics, as in making public policy itself. It is only "freedom

lives of the States, leading to the destruction and absorption of small and medium-sized States for the benefit of empires." States must, as Bakunin noted, "devour others in order not to be devoured."⁴ Such a power-taking game will almost invariably tend toward centralization, hegemony, and increasingly sophisticated methods of command, coercion, and control. Plainly, in this quest to monopolize power, there will always have to be dominated subjects.

As institutionalized systems of domination, then, neither state nor capital are controllable. Nor can they be mended or made benign. Thus, the rallying cry of any kind of leftist or progressive activism that accepts the terms of the nation-state and/or capitalism is ultimately only this: "No exploitation without representation! No domination without representation!"

Direct democracy, on the other hand, is completely at odds with both the state and capitalism. For as "rule of the people" (the etymological root of democracy), democracy's underlying logic is essentially the unceasing movement of freedom making. And freedom, as we have seen, must be jettisoned in even the best of representative systems.

Not coincidentally, direct democracy's opponents have generally been those in power. Whenever the people spoke—as in the majority of those who were disenfranchised, disempowered, or even starved—it usually took a revolution to work through a "dialogue" about democracy's value. As a direct form of governance, therefore, democracy can be nothing but a threat to those small groups who wish to rule over others: whether they be monarchs, aristocrats, dictators, or even federal administrations as in the United States.

Indeed, we forget that democracy finds its radical edge in the great revolutions of the past, the American Revolution

⁴ Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, cited in G. P. Maximoff, ed., *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism* (New York: Free Press, 1953), 211, 138.

included. Given that the United States is held up as the pinnacle of democracy, it seems particularly appropriate to hark back to those strains of a radicalized democracy that fought so valiantly and lost so crushingly in the American Revolution. We need to take up that unfinished project—of struggling for “a free life in the free city,” in contrast to accepting “the state” as the only form of government, as Peter Kropotkin argued in his book of the same name—if we have any hope of contesting domination itself.⁵

This does not mean that the numerous injustices tied to the founding of the United States should be ignored or, to use a particularly appropriate word, whitewashed. The fact that native peoples, blacks, women, and others were (and often continue to be) exploited, brutalized, and/or murdered wasn't just a sideshow to the historic event that created this country. Any movement for direct democracy has to grapple with the relation between this oppression and the liberatory moments of the American Revolution.

At the same time, one needs to view the revolution in the context of its times and ask, In what ways was it an advance? Did it offer glimpses of new freedoms, ones that we should ultimately extend to everyone? Like all the great modern revolutions, the American Revolution spawned a politics based on face-to-face assemblies confederated within and between cities.

“American democratic polity was developed out of genuine community life. . . . The township or some not much larger area was the political unit, the town meeting the political medium, and roads, schools, the peace of the community, were the political objectives,” according to John Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems*.⁶ This outline of self-governance did not suddenly

⁵ Peter Kropotkin, *The State: Its Historic Role*, trans. Vernon Richards (London: Freedom Press, 1987), 31.

⁶ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954), 111.

appear in 1776. It literally arrived with the first settlers, who in being freed from the bonds of Old World authority, decided to constitute the rules of their society anew in the Mayflower Compact. This and a host of other subsequent compacts were considered mutual promises—of both rights and duties—on the part of each person to their community—a promise initially emanating out of newfound egalitarian religious values. The idea caught on, and many New England villages drafted their own charters and institutionalized direct democracy through town meetings, where citizens met regularly to determine their community's public policy and needs.

Participating in the debates, deliberations, and decisions of one's community became part of a full and vibrant life; it not only gave colonists (albeit mostly men, and albeit as settlers) the experience and institutions that would later support their revolution but also a tangible form of freedom worth fighting for. Hence, they struggled to preserve control over their daily lives: first with the British over independence, and later, among themselves over competing forms of governance. The final constitution, of course, set up a federal republic not a direct democracy. But before, during, and after the revolution, time and again, town meetings, confederated assemblies, and militias either exerted their established powers of self-management or created new ones when they were blocked—in both legal and extralegal institutions—becoming ever more radical in the process.

Those of us living in the United States have inherited this self-schooling in direct democracy, even if only in vague echoes like New Hampshire's “live free or die” motto or Vermont's yearly Town Meeting Day. Such institutional and cultural fragments, however, bespeak deep-seated values that many still hold dear: independence, initiative, liberty, equality. They continue to create a very real tension between grassroots self-governance and top-down representation—a tension that we, as modern-day revolutionaries, need to build on.