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Democracy Means Bureaucracy

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Broadly speaking, democracy and capitalism were stabilized throughout the 20th century via the progressive inclusion of populations that had previously been excluded from the privileges of voting and property ownership. This began with women's suffrage and the Fordist compromise, continued through desegregation and the end of the European colonial empires, and concluded with the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Since then, almost the entire world has been integrated into neoliberalism, an economic system premised on the ceaseless concentration of capital in fewer and fewer hands at the top, and a race to the bottom for wage-earners. Now that it is a worldwide system, there are fewer opportunities to draw in resources with which to continue expanding the pyramid scheme.

Between ecological catastrophe and growing inequality, the average participants in globalized capitalism no longer have cause to expect an ever-improving quality of life. State governments are dismantling the programs that once served to offset the vicissitudes of the market, feeding every resource into

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the fire in order to keep their economies competitive as the crisis accelerates. Contemporary democratic governments preside over an increasingly invasive security apparatus intended to preserve order at any price.

In 2010–2014, a wave of movements around the world proposed to solve these problems with a more participatory democratic model. Yet those movements ended in new dictatorships in Egypt and elsewhere in the global South, while they were reabsorbed into representational politics in Europe and the United States—most notably in the cases of Syriza and Podemos. As these efforts reached their limits, a new generation of far-right and outright fascist politicians used the democratic process to gain power: Golden Dawn in Greece, Donald Trump in the United States, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, the Lega Nord in Italy, and the Swedish Democrats in Sweden.

In much of the world, faith in democracy is collapsing. The *New York Times* reports that in 2017, only 18 percent of Mexicans surveyed said they were satisfied with democracy—a sentiment reflected around much of Latin America. Those who understood democracy as promising liberty, equality, and universal fellowship are discovering that representational politics serves to maintain the old concentrations of power. In this regard, it is a lot like capitalism: it rotates the figures that appear at the apex of power while rendering inequality itself structural and permanent.

Dissatisfaction with democracy will not necessarily produce more inclusive or liberating alternatives. Aiming to preserve the status of traditionally privileged demographics as neoliberalism generates new instability, various nationalists and authoritarians are proposing new criteria for exclusion from political participation, including citizenship, religion, ethnicity, and gender. All of these already have a longstanding history as dividing lines in previous iterations of democracy.

Narrowing down the number of people who are granted rights and privileges within the prevailing order will undermine all the mechanisms that stabilized capitalism and democracy up to this point. This will almost certainly generate new revolts. The question is whether these revolts can coalesce around new models of decision-making and power relations that do not consolidate control in the hands of the few.

It's up to us to show how capitalism and democracy have failed to deliver the dignity and self-determination their proponents promised and to propose alternative ways of organizing our lives, lest we leave the field of critique to proponents of even more authoritarian systems.

For an academic study of the anarchist critique of democracy, we recommend Markus Lundström's *Anarchist Critique of Radical Democracy: The Impossible Argument*.

Our forebears overthrew kings and dictators, but they didn't abolish the institutions by which kings and dictators ruled: they democratized them. Yet whoever operates these institutions—whether it's a king, a president, or an electorate—the experience on the receiving end is roughly the same. Laws, police, and bureaucracy came before democracy; they function the same way in a democracy as they do in a dictatorship. The only difference is that, because we can cast ballots about how they should be applied, we're supposed to regard them as ours even when they're used against us.

The more people are governed by a given democratic system, the fewer can actively participate in the decision-making. To function on a mass scale, democracy requires formal processes, protocol, credentials, and so many levels of representation as to effectively exclude most people. The result is a tremendous expenditure of resources—caucuses, conventions, forums,

registration, paperwork, lobbying, electoral campaigns—just to maintain the façade of public participation.

Without all this red tape, there would be anarchy: we would participate directly in the decisions that shape our lives. Instead of petitioning the authorities or waiting on the arbitrary edicts of government agencies, we could experiment with solving our problems together on our own terms.