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Direct Democracy

Popular self-management beyond hierarchy

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Content:

Introduction

Opposing oppression and exploitation without proposing alternative political system leaves the ruling system intact. The system acts, the opposition reacts. Those who struggle against evils of a political system but do not offer an alternative to that system are politically impotent. [1]

Aki Orr

I ask to be able to participate directly in all the social decisions that may affect my existence, or the general course of the world in which I live. I do not accept the fact that my lot is decided, day after day, by people whose projects are hostile to me or simply unknown to me, and for whom we, that is I and everyone else, are only numbers in a general plan or pawns on a chessboard, and that, ultimately, my life and death are in the hands of people whom I know to be, necessarily, blind. [2]

Cornelius Castoriadis

We live in dynamic times where a global crisis is slowly penetrating every sphere of our lives. In response to the contemporary state of uncertainty, people are rising all across the globe demanding change. There are different proposals to what direction our society shoud take. Inbetween all the alternatives being placed on the table there is one word that can be heard almost everywhere – "democracy". Some are calling it real democracy, others horizontal, direct or participatory democracy and so on. Here I'll present the proposal of the direct democracy as a project beyond hierarchy, representation and exploitation.

But someone will ask: "why do we need alternatives, doesn't our contemporary system work?" Yes, it unquestionably works, but the question is in whose interest. The following statistics can give us an idea about that: the richest 1% of people in the world own 48% of global wealth, while the richest

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[1] http://www.autonarchy.org.il/
[2] *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1997. P.92

10% own more than 85% of world's total global assets[3]. The contemporary politico-economic system serves, at best, the interests of 10% of all the people. This situation suppresses the creativity, the abilities and the dignity of the remaining 90%, dooming a small part of them to mediocre and gray life, while the rest (the overwhelming majority) to hunger and misery.

The very logic in which the contemporary organization of social life is being based is one of hierarchy and passivity. In its essence, the situation is similar in every sphere of our life, no matter if we speak about family, politics, economy or culture. All the contemporary structures are characterized by organizing people's lives from the outside, in the complete absence of those whose lives are being organized and often against their very desires and interests. This creates a gap between a thin layer of managerial institutions, bearers of abstract power, and the vast majority of the people, whose role is being reduced to a narrow implementator of decisions (already taken by the above mentioned institutions). As a result, most of the people nowadays feel powerless and alienated from their very life.

In the words of Karl Polanyi:

It is not human will but prices that determine the purpose of labour and not human will but the interest rate that commands capital. […] The only real and functioning objective facts of society are competition, capital, interest, prices and so forth; here, human free will is but a mirage, a fantasy.[4]

Treating the people, either in political or economic sphere, as mere tools, systematically ignoring their desires and thoughts, means stripping them from creativity and imagination. As the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis rightly observes in his '*On the content of Socialism*'[5]:

In real life, capitalism is obliged to base itself on people's capacity for self-organization, on the individual and collective creativity of the producers. Without making use of these abilities the system could not survive for a day. But the whole "official" organization of modern society both ignores and seeks to suppress these abilities to the utmost.

As a result of that, there is a huge loss of human creativity and capacity. In the corporate and statist structures the logic of hierarchy reigns, which grants small managerial elites with a decision making power while leaving the rest

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[3]   http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/oct/14/richest-1percent-half-global-wealth-credit-suisse-report

[4] Polanyi, 2005a, pp. 138,149

[5] http://eagainst.com/articles/castor/

with only the task of following and implementing. But since the will of this majority is being neglected, and even suppressed, they don't really put any effort in the implementation of the orders of the managerial elites. As a result there is a loss of productivity and quality. In order to counter this effect the managerial elites invest huge amount of their powers and time into figuring out ways to control the implementators. Soon, the managerial role of these elites ceases to be their main and only task and they start undertaking more and more *repressive* forms.

Because of these dynamics, as the vast majority of mere implementators, so the thin layer of managers cannot perform their tasks properly. The incompatibility of this organizational model and all the loss and suppression of human creativity and capacity constantly creates crisis, which will not neceserilly lead to the overthrow of the contemporary system, but is surely making the lives of us all more miserable and unpleasant. So in order to overcome the current crisis, and the ones that have yet to come, it is insufficient to just reform the current system, but to completely replace it with another one, which will not generate the same problems.

Direct Democracy as alternative

For most people, democracy is still identified with some notion of ordinary people collectively managing their own affairs. [6]

David Graeber

One alternative system is direct democracy. It strives to dismantle the social separation between executives and implementators. Instead, it aims to create institutions which allow each and every member of society to directly participate in the decision-making on political, economic, social, ecological, etc., matters, which concerns him and to directly participate in their implementation. This gives space for a more complete realization of human potential. I have to clarify that direct democracy is nothing like the different forms of "democracy" that we know to be implemented on massive, statist level, which are based on representative logic – deciding for someone else, who then to decide for you, which in no way is the same as deciding for yourself and your community by yourself and your community.

But today's dominant imaginary rejects the idea that people can self-manage their affairs. At least, if the group of people grows beyond the number of 150 (Dunber's Number) then chaos begins. The popular belief is that communities and whole societies have a need for managerial apparatuses, specially designed for this purpose and with little as possible popular participation in them, who to organize the masses.

But there are practices from the past and the present that give us glimpses of how direct democracy could look like on a larger scale, like the Athenian Polis[7], the Paris Commune[8], The Spanish Revolution of 1936-39[9], as well as some contemporary examples such as the Zapatistas autonomous caracoles[10],

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[6] https://anth1001.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/graeber_never-was-a-west.pdf
[7] https://vimeo.com/66587994
[8] http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/Pariscommune.htm
[9] https://libcom.org/history/1936-1939-the-spanish-civil-war-and-revolution
[10] http://www.stateofnature.org/?p=6119

the Rojava's democratic confederalism[11] and so on. During these experiences, life not only continues but thrives in conditions of direct democracy.

In one autonomous society, based on direct democracy, the political, the economic, the social and the ecological spheres should be organized on the basis of self-management and non-hierarchy. Direct democracy has to be embedded in every sphere in order to remain truly direct. For example, if it's being implemented only in the so-called political sphere, but not in the economic one, in which relations remain the same as before (exploitative and unequal), this will sooner or later reflect on the former.

Political institutions

Suitable basic political institutions for the organization of social life on the principles described above, are similar to the ones already described[12] by libertarian thinkers like Cornelius Castoriadis, Hannah Arendth and Murray Bookchin:

1. *General assembly* on the level of neighbourhood, village etc. Right of participation in it have all members of a certain community. Historically, the general assembly has proved it's efficiency in groups with size of close to 50 000 people. For example, in Ancient Athens the citizens, having the right to participate in the Ekklesia (general assembly), were between 30-50 000[13]. In a direct-democratic system, *the general assembly should always be the highest decision-making body* (Reyes and Harnecker, 2013). Differences and conflicts between different parts of society should be resolved on this floor.

   The general assembly will have to create a general frame of rules and aims for it's community, and not to deal with routine questions. It can reject or accept every decision, taken by other communal institutions of the same community. For it's smooth functioning, the general assembly can assign working groups, which to deal with certain issues and everyday questions. This type of assemblies are being held regularly – weekly, monthly, etc. In addition, a procedure should exist

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[11] http://new-compass.net/articles/revolution-rojava

[12] Participatory political institutions are being discussed in influential works like *Worker's Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society* (Castoriadis , 1972), *On Revolution* (Hannah Arendt , 1963) and *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy* (Murray Bookchin , 2015)

[13] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian_democracy

to call an urgent assembly in case of need, initiated by a certain amount of people from the community.

2. *The Council,* consists of delegates of certain location (neighbourhood for example). They can be chosen among the members of the community through elections or by lot (as were the magistrates in Ancient Athens), and remain revocable at any time. In a community, with population between 5000 to 10 000 people, such council can consist of 30-50 delegates (Castoriadis, 1957). Such institution will be dealing with routine tasks and will be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the decisions, taken by the *general assembly*. The councils should hold their meetings as often as necessary (for example twice a week). The regular rotation of delegates (once every two, three months or more) will prevent the emergence of hierarchy and will allow broader participation in the council.

In a direct democracy each community has its autonomy, which is being asserted by institutions as the ones described above. However, such communities cannot exist completely in isolation from the rest of the world, neither I believe, such thing is even desirable. That's why there are different confederalist forms, such as the Zapatista's caracoles[14] and the Rojava's cantons[15], that can link different communities, without stripping them from their autonomy. Such institutional forms can look somewhat like this:

Confederal councils, consisting of delegates, assigned by the *general assemblies* of each community. Such delegates should remain revocable at any given moment by those that have appointed them. The meetings of this type of council will be held regularly. After each meeting the delegates will report back to their *general assemblies* for what has been done. For it to be as productive as possible, but at the same time as participatory as possible, such institutions will have to meet the following two requirements: not to include too many members, but to allow the participation of enough of them, in order for the broadest possible number of points of view to be represented. This can be done by appointing, for example, one delegate per every 10-20 000 people and rotating the delegates on regular basis so as to allow broader participation and to prevent the emergence of strict political roles.

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[14] http://roarmag.org/2013/08/escuelita-zapatista-10-year-autonomy/
[15] http://new-compass.net/articles/rojavas-communes-and-councils

If a confederal institution takes decision, exceeding its power or in conflict with the will of the local institutions, it will be up to these local bodies to undertake the necessary steps, starting with revoking their delegates. The confederal bodies cannot preserve themselves, implementing unacceptable practices, since they don't really have any authority and their delegates are revocable at any given moment. But if the communities allow their delegates to exceed their powers – nothing can be done. The people can self-manage themselves only if they want to. If an external power forces them to do so, then any trace of direct democracy will be lost, since from the very beggining it requires people's consent. A society can be run by direct democracy only if most of the people want to decide policies themselves (Aki Orr, 2005).

Economy

Direct democracy in the economy aims at satisfying the needs of all people – which requires all decisions regarding the economic matters to be taken democratically. [16] However, it does not exclude the freedom of choice, i.e. every person to have control over his/her personal matters (what to work and where, what to consume, etc.). In short, the aim of direct democracy in the economic sphere is not the constant economic growth, but the qualitative satisfaction of people's needs.

The main criteria in the direct-democratic economy is not efficiency, defined today by contemporary technocratic economists as satisfying the needs, backed by a lot of money. [17] In a society managed through direct democracy, efficiency should be measured according to the satisfaction of everyone's needs.

The introduction of direct democracy in the economic sphere requires all economic decisions, i.e. the ones regarding the functioning of the economy as a whole (production, consumption, investments, used technologies, work time etc.), to be made not by governments and businessmen, but collectively by all citizens, for example, through confederations of local democratic economic units such as producer and consumer associations.

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[16]

http://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/fotopoulos/english/brbooks/inclusive_entry.htm
[17] "What comes first in capitalism is not human development but privately accumulated profits by a tiny minority of the population. When there is a conflict between profits and human development, profits take precedence.''- Michael A. Libowitz, from *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development* (2010)

For self-management to be sustained no institutionalized economic structure should have more power than any other. This requires the means of production and distribution to be collectively owned and directly controlled by the communities that create them and attribute them to workers cooperatives. This does not mean necessarily that everyone should earn the same salaries for their labour. Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, creators of the democratic economic model Parecon, argue that the remuneration should be based on the effort and sacrifice invested by the workers in the workplace:

Remuneration according to effort and sacrifice (and in some cases need) is rather different than the usual left precept – which is remuneration according to contribution to the social product. The latter pays a large person and a small person cutting cane by the size of the piles they accumulate. The former pays a large person and a small person cutting cane by (assuming/establishing they are both working comparably hard) for the amount of time they are working. This also goes for a person who has learned how to cut better and one who doesn't have the same competence – for the same hardship and effort even with different size piles cut, you get the same pay. Our claim is that this is equitable – pay depends only on hardship to the payee, which is what should be the case. [18]

This logic corresponds to the participatory character of direct democracy since people have direct control over the efforts invested and sacrifice made at their workplaces, and not over their physical advantages, better tools or other favorable conditions.

As mentioned above, the economy of a direct-democratic society is consisted of local economic units, such as producer and consumer associations. Production is being undertaken by associations, consisting of producer's cooperatives, in which the very workers are also the owners. The management of such type of cooperatives is being done by workplace assemblies in which all workers-owners can participate. This implies abolition of the corporate hierarchy, so typical of the state and private enterprises.

On the other hand, consumers from a given area connect with each other, establishing consumer associations. These structures create networks with producers' associations, with the aim of satisfaying the needs of consumers without the involvement of intermediaries. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility of single individuals, without entering consumer associations, to link themselves with producer organizations and order directly from them.

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[18] *https://zcomm.org/qaremun-2/*

This freedom of choice creates *agora* in the ancient athenian sense of the term, as a meeting space for free citizens to meet and exchange.

Of course, in a political project such as direct democracy, economy cannot be separated from politics. [19] This presume general assemblies on a local level and the councils on a regional level, as supreme sources of power, creating the common frame for economic developement. However, this frame should not be mistaken with some determinisic and bureaucratic planning. The only thing these structures do in this case is to determine the general direction of principles and values, according to which the economy should develop and to keep their right to entervene in it if any of its units and structures grossly violate the collectively constructed principle frame.

Justice

Direct democracy requires autonomy[20], thus each community, through its decision-making bodies creates its rules and constitution. On a confederal level, communities are determing the so-called human rights, to be respected by all.

The adherence to these juridical frames is being observed by direct-democratic institutions. As proposed[21] by Castoriadis, "each council might act as a "lower court" in relation to "offences" commited in its area." As well as each individual can have the right for objection to the confederal council (or other institution on this level), part of whose jurisdiction his community is.

The protection of minority rights (ethnical, ideological, etc) can be done by *citizen juries*, as proposed[22] by Stephen R. Shalom in his political model, called ParPolity. These juridicial bodies are being established in each community, and they function in paralel with the general assemblies and the councils. In order for the democratic character of this institution to be ensured, there is need of embedding in it certain democratic mechanisms such as the appointment of their members to be done by sortition amongst all citizens of

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[19] http://www.geonewsletter.org/story/solidarity-economy-political-economy

[20] Most, if not all, examples for funicationing direct democracy include local structures like the polity or the canton, which allow the communities, without outside interference, to determine their local organizational conditions, legislation etc.

[21] https://www.marxists.org/archive/castoriadis/1972/workers-councils.htm

[22] https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/parpolity-political-vision-for-a-good-society-by-stephen1-shalom/

the area, to hold office for short periods of time (for example one year) and revocability in case of suspicion of corruption, etc.

The target of these citizen juries is to review decisions, taken by the general assemblies and the councils. In case of detecting violations, they will have the right to demand the problematic decision to be redebated and revoted by the decision-making bodies that made them in first place. If the problematic decision passes and the second time it will be up to the juries to start raising awareness amongst the members of the community and petitioning for its further revision.

As regarding the physical punishment and the prison system, which places the offenders in isolation from the world, there is no space for such thing in a self-managed society, where the highest value is the communication and solidarity between the people. The democratic justice aims at rehabilitation and reeducation of offenders and their reintegration in the social environment. Imprisonment can be done only in cases where a given individual poses an immediate threat to others and in these cases there is need not of prisons, but of another type of institutions, with more pedagogical and medical charasteristics.

Education

In conditions of direct democracy education should be truly autonomous, i.e. free from outside pressure. Each university, as well as school, should draw its own curriculums and teaching methods, independently from other educational institutions. This can be done through a general assembly[23] in which teachers and students collectively discuss and determine the direction and content of the educational process. This type of assemblies, by themselves, also possess an educational character, as expressed by A.S. Neill, because they teach the students critical thinking, citizenship, responsibility and creativity. For Neill, self-governance is "the most valuable asset in education and life" and the general assembly "more important than all the textbooks in the world".[24] In this way education becomes a constant process, an affair of the ones from "below", participating in it, and not a tool for indoctrination, serving the state or the business.

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[23] See for example the institution of 'General meeting', adobted by the libertarian school Summerhill in England: http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/downloads/Policy-statement-community-life-2014.pdf

[24] Bailey 2013, p. 131.

But this, each educational institution drawing autonomously its own educational processes and program, must not be an obstacle to networking between different schools and universities and the exchange of practices and experience between them. Such types of relations are of key importance for the enrichment and development of educational institutions.

The resources necessary for the optimal functioning of the educational institutions, as with other public institutions, should be provided by the communities that are being served by them. Each school and university draws a report on its current state and its needs through common assembly, in which right to participate have everyone involved in some way with its functioning (i.e. janitors, gardeners, teachers, students, technicians etc). This report is being presented to the general assembly or to the confederal council, depending the size of the region, being served by the educational institution. Through these practices and institutions, education is becoming a truly democratic affair, deed of the directly involved in it, but with constant feedback with the community.

Energy

The energy is of great importance for the state of one society. Almost all spheres and proceses of our lives depend on it and its management plays a key role for the sustainabillity of one political system. A truly democratic society requires in the base of energetics to be embedded two, mutually complementary, principles – decentralization and enviromental friendliness.

All settlements should strive towards energetic autarchy, in order for the people living in them to be able to manage their energy sources directly. For example, each local council can appoint an energy committee which to sustain and manage the energy sources of the community. In this type of committees can participate as equals energy experts, appointed through voting, and citizens, appointed through sortition amongst the ones volunteering. Each decision made by the energy committee can be repealed by the general assembly of the settlement and each of its members – revoked.

In case that the energetic autarchy is impossible for one settlement, then it can share the energy sources of another one. In such circumstances the councils of both settlements appoint common energy committee, and each of them can revoke the members it has appointed to it.

As Andrew Flood suggested in 1995: *In a society where we democratically control production we will decide not to pollute, or to limit pollution to a level*

that can be absorbed. [25] We can assume that nobody will be willing to dump dangerous and toxic waste on the ground they live on. And even more so, the direct management of the energy sources requires decentralization, which in its turn demands small scale energy sources, capable of satisfying the needs of the community, like the renewable ones. This automatically excludes the large scale projects such as the nuclear power plants, and also the massive solar and wind fields, which although renewable, are based on the same centralized and non-ecological[26] basis.

Media

Underestimating the role of the media in one society is a big mistake. It has the strength to form public opinion and to direct, in a subconscious way, the activities of the people. This is clearly expressed in the contemporary society where media moguls cast huge influence on the political processes and political parties can hardly take the authority without their help.

Nowadays, there are two main types of media – statist and private. Both, however, refract the information they transmit, through the prism of the state machinery or the business. Public opinion can hardly come to the surface of mainstream media, though the media claims to be transmitting objectively and giving voice to all points of view. In fact, the contemporary mainstream media represents the opinion of certain privileged elites, both political and economical.

In a direct-democratic society the media will have to allow the people to express their opinions as a society, as well as autonomous individuals.

On an individual basis this means that every person can be publishing, alone or in colaboration with a group of associates, newspapers, brochures, radio and TV shows, etc. Freedom of speech is important for one political society since, in the words of Hannah Arendt, '*speech is what makes man a political being'.* Internet can contribute greatly for this. Even today it allows millions of people all over the planet to express publicly their thoughts, opinions and ideas through blogs and websites, which can be created freely, without bureaucratic intermediates. That's why internet will be an indispensable tool for self-expression in one truly democratic society.

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[25] Andrew Flood in '*Anarchism and the Environmental movement*' (1995) available online at: http://struggle.ws/talks/envir_anarchism.html

[26] http://www.ucsusa.org/clean_energy/our-energy-choices/renewable-energy/environmental-impacts-of.html#.VUTv5vmqqko

In the social sphere this means the establishing of social media, controlled and managed by the communities it is serving. In practice, this can be realized through the general assembly, which to appoint a team of editors and technicians, whose job to be the creation and management of radio stations and TV channels, newspapers, etc. Each of the members of this team can be revoked at any moment by the general assembly. One of the tasks of one such media will be to live stream the sessions of the general assembly and the council. Another will be the promulgation of problems and matters of public interest. This can be realized through the gathering of certain amount of signitures (predetermined by the general assembly) in order for a new one to be promulgated by the socal medias.

Healthcare

In one direct-democratic society the very people who work in the healthcare institutions will organize in a horizontal manner the way they function. Main principles should be self-management and solidarity. The main decision making bodies, suitable for the above mentioned principles can look like *faculty assemblies* and *common assembly* of the institution. For example, doctors will organize the specific processes, typical for their type of work, in one assembly, nurses in another, and so on. The matters that concern the conditions and functioning of the institution as a whole will be dealth within a common assembly where everyone that works in it in one way or another (doctors, nurses, sanitarians, janitors etc) will have the right to participate.

The opinions of outside people, participating in one way or another in the health care system (as the patients for example), must not be neglected in one direct-democratic society. The medical personnel and the health care strategy can be appointed by health commitees[27], functioning as working groups of the council. Also the rescources needed for sustaining and developing the health care institutions will be provided by the very communities that are using their services. In practice this can look somehow like this: The common assembly of one medical institution prepares a report with the rescources needed for its proper functioning and presents it to the general assembly of the community, which is using its services. In this way, public services are becoming truly public, and not statist or corporate, where the decisions are coming from "above".

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[27] As the ones, created by the Zapatistas:
http://www.who.int/social_determinants/resources/csdh_media/autonomy_mexico_2007_en.pdf

Architecture

As I have mentioned in the beginning, in order for direct democracy to be truly direct it have to be established in every sphere of the social life, which means that it must reach out also to the architecture. Historically, *'almost everything in human history that surrounds us is invented by amateurs. A number of the most amazing places in the world ... are not designed by architects'*. [28] In the free city-states of medieval Italy the citizens, through citizen committees, were participating in the urban planning. *'During his service in the Florentine Committee, Dante participates in the preparation and planning of the widening of the street San Procolo*.'[29]

In practice, one such interactive architecture can be realized through citizen committees, dealing with the urban and village planning, in which every citizen can participate. In order for the democratic character to be maintained, each decision can be abrogated by the general assembly as a highest authority. Furthermore, the very architecture can allow direct citizen interaction. For example, switches on the street lights can allow their turning on and off by citizens that are in close proximity, fridges for common use in the entranses of housing buildings, etc.

Defence

As regarding the defence of a democratic society, the professionalized military forces should be replaced by the armed populace as was the case in Ancient Athens and modern Switzerland, where professional soldiers constitute about 5% of the military and the rest are conscripts or volunteers by the age of 19 to 34 (in some cases up to 50) [30].

The citizens of a certain community constitute non-permanent, teritorially-based units and each council is responsible for the defense of its territory. The regional confederations integrate these local units into larger armed forces.

In case of an armed conflict, the general assemblies can create a military headquarter, whose members to be elected through voting by all citizens. Here, the electoral element is necessary because the leading of an army

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[28] Christopher Alexander, The Oregon Experiment (Oxford University Press, 1975): 45, 46

[29] Ibid.

[30] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_of_Switzerland

requires experience and knowledge, which has an expert nature and not everyone possesses such. The members of the military headquarter remain revokable at any time. This institution is being dismantled in the moment when armed conflict is resolved.

The question of scale

Such institutions are accompanying the processes and social life in democratic societies from ancient times[31] to contemporary autonomous communities in Chiapas, Rojava, Brazil, etc. But the proponents of the today's hierarchical models for social organizing claim that the very sizes of our societies do not allow the implementation of direct democracy on a larger scale. For them, it can work in small scale, but when large segments of people have to do it, it becomes impossible, i.e. if a lot of autonomous self-managed communities arose simultaneously they will not be able to coordinate between each other on matters that are of common concern. According to them, the only possible form of democracy today is the representative one, which "inevitably" contains the danger of political alienation, i.e. social division into those who it represents and those being represented.

It seems, however, that they do not take into consideration the level that contemporary state of technology has reached. Technology in itself is not a solution, but it can be placed in service of direct democracy, if there is political will from the grassroots for such a thing. If such step is being undertaken, the excuse for the usage of representation will become completely obsolete.

During popular uprisings of the past, in which the people were organizing themselves through town hall meetings, general assemblies and public gatherings the question of scale, i.e. the amount of people that could assemble in the same place, was pretty much determined by the physical limitation of the speakers. Today because of the development of technology these limitations have to be reconsidered. In the reality of contemporary technologies distances not only got smaller – they have practically dissapeared. This allows society to create, on its own volition, online platforms in which a broad public participation, beyond the limitations of physical space, can be made possible. Through the internet can be established a connection between large number of assemblies of different communities or social groups could initiate referendums on matters, concerning larger areas,

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[31] For more on the direct democracy in the archaic world see the influential texts *The greek polis and the creation of democracy* (Castoriadis, 1983) and *Society against the state* (Clastres, 1974)

in order bureucratization to be avoided. The possibilities of contemporary technologies (and the internet in particular) can be used in a wide range of cases as in the confederalist way I have just talked about. Already, social movements are making attempts in this direction, calling for on-line meetings[32], in an effort to surpass the limitations of space.

In any case, the sessions of various councils can easily be live-streamed and with the further developement of technologies in the future, it can be made as to allow interaction from the side of the spectator. This, in combination with the revocabillity of delegates and other democratic mechanisms, can strenghten public control over every institution.

Another argument in favour of the whole scale problem is that when a lot of people gather in the same place, most of them won't be able to express themselves. However, this argument is somewhat presented in bad faith since certain set of rules can be established in order to allow as much as possible participants to be able to express their opinions, like a time limitation for each speaker (for example 3 minutes each), choosing by lot the next speaker from a pool with the names of everyone who wants to have the word and so on[33].

There are also other points on this matter and just to mention some, here is one[34] made by Cornelius Castoriadis:

It might be claimed that the problem of numbers remains and that people never would be able to express themselves in a reasonable amount of time. This is not a valid argument. There would rarely be an assembly of over twenty people where everyone would want to speak, for the very good reason that when there is something to be decided upon there are not an infinite number of options or an infinite number of arguments. In unhampered rank-and-file workers' gatherings (convened, for instance, to decide on a strike)

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[32] Like these ones: https://www.facebook.com/events/170992339630642/ and https://www.facebook.com/realdemocracynowcanada/notes

[33] To avoid any misunderstanding I would like to make it clear that when we speak of direct democracy in the radical sense of the term, as self-management of society without any 'top-down' hierarchical mechanisms and institutions we are not talking of 'lawlesness' and 'chaos'. Quite the contrary, in order such thing to work there will be need of a lot of rules and organization, but the difference is who and how will determine them, which is of real importance here.

[34] https://libcom.org/library/on-the-content-of-socialism-ii-socialisme-ou-barbarie

there have never been "too many" speeches. The two or three fundamental opinions having been voiced, and various arguments having been exchanged, a decision is soon reached. The length of speeches, moreover, often varies inversely with the weight of their content. Russian leaders sometimes talk on for four hours at Party Congresses without saying anything. The speech of the Ephor that persuaded the Spartans to launch the Peloponnesian War occupies twenty-one lines of Thucydides (I, 86).

It is wrong to believe that the size of our contemporary society is too big in comparison with the ones from the past (tens of millions instead of tens of thousands) in order for a direct democracy to be able to function properly. First of all, we have to stop mistaking 'society' with 'state'. Already, the base for such a democracy exist in the form of neighbourhoods, villages, etc. Direct democracy can be implemented at this level and then all these autonomous democratic communities can start networking with each other according to the needs of their residents. And technology can be quite helpful in the networking between large amount of communities and/or between such that are being separated by great distance.

Transitional strategy

The transition towards direct democracy will not happen overnight. The expectation of an upcoming revolution will not lead us far, it can even have negative consequences like providing an excuse for passivity. But even if such revolution occurs, we cannot expect that in such critical situation society will rush into unknown and untested directions. Quite the contrary, it can turn desperately towards ready institutions and structures which were already realized, even in limited scale and political propositions that, even hidden by the dominant ideology, have not dissapeared completely. That's why its important to build from today the infrastructure of one truly democratic future society.

The political will for participation does not appear out of thin air, it is being built and sustained through daily practice. Contemporary dominant structures cultivate submission and uncriticalness. They teach us to accept the hierarchical dogma. No matter what kind of changes appear, as long as most of our time is being spent in these structures, our imaginary will be dominated by the logic they promote. This creates a vicious cycle, exit from which is being offered by horizontal structures such as cooperatives, collectives, neighbourhood assemblies, based on equality and direct democracy.

Instead of working for a company, dominated by a thin managerial layer, we can start a collective initiative, in which all members are co-owners, participating in the decision making. And where we live, instead of waiting for support from the local authorities, we can organize local assemblies, through which collectively, as equals, to search solutions to the problems of our neighbourhoods.

Such type of horizontal structures act as universities, teaching people the logic of self-organization and self-management through practice (Of course, they must always maintain an anti-systemic character and constantly re-think their practicess in order to avoid absorbtion by the dominant system). This citizen's activity creates political consciouseness and shows to the participants that direct democracy is not just some muddy utopia, but a tool for finding and solving problems here and now. And as long as these horizontal structures develop and multiply, as long as they maintain themselves part of wider resistance movement for social change and more and more people see their usefulness, we will be getting closer to direct democracy.

Direct Democracy is not Utopia

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. [35]

Cornelius Castoriadis

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 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 Athens[36] 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

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[35] Castoriadis, Cornelius. (2010) "The project of Autonomy is not Utopia." *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificancy, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today.* (http://www.notbored.org/ASA.pdf). p 8

[36] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian_democracy

by all citizens (around 30 000) on a general assembly (*ekklêsia*)[37].

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 Clisthenes[38] 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 emperor[39]. In their place, a system of governance was created through interlocking and balanced councils. Large deliberative 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 assemblies[40], took care of the important local administration. These assemblies were appointing delegates[41] (revocable at any time) to

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[37] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesia_(ancient_Athens)

[38] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boule_(ancient_Greece)#The_Reforms_of_Cleisthenes

[39] GRENDLER, PAUL F.. "Renaissance." Europe, 1450 to 1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World. 2004.*Encyclopedia.com.* (May 21, 2015). http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3404900963.html

[40] http://new-compass.net/articles/popular-assemblies-revolts-and-revolutions

[41] Marx, Karl. (1871) „The Paris Commune". In *The Civil War in France* (https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/)

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 revolt[42]. The preconditions for it were the authoritarian government and the widespread poverty of this tima and the concrete reson 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 goverment 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 began[43]. 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 Leval[44].

One contemporary example for society, whose organization is based on democratic participation, are the Kuna people[45]. They live on 50 small islands, part of the archipelagus 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 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

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[42] http://www.eroseffect.com/articles/Paris%20Gwangju.pdf

[43] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Civil_War#Social_revolution

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

[45] Notes from Nowhere. (2003) *We are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism.*(http://artactivism.members.gn.apc.org/allpdfs/107-[essay]Autonomy.pdf). pp 113-4

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.

The Landless Worker's Movement[46] (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 families[47], 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 Mills[48] 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) [49]. 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

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[46] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landless_Workers%27_Movement

[47]
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landless_Workers%27_Movement#Organizational_structure

[48] Singh, Supriya. *Participatory Forest Management in Mendha Lekha, India.* (http://www.ceecec.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Mendha-Lekha-Using-Self-Governance1.pdf). p 8

[49] Neema Pathak and Erica Taraporewala. (2008). *Towards self-rule and forest conservation in Mendha-Lekha Village, Gadchiroli.* (http://www.iccaconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/images/media/grd/mendha_india_report_icca_grassroots_discussions.pdf) p 6

of the area (each sending a delegate) is being held. Around 1 500 villages across India have been taking similar steps[50].

In Rojava a direct-democratic system is also being put into practice,. In its core are the communes[51] (i.e. general assemblies), consisted of neighbourhoods with population of around 300 people each. The communes appoint co-presidents to participate in the Canton administration[52]. 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-management[53]. The local assemblies of each settlement, a basic decision-making institution, sends delegates to the regional councils, which decide on production, redistribution etc[54]. 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 significantly[55] - nowadays the indigenous people living there have access to healthcare, education, electricity (things they didn't had before).

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50   http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Panchayat-Act-helps-villagers-regain-control-over-resources/articleshow/8002860.cms

51 http://new-compass.net/articles/revolution-rojava

52 http://www.biehlonbookchin.com/rojavas-communes-and-councils/

53 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zapatista_Army_of_National_Liberation#Ideology

54

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebel_Zapatista_Autonomous_Municipalities#Functioning

55   http://www.elkilombo.org/the-classmates-iii-those-who-were-not-are-not-and-will-not-be-invited/

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

We live in dynamic times where a global crisis is slowly penetrating every sphere of our lives. In response to the contemporary state of uncertainty, people are rising all across the globe demanding change. There are different proposals to what direction our society shoud take. Inbetween all the alternatives being placed on the table there is one word that can be heard almost everywhere – "democracy". Some are calling it real democracy, others horizontal, direct or participatory democracy and so on. Here is being presented the proposal of the direct democracy as a project beyond hierarchy, representation and exploitation.

It strives to dismantle the social separation between executives and implementators. Instead, it aims to create institutions which allow each and every member of society to directly participate in the decision-making on political, economic, social, ecological, etc., matters, which concerns him and to directly participate in their implementation. Therefore it is nothing like the different forms of "democracy" that we know to be implemented on massive, statist level, which are based on representative logic – deciding for someone else, who then to decide for you, which in no way is the same as deciding for yourself and your community by yourself and your community.

The transition towards direct democracy will not happen overnight. The expectation of an upcoming revolution will not lead us far, it can even have negative consequences like providing an excuse for passivity. But even if such revolution occurs, we cannot expect that in such critical situation society will rush into unknown and untested directions. Quite the contrary, it can turn desperately towards ready institutions and structures which were already realized, even in limited scale and political propositions that, even hidden by the dominant ideology, have not dissapeared completely. That's why its important to build from today the infrastructure of one truly democratic future society.