From Democracy To Freedom

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That brings us back to our starting place—to modern-day Athens, Greece. In the city where democracy first came of age, thousands of people now organize themselves under anarchist banners in horizontal, decentralized networks. In place of the exclusivity of ancient Athenian citizenship, their structures are extensive and open-ended; they welcome migrants fleeing the war in Syria, for they know that their experiment in freedom must grow or perish. In place of the coercive apparatus of government, they seek to maintain a decentralized distribution of power reinforced by a collective commitment to solidarity. Rather than uniting to impose majority rule, they cooperate to prevent the possibility of rule itself.

This is not an outdated way of life, but the end of a long error.

From Democracy to Freedom

Let's return to the high point of the uprisings. Thousands of us flood into the streets, finding each other in new formations that offer an unfamiliar and exhilarating sense of agency. Suddenly everything intersects: words and deeds, ideas and sensations, personal stories and world events. Certainty—finally, we feel at home—and uncertainty: finally, an open horizon. Together, we discover ourselves capable of things we never imagined.

What is beautiful about such moments transcends any political system. The conflicts are as essential as the flashes of unexpected consensus. This is not the functioning of democracy, but the experience of freedom—of collectively taking our destinies in our hands. No set of procedures could institutionalize this. It is a prize we must wrest from the jaws of habit and history again and again.

Next time a window of opportunity opens, rather than reinventing "real democracy" yet again, let our goal be freedom, freedom itself.

Democracy is the most universal political ideal of our day. George Bush invoked it to justify invading Iraq; Obama congratulated the rebels of Tahrir Square for bringing it to Egypt; Occupy Wall Street claimed to have distilled its pure form. From the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea to the autonomous region of Rojava, practically every government and popular movement calls itself democratic.

And what's the cure for the problems with democracy? Everyone agrees: more democracy. Since the turn of the century, we've seen a spate of new movements promising to deliver *real* democracy, in contrast to ostensibly democratic institutions that they describe as exclusive, coercive, and alienating.

Is there a common thread that links all these different kinds of democracy? Which of them is the *real* one? Can any of them deliver the inclusivity and freedom we associate with the word?

Impelled by our own experiences in directly democratic movements, we've returned to these questions. Our conclusion is that the dramatic imbalances in economic and political power that have driven people into the streets from New York City to Sarajevo are not incidental defects in specific democracies, but structural features dating back to the origins of democracy itself; they appear in practically every example of democratic government through the ages. Representative democracy preserved all the bureaucratic apparatus that was originally invented to serve kings; direct democracy tends to recreate it on a smaller scale, even outside the formal structures of the state. *Democracy is not the same as self-determination.*

To be sure, many good things are regularly described as democratic. This is not an argument against discussions, collectives, assemblies, networks, federations, or working with people you don't always agree with. The argument, rather, is that when we engage in those practices, if we understand what we are doing as *democracy*—as a form of participatory government rather than a collective practice of freedom—then sooner or later, we will recreate all

the problems associated with less democratic forms of government. This goes for representative democracy and direct democracy alike, and even for consensus process.

Rather than championing democratic procedures as an end in themselves, then, let's return to the values that drew us to democracy in the first place: egalitarianism, inclusivity, the idea that each person should control her own destiny. If democracy is not the most effective way to actualize these, what is?

As fiercer and fiercer struggles rock today's democracies, the stakes of this discussion keep getting higher. If we go on trying to replace the prevailing order with a more participatory version of the same thing, we'll keep ending up right back where we started, and others who share our disillusionment will gravitate towards more authoritarian alternatives. We need a framework that can fulfill the promises democracy has betrayed.

In the following text, we examine the common threads that connect different forms of democracy, trace the development of democracy from its classical origins to its contemporary representative, direct, and consensus-based variants, and evaluate how democratic discourse and procedures serve the social movements that adopt them. Along the way, we outline what it would mean to seek freedom directly rather than through democratic rule.

This project is the result of years of transcontinental dialogue. To complement it, we are publishing case studies from participants in movements that have been promoted as models of direct democracy: 15M in Spain (2011), the occupation of Syntagma Square in Greece (2011), Occupy in the United States (2011–2012), the Slovenian uprising (2012–2013), the plenums in Bosnia (2014), and the Rojava revolution (2012–2016).

hierarchies, oppression, pointless antagonism. The first step down this road is to remove the incentives that the state offers *not* to resolve conflict.

Unfortunately, many of the models of conflict resolution that once served human communities are now lost to us, forcibly replaced by the court systems of ancient Athens and Rome. We can look to experimental models of transformative justice for a glimpse of the alternatives we will have to develop.

Refusing to Be Ruled

Envisioning what a horizontal and decentralized society might look like, we can imagine overlapping networks of collectives and assemblies in which people organize to meet their daily needs— food, shelter, medical care, work, recreation, discussion, companionship. Being interdependent, they would have good reason to settle disputes amicably, but no one could force anyone else to remain in an arrangement that was unhealthy or unfulfilling. In response to threats, they would mobilize in larger ad hoc formations, drawing on connections with other communities around the world.

In fact, a great many stateless societies have looked something like this in the course of human history. Today. models like this continue to appear at the intersections of indigenous, feminist, and anarchist traditions.

> "The principle that the majority have a right to rule the minority, practically resolves all government into a mere contest between two bodies of men, as to which of them shall be masters, and which of them slaves; a contest, that—however bloody—can, in the nature of things, never be finally closed, so long as man refuses to be a slave."
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> – Lysander Spooner, *No Treason*

up with new ways of addressing strife. Conflicts between those who oppose the state are one of the chief assets that preserve its supremacy.[3] If we want to create spaces of freedom, we must not become so fractured that we can't defend those spaces, and we must not resolve conflicts in a way that creates new power imbalances.

One of the most basic functions of democracy is to offer a way of concluding disputes. Voting, courts, and police all serve to *decide* conflicts without necessarily *resolving* them; the rule of law effectively imposes a winner-take-all model for addressing differences. By centralizing force, a strong state is able to compel feuding parties to suspend hostilities even on mutually unacceptable terms. This enables it to suppress forms of strife that interfere with its control, such as class warfare, while fostering forms of conflict that undermine horizontal and autonomous resistance, such as gang warfare. We cannot understand the religious and ethnic violence of our time without factoring in the ways that state structures provoke and exacerbate it.

When we accord institutions inherent legitimacy, this offers us an excuse not to resolve conflicts, relying instead on the intercession of the state. It gives us an alibi to conclude disputes by force and to exclude those who are structurally disadvantaged. Rather than taking the initiative to work things out directly, we end up jockeying for power.

If we don't recognize the authority of the state, we have no such excuses: we must find mutually satisfying resolutions or else suffer the consequences of ongoing strife. This gives us an incentive to take all parties' needs and perceptions seriously, to develop skills with which to defuse tension. It isn't necessary to get everyone to agree, but we have to find ways to differ that do not produce

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[3] Witness the Mexican *autodefensas* who set out to defend themselves against the cartels that are functionally identical with the government in some parts of Mexico, only to end up in gang warfare against each other.

What Is Democracy?

What is democracy, exactly? Most of the textbook definitions have to do with majority rule or government by elected representatives. On the other hand, a few radicals have argued that "real" democracy only takes place outside and against the state's monopoly on power. Should we understand democracy as a set of decision-making procedures with a specific history, or as a general aspiration to egalitarian, inclusive, and participatory politics?

> "What is democracy?"
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> "Well, I was never very clear on it, myself. Like every other kind of government, it's got something to do with young men killing each other, I believe."
>
> – *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971)

To pin down the object of our critique, let's start with the term itself. The word democracy derives from the ancient Greek *dēmokratía,* from *dêmos* "people" and *krátos* "power." This formulation of *rule by the people,* which has resurfaced in Latin America as *poder popular,* begs the question: which people? And what kind of power?

These root words, *demos* and *kratos,* suggest two common denominators of all democracy: a way of determining who participates in the decision-making, and a way of enforcing decisions. Citizenship, in other words, and policing. These are the essentials of democracy; they are what make it a form of government. Anything

short of that is more properly described as *anarchy*—the absence of government, from the Greek *an-* "without" and *arkhos* "ruler."

Common denominators of democracy:

- **a way of determining who participates in making decisions**
  (*demos*)

- **a way of enforcing decisions**
  (*kratos*)

- **a space of legitimate decision-making**
  (*polis*)

- **and the resources that sustain it**
  (*oikos*)

Who qualifies as *demos?* Some have argued that etymologically, *demos* never meant *all* people, but only particular social classes. Even as its partisans have trumpeted its supposed inclusivity, in practice democracy has always demanded a way of distinguishing between included and excluded. That could be status in the legislature, voting rights, citizenship, membership, race, gender, age, or participation in street assemblies; but in every form of democracy, for there to be legitimate decisions, there have to be formal conditions of legitimacy, and a defined group of people who meet them.

In this regard, democracy institutionalizes the provincial, chauvinist character of its Greek origins, at the same time as it seemingly offers a model that could involve all the world. This is why democracy has proven so compatible with nationalism and the state; it presupposes the Other, who is not accorded the same rights or political agency.

The focus on inclusion and exclusion is clear enough at the dawn of modern democracy in Rousseau's influential *Of the Social Contract,* in which he emphasizes that there is no contradiction between democracy and slavery. The more "evildoers" are in chains,

all involved, like it or not, in one closed group sharing a single inescapable space: earth. So it is not a question of distinguishing the spaces in which we must be accountable to each other from the spaces in which we may act freely. The question is how to foster both responsibility and autonomy at every order of scale.

Towards this end, we set out to create mutually fulfilling collectivities at each level of society—spaces in which people identify with each other and have cause to do right by each other. These can take many forms, from housing cooperatives and neighborhood assemblies to international networks. At the same time, we recognize that we will have to reconfigure them continuously according to how much intimacy and interdependence proves beneficial for the participants. When a configuration must change, this need not be a sign of failure: on the contrary, it shows that the participants are not competing for hegemony. Instead of treating group decision-making as a pursuit of unanimity, we can approach it as a space for differences to arise, conflicts to play out, and transformations to occur as different social constellations converge and diverge. Disagreeing and dissociating can be just as desirable as reaching agreement, provided they occur for the right reasons; the advantages of organizing in larger numbers should suffice to discourage people from fracturing gratuitously.

Our institutions should help us to tease out differences, not suppress or submerge them. Some witnesses returning from Rojava report that when an assembly there cannot reach consensus, it splits into two bodies, dividing its resources between them. If this is true, it offers a model of voluntary association that is a vast improvement on the Procrustean unity of democracy.

Resolving conflicts

Sometimes dividing into separate groups isn't enough to resolve conflicts. To dispense with centralized coercion, we have to come

as the driving force of these movements, rather than as a raw material to be shaped through democratic process, it might help us to prioritize what we do best.

Anarchists frustrated by the contradictions of democratic discourse have sometimes withdrawn to organize themselves according to preexisting affinity alone. Yet segregation breeds stagnation and fractiousness. It is better to organize on the basis of our conditions and needs so we come into contact with all the others who share them. Only when we understand ourselves as nodes within dynamic collectivities, rather than discrete entities possessed of static interests, can we make sense of the rapid metamorphoses that people undergo in the course of experiences like the Occupy movement—and the tremendous power of the *encounter* to transform us if we open ourselves to it.

Cultivating Collectivity, Preserving Difference

If no institution, contract, or law should be able to dictate our decisions, how do we agree on what responsibilities we have towards each other?

Some have suggested a distinction between "closed" groups, in which the participants agree to answer to each other for their actions, and "open" groups that need not reach consensus. But this begs the question: how do we draw a line between the two? If we are accountable to our fellows in a closed group only until we choose to leave it, and we may leave at any time, that is little different from participating in an open group. At the same time, we are

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front of those confronting the police, crossed his forearms in the X that symbolizes strong disagreement in the sign language of consensus process, and said 'You can't do this! I block you!' For him, consensus was a tool of horizontal control, giving everyone the right to suppress whichever of others' actions they found disagreeable."

he suggests, the more perfect the freedom of the citizens. Freedom for the wolf is death for the lamb, as Isaiah Berlin later put it. The zero-sum conception of freedom expressed in this metaphor is the foundation of the discourse of rights granted and protected by the state. In other words: for citizens to be free, the state must possess ultimate authority and the capacity to exercise total control. The state seeks to produce sheep, reserving the position of wolf for itself.

By contrast, if we understand freedom as cumulative, the freedom of one person becomes the freedom of all: it is not simply a question of being protected by the authorities, but of intersecting with each other in a way that maximizes the possibilities for everyone. In this framework, the more that coercive force is centralized, the less freedom there can be. This way of conceiving freedom is social rather than individualistic: it approaches liberty as a collectively produced relationship to our potential, not a static bubble of private rights.[1]

Let's turn to the other root, *kratos.* Democracy shares this suffix with aristocracy, autocracy, bureaucracy, plutocracy, and technocracy. Each of these terms describes government by some subset of society, but they all share a common logic. That common thread is *kratos,* power.

What kind of power? Let's consult the ancient Greeks once more.

In classical Greece, every abstract concept was personified by a divine being. Kratos was an implacable Titan embodying the kind of coercive force associated with state power. One of the oldest sources in which Kratos appears is the play *Prometheus Bound,* composed by Aeschylus in the early days of Athenian democracy. The play opens with Kratos forcibly escorting the shackled Prometheus,

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[1] "I am truly free only when all human beings, men and women, are equally free. The freedom of others, far from negating or limiting my freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary premise and confirmation." –Mikhail Bakunin

who is being punished for stealing fire from the gods to give to humanity. Kratos appears as a jailer unthinkingly carrying out Zeus's orders—a brute "made for any tyrant's acts."

The sort of force personified by Kratos is what democracy has in common with autocracy and every other form of rule. They share the institutions of coercion: the legal apparatus, the police, and the military, all of which preceded democracy and have repeatedly outlived it. These are the tools "made for any tyrant's acts," whether the tyrant at the helm is a king, a class of bureaucrats, or "the people" themselves. "Democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people," as Oscar Wilde put it. Mu'ammer al Gaddafi echoed this approvingly a century later, without irony: *"Democracy is the supervision of the people by the people."*

In modern-day Greek, *kratos* is simply the word for state. To understand democracy, we have to look closer at government itself.

> "There is no contradiction between exercising democracy and legitimate central administrative control according to the well-known balance between centralization and democracy… Democracy consolidates relations among people, and its main strength is respect. The strength that stems from democracy assumes a higher degree of adherence in carrying out orders with great accuracy and zeal."
>
> – Saddam Hussein, "Democracy: A Source of Strength for the Individual and Society"

The spokescouncil immediately preceding the demonstrations against the 2001 Free Trade Area of the Americas summit in Quebec City was a classic space of encounter. This meeting brought together a wide range of autonomous groups that had converged from around the world to protest the FTAA. Rather than attempting to make binding decisions, the participants introduced the initiatives that their groups had prepared and coordinated for mutual benefit wherever possible. Much of the decision-making occurred afterwards in informal intergroup discussions. By this means, thousands of people were able to synchronize their actions without need of central leadership, without giving the police much insight into the wide array of plans that were to unfold. Had the spokescouncil employed an organizational model intended to produce unity and centralization, the participants could have spent the entire night fruitlessly arguing about goals, strategy, and which tactics to allow.

Most of the social movements of the past two decades have been hybrid models juxtaposing spaces of encounter with some form of democracy. In Occupy, for example, the encampments served as open-ended spaces of encounter, while the general assemblies were formally intended to function as directly democratic decision-making bodies. Most of those movements achieved their greatest effects because the encounters they facilitated opened up opportunities for autonomous action, not because they centralized group activity through direct democracy.[2] If we approach the *encounter*

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[2] Many of the decisions that gave Occupy Oakland a greater impact than other Occupy encampments, including the refusal to negotiate with the city government and the militant reaction to the first eviction, were the result of autonomous initiatives, not consensus process. Meanwhile, some occupiers interpreted consensus process as a sort of decentralized legal framework in which any action undertaken by any participant in the occupation should require the consent of every other participant. As one participant recalls, "One of the first times the police tried to enter the camp at Occupy Oakland, they were immediately surrounded and shouted at by a group of about twenty people. Some other people weren't happy about this. The most vocal of these pacifists placed himself in

only with those who share one's preferences. In a crowded, interdependent world, we can't afford to refuse to coexist or coordinate with others. The point is simply that we must not seek to *legislate* relations.

Instead of deferring to a blueprint or protocol, we can evaluate institutions on an ongoing basis: Do they reward cooperation—or contention? Do they distribute agency—or create bottlenecks of power? Do they offer each participant the opportunity to fulfill her potential on her own terms—or impose external imperatives? Do they facilitate the resolution of conflict on mutually agreeable terms—or punish all who run afoul of a codified system?

> "He expressed himself to us that we should never allow ourselves to be tempted by any consideration to acknowledge laws and institutions to exist as of right if our conscience and reason condemned them. He admonished us not to care whether a majority, no matter how large, opposed our principles and opinions; the largest majorities were sometimes only organized mobs."
>
> – August Bondi, writing about John Brown

Creating Spaces of Encounter

In place of formal sites of centralized decision-making, we propose a variety of *spaces of encounter* where people may open themselves to each other's influence and find others who share their priorities. Encounter means mutual transformation: establishing common points of reference, common concerns. The space of encounter is not a representative body vested with the authority to make decisions for others, nor a governing body employing majority rule or consensus. It is an opportunity for people to experiment with acting in different configurations on a voluntary basis.

Monopolizing Legitimacy

> "As in absolute governments the King is law, so in free countries the law ought to be King."
>
> – Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

As a form of government, democracy offers a way to produce a single order out of a cacophony of desires, absorbing the resources and activities of the minority into policies dictated by the majority. In any democracy, there is a legitimate space of decision-making, distinct from the rest of life. It could be a congress in a parliament building, or a general assembly on a sidewalk, or an app soliciting votes via iPhone. In every case, it is not our immediate needs and desires that are the ultimate source of legitimacy, but a particular decision-making process and protocol. In a state, this is called "the rule of law," though the principle does not necessarily require a formal legal system.

This is the essence of government: decisions made in one space determine what can take place in all other spaces. The result is alienation—the friction between what is decided and what is lived.

Democracy promises to solve this problem by incorporating everyone into the space of decision-making: the rule of all by all. "The citizens of a democracy submit to the law because they recognize that, however indirectly, they are submitting to themselves as makers of the law." But if all those decisions were actually made by the people they impact, there would be no need for a means of enforcing them.

"The great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

– James Madison, *The Federalist*

What protects the minorities in this winner-take-all system? Advocates of democracy explain that minorities will be protected by institutional provisions—"checks and balances." In other words, the same structure that holds power over them is supposed to protect them from itself.[1] In this approach, democracy and personal freedom are conceived as fundamentally at odds: to preserve freedom for individuals, a government must be able to take freedom away from everyone. Yet it is optimistic indeed to trust that institutions will always be better than the people who maintain them. The more power we vest in government in hopes of protecting the marginalized, the more dangerous it can be when it is turned against them.

How much do you buy into the idea that the democratic process should trump your own conscience and values? Let's try a quick exercise. Imagine yourself in a democratic republic with slaves—say, ancient Athens, or ancient Rome, or the United States of America until the end of 1865. Would you obey the law and treat people as property while endeavoring to change the laws, knowing full well that whole generations might live and die in chains in the meantime? Or would you act according to your conscience in defiance of the law, like Harriet Tubman and John Brown?

If you would follow in the footsteps of Harriet Tubman, then you, too, believe that there is something more important than the rule

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[1] This seeming paradox didn't trouble the framers of the US Constitution because the minority whose rights they were chiefly concerned with protecting was the class of property owners—who already had plenty of leverage on state institutions. As James Madison said in 1787, "Our government ought to secure the permanent interests of the country against innovation. Landholders ought to have a share in the government, to support these invaluable interests, and to balance and check the other. They ought to be so constituted as to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority."

so can nationalists and racists. The fact that a person or group is autonomous tells us little about whether the relations they cultivate with others are egalitarian or hierarchical, inclusive or exclusive. If we wish to maximize autonomy for everyone rather than simply seeking it for ourselves, we have to create a social context in which no one is able to accumulate institutional power over anyone else.

We have to create *anarchy*.

Demystifying Institutions

Institutions exist to serve us, not the other way around. They have no inherent claim on our obedience. We should never invest them with more legitimacy than our own needs and desires. When our wishes conflict with others' wishes, we can see if an institutional process can produce a solution that satisfies everyone; but as soon as we accord an institution the right to adjudicate our conflicts or dictate our decisions, we have abdicated our freedom.

This is not a critique of a particular organizational model, or an argument for "informal" structures over "formal" ones. Rather, it demands that we treat all models as provisional—that we ceaselessly reappraise and reinvent them. Where Thomas Paine wanted to enthrone the law as king, where Rousseau theorized the social contract and more recent enthusiasts of capitalism *über alles* dream of a society based on contracts alone, we counter that when relations are truly in the best interests of all participants, there is no need for laws or contracts.

Likewise, this is not an argument in favor of mere individualism, nor of treating relationships as expendable, nor of organizing

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laws of objective morality rather than acting according his desires. By contrast, an anarchist might counter that we owe our freedom to the spontaneous interplay of myriad forces within us, not to our capacity to force a single order upon ourselves. Which of those conceptions of freedom we embrace will have repercussions on everything from how we picture freedom on a planetary scale to how we understand the movements of subatomic particles.

through the anti-globalization movement and the rebellion in Argentina, the idea of leaderless structures has spread even into the business world.

But decentralization is just as important as horizontality if we do not wish to be trapped in a tyranny of equals, in which everyone has to be able to agree on something for anyone to be able to do it. Rather than a single process through which all agency must pass, decentralization means multiple sites of decision-making and multiple forms of legitimacy. That way, when power is distributed unevenly in one context, this can be counterbalanced elsewhere. Decentralization means preserving difference—strategic and ideological diversity is a source of strength for movements and communities, just as biodiversity is in the natural world. We should neither segregate ourselves into homogenous groups on the pretext of affinity nor reduce our politics to lowest common denominators.

Decentralization implies autonomy—the ability to act freely on one's own initiative. Autonomy can apply at any level of scale—a single person, a neighborhood, a movement, an entire region. To be free, you need control over your immediate surroundings and the details of your daily life; the more self-sufficient you are, the more secure your autonomy is. This needn't mean meeting all your needs independently; it could also mean the kind of interdependence that gives you leverage on the people you depend on. No single institution should be able to monopolize access to resources or social relations. A society that promotes autonomy requires what an engineer would call redundancy: a wide range of options and possibilities in every aspect of life.

If we wish to foster freedom, it's not enough to affirm autonomy alone.[1] A nation-state or political party can assert autonomy;

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[1] "Autonomy" is derived from the ancient Greek prefix *auto-,* self, and *nomos,* law—giving oneself one's own law. This suggests an understanding of personal freedom in which one aspect of the self—say, the superego—permanently controls the others and dictates all behavior. Kant defined autonomy as self-legislation, in which the individual compels himself to comply with the universal

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of law. This is a problem for anyone who wants to make conformity with the law or with the will of the majority into the final arbiter of legitimacy.

> "Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?"
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> – Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*

The Original Democracy

In ancient Athens, the much-touted "birthplace of democracy," we already see the exclusion and coercion that have been essential features of democratic government ever since. Only adult male citizens with military training could vote; women, slaves, debtors, and all who lacked Athenian blood were excluded. At the very most, democracy involved less than a fifth of the population.

Indeed, slavery was more prevalent in ancient Athens than in other Greek city states, and women had fewer rights relative to men. Greater equality among male citizens apparently meant greater solidarity against women and foreigners. The space of participatory politics was a gated community.

We can map the boundaries of this gated community in the Athenian opposition between public and private—between *polis* and *oikos.* The *polis,* the Greek city-state, was a space of public discourse where citizens interacted as equals. By contrast, the *oikos,* the household, was a hierarchical space in which male property owners ruled supreme—a zone outside the purview of the political, yet serving as its foundation. In this dichotomy, the *oikos* represents everything that provides the resources that sustain politics, yet is taken for granted as preceding and therefore outside it.

These categories remain with us today. The words "politics" ("the affairs of the city") and "police" ("the administration of the city") come from *polis,* while "economy" ("the management of the household") and "ecology" ("the study of the household") derive from *oikos.*

Democracy is still premised on this division. As long as there is a political distinction between public and private, everything

Towards Freedom: Points of Departure

The classic defense of democracy is that it is the worst form of government—except for all the others. But if *government* itself is the problem, we have to go back to the drawing board.

Reimagining humanity without government is an ambitious project; two centuries of anarchist theory only scratch the surface. For the purposes of this analysis, we'll conclude with a few basic values that could guide us beyond democracy, and a few general proposals for how to understand what we might do instead of *governing.* Most of the work remains to be done.

> "Anarchism represents not the most radical form of democracy, but an altogether different paradigm of collective action."
>
> – Uri Gordon, *Anarchy Alive!*

Horizontality, Decentralization, Autonomy, Anarchy

Under scrutiny, democracy does not live up to the values that drew us to it in the first place—*egalitarianism, inclusivity, self-determination.* Alongside these values, we must add *horizontality, decentralization,* and *autonomy* as their indispensible counterparts.

Horizontality has gained a lot of currency since the late 20th century. Starting with the Zapatista uprising and gaining momentum

needed between majority rule and tyranny—two expressions of the same basic principle. The state can assume many shapes; like vegetation, it can die back, then regrow from the roots. It can take the form of a monarchy or a parliamentary democracy, a revolutionary dictatorship or a provisional council; when the authorities have fled and the military has mutinied, the state can linger as a germ carried by the partisans of order and protocol in an apparently horizontal general assembly. All of these forms, however democratic, can regenerate into a regime capable of crushing freedom and self-determination.

The one sure way to avoid cooptation, manipulation, and opportunism is to refuse to legitimize any form of rule. When people solve their problems and meet their needs directly through flexible, horizontal, decentralized structures, there are no leaders to corrupt, no formal structures to ossify, no single process to hijack. Do away with the concentrations of power and those who wish to seize power can get no purchase on society. An ungovernable people will likely have to defend itself against would-be tyrants, but it will never put its own strength behind their efforts to rule.

from the household (the gendered space of intimacy that sustains the prevailing order with invisible and unpaid labor[1]) to entire continents and peoples (like Africa during the colonial period—or even blackness itself) may be relegated outside the sphere of politics. Likewise, the institution of property and the market economy it produces, which have served as the substructure of democracy since its origins, are placed beyond question at the same time as they are enforced and defended by the political apparatus.

Fortunately, ancient Athens is not the only reference point for egalitarian decision-making. A cursory survey of other societies reveals plenty of other examples, many of which are not predicated on exclusivity or coercion. But should we understand these as *democracies,* too?

> "Are we supposed to believe that before the Athenians, it never really occurred to anyone, anywhere, to gather all the members of their community in order to make joint decisions in a way that gave everyone equal say?"
>
> – David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*

In his *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology,* David Graeber takes his colleagues to task for identifying Athens as the origin of democracy; he surmises that the Iroquois, Berber, Sulawezi, or Tallensi models do not receive as much attention simply because none of them center around voting. On one hand, Graeber is right to direct our attention to societies that focus on building consensus rather than practicing coercion: many of these embody the best

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[1] In this context, arguing that "the personal is political" constitutes a feminist rejection of the dichotomy between *oikos* and *polis.* But if this argument is understood to mean that the personal, too, should be subject to democratic decision-making, it only extends the logic of government into additional aspects of life. The real alternative is to affirm *multiple sites of power,* arguing that legitimacy should not be confined to any one space, so decisions made in the household are not subordinated to those made in the sites of formal politics.

values associated with democracy much more than ancient Athens did. On the other hand, it doesn't make sense for us to label these examples truly democratic while questioning the democratic credentials of the Greeks who invented the term. This is still ethnocentrism: affirming the value of non-Western examples by granting them honorary status in our own admittedly inferior Western paradigm. Instead, let's concede that democracy, as a specific historical practice dating from Sparta and Athens and emulated worldwide, has not lived up to the standard set by many of these other societies, and it does not make sense to describe them as democratic. It would be more responsible, and more precise, to describe and honor them in their own terms.

That leaves us with Athens as the original democracy, after all. What if Athens became so influential not because of how free it was, but because of how it harnessed participatory politics to the power of the state? At the time, most societies throughout human history had been stateless; some were hierarchical, others were horizontal, but no stateless society had the centralized power of *kratos.* The states that existed, by contrast, were hardly egalitarian. The Athenians innovated a hybrid format in which horizontality coincided with exclusion and coercion. If you take it for granted that the state is desirable or at least inevitable, this sounds appealing. But if the state is the root of the problem, then the slavery and patriarchy of ancient Athens were not early irregularities in the democratic model, but indications of the power imbalances coded into its DNA from the beginning.

that opposes the state and other forms of hierarchical power in and of themselves.

Even explicitly revolutionary strategies can be turned to the advantage of world powers in the name of democracy. From Venezuela to Macedonia, we have seen state actors and vested interests channel genuine popular dissent into ersatz social movements in order to shorten the electoral cycle. Usually, the goal is to force the ruling party to resign in order to replace it with a more "democratic" government—i.e., a government more amenable to US or EU objectives. Such movements usually focus on "corruption," implying that the system would work just fine if only the right people were in power. When we enter the streets, rather than risk being the dupes of some foreign policy initiative, we should not mobilize against any particular government, but against government per se.

The Egyptian revolution dramatically illustrates the dead end of democratic revolution. After hundreds had given their lives to overthrow dictator Hosni Mubarak and institute democracy, popular elections brought another autocrat to power in the person of Mohamed Morsi. A year later, in 2013, nothing had improved, and the people who had initiated the revolution took to the streets once more to reject the results of democracy, forcing the Egyptian military to depose Morsi. Today, the military remains the de facto ruler of Egypt, and the same oppression and injustice that inspired two revolutions continues. The options represented by the military, Morsi, and the people in revolt are the same ones that Lincoln described in his inaugural speech: tyranny, majority rule, and anarchy.

Here, at the furthest limit of the struggle against poverty and oppression, we always come up against the state itself. As long as we submit to being governed, the state will shift back and forth as

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real purpose of participatory budgeting is to redirect popular attention from the failures of government to the project of making it *more democratic.*

government that preceded Lula to legalize many land occupations, but it made no headway whatsoever under Lula. This pattern recurred all around Latin America as supposedly radical politicians betrayed the social movements that had put them in office. Today, the most powerful social movements in Brazil are right-wing protests against the Workers' Party. There are no electoral shortcuts to freedom.

What if instead of seeking state power, we focus on promoting directly democratic models such as neighborhood assemblies? Unfortunately, such practices can be appropriated to serve a wide range of agendas. After the Slovenian uprising of 2012, while self-organized neighborhood assemblies continued to meet in Ljubljana, an NGO financed by the city authorities began organizing assemblies in a "neglected" neighborhood as a pilot project towards "revitalizing" the area, with the explicit intention of drawing disaffected citizens back into dialogue with the government. During the Ukrainian revolution of 2014, the fascist parties Svoboda and Right Sector came to prominence via the democratic assemblies in the occupied Maidan. In 2009, members of the Greek fascist party Golden Dawn joined locals in the Athenian neighborhood of Agios Panteleimonas in organizing an assembly that coordinated attacks on immigrants and anarchists. If we want to foster inclusivity and self-determination, it is not enough to propagate the rhetoric and procedures of participatory democracy.[2] We need to spread a framework

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[2] As economic crises intensify alongside widespread disillusionment with representational politics, we see governments offering more direct participation in decision-making to pacify the public. Just as the dictatorships in Greece, Spain, and Chile were forced to transition into democratic governments to neutralize protest movements, the state is opening up new roles for those who might otherwise lead the opposition to it. If we are directly responsible for making the political system work, we will blame ourselves when it fails—not the format itself. This explains the new experiments with "participatory" budgets from Pôrto Alegre to Poznań. In practice, the participants rarely have any leverage on town officials; at most, they can act as consultants, or vote on a measly 0.1% of city funds. The

Representative Democracy—A Market for Power

The US government has more in common with the republic of ancient Rome than with Athens. Rather than governing directly, Roman citizens elected representatives to head up a complex bureaucracy. As Roman territory expanded and wealth flooded in, small farmers lost their footing and massive numbers of the dispossessed flooded the capital; unrest forced the Republic to extend voting rights to wider and wider segments of the population, yet political inclusion did little to counteract the economic stratification of Roman society. All this sounds eerily familiar.

The Roman Republic came to an end when Julius Caesar seized power; from then on, Rome was ruled by emperors. Yet very little changed for the average Roman. The bureaucracy, the military, the economy, and the courts continued to function the same as before.

> "Those persons who believe in the sharpest distinction between democracy and monarchy can scarcely appreciate how a political institution may go through so many transformations and yet remain the same. Yet a swift glance must show us that in all the evolution of the English monarchy, with all its broadenings and its revolutions, and even with its jump across the sea into a colony which became an independent nation and then a powerful State, the same State functions and attitudes have been preserved essentially unchanged."
>
> – Randolph Bourne, *The State*

Fast-forward eighteen centuries to the American Revolution. Outraged about "taxation without representation," North American subjects of the British Empire rebelled and established a representative democracy of their own,[1] soon complete with a Roman-style Senate. Yet once again, the function of the state remained unchanged. Those who had fought to throw off the king discovered that taxation *with* representation was little different. The result was a series of uprisings—Shay's Rebellion, the Whisky Rebellion, Fries's Rebellion, and more—all of which were brutally suppressed. The new democratic government succeeded in pacifying the population where the British Empire had failed, thanks to the loyalty of many who had revolted against the king: for didn't this new government *represent* them?[2]

This story has been repeated time and time again. In the French revolution of 1848, the provisional government's prefect of police entered the office vacated by the king's prefect of police and took up the same papers his predecessor had just set down. In the 20th century transitions from dictatorship to democracy in Greece, Spain, and Chile, and more recently in Tunisia and Egypt, social movements that overthrew dictators had to go on fighting against the very same police under the democratic regime. This is *kratos,* what some have called the Deep State, carrying over from one regime to the next.

Laws, courts, prisons, intelligence agencies, tax collectors, armies, police—most of the instruments of coercive power that we consider oppressive in a monarchy or a dictatorship operate the same way in a democracy. Yet when we're permitted to cast ballots about who supervises them, we're supposed to regard them as *ours,* even when they're used against us. This is the great

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[1] This is a fundamental paradox of democratic governments: established by a crime, they sanctify law—legitimizing a new ruling order as the fulfillment and continuation of a revolt.

[2] "Obedience to the law is true liberty," reads one memorial to the soldiers who suppressed Shay's Rebellion.

If we claim legitimacy on the grounds that we represent the public, we offer the authorities an easy way to outmaneuver us, while opening the way for others to coopt our efforts. Before the introduction of universal suffrage, it was possible to maintain that a movement represented the will of the people; but nowadays an election can draw more people to the polls than even the most massive movement can mobilize into the streets. The winners of elections will always be able to claim to represent more people than can participate in movements.[1] Likewise, movements purporting to represent the most oppressed sectors of society can be outflanked by the inclusion of token representatives of those sectors in the halls of power. And as long as we validate the idea of representation, some new politician or party can use our rhetoric to come to power. We should not claim that we represent the people—we should assert that no one has the right to rule us.

What happens when a movement comes to power through electoral politics? The victory of Lula and his Workers' Party in Brazil seemed to present a best-case scenario in which a party based in grassroots radical organizing took the helm of the state. At the time, Brazil hosted some of the world's most powerful social movements, including the 1.5-million-strong land reform campaign MST (Landless Workers' Movement); many of these were interconnected with the Workers' Party. Yet after Lula took office in 2002, social movements entered a precipitous decline that lasted until 2013. Members of the Workers' Party dropped out of local organizing to take positions in the government, while the necessities of realpolitik prevented Lula from granting concessions to the movements he had previously supported. The MST had forced the conservative

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[1] At the end of May 1968, the announcement of snap elections broke the wave of wildcat strikes and occupations that had swept across France; the spectacle of the majority of French citizens voting for President de Gaulle's party was enough to dispel all hope of revolution. This illustrates how elections serve as a pageantry that *represents* citizens to each other as willing participants in the prevailing order.

democratic tactics that turn out to be just as useful to those who seek state power; and movements that topple governments, only to replace them. Let's consider each in turn.

If we limit our movements to what the majority of participants can agree on in advance, we may not be able to get them off the ground in the first place. When much of the population has accepted the legitimacy of the government and its laws, most people don't feel entitled to do anything that could challenge the existing power structure, no matter how badly it treats them. Consequently, a movement that makes decisions by majority vote or consensus may have difficulty agreeing to utilize any but the most symbolic tactics. Can you imagine the residents of Ferguson, Missouri holding a consensus meeting to decide whether to burn the QuikTrip store and fight off the police? And yet those were the actions that sparked what came to be known as the Black Lives Matter movement. People usually have to experience something new to be open to it; it is a mistake to confine an entire movement to what is already familiar to the majority of participants.

By the same token, if we insist on our movements being completely transparent, that means letting the authorities dictate which tactics we can use. In conditions of widespread infiltration and surveillance, conducting all decision-making in public with complete transparency invites repression on anyone who is perceived as a threat to the status quo. The more public and transparent a decision-making body is, the more conservative its actions are likely to be, even when this contradicts its express reason for being—think of all the environmental coalitions that have never taken a single step to halt the activities that cause climate change. Within democratic logic, it makes sense to demand transparency from the government, as it is supposed to represent and answer to the people. But outside that logic, rather than demanding that participants in social movements represent and answer to each other, we should seek to maximize the autonomy with which they may act.

achievement of two and a half centuries of democratic revolutions: instead of abolishing the means by which kings governed, they rendered those means *popular.*

> "A Constituent Assembly is the means used by the privileged classes, when a dictatorship is not possible, either to prevent a revolution, or, when a revolution has already broken out, to stop its progress with the excuse of legalizing it, and to take back as much as possible of the gains that the people had made during the insurrectional period."
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> – Errico Malatesta, "Against the Constituent Assembly as against the Dictatorship"

The transfer of power from rulers to assemblies has served to prematurely halt revolutionary movements ever since the American Revolution. Rather than making the changes they sought via direct action, the rebels entrusted that task to their new representatives at the helm of the state—only to see their dreams betrayed.

The state is powerful indeed, but one thing it cannot do is deliver freedom to its subjects. It cannot, because it derives its very being from their subjection. It can subject others, it can commandeer and concentrate resources, it can impose dues and duties, it can dole out rights and concessions—the consolation prizes of the governed—but it cannot offer self-determination. *Kratos* can dominate, but it cannot liberate.

Instead, representative democracy promises the opportunity to rule each other on a rotating basis: a distributed and temporary kingship as diffuse, dynamic, and yet hierarchical as the stock market. In practice, since this rule is delegated, there are still rulers who wield tremendous power relative to everyone else. Usually, like the Bushes and Clintons, they hail from a de facto ruling class. This ruling class tends to occupy the upper echelons of all the other

hierarchies of our society, both formal and informal. Even if a politician grew up among the plebs, the more he exercises authority, the more his interests diverge from those of the governed. Yet the real problem is not the intentions of politicians; it is the apparatus of the state itself.

Competing for the right to direct the coercive power of the state, the contestants never question the value of the state itself, even if in practice they only find themselves on the receiving end of its force. Representative democracy offers a pressure valve: when people are dissatisfied, they set their sights on the next elections, taking the state itself for granted. Indeed, if you want to put a stop to corporate profiteering or environmental devastation, isn't the state the only instrument powerful enough to accomplish that? Never mind that it was state that established the conditions in which those are possible in the first place.

> "Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear—that is, if they sustain alienation. And the spontaneous reproduction of superimposed needs by the individual does not establish autonomy; it only testifies to the efficacy of the controls."
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> – Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*

So much for democracy and political inequality. What about the economic inequality that has attended democracy since the beginning? You would think that a system based on majority rule would tend to reduce the disparities between rich and poor, seeing as the poor constitute the majority. Yet, just as in ancient Rome, the current ascendancy of democracy is matched by enormous gulfs between the haves and the have-nots. How can this be?

Considering how much power the market and the government wield over us, it's tempting indeed to imagine that we could somehow turn the tables and govern *them.* Even those who do not believe that it is possible for *the people to rule the government* usually end up governing the one thing that is left to them—their resistance to it. Approaching protest movements as experiments in direct democracy, they set out to prefigure the structures of a more democratic world.

But what if prefiguring democracy is part of the problem? That would explain why so few of these movements have been able to mount an irreconcilable opposition to the structures that they formed to oppose. With the arguable exceptions of Chiapas and Rojava, all of them have been defeated (Occupy), reintegrated into the functioning of the prevailing government (Syriza, Podemos), or, worse still, have overthrown and replaced that government without achieving any real change in society (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Ukraine).

When a movement seeks to legitimize itself on the basis of the same principles as state democracy, it ends up trying to beat the state at its own game. Even if it succeeds, the reward for victory is to be coopted and institutionalized—whether within the existing structures of government or by reinventing them anew. Thus movements that begin as revolts against the state end up recreating it.

> "Occasionally you rebel, but it's only ever just to start doing the same thing again from scratch."
>
> – Albert Libertad, "Voters: You Are the Real Criminals"

This can play out in many different ways. There are movements that hamstring themselves by claiming to be more democratic, more transparent, or more representative than the authorities; movements that come to power through electoral politics, only to betray their original goals; movements that promote directly

Democratic Obstacles to Liberation

Barring war or miracle, the legitimacy of every constituted government is always eroding; it can only erode. Whatever the state promises, nothing can compensate for having to cede control of our lives. Every specific grievance underscores this systemic problem, though we rarely see the forest for the trees.

This is where democracy comes in: another election, another government, another cycle of optimism and disappointment.

> "Democracy is a great way of assuring the legitimacy of the government, even when it does a bad job of delivering what the public wants. In a functioning democracy, mass protests challenge the rulers. They don't challenge the fundamental nature of the state's political system."
>
> – Noah Feldman, "Tunisia's Protests Are Different This Time"

But this does not always pacify the population. The past decade has seen movements and uprisings all around the world—from Oaxaca to Tunis, Istanbul to Rio de Janeiro, Kiev to Hong Kong—in which the disillusioned and disaffected attempt to take matters into their own hands. Most of these have rallied around the standard of more and better democracy, though that has hardly been unanimous.

Just as capitalism succeeded feudalism in Europe, representative democracy proved more sustainable than monarchy because it offered mobility within the hierarchies of the state. The dollar and the ballot are both mechanisms for distributing power hierarchically in a way that takes pressure off the hierarchies themselves. In contrast to the political and economic stasis of the feudal era, capitalism and democracy ceaselessly reapportion power. Thanks to this dynamic flexibility, the potential rebel has better odds of improving his status within the prevailing order than of toppling it. Consequently, opposition tends to reenergize the political system from within rather than threatening it.

Representative democracy is to politics what capitalism is to economics. The desires of the consumer and the voter are represented by currencies that promise individual empowerment yet relentlessly concentrate power at the top of the social pyramid. As long as power is concentrated there, it is easy enough to block, buy off, or destroy anyone who threatens the pyramid itself.

This explains why, when the wealthy and powerful have seen their interests challenged through the institutions of democracy, they have been able to suspend the law to deal with the problem—witness the gruesome fates of the brothers Gracchi in ancient Rome and Salvador Allende in modern Chile. Within the framework of the state, property has always trumped democracy.[3]

> "In representative democracy as in capitalist competition, everyone supposedly gets a chance but only a few come out on top. If you didn't win, you

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[3] Just as the "libertarian" capitalist suspects that the activities of even the most democratic government interfere with the pure functioning of the free market, the partisan of pure democracy can be sure that as long as there are economic inequalities, the wealthy will always wield disproportionate influence over even the most carefully constructed democratic process. Yet government and economy are inseparable. The market relies upon the state to enforce property rights, while at bottom, democracy is a means of transferring, amalgamating, and investing political power: it is a market for agency itself.

must not have tried hard enough! This is the same rationalization used to justify the injustices of sexism and racism: look, you lazy bums, you could have been Bill Cosby or Hillary Clinton if you'd just worked harder. But there's not enough space at the top for all of us, no matter how hard we work.

When reality is generated via the media and media access is determined by wealth, elections are simply advertising campaigns. Market competition dictates which lobbyists gain the resources to determine the grounds upon which voters make their decisions. Under these circumstances, a political party is essentially a business offering investment opportunities in legislation. It's foolish to expect political representatives to oppose the interests of their clientele when they depend directly upon them for power."

– *Work*

indeed, they were able to act thus only because they did not recognize one. Were it not for the pressure generated by autonomous actions like theirs, the federal government would never have intervened in the South; had more people taken the initiative the way they did, slavery would not have been possible and the Civil War would not have been necessary.

In other words, the problem was not too much anarchy, but too little. It was autonomous action that forced the issue of slavery, not democratic deliberation. What's more, had there been more partisans of anarchy, rather than majority rule, it would not have been possible for Southern whites to regain political supremacy in the South after Reconstruction.

One more anecdote bears mention. A year after his inaugural speech, Lincoln addressed a committee of free men of color to argue that they should emigrate to found another colony like Liberia in hopes that the rest of black America would follow. Regarding the relation between emancipated black people and white American citizens, he argued,

> It is better for us both to be separated... There is an unwillingness on the part of our people, harsh as it may be, for you free colored people to remain with us.

So, in Lincoln's political cosmology, the *polis* of white citizens cannot separate, but as soon as the black slaves of the *oikos* no longer occupy their economic role, it is better that they depart. This dramatizes things clearly enough: the nation is indivisible, but the excluded are disposable. Had the slaves freed after the Civil War emigrated to Africa, they would have arrived just in time to experience the horrors of European colonization, with a death toll of ten million in Belgian Congo alone. The proper solution to such catastrophes is not to integrate all the world into a single republic governed by majority rule, but to combat all institutions that divide people into majorities and minorities—rulers and ruled—however democratic they might be.

to freedom—what Lincoln calls our "revolutionary right" to overthrow governments.

Yet, in associating anarchy with the secession of the Southern states, Lincoln was mounting a critique of autonomy that echoes to this day. If it weren't for the Federal government, the argument goes, slavery would never have been abolished, nor would the South have desegregated or granted civil rights to people of color. These measures against injustice had to be introduced at gunpoint by the armies of the Union and, a century later, the National Guard. In this context, advocating decentralization seems to mean accepting slavery, segregation, and the Ku Klux Klan. Without a legitimate central governing body, what mechanism could stop people from acting oppressively?

There are several errors here. The first mistake is obvious: of Lincoln's three options—despotism, majority rule, and anarchy—the secessionists represented despotism, not anarchy. Likewise, it is naïve to imagine that the apparatus of central government will be employed solely on the side of freedom. The same National Guard that oversaw integration in the South used live ammunition to put down black uprisings around the country; today, there are nearly as many black people in US prisons as there once were slaves in the US. Finally, one need not vest all legitimacy in a single governing body in order to act against oppression. One may still act—one must simply do so without the pretext of enforcing law.

Opposing the centralization of power and legitimacy does not mean withdrawing into quietism. Some conflicts must take place; there is no getting around them. They follow from truly irreconcilable differences, and the imposition of a false unity only defers them. In his inaugural address, Lincoln was pleading in the name of the state to suspend the conflict between abolitionists and partisans of slavery—a conflict that was inevitable and necessary, which had already been delayed through decades of intolerable compromise. Meanwhile, abolitionists like Nat Turner and John Brown were able to act decisively without need of a central political authority—

Direct Democracy: Government without the State?

That brings us to the present. Africa and Asia are witnessing new movements in favor of democracy; meanwhile, many people in Europe and the Americas who are disillusioned by the failures of representative democracy have pinned their hopes on direct democracy, shifting from the model of the Roman Republic back to its Athenian predecessor. If the problem is that government is unresponsive to our needs, isn't the solution to make it more participatory, so we wield power directly rather than delegating it to politicians?

But what does that mean, exactly? Does it mean voting on laws rather than legislators? Or toppling the prevailing government and instituting a government of federated assemblies in its place? Or something else?

> "True democracy exists only through the direct participation of the people, and not through the activity of their representatives. Parliaments have been a legal barrier between the people and the exercise of authority, excluding the masses from meaningful politics and monopolizing sovereignty in their place. People are left with only a façade of democracy, manifested in long queues to cast their election ballots."
>
> – Mu'ammer al Gaddafi, *The Green Book*

On one hand, if direct democracy is just a more participatory and time-consuming way to pilot the state, it might offer us more say

in the details of government, but it will preserve the centralization of power that is inherent in it. There is a problem of scale here: can we imagine 219 million eligible voters directly conducting the activities of the US government? The conventional answer is that local assemblies would send representatives to regional assemblies, which in turn would send representatives to a national assembly—but there, already, we are speaking about representative democracy again. At best, in place of periodically electing representatives, we can picture a ceaseless series of referendums decreed from on high.

One of the most robust versions of that vision is digital democracy, or e-democracy, promoted by groups like the Pirate Party. The Pirate Party has already been incorporated into the existing political system; but in theory, we can imagine a population linked through digital technology, making all the decisions regarding their society via majority vote in real time. In such an order, majoritarian government would gain a practically irresistible legitimacy; yet the greatest power would likely be concentrated in the hands of the technocrats who administered the system. Coding the algorithms that determined which information and which questions came to the fore, they would shape the conceptual frameworks of the participants a thousand times more invasively than election-year advertising does today.

> "The digital project of reducing the world to representation converges with the program of electoral democracy, in which only representatives acting through the prescribed channels may exercise power. Both set themselves against all that is incomputable and irreducible, fitting humanity to a Procrustean bed. Fused as electronic democracy, they would present the opportunity to vote on a vast array of minutia, while rendering the infrastructure itself unquestionable—*the more participatory a system is, the more 'legitimate.'*"

build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced and go out of the presence and beyond the reach of each other, but the different parts of our country cannot do this. They cannot but remain face to face, and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them. Is it possible, then, to make that intercourse more advantageous or more satisfactory after separation than before? Can aliens make treaties easier than friends can make laws? Can treaties be more faithfully enforced between aliens than laws can among friends? Suppose you go to war, you cannot fight always; and when, after much loss on both sides and no gain on either, you cease fighting, the identical old questions, as to terms of intercourse, are again upon you.

This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing Government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it.

Follow this logic far enough in today's globalized world and you arrive at the idea of world government: majority rule on the scale of the entire planet. Lincoln is right, *contra* partisans of consensus, that unanimous rule is impossible and that those who do not wish to be ruled by majorities must choose between despotism and anarchy. His argument that aliens cannot make treaties more easily than friends make laws sounds convincing at first. But *friends* don't enforce laws on each other—laws are made to be imposed on weaker parties, whereas treaties are made between equals. *Government* is not something that takes place between friends, any more than *a free people* need a *sovereign*. If we have to choose between despotism, majority rule, and anarchy, anarchy is the closest thing

But can decentralized networks stand a chance against centralized power structures? If they can't, then the whole discussion is moot, as any attempt to experiment with decentralization will be crushed by more centralized rivals.

The answer remains to be seen, but today's centralized powers are by no means sure of their own invulnerability. Already, in 2001, the RAND Corporation was arguing that decentralized networks, rather than centralized hierarchies, will be the power players of the 21st century. Over the past two decades, from the so-called anti-globalization movement to Occupy and the Kurdish experiment with autonomy in Rojava, the initiatives that have succeeded in opening up space for new experiments (both democratic and anarchistic) have been decentralized, while more centralized efforts like Syriza have been co-opted almost immediately. A wide range of scholars are now theorizing the distinguishing features and advantages of network-based organizing.

Finally, there is the question of whether a society needs a centralized political apparatus to be able to put a stop to oppression and injustice. Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address, delivered in 1861 on the eve of the Civil War, is one of the strongest expressions of this argument. It's worth quoting at length:

> Plainly the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy. A majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it does of necessity fly to anarchy or to despotism. Unanimity is impossible. The rule of a minority, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy or despotism in some form is all that is left...

> Physically speaking, we cannot separate. We cannot remove our respective sections from each other nor

– Deserting the Digital Utopia

But even if such a system could be made to work perfectly—do we want to retain centralized majoritarian rule in the first place? The mere fact of being participatory does not make a political process any less coercive. As long as the majority has the capacity to force its decisions on the minority, we are talking about a system identical in spirit with the one that governs the US today—a system that would also require prisons, police, and tax collectors, or else other ways to perform the same functions.

Real freedom is not a question of how participatory the process of answering questions is, but of the extent to which we can frame the questions ourselves—and whether we can stop others from imposing their answers on us. The institutions that operate under a dictatorship or an elected government are no less oppressive when they are employed directly by a majority without the mediation of representatives. In the final analysis, even the most directly democratic state is better at concentrating power than maximizing freedom.

On the other hand, not everyone believes that democracy is a means of state governance. Some proponents of democracy have attempted to transform the discourse, arguing that true democracy only takes place outside the state and against its monopoly on power. For opponents of the state, this appears to be a strategic move, in that it appropriates all the legitimacy that has been invested in democracy across three centuries of popular movements and self-congratulatory state propaganda. Yet there are three fundamental problems with this approach.

> "Democracy is not, to begin with, a form of State. It is, in the first place, the reality of the power of the people that can never coincide with the form of a State. There will always be tension between democracy as the exercise of a shared power of thinking and acting,

and the State, whose very principle is to appropriate this power… The power of citizens is, above all, the power for them to act for themselves, to constitute themselves into an autonomous force. Citizenship is not a prerogative linked to the fact of being registered as an inhabitant and voter in a country; it is, above all, an exercise that cannot be delegated."

– Jacques Rancière

First, it's ahistorical. Democracy originated as a form of state government; practically all the familiar historical examples of democracy were carried out via the state or at least by people who aspired to govern. The positive associations we have with democracy as a set of abstract aspirations came later.

Second, it fosters confusion. Those who promote democracy as an alternative to the state rarely draw a meaningful distinction between the two. If you dispense with representation, coercive enforcement, and the rule of law, yet keep all the other hallmarks that make democracy a means of governing—citizenship, voting, and the centralization of legitimacy in a single decision-making structure—you end up retaining the procedures of government without the mechanisms that make them *effective.* This combines the worst of both worlds. It ensures that those who approach anti-state democracy expecting it to perform the same function as the state will inevitably be disappointed, while creating a situation in which anti-state democracy tends to reproduce the dynamics associated with state democracy on a smaller scale.

Finally, it's a losing battle. If what you mean to denote by the word democracy can only occur outside the framework of the state, it creates considerable ambiguity to use a term that has been associated with state politics for 2500 years.[1] Most people will assume that what you mean by democracy is reconcilable with the

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[1] The objection that the democracies that govern the world today aren't *real* democracies is a variant of the classic "No true Scotsman" fallacy. If, upon inves-

Arguments Against Autonomy

There are several objections to the idea that decision-making structures should be voluntary rather than obligatory, decentralized rather than monolithic. We're told that without a central mechanism for deciding conflicts, society will degrade into civil war; that it is impossible to defend against centralized aggressors without a central authority; that we need the apparatus of central government to deal with oppression and injustice.

In fact, the centralization of power is as likely to provoke strife as to resolve it. When everyone has to gain leverage on the structures of the state to obtain any control over the conditions of her own life, this is bound to generate friction. In Israel/Palestine, India/Pakistan, and other places where people of a variety of religions and ethnicities had coexisted autonomously in relative peace, the colonially imposed imperative to contend for political power within the framework of a single state produced protracted ethnic violence. Such conflicts were common in 19th century US politics, as well—consider the early gang warfare around elections in Washington and Baltimore, or the fight for Bleeding Kansas. If these struggles are no longer common in the US, that's not evidence that the state has *resolved* all the conflicts it generated.

Centralized government, touted as a way to conclude disputes, just consolidates power so the victors can maintain their position through force of arms. And when centralized structures collapse, as Yugoslavia did during the introduction of democracy in the 1990s, the consequences can be bloody indeed. At best, centralization only postpones strife—like a debt accumulating interest.

discussions, or even, as in Rojava, establishing women-only assemblies with veto power. This strategy seeks to implement equality, but it still assumes that all power should be vested in the public sphere. The alternative is to identify sites and practices of decision-making that already empower people who do not benefit from male privilege, and grant them greater influence. This approach draws on longstanding feminist traditions that prioritize people's lives and experiences over formal structures and ideologies, recognizing the importance of diversity and valuing dimensions of life that are usually invisible.

These two approaches can coincide and complement each other, but only if we dispense with the idea that all legitimacy should be concentrated in a single institutional structure.

state after all. This sets the stage for statist parties and strategies to regain legitimacy in the public eye, even after having been completely discredited. The political parties Podemos and Syriza gained traction in the occupied squares of Barcelona and Athens thanks to their rhetoric about direct democracy, only to make their way into the halls of government where they are now behaving like any other political party. They're still doing democracy, just more *efficiently* and *effectively.* Without a language that differentiates what they are doing in parliament from what people were doing in the squares, this process will recur again and again.

> "We must all be both rulers and ruled simultaneously, or a system of rulers and subjects is the only alternative... Freedom, in other words, can only be maintained through a sharing of political power, and this sharing happens through political institutions."
>
> – Cindy Milstein, "Democracy Is Direct"

When we identify what we are doing when we oppose the state as the practice of *democracy,* we set the stage for our efforts to be reabsorbed into larger representational structures. Democracy is not just a way of managing the apparatus of government, but also of regenerating and legitimizing it. Candidates, parties, regimes, and even the form of government can be swapped out from time to time when it becomes clear that they cannot solve the problems of

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tigation, it turns out that not a single existing democracy lives up to what you mean by the word, you might need a different expression for what you are trying to describe. This is like communists who, confronted with all the repressive communist regimes of the 20th century, protest that not a single one of them was properly communist. When an idea is so difficult to implement that millions of people equipped with a considerable portion of the resources of humanity and doing their best across a period of centuries can't produce a single working model, it's time to go back to the drawing board. Give anarchists a tenth of the opportunities Marxists and democrats have had, and then we may speak about whether anarchy works!

their constituents. In this way, government itself—the source of at least some of those problems—is able to persist. Direct democracy is just the latest way to rebrand it.

Even without the familiar trappings of the state, any form of government requires some way of determining who can participate in decision-making and on what terms—once again, who counts as the *demos.* Such stipulations may be vague at first, but they will get more concrete the older an institution grows and the higher the stakes get. And if there is no way of enforcing decisions—no *kratos*—the decision-making processes of government will have no more weight than decisions people make autonomously.[2] This is the paradox of a project that seeks *government* without the state.

These contradictions are stark enough in Murray Bookchin's formulation of libertarian municipalism as an alternative to state governance. In libertarian municipalism, Bookchin explained, an exclusive and avowedly vanguardist organization governed by laws and a Constitution would make decisions by majority vote. They would run candidates in city council elections, with the long-term goal of establishing a confederation that could replace the state. Once such a confederation got underway, membership was to be binding even if participating municipalities wanted to withdraw. Those who try to retain government without the state are likely to end up with something like the state by another name.

The important distinction is not between democracy and the state, then, but between government and self-determination. Government is the exercise of authority over a given space or polity: whether the process is dictatorial or participatory, the end result is the imposition of control. By contrast, self-determination means disposing of one's potential on one's own terms: when people en-

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[2] Without formal institutions, democratic organizations often enforce decisions by delegitimizing actions initiated outside their structures and encouraging the use of force against them. Hence the classic scene in which protest marshals attack demonstrators for doing something that wasn't agreed upon in advance via a centralized democratic process.

binary have been relegated to private spheres: the household, the kitchen, the family, child-rearing, sex work, care work, other forms of invisible and unpaid labor.

Insofar as democratic systems centralize decision-making power and authority in the public sphere, this reproduces patriarchal patterns of power. This is most obvious when women are formally excluded from voting and politics—but even where they are not, they often face informal obstacles in the public sphere while bearing disproportionate responsibility in the private sphere.

The inclusion of more participants in the public sphere serves to further legitimize a space where women and those who do not conform to gender norms operate at a disadvantage. If "democratization" means a shift in decision-making power from informal and private sites towards more public political spaces, the result could even erode some forms of women's power. Recall how grassroots women's shelters founded in the 1970s were professionalized through state funding to such an extent that by the 1990s, the women who had founded them could never have qualified for entry-level positions in them.

So we cannot rely on the degree of women's formal participation in the public sphere as an index of liberation. Instead, we can deconstruct the gendered distinction between public and private, validating what takes place in relationships, families, households, neighborhoods, social networks, and other spaces that are not recognized as part of the political sphere. This wouldn't mean formalizing these spaces or integrating them into a supposedly gender-neutral political practice, but rather legitimizing multiple ways of making decisions, recognizing multiple sites of power within society.

There are two ways to respond to male domination of the political sphere. The first is to try to make the formal public space as accessible and inclusive as possible—for example, by registering women to vote, providing child care, setting quotas of who must participate in decisions, weighting who is permitted to speak in

example, the tensions between the decision-making processes of the predominantly white general assemblies and the less white encampments within many Occupy groups.) Only when we dispense with the idea that any political process is inherently legitimate will we be able to strip away the final alibi of the racial disparities that have always characterized democratic governance.

Turning to gender, this gives us a new perspective on why Lucy Parsons, Emma Goldman, and other women argued that the demand for women's suffrage was missing the point. Why would anyone reject the option to participate in electoral politics, imperfect as it is? The short answer is that they wanted to abolish government entirely, not to make it more participatory. But looking closer, we can find some more specific reasons why people concerned with women's liberation might be suspicious of the franchise.

> "The history of the political activities of men proves that they have given him absolutely nothing that he could not have achieved in a more direct, less costly, and more lasting manner. As a matter of fact, every inch of ground he has gained has been through a constant fight, a ceaseless struggle for self-assertion, and not through suffrage. There is no reason whatever to assume that woman, in her climb to emancipation, has been, or will be, helped by the ballot."
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> – Emma Goldman, "Women Suffrage"

Let's go back to *polis* and *oikos*—the city and the household. Democratic systems rely on a formal distinction between public and private spheres; the public sphere is the site of all legitimate decision-making, while the private sphere is excluded or discounted. Throughout a wide range of societies and eras, this division has been profoundly gendered, with men dominating public spheres—ownership, paid labor, government, management, and street corners—while women and those outside the gender

gage in it together, they are not ruling each other, but fostering cumulative autonomy. Freely made agreements require no enforcement; systems that concentrate legitimacy in a single institution or decision-making process always do.

It is strange to use the word *democracy* for the idea that the state is inherently undesirable. The proper word for that idea is *anarchism.* Anarchism opposes all exclusion and domination in favor of the radical decentralization of power structures, decision-making processes, and notions of legitimacy. It is not a matter of governing in a completely participatory manner, but of making it impossible to impose any form of rule.

Consensus and the Fantasy of Unanimous Rule

If the common denominators of democratic government are citizenship and policing—*demos* and *kratos*—the most radical democracy would expand those categories to include the whole world: universal citizenship, community policing. In the ideal democratic society, every person would be a citizen,[1] and every citizen would be a policeman.[2]

At the furthest extreme of this logic, majority rule would mean rule by consensus: not the rule of the majority, but unanimous rule. The closer we get to unanimity, the more legitimate government is perceived to be—so wouldn't rule by consensus be the most legitimate government of all? Then, finally, there would be no need for anyone to play the role of the police.

> "In the strict sense of the term, there has never been a true democracy, and there never will be... One can hardly imagine that all the people would sit permanently in an assembly to deal with public affairs."
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> – Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Of the Social Contract*

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[1] In theory, categories that are defined by exclusion, like citizenship, break down when we expand them to include the whole world. But if we wish to break them down, why not reject them outright, rather than promising to do so while further legitimizing them? When we use the word citizenship to describe something desirable, that can't help but reinforce the legitimacy of that institution as it exists today.

[2] In fact, the English word "police" is derived from *polis* by way of the ancient Greek word for citizen.

There are no easy fixes for this problem. Reformers often speak about making our political system more "democratic," by which they mean more inclusive and egalitarian. Yet when their reforms are realized in a way that legitimizes and strengthens the institutions of government, this only puts more weight behind those institutions when they strike at the targeted and marginalized—witness the mass incarceration of black people since the civil rights movement. Malcolm X and other advocates of black separatism were right that a white-founded democracy would never offer freedom to black people—not because white and black people can never coexist, but because in rendering politics a competition for centralized political power, democratic governance creates conflicts that preclude coexistence. If today's racial conflicts can ever be resolved, it will be through the establishment of new relations on the basis of decentralization, not by integrating the excluded into the political order of the included.[1]

> "As long as there are police, who do you think they will harass? As long as there are prisons, who do you think will fill them? As long as there is poverty, who do you think will be poor? It is naïve to believe we could achieve equality in a society based on hierarchy. You can shuffle the cards, but it's still the same deck."
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> – *To Change Everything*

As long as we understand what we are doing together politically as *democracy*—as government by a legitimate decision-making process—we will see that legitimacy invoked to justify programs that are functionally white supremacist, whether they are the policies of a state or the decisions of a spokescouncil. (Recall, for

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[1] This far, at least, we can agree with Booker T. Washington when he said, "The Reconstruction experiment in racial democracy failed because it began at the wrong end, emphasizing political means and civil rights acts rather than economic means and self-determination."

Where politics is constructed as a zero-sum competition, those who hold power will be loath to share it with others. Consider the men who opposed universal suffrage and the white people who opposed the extension of voting rights to people of color: the structures of democracy did not discourage their bigotry, but gave them an incentive to institutionalize it.

Olson traces the way that the ruling class fostered white supremacy in order to divide the working class, but he neglects the ways that democratic structures lent themselves to this process. He argues that we should promote class solidarity as a response to these divisions, but (as Bakunin argued contra Marx) the difference between the governing and the governed is itself a class difference—think of ancient Athens. Racialized exclusion has always been the flip side of citizenship.

> "By erecting a slave society, America created the economic foundation for its great experiment in democracy… America's indispensable working class existed as property beyond the realm of politics, leaving white Americans free to trumpet their love of freedom and democratic values."
>
> – Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations"

So the political dimension of white supremacy isn't just a consequence of racial disparities in economic power—it also produces them. Ethnic and racial divisions were ingrained in our society long before the dawn of capitalism; the confiscation of Jewish property under the Inquisition financed the original colonization of the Americas, and the looting of the Americas and enslavement of Africans provided the original startup capital to jumpstart capitalism in Europe and later North America. It is possible that racial divisions could outlast the next massive economic and political shift, too—for example, as exclusive assemblies of predominantly white (or Jewish, or even Kurdish) citizens.

Obviously, this is impossible. But it's worth reflecting on what sort of utopia is implied by idealizing direct democracy as a form of government. Imagine the kind of totalitarianism it would take to produce enough cohesion to *govern* a society via consensus process—to get *everyone* to agree. Talk about reducing things to the lowest common denominator! If the alternative to coercion is to abolish disagreement, surely there must be a third path.

This problem came to the fore during the Occupy movement. Some participants understood the general assemblies as the *governing bodies* of the movement; from their perspective, it was undemocratic for people to act without unanimous authorization. Others approached the assemblies as *spaces of encounter* without prescriptive authority, in which people might exchange influence and ideas, forming fluid constellations around shared goals to take action. The former felt betrayed when their fellow Occupiers engaged in tactics that hadn't been agreed on in the general assembly; the latter countered that it didn't make sense to grant veto power to an arbitrarily convened mass including literally anyone who happened by on the street.

Perhaps the answer is that the structures of decision-making must be decentralized as well as consensus-based, so that universal agreement is unnecessary. This is a step in the right direction, but it introduces new questions. How should people be divided into polities? What dictates the jurisdiction of an assembly or the scope of the decisions it can make? Who determines which assemblies a person may participate in, or who is most affected by a given decision? How are conflicts between assemblies resolved? The answers to these questions will either institutionalize a set of rules governing legitimacy, or prioritize voluntary forms of association. In the former case, the rules will likely ossify over time, as people refer to protocol to resolve disputes. In the latter case, the structures of decision-making will continuously shift, fracture, clash, and reemerge in organic processes that can hardly be described as *government*. When the participants in a decision-making process are

free to withdraw from it or engage in activity that contradicts the decisions, then what is taking place is not government—it is simply conversation.[3]

> "Democracy means government by discussion, but it is only effective if you can stop people talking."
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> – Clement Attlee, UK Prime Minister, 1957

From one perspective, this is a question of emphasis. Is our goal to produce the ideal institutions, rendering them as horizontal and participatory as possible but deferring to them as the ultimate foundation of authority? Or is our goal to maximize freedom, in which case any particular institution we create is subordinate to liberty and therefore dispensable? Once more—what is legitimate, the institutions or our needs and desires?

Even at their best, institutions are just a means to an end; they have no value in and of themselves. No one should be obliged to adhere to the protocol of any institution that suppresses her freedom or fails to meet her needs. If everyone were free to organize with others on a purely voluntary basis, that would be the best way to generate social forms that are truly in the interests of the participants: for as soon as a structure was not working for everyone involved, they would have to refine or replace it. This approach won't bring all of society into consensus, but it is the only way to guarantee that consensus is meaningful and desirable when it *does* arise.

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[3] See Kant's argument that a republic is "violence with freedom and law," whereas anarchy is "freedom and law without violence"—so the law becomes a mere recommendation that cannot be enforced.

The Excluded: Race, Gender, and Democracy

We often hear arguments for democracy on the grounds that, as the most inclusive form of government, it is the best suited to combat the racism and sexism of our society. Yet as long as the categories of rulers/ruled and included/excluded are built into the structure of politics, coded as "majorities" and "minorities" even when the minorities outnumber the majorities, imbalances of power along race and gender lines will always be reflected as disparities in political power. This is why women, black people, and other groups still lack political leverage proportionate to their numbers, despite having ostensibly possessed voting rights for a century or more.

> "We haven't benefitted from America's democracy. We've only suffered from America's hypocrisy."
>
> – Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet"

In *The Abolition of White Democracy,* the late Joel Olson presents a compelling critique of what he calls "white democracy"—the concentration of democratic political power in white hands by means of a cross-class alliance among those granted white privilege. But he takes for granted that democracy is the most desirable system, assuming that white supremacy is an incidental obstacle to its functioning rather than a natural consequence thereof. If democracy is the ideal form of egalitarian relations, why has it been implicated in structural racism for practically its entire existence?