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Direct Democracy is not Utopia

Yavor Tarinski

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There are moments, and even eras, when individuals have taken a passionate interest in common affairs. They went into the streets, they demanded things, and they imposed a certain number of them.

Cornelius Castoriadis¹

One of the most common arguments against direct democracy is that it sounds as a very good idea, but it is impossible to implement. It has never been implemented in practice and it never will. It can only exist, we are being told, under the form of referendums, taking place once in a while, through which the populace can influence state policies, but not in the classical sense of the term as stateless autonomous society, directly managing its public affairs. However, it is true that most people we

¹ Castoriadis, Cornelius. (2010) "The project of Autonomy is not Utopia." A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificance, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today. (www.notbored.org). p 8

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meet in our daily lives do not have even the slightest idea that there were existing and still exist examples of self-management put in practice. This is due to the silence of the mainstream media about the contemporary horizontal practices. The ones that manage to briefly appear on the mainstream surface are being met with irony, ridicule and discredited by politicians and technocrats. Here I'll present briefly only few examples from the past and present, who, through their practices, prove that another world is possible.

The very concept of democracy emerged in Ancient Athens² approximately 2 500 years ago. In greek, demos means community, the people, while kratos — the power to decide, to manage. Therefore demos-kratia means the power of people to make decisions. The main decisions in the Athenian polis were made by all citizens (around 30 000) on a general assembly (ekklēsia)³. The assembly had four main functions: it made executive pronouncements (decrees, such as deciding to go to war or granting citizenship to a foreigner); it elected some officials; it legislated; and it tried political crimes. As the system evolved, the last function was shifted to the courts. The second institution that was playing main role in the political life of Ancient Athens was the Boule (boulē) — council, dealing with the administration of everyday life of the city. After the reforms made by Clisthenes⁴ the number of its members grew to 500, chosen by lot amongst all citizens of the polis.

Then, in the Middle Ages (between 9th and 15th century), people in many Italian cities threw off the authority of prince, king, or emperor⁵. In their place, a system of governance was created through interlocking and balanced councils. Large de-

it were and continue to be implemented in practice in different parts of the world. All of them, though different in many aspects, share one thing in common, namely the belief that the people themselves should be masters of their own destiny. Their mere replication from one place to another would be a mistake, since the forms in the abovementioned examples are suited to specific cultural, anthropological, geopolitical and other specificities. But they can serve to us as a source of inspiration and ideas which to guide us in our efforts to establish our own institutions and practices that correspond to the specificities of our local context. And above all, they give us confidence that different forms of direct democracy do exist, that it is not an utopia, and what is most important, it can be implemented here and now.

² en.wikipedia.org

³ en.wikipedia.org)

⁴ en.wikipedia.org

⁵ GRENDLER, PAUL F.. "Renaissance." Europe, 1450 to 1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World. 2004.Encyclopedia.com. (May 21, 2015). www.encyclopedia.com

In Rojava a direct-democratic system is also being put into practice. In its core are the communes¹⁷ (i.e. general assemblies), consisted of neighbourhoods with population of around 300 people each. The communes appoint co-presidents to participate in the Canton administration¹⁸. In each commune function five or six different committees. The communes function in two ways. First, they resolve problems quickly – for example technical and social ones. Secondly, the communes allow everyone from the society to participate directly in the decision-making. The coordination between communes is being done on a couple of levels by confederal structures: regional and city councils and cantons.

The last contemporary example I'm going to present here briefly are the Zapatista communities, located in the mountains and jungles of Chiapas, Mexico. The Zapatistas revolted in 1994, when the Mexican government introduced the North American Free Trade Agreement. They started organizing autonomous communities, based on indigenous traditions and democratic self-management¹⁹. The local assemblies of each settlement, a basic decision-making institution, sends delegates to the regional councils, which decide on production, redistribution etc²⁰. The delegates are rotating regularly and hold office for short periods of time in order to prevent formal or informal hierarchies from emerging. For the 20 years the Zapatistas are self-managing their communities, the standart of life has risen significantly²¹ – nowadays the indigenous people living there have access to healthcare, education, electricity (things they didn't had before).

All these examples are a proof that another way of social, political and economic organizing is possible and variations of

¹⁷ new-compass.net

¹⁸ www.biehlonbookchin.com

¹⁹ en.wikipedia.org

²⁰ en.wikipedia.org

²¹ www.elkilombo.org

liberative assemblies, comprising of one hundred, two hundred, or more adult males, elected or chosen by lot, debated and created laws. Executive committees, often six, eight, or a dozen men elected for two to six months, put the laws into action. Short terms in office and rules against self-succession made it possible for several hundred or more adult males to participate in government in a few years. The system of balanced and diffused power ensured that no individual or family could control the city. It was a government of balanced power and mutual suspicion.

The Paris Commune is one of the most significant examples for existing model of direct democracy. Although the popular uprising was crushed on May 27th, 1871 by the French state's army, for couple of months the city of Paris was being managed by its citizens. The communards, through neighborhood assemblies⁶, took care of the important local administration. These assemblies were appointing delegates⁷ (revocable at any time) to participate in councils, forming confederations, through which they effectively coordinated production and redistribution.

A century later, in 1980, in the city of Kwanju, South Korea, the people rose up in the so called Kwanju's people revolt⁸. The preconditions for it were the authoritarian government and the widespread poverty of this time and the concrete reason was the brutality of paramilitary groups towards protesters. The people of Kwanju revolt, driving the military forces out of the city. The revolt lasts only three weeks but during this short period neighbourhood assemblies emerged, giving voice to the common people. Connecting with one another, these basic institutions of the direct democracy maintained order and organized redistribution in the city. The revolt was crushed by government

⁶ new-compass.net

⁷ Marx, Karl. (1871) „The Paris Commune”. In *The Civil War in France* (www.marxists.org)

⁸ www.erosseffect.com

forces on May 27th — the same date as the fall of the Paris Commune.

Another historic example are the practices that emerged during the Spanish Civil War in the period 1936–39. In this period the inhabitants of the anarchist-controlled areas, Aragón and Catalonia, managed to push the authorities out and an experiment in self-management began⁹. In them workers and peasants collectivised the land and industry and set up councils through which the production, distribution and all public services were coordinated. For three years this area was managed on the basis of popular direct democracy and solidarity. For the success of this model speak authors such as George Orwell and Gaston Leval¹⁰.

One contemporary example for society, whose organization is based on democratic participation, are the Kuna people¹¹. They live on 50 small islands, part of the archipelago Comarca Kuna Yala, located in the Pacific Ocean between Colombia and Panama. They achieved their autonomy after bloody resistance against the colonial police in 1925. Today 70 000 kunas manage their daily affairs through a complicated system, based on direct democracy, which federates 500 autonomous communities, who participate in the common congress of Kuna. This congress takes place once every 6 months. Each community has its own inner rules and laws and is completely autonomous from the rest; the only condition is each community to send four delegates to the common congress in order to coordinate and make decisions that concern all in the region.

⁹ en.wikipedia.org

¹⁰ In the books *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) by George Orwell and *Social Reconstruction in Spain: Spain and the World* (1938) by Gaston Leval

¹¹ Notes from Nowhere. (2003) *We are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism.* (artactivism.members.gn.apc.org/[essay]Autonomy.pdf). pp 113–4

The Landless Worker's Movement¹² (Movimiento Sem Tierra or MST in short) is another example from the present. Located in Brazil, this movement has around 1.5 million members. One of its main activities is the occupation of land. The way it operates is based on a system of direct democracy. MST is a leaderless horizontal movement, based on dialogue and consensus. Main decision making bodies are the assemblies of every 10–15 families¹³, living in a MST settlement. Each one of them appoints one man and one woman to attend regional coordinational meetings. It is important to note that every family member, part of MST, has the right to participate in assembly.

In the Indian state Maharashtra is located the self-managed village Mendha. It's autonomy is rooted in the resistance of the locals against the Ballarpur Paper Mills¹⁴ corporation, deforestating the region. In the course of their resistance, the locals have developed a system based on direct democracy. Nowadays, the highest decision making body of the settlement is the village assembly, consisted of at least two adults of every household (at least one man and woman)¹⁵. However, everybody can attend the assemblies, regardless his/her age or sex. The assembly is being held once a month and decisions are being taken after consensus has been reached. The assembly also resolves conflicts on local level. For large scale matters, a congress of the 32 villages of the area (each sending a delegate) is being held. Around 1 500 villages across India have been taking similar steps¹⁶.

¹² en.wikipedia.org

¹³ en.wikipedia.org

¹⁴ Singh, Supriya. *Participatory Forest Management in Mendha Lekha, India.* (www.ceecec.net). p 8

¹⁵ Neema Pathak and Erica Taraporewala. (2008). *Towards self-rule and forest conservation in Mendha-Lekha Village, Gadchiroli.* (www.iccaconsortium.org) p 6

¹⁶ timesofindia.indiatimes.com