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Yavor Tarinski

TOWARDS AUTONOMY

Participatory politics of the 21st century



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Author: Yavor Tarinski
Editor: Ioanna Maravelidi
Design: Yavor Tarinski

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Introduction

So we see that the crisis of modern society is not without issue. It contains the seeds of something new, which is emerging even now. But the new will not come about automatically. Its emergence will be assisted by the actions of people in society, by their permanent resistance and struggle and by their often unconscious activity. But the new will not complete itself, will not be able to establish itself as a new social system, as a new pattern of social life, unless at some stage it becomes a conscious activity, a conscious action of the mass of the people. For us, to initiate this conscious action and to help it develop, whenever it may manifest itself, is the real new meaning to be given to the words 'revolutionary politics'.

Cornelius Castoriadis¹

We live in an unjust world. And the ever increasing injustices are causing growing number of people to be taking the streets, protesting policies imposed by governments and corporate lobbyists, discussing and developing solutions to the crises, caused by the bureaucratic management and

¹ "The crisis of modern society": a talk given by 'Paul Cardan' (Cornelius Castoriadis). Issued as a pamphlet by Solidarity (London) a month later in June 1965. (Solidarity pamphlet No. 23).

capitalist growth, and struggling to implement in practice their desires for better, more just world.

Amongst the social movements new meanings and significations are picking their way through the police barricades, the media manipulations and the widespread cynicism. Amongst them are new narratives, spreading beyond traditional concepts of ideology, i.e. narratives that aim at breaking the walls, erected by dogmatized ideas between politicized activists and the rest of society, which also gives new role to the revolutionary organizations.

At the same time rapidly increasing number of people is starting to question the 'growth' doctrine, because of the growing crisis, caused to a big degree by it, encompassing the environment, human health etc. Thus the capitalist logic of the "cancer cell" is being challenged by the new narrative of de-growth.

These and other new narratives allow new alternative proposals to be further developed and implemented in practice. Liberated from the chains of the ideological 'purity' and the 'growth' doctrine, the proposals of the direct democracy, the commons, the solidarity economy and many more are nowadays flourishing, igniting the imaginary of more and more social movements and communities.

This excites new forms of activism, aimed simultaneously at resisting and creating, emphasizing on the need of laying today the basis of the future society, which to allow the emergence of new anthropological type of socially active and responsible individuals, capable of self-limitation.

All of these elements are intertwining with each other into project of autonomy, which suggests that society can create its own institutions without external authorities and the individuals, constituting it, are fully aware that they, and not some external force, are doing it. We see the signs of this autonomy in the actions of the countless movements and

communities, resisting the imposition of ways of life, that they didn't chose themselves and striving at creating new ones that reflect their desires and needs. It is not by chance that the word autonomy is being used by some of the most emblematic examples of direct-democratic societies: from the caracoles of the Zapatistas to the democratic cantons of Rojava².

The present volume gathers articles of mine, written in the period between 2015 and 2016 and published online on different websites. These articles examine the above mentioned topics, emphasizing on their participatory character. In a sense, this book examines the modern efforts at establishing autonomy in different spheres of human life: the resources we share, the cities we live in, the products we produce, the decisions we take etc. It presents a colorful puzzle of participatory politics that can take us closer to the creation of one truly autonomous society.

² <https://roarmag.org/essays/chiapas-rojava-zapatista-kurds/>

Part 1:

Thinking Differently

Radical Organizing for the 21st Century³

Revolution is not 'showing' life to people, but making them live. A revolutionary organization must always remember that its objective is not getting its adherents to listen to convincing talks by expert leaders, but getting them to speak for themselves, in order to achieve, or at least strive toward, an equal degree of participation.

Guy Debord⁴

Today we see a deepening crisis of representation, reflected by increasing abstention rates during elections even in countries with traditionally high electoral activity, like Greece⁵. Political parties across Europe that win elections rarely gather enough seats to rule alone, and are thus forced to engage in unstable coalitions to form governments. Even the so-called radical parties, that claim to represent the massive social movements of the last years, don't seem to be able to increase noticeably their membership base or to initiate lasting social mobilizations on a large scale.

This crisis of representation also affects the traditional social movements. Traditional ideological organizations fail to increase their membership base

³ Originally published by new-compass.net (11.04.2016)

⁴ Debord, Guy. *For a Revolutionary Judgment of Art* (1961)

⁵ <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2015/09/21/voter-turnout-in-greek-elections-drops-to-new-historic-low-infographic/>

too, ceding back instead⁶. Also, the proposals they articulate are rarely more than a reproduction of old patterns of thinking and acting, thus they are unable to interact adequately with contemporary reality.

Modern radical organizations striving for social emancipation should therefore adopt new ways of thinking and acting. The term 'radical' is being used here as signifying radical change of the dominant forms of politics and the replacement of one set of imaginary significations with another one, and not as reference point for torrents of blood or violence as an end in itself. We can distinguish at least three forms of organizing that are more adequate to current reality: a) mapping and strengthening social counter-powers; b) adopting a de-ideologized narrative; c) addressing the difficult question of managing power in a non-hierarchical manner. ..

Mapping and strengthening social counter-power

In contrast to this, new grassroots movements have adopted a quite innovative approach: they have attempted to skip the capitalist intermediaries and state bureaucracies, opening up, instead, spaces for popular interaction that could give practical solutions to people's everyday problems, like directly connecting producers and consumers in the form of barter markets and solidarity networks. This has led to the emergence of many new structures based on solidarity, participation and creativity. Another example are the deliberative assemblies that emerged in the squares of major cities around the world during the mass mobilizations of 2011-12. Although the momentum was eventually lost, these practices showed a popular creativity that couldn't be encompassed by any traditional ideology based mainly on resistance.

⁶ <https://roarmag.org/magazine/anti-capitalist-politics-21st-century/>

In a system, which is rapidly disintegrating both society as well as itself, the emphasis of the struggles that the social movements are waging should be on building and proposing sustainable alternative structures that can change people's everyday life in practice, rather than merely resisting the policies imposed by the ruling elites (but not completely abandoning resistance as an important tactic).

A modern radical organization, while not ceasing to resist unjust policies, would have to emphasize creating and locating structures that emerge from the midst of society and to nurture their direct-democratic character, solidarity and creativity. Furthermore, it should connect these to other popular initiatives, thus preventing them from being crushed in an environment of harsh social cannibalism, while simultaneously building coherent counter-power. With the establishment of such networks of communally managed structures, a growing number of human needs could be met and their radical democratic character and solidarity-based logic would be ensured by the support of a political movement. In this manner, an attempt could be made to radically transform the work time of the participants, blurring the borders between work and free (hobby) time and integrating them into one free public time.

This approach will not alienate these endeavors from society, but on the contrary, since they have emerged from amongst its ranks, strong links between them will remain. This stands in stark contrast with the structures created and managed by ideologically charged traditional organizations, which are viewing society as unenlightened and themselves as "would-be" teachers, thus unconsciously reproducing the existing dichotomy between the "expert" and the "non-expert".

Adoption of a de-ideologized narrative

Due to their ideological character, traditional radical organizations tend to adopt their own narratives which are incompatible and often even quite hostile towards the rest of society. As I will show in the next chapter, this results in the establishment of a non-contextual way of thinking and acting, which prevents, or at least makes it very difficult, for radical political organizations to interact with the people, leading to their sectarianization.

To avoid this, a new approach is needed. An approach that goes beyond ideology, that is, beyond dogmas and identities. This could be helpful in a two ways: on the one hand, it would allow radical organizations to interact with wider sections of society. On the other, it would enable a better understanding of the modern world, as the traditional ideologies were based on simplistic 'subject-object' determinations (proletariat-communism or bourgeois-capitalism), which don't correspond to the complexities of our time.

Many activists express the fear that without ideological identities their political groups will lose their cohesion, thereby remaining unprotected from efforts at their assimilation by the *status quo*. This could prove right if ideology is being taken out of the equation and nothing takes its place. However this doesn't have to be the case: by de-ideologization, I don't suggest the removal of political principles and ideals, but rather the removal of ideologically enforced identities and dogmas that are erecting imaginary walls between political movements and society. This implies the creation of a radical culture, based on political principles, that is open to a wide range of societal interactions. In the end, if social emancipation is possible at all, it will be so only with the consent of the popular majority. The connection with the wider society should be among the top priorities of every group striving for a

radical break with the contemporary order of things. Following this line of thought, a radical organization can't be anything but direct-democratic.

The question of power

An additional element that has to be taken into consideration by contemporary radical organizations is the role of power. The traditional radical movements were viewing this question in at least two oversimplified ways: either power must be taken through seizing the state apparatus and establishing dictatorship of the proletariat; or power must be abolished completely, which often results into rejection of all forms of rules and norms. Thus, people willing to engage in radical political activity are often faced with the option of participating in totalitarian or chaotic types of organization.

Nowadays we see the need for a new type of power that is becoming ever more prominent from different expressions of popular creativity. The paradigm of the commons is a good example of this. While rejecting the bureaucratic centralization of the state and the ruthless barbarity of the capitalist market, the commons are insistently emphasizing the importance of norms, regulations and penal codes that constitute horizontal power, as these can't be overridden by an individual or by a group of people. This type of power flows from the "bottom-up"; it is a different type of power, consciously determined by the involved individuals, through democratic processes such as general assemblies, online forums and platforms. In a sense, it is a form of self-limitation.

Contemporary radical organizations should tackle this aspiration both on a theoretical and a practical level. On the one hand, they should strive for self-instituting; at charging their structures and processes with institutional characteristics. For example, decision-making bodies like general assemblies should have the role of institutions, through which the group expresses its

collective will in the form of practical power, and not just as loose, semi-formal coordinational device between free time volunteers. Simultaneously, the question should also be articulated on a more theoretical level in order to generate reflections for solving contemporary issues of crucial importance, which could also contribute to radical organizations overcoming their ideological abstractivism and developing more concrete and up-to-date proposals. For example, different matters, like keeping polluting fossil fuels in the ground, require something more than voluntary consent and wishful thinking. Thus, a difficult challenge for contemporary radical organizations will be to form proposals for how no individual or group of individuals would be able to violate the agreements reached by the majority of society, without losing the participatory element and individual autonomy and descending into totalitarianism.

Conclusion

With mass popular mobilizations in recent years taking place ever more frequently, decentralization of modern technology bringing ever growing number of people in contact with one another and allowing free uncensored (for now) expression of collective and individual creativity, cultural exchange caused by mass migrations and other phenomena of modern contemporality, the question of the role of radical organizations is of crucial importance. Although we have seen popular activity increasing during the last years, it didn't manage to produce solid and lasting forms of counter-power. Therefore, the mass social movements could gain much from experienced radicals, in theory and in practice, if the latter are willing to abandon the 'safety' of ideological traditionality and to bravely dive into public affairs.

If we want to take the maximum of the next wave of public outrage, probably caused by new wave of austerity measures, more broken promises by representative governments, the public dissatisfaction with the

contemporary exclusively consumerist lifestyle, or even from the left impotence to overpass its traditional thinking and to tackle adequately the challenges of our contemporality, radical organizations will have to adopt practices that will make their speech and practices more understandable and close to the common people. Even more, it could possibly open horizons for the creation of new sets of significations which could replace the existing system, by which it is difficult to keep society from complete disintegration.

Beyond Ideology: Rethinking Contextuality⁷

*We are indeed conditioned by the contexts in which we live, but
we are also the creators of our political and social constructions
and we can change them if we are so determined.*

Mary Dietz⁸

In the debate⁹ between Simon Springer and David Harvey on what ideological frame the radical geography should adopt, Harvey's proposal for *letting radical geography free of any particular "ism"* seems to make a lot of sense. And although their polemical texts discuss, at first sight, the matter of radical geography, in my opinion, they have also a wider importance for the whole question of the role of ideology in the project for social liberation and emancipation. With small exceptions, the proposal of freeing ourselves from ideology seems highly neglected from the movements for social emancipation, and I think this is a big mistake if we want to actually involve more people in them and act constructively.

We see activists and thinkers being busy with trying to keep their ideological/identical "purity", often engaging in endless discussions on what

⁷ Originally published by respublica.gr (06.08.2015)

⁸ Dietz, Mary. Context is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship. in Dimensions of Radical Democracy. edited by Chantall Mouffe.1992. Verso Books. p79

⁹ <http://davidharvey.org/2015/06/listen-anarchist-by-david-harvey/>

is “anarchist”, “marxist” or whatever. Don’t get me wrong, I do not mean to abandon theory as such in the name of direct action. On the contrary, I think that theoretical research and critical thinking are essential for effective action. **But Ideology must not be mistaken with theory.**

Ideology and non-contextuality

The Situationist International defined Ideology as a doctrine of interpretation of existing facts¹⁰, which can be understood as thinking in a non-contextual way. What this means is that the *ideologue* creates a certain type of analysis, influenced by his local context (social environment, economic development, culture etc.) and constantly tries to fit in it realities, born in different contexts, which often leads to non-understanding. We can see this clearly, for example, in the reactions of certain anarchists and marxists (having purist class analysis based solely on realities of 19th-century industrial Europe), which are judging the events in Rojava, searching there for “proletariat”, that does not exist in the classical Western sense¹¹.

In this line of thought, Ideology castrates the ideas one has, turning them into sterile/mummified dogmas that cannot exist beyond their initial form. The “ideologized” ideas become incompatible with realities/contexts that differ from the ones that have given them birth, and in a way, they become useless. The ideological non-contextuality obstructs both the theoretical research and the subsequent from it activity. Ideology creates the dogmatic notion of utopia and excludes everything that does not fit in it, even if there are some common principles (as we saw above in the case of Rojava), creating a sort of self-alienating elitist subculture.

¹⁰ “There is no such thing as situationis, which would mean a doctrine of interpretation of existing facts.” (Situationist International) from Internationale Situationniste #1, Knabb, p45

¹¹ <https://roarmag.org/essays/zapatistas-rojava-anarchist-revolution/>

Thus Ideology becomes more self-expressive than instrumental. It morphs into specific identity, often serving as an excuse for abdicating from broad social affairs. Instead, it creates its own circle of self-interest, open mainly to like-minded (sharing same Ideology) individuals who remove themselves voluntarily from the institutions and social networks of the society which they potentially could influence¹². As Jonathan Matthew Smucker points out:

[...] when we do not contest the cultures, beliefs, symbols, narratives, etc. of the existing institutions and social networks that we are part of, we also walk away from the resources and power embedded within them. In exchange for a shabby little activist clubhouse, we give away the whole farm. We let our opponents have everything.

Because of its non-contextual character, Ideology can be viewed as part of the dominant nowadays imaginary, based on bureaucratic logic, which needs to frame everything into “comfortable” fixed boxes, i.e. strict social and political roles, thus creating and strengthening identity, rather than ideas. In her book *The Emergence of social space*, Kristin Ross describes how during the Paris Commune, Catulle Mendès (representing the pre-commune order) is not really mourning the drop in production but rather his anxiety stems from the attack on identity, since *the shoemakers stopped making shoes, but barricades*¹³. She traces this bureaucratic logic of narrow identity back to Plato, for whom in a well-constituted state a unique task is being attributed to each person; a shoemaker is first of all someone who cannot also be a warrior¹⁴.

One characteristic of the bureaucratic logic is its inherent predisposition towards hierarchy, since some tasks and roles are more important than others. David Graeber, in an interview for the Greek political magazine

¹² <http://www.alternet.org/visions/why-we-cant-depend-activists-create-change>

¹³ Ross, Kristin. *The Emergence of social space*. Verso 2008 p14

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p13

Babylonia, defines Ideology as *the idea that one needs to establish a global analysis before taking action*, which presupposes that the role of intellectual vanguard (narrow ideologues-experts), have to play a leadership role in any popular political movement¹⁵.

Beyond Ideology: Context is all

In order for modern social movements to really challenge the existing order, they will have to overpass the limits of the contemporary imaginary, based on bureaucratic logic and fixed political roles. In practice this means moving beyond ideology, i.e. locating desirable principles and results, and simultaneously making efforts at adjusting them to the local context. This does not mean to leave aside our ideals and to “go with the flow”, but on the contrary, to try to share them with as more people as possible, who most probably don’t share the same (or any at all) Ideology/dogma/political lifestyle. In so doing questions such as “is EZLN anarchist or not”¹⁶ will become obsolete and replaced by “what do they propose, on what basis and principles, how and do we agree with what they do” and so on.

In the end, it depends on the goals we target with our struggles. If we strive towards social emancipation and direct democratic participation, we cannot but try to link various struggles, movements and as many people as possible and for this to happen, we have to change the way we express our ideas according to the interlocutor we have before us. As Aki Orr suggests: *A society can be run by Direct Democracy only if most of its citizens want to decide policies themselves* since no minority, however positive its intentions, can impose it on society¹⁷.

¹⁵ <http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/recentfeatures/ideology.php>

¹⁶ Back in 2002, the US journal Green Anarchy published a critical article of the Zapatista movement, named “The EZLN are not anarchist!”

¹⁷ Orr, Aki. Politics Without Politicians. 2005

Steps towards this direction were made by Larry Giddings, who replaced the ideological label “anarchist” with the broader “anti-authoritarian”¹⁸. He did so after acknowledging that whether he recognizes non-anarchist struggles or not, they still exist, and by ignoring them because they don’t reflect his own notion of a “non-nation-state future”, he ignores his own desire for such. He reached the conclusion that de-centralized social and economic systems, organized in democratic, non-statist manner, will only come through common struggles by various movements and broad social involvement.

So instead of constantly trying to define what “true” anarchism is, he decided to try another approach: to locate the anti-authoritarian characteristics of various already existing social movements and to identify their common enemies (oppressors) and thus to connect them. And in order such connections to be made, narrow ideological narratives had to be abandoned and replaced by general anti-authoritarian culture, which can simultaneously be determined and itself to determine the context in which it was created.

Conclusion

Moving beyond Ideology does not mean abdicating from our ideas and principles but their constant reevaluation and development. To the fears that without ideological identities we will be absorbed by the dominant culture of political apathy and mindless consumerism we can answer with the creation of a broad citizen culture of autonomous individuals who are, before all, *speakers of words and doers of deeds*¹⁹. Such a broad concept, based, as proposed by Mary Dietz, on the virtue of mutual respect and the principle of “positive liberty” of self-governance (and not simply the “negative liberty” of non-interference), will keep the anti-authoritarian spirit while allowing for interaction with large sections of the society and the implementation in

¹⁸ Giddings, Larry. *Why Anti-Authoritarian*. 1990

¹⁹ Dietz, Mary. Context is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship. in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*. edited by Chantall Mouffe. Verso Books. 1992. p75

practice of our ideas in different contexts. Only one such approach will help us escape the “sectarianism” (with all the separatism and lifestylishness that stems from it) of the political movements haunting them from the beginning of 20th century until nowadays.

Beyond the “Growth” Doctrine²⁰

Society has been locked into thought dominated by progressivist growth economics; the tyranny of these has made imaginative thinking outside the box impossible. [...] But our ever increasing consumption is not sustainable; sooner or later we will have to give it up.

Serge Latouche²¹

“Economic Growth” is an oft-repeated mantra in our times. A majority of contemporary political and economic elites, right wingers as well as many leftists²² still adhere to the growth doctrine neglecting its many disadvantages.

Destruction of the social fabric

Growth-based capitalist societies are dominated by consumerism, degrading the citizens into atomized, apolitical individuals that care only about themselves. As Erik Olin Wright rightly observes²³, the dynamics of capitalist profit-driven market competition impose a strong pressure on capitalist economies to grow in total output, not just in productivity. Profits are made from selling goods and services and the more a capitalist firm sells, the higher the profit. Capitalist firms are therefore constantly attempting to increase

²⁰ Originally published by new-compass.net (05.10.2015)

²¹ <https://mondediplo.com/2004/11/14latouche>

²² Ibid

²³ Wright, Erik Olin. *Envisioning Real Utopias*. 2010. Verso Books. p66

their production and their sales. Enormous resources are devoted to this specific task, especially in the form of advertising and marketing strategies, but also in terms of government policies that systematically facilitate expansion of output. In sum, this creates a strong trajectory of growth biased towards increased production.

In a growth-based capitalist society, free time is given zero value because it does not result in a commodity that can be sold on the market. A dynamic of ever-increasing consumption supported by cultural forms creates alienated and mechanistic individuals detached from the collectivity. In other words: humans capable of autonomous thought are transformed into mindless machines turning heteronomously the giant cogwheel of economic growth in the name of growth itself.

Increasing inequalities

Increasing social inequalities is another negative effect that constant economic growth has on society. According to Jason Hickel, London School of Economics, the world's richest 1 percent have increased their profits²⁴ by 60 percent in the last 20 years, while global economic inequality is in its peak for the same period - a period during which the global economy has been constantly growing. These negative effects of the growth doctrine were already noticed in 1897 by Errico Malatesta, who in his book *At the Café* wrote²⁵:

“These evils [social inequality, poverty, unemployment] generally are more intense in countries where the industry is more developed, except if the workers themselves didn’t manage, through organizing at the working place, resistance or revolt, to achieve better living conditions.”

²⁴ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/04/201349124135226392.html>

²⁵ Malatesta, Errico. *At the Cafe: Conversations on Anarchism*, Freedom Press 2005, p. 30

More than a century later, George Monbiot maintains that²⁶,

“the old excuse, that we must trash the planet to help the poor, simply does not pass. For a few decades of extra enrichment for those who already possess more money than they know how to spend, the prospects of everyone else who will live on this earth are diminished.”

The doctrine of constant economic growth contributes to increase of inequality and injustice, and the wealth that is produced is often illusory: even for the rich, this kind of society is neither comfortable nor pleasant, but is, on the contrary, permeated by cynicism and violence.

Perhaps it is time to start thinking beyond the growth doctrine and to reject the infamous thatcherian slogan that "there is no alternative" to capitalism. Instead, we should strive towards quality rather than quantity and cooperation rather than competition.

A society beyond economism

In order to be able to imagine and to create a society that is not based on constant economic growth, we have to move beyond economism, that is, narrow mechanistic and consumerist thinking. This means to oppose in theory and in practice the dominance that the economy has in all spheres of modern life as well as in our minds and to subordinate it to the political, in order to reflect real human needs and desires.

An alternative to both capitalism and the nation state, is the *autonomous* society. According to Cornelius Castoriadis, an autonomous society cannot be established except through the autonomous activity of the collectivity²⁷. Such an activity presupposes that people strongly value something other than the possibility of buying a shiny new gadget. On a

²⁶ <http://www.monbiot.com/2012/12/10/the-gift-of-death/>

²⁷ Castoriadis, Cornelius. Democracy and Relativism. 2013. p59 (available online at <http://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf>)

deeper level, it presupposes that the passion for direct democracy, freedom and public affairs will take the place of distraction, cynicism, conformism, and consumerism. Also it requires the replacement of the national and global centralized institutions of governance with the establishment of autonomous self-managed polities²⁸.

An autonomous society is based on solidarity, equality, self-determination and democracy. The needs of the society are determined by the citizens and not by artificial market mechanisms and dogmas. Large-scale polluting and depletable energy sources will be replaced by small-scale renewable ones, aimed at local self-rule and sustainability. This presupposes, among other things, that the “economic” cease to be the dominant or exclusive value.

The price to pay for liberty is the destruction of the economy as a central value and its replacement with the passion for political participation. Otherwise, the price humanity will have to pay for the wasteful consumerist lifestyle that the growth doctrine promotes will be much higher. Many scientists warns²⁹ that the Earth will not be able to maintain for much longer the conditions for life as we know it if our economies continue to function in the same way. A growing number of people however, are now starting to get dissatisfied with this consumerist lifestyle, since, as it appears, constant consumption is not good enough reason to live.

Self-limitation

Contemporary techno science is reflected in the famous slogan, "if it can be done, it will be done, no matter what the consequences." This logic is strongly intertwined with the growth doctrine. The essence of this way of thinking is that it does not matter whether we need something or not; a reason will be made for creating it and means found for selling it.

²⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politeia>

²⁹ <http://www.extremetech.com/extreme/166986-earth-will-not-remain-habitable-for-long-time-to-find-another-planet-says-new-research>

Castoriadis poses the question of self-limitation³⁰ of the advances in technology and knowledge, not for religious reasons or for totalitarian ones (he points at the fact that Stalin decreed that the theory of relativity is anti-proletarian), but for reasons that have to do with political choice, that is, with *thinking*. In other words: to break with the heteronomy of techno-science that is dominating contemporary society's imaginary and to replace it with an autonomous thinking that opens up many horizons. The emergence of citizens capable of individual and collective conscious self-limitation is of crucial importance to taking society beyond the growth doctrine. This can only be done by common people through opening spaces of participation and emancipation that can embed responsibility and autonomy in every sphere of human life.

³⁰ Castoriadis, Cornelius. Democracy and Relativism. 2013. p62 (available online at <http://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf>)

Part 2:
Schematizing the Future

Direct Democracy: Beyond Hierarchy³¹

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.

Aki Orr³²

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 as to what direction our society should take.

In between all the alternatives being put 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. Here I will present a proposal of direct democracy as a project beyond hierarchy, representation and exploitation.

Some might ask: “why do we need alternatives, does not our contemporary system work?” Yes, it unquestionably works, but the question is, in whose

³¹ Originally published by new-compass.net (20.06.2015)

³² <http://www.autonarchy.org.il/>

interest? The following statistics³³ can give us an idea about that: 1 percent of the richest people in the world own 40 percent of the global wealth, while the richest 10 percent own more than the 85 percent of the world's assets. The contemporary politico-economic system serves, in the best case, the interests of 10 percent of the population. This situation suppresses the creativity, the abilities and the dignity of the rest of the 90 percent, dooming a small part of them to mediocre and gray life, and the rest (the overwhelming majority) to hunger and misery.

The very logic in which the contemporary organization of social life is being based, is the one of hierarchy and passivity. In its essence, the situation is similar in every sphere of our life, be it in family, politics, economy or culture. All the contemporary structures consist of organizing people's lives from the outside - in complete absence of the ones 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 population, whose role is being reduced to mere implementers of decisions (already taken by the above mentioned institutions). As a result of this, most of the people nowadays feel powerless and alienated from their lives.

According to Karl Polanyi³⁴, it is not human will, but prices and interest rates that direct the course of society. 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. Treating people, either in the political or economic sphere, as mere tools, systematically ignoring their desires and thoughts, is stripping them of their creativity and imagination. As the

³³ <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/oct/14/richest-1percent-half-global-wealth-credit-suisse-report>

³⁴ Polanyi, Karl (2005a): *Chronik der großen Transformation*, Band 3, ed. by Michele Cangiani, Kari-Polanyi Levitt and Claus Thomasberger, Marburg: Metropolis. pp. 138, 149.

philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis rightly observed³⁵, the whole “official” organization of modern society both ignores and seeks to suppress people’s capacity for self-organization and the individual and collective creativity of the producers. As a result, 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 decision making power while leaving the rest with only the task of following and implementing. However, as the will of this majority is being neglected and even suppressed, they do not 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 a huge amount of energy and time into figuring out ways to control the ‘implementers’. Eventually, 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, 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 create crisis, which will not necessarily lead to the overthrowing of the contemporary system, but it is surely making the lives of all of us more miserable and unpleasant. Thus in order to tackle the current crisis and the ones that have yet to come, it is not enough 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

³⁵ Castoriadis, Cornelius. On the Content of Socialism. 1957

One alternative system is direct democracy. It dismantles the social separation between executives and implementers and aims at creating institutions which allow each and every member of society to participate directly in the decision making of the political, economic, social, and ecological matters which concern them and to directly participate in their implementation. This gives space for more complete realization of human potential. I have to make it clear that this kind of direct democracy is nothing like the different forms of “democracy” that we know to be implemented at massive state levels and which are based on representative logic – deciding for someone else who then decides for you, which in no way is the same as citizens and communities making their own decisions.

Today’s dominant way of thinking rejects the idea that people can manage their own affairs. It is commonly believed that if a group of people grows beyond the number of 150 (Dunbar’s Number³⁶), then chaos begins. The popular belief is that communities and whole societies are in need of managerial apparatuses to organize the masses, with as little popular participation as possible. However, past and present democratic practices can give us a glimpse of how direct democracy could look like on a larger scale. These practices include the Athenian Polis, the Paris Commune, The Spanish Revolution of 1936-39, as well as some contemporary examples, such as the Zapatistas autonomous caracoles, and Rojava’s democratic confederalism.

Main Institutions

Suitable basic political institutions for organizing social life along the principles described above have similarities to institutions already described by thinkers like Cornelius Castoriadis, Hannah Arendt, and Murray

³⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunbar%27s_number

Bookchin³⁷. In one such model, the general assembly on the level of neighbourhood or village should always be the highest decision-making body, in which all members of the community have the right to participate. Historically the general assembly has proved its efficiency in communities of a size close to 50,000 people. For example, in Ancient Athens the number of citizens, having the right to participate in the Ekklesia (general assembly), were between 30,000 and 50,000³⁸. The general assembly creates a general frame of rules and aims for the community and does not deal with routine questions. It can reject or accept every decision, taken by other institutions of the same community. For its smooth functioning, the general assembly can assign working groups, which deal with certain issues and everyday questions.

Second comes the popular council, consisting of delegates of a certain location (a neighborhood for example). The delegates can be chosen among the members of the community through elections or by lot (as were the magistrates in Ancient Athens) and can be revoked at any time. Castoriadis suggests that in communities with a population between 5,000 and 10,000, such councils can consist of 30 to 50 delegates³⁹. These institutions will be dealing with routine tasks and will be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the decisions taken by the general assembly. Regular rotation of the delegates will prevent the emergence of hierarchy and will allow for broader participation in the council.

In a direct democracy, each community has its autonomy, which is being asserted by institutions like those described above. However, such

³⁷ Participatory political institutions are being discussed in influential works like *Worker's Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society* (Cornelius Castoriadis, 1972), *On Revolution* (Hannah Arendt, 1963) and *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy* (Murray Bookchin, 2015).

³⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian_democracy

³⁹ Castoriadis, Cornelius. »Sur le contenu du socialisme", *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 22 (juillet-septembre 1957) pp.1-74.

democratic communities cannot exist completely in isolation from the rest of the world. Thus, various confederalist forms, such as the Zapatista's caracoles and the Rojava's cantons, can link different communities together without stripping them of their autonomy. A suitable form for such coordination are the confederal councils, which consist of delegates assigned by the general assemblies of each community. The delegates should remain revocable at any time by those who have appointed them and should be rotated. For them to be as effective as possible, while at the same time as participatory as possible, these institutions will have to meet the following two requirements: they should not include too many members but enough to enable the broadest possible points of view to be represented.

As regards the economy of a direct-democratic society, it could consist of local economic units such as producers and consumers associations. In these institutions, the consumers in a given area connect with each other and establish consumer associations. These structures create networks with producers' associations (whose management is carried out through workplace assemblies in which all workers-owners can participate). This does not, however, prevent individuals from buying directly from producer organizations without being members of the consumer associations. This freedom of choice creates an agora in the ancient Athenian sense of the term, as a meeting space for free citizens to meet and exchange commodities.

In a direct democracy the economy cannot be separated from politics. This implies that the general assemblies at local level and the councils at the regional level, as supreme sources of power, create the common frame for economic development. However this frame should not be mistaken for some kind of deterministic 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 intervene if any of the economic institutions roughly violates the collectively constructed frame of principles.

However, in order to remain truly direct, democracy has to be embedded in every sphere of life. Healthcare, education, energy and even architecture should all be based on a participatory politics through common assemblies and deliberative committees, directly linked with the supreme communal institutions (general assemblies and councils) in order to assert the right of the commons.

Transitional Strategy

The transition towards direct democracy will not happen overnight. To just wait for an upcoming revolution will not lead us far; it can even serve as an excuse for passivity. And even if such a revolution should occur, we cannot expect that society will rush into unknown and untested directions. Quite on the contrary, it can turn desperately towards institutions and structures which were already created in limited scale and political propositions that, although hidden by the dominant system, have not disappeared completely. This is why it is important to start creating truly democratic infrastructures and political will for participation today.

Democracy does not appear out of thin air. It is being built and sustained through daily practice. The contemporary dominant structures cultivate submission and uncritical acceptance of the hierarchical dogma. This creates a vicious circle, exit from which is being offered by horizontal structures such as cooperatives, collectives, and neighborhood assemblies based on equality and direct democracy. Instead of working for a company, dominated by a thin managerial layer, we can start a cooperative, in which all members are co-owners and have the right to participate in collective decision-making. Instead of waiting for local authorities, we can organize local assemblies in

our communities in which we can collectively search for solutions to the problems of our neighborhoods.

Such horizontal structures can act as universities, teaching people the logic of self-organization and self-management through practice. It is important, however, that these structures maintain an anti-systemic character and constantly aim to re-think their practices in order to avoid absorption by the dominant system. Through citizen activity, political consciousness can be created and show that direct democracy is not just some muddy utopia, but a tool for finding and solving problems here and now. As long as these horizontal structures develop and multiply and as long as they remain a part of a wider resistance movement for social change, more and more people will see their usefulness, and we will be getting closer to a direct democracy.

Sortition and Direct Democracy⁴⁰

Democracy arose from the idea that those who are equal in any respect are equal absolutely. All are alike free, therefore they claim that they are all equal absolutely... The next step is when the democrats, on the ground that they are equal, claim equal participation in everything.
Aristotle⁴¹

In response to the deepening crisis of representation, direct democracy today comes up as an alternative proposal, put forward by the social movements arising worldwide. On the one hand, populists and party functionaries, in an attempt to attract the votes of the vast majority of people who are dissatisfied with the current state of affairs, have declared the semi-direct democracy approach of the referendum as their solution to the current crisis⁴². The social movements themselves, on the other, through their own practices, have highlighted the direct democracy approach of networks of “face-to-face” assemblies. Discussions in political debates about reforming representative democracy in order to allow for broader citizen participation

⁴⁰ Originally published by libcom.org (04.02.2015)

⁴¹ Aristotle. Politics 1301a28-35

⁴² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_direct_democracy_parties

are becoming more frequent⁴³, while activists on the streets discuss and attempt to create autonomous structures beyond the state and Capital, which can potentially serve as groundwork for a fairer and more direct-democratic society.

Unfortunately, activists from different movements and the supporters of the aforementioned ideas often miss or even consciously neglect one practice in particular – choosing by lot (or Sortition), originating in the Athenian *politia*, where the very concept of democracy is rooted. According to Aristotle *choosing by lot is a sign of democracy while elections are a sign of oligarchy*. In the Athenian Democracy, sortition, together with the institution of the general assembly, allowed the citizens “to rule and to be ruled”. The logic behind the sortition process originates from the idea, also arrived at by Lord Acton many centuries later, that simply “Power corrupts”. Most empirical evidence from their time to ours, points to this conclusion⁴⁴. For that reason, when the time came to choose individuals to be assigned to empowering positions, the ancient Athenians often resorted to choosing by lot.

The supporters of direct democracy often have a complete and detailed vision of what a society managed by local assemblies and coordinated by federative councils on a regional level would look like. But when it comes to the question of how the members of these federative structures should be elected, often no satisfactory answer is presented. No matter how decentralized the structure of a society becomes, the danger of emergence of formal and informal hierarchies, undermining the democratic processes, is always present and the search for mechanisms for their prevention should be a concern of everyone, as long as people want to keep direct democracy functioning. According to Michel Foucault “power is everywhere and comes

⁴³http://globaldirect.today/press/DOCS/Global_Democracy/Transnational_Direct_Democracy_Kauffmann.pdf

⁴⁴http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/power_paradox

from everywhere”⁴⁵. In this line of thought, power is not limited only to one central structure (the state for example) or to the concentration of material goods in the hands of an elite. It is everywhere, reproducing itself in our relationships, language, culture, etc.

If we view this logic from an antiauthoritarian perspective we can conclude that the danger in a society based on direct citizen participation, for example, elected delegates to become “professional politicians” (In the bad sense of the word) is very real. In many groups today, even in ones that are part of the anti-authoritarian specter, unofficial hierarchies keep emerging and participants often do not have the means to confront these problems, which slowly corrodes the relationships between the activists or even leads to the group’s breakup. Choosing by lot is a mechanism precisely suited for dealing with that problem, preventing the establishment of strict “political” roles.

Another key aspect of sortition is that it promotes an active citizenry. In order to function properly, a direct democracy needs autonomous individuals, capable of critical thinking and interested in public affairs, or in other words: active citizens. Institutions, utilizing the mechanism of sortition, serve as universities on citizenship, where people immerse themselves deeply in the political life of the society for a certain period of time and acquire a sense of responsibility, and depending on the size of the community, all of them, or a large percentage of the population, passes through that process. Also, by knowing that they can be chosen at any moment, the people are thus stimulated to act responsibly and to care about the common affairs of the society on daily basis.

Sortition can also potentially help with the emancipation of women. While in a representative democracy (with elections as its main mechanism) governments are dominated primarily by men, in an institution where members are chosen by lot, a society may decide for the configuration

⁴⁵ <http://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/foucault-power-is-everywhere/>

between men and women to be equal.⁴⁶ This also applies for marginalized communities. In general, during the electoral processes they almost always remain unrepresented, while in the case of sortition this can be regulated by the society itself.

Of course, thinking that sortition alone can prevent the emergence of demagogues and “professional politicians” is naïve. But if it's implemented together with short periods for holding the position, revocability and rotation, similar to the model that emerged in Ancient Athens, we get a comprehensive package of mechanisms that serves to prevent the occurrence of oligarchy.

It is important to note that while sortition can be a principal method for appointing most administrative roles in a direct-democratic society, some of them will still have to keep the electoral element. Some tasks demand expertise that most people lack, and because of that it is necessary that the citizens be able to choose between the experts they have. For example in Ancient Athens, naval admirals, architects, etc. were chosen through elections, while sortition was the dominant way of choosing members of the Boule⁴⁷, magistrates etc.

Today the process of sortition is not a widespread practice in governance. The most famous example is the Citizens' Assembly in British Columbia.⁴⁸ It

⁴⁶ Wright, Erik Olin. *Envisioning Real Utopias*. 2010. Verso Books. p.171

⁴⁷ Boule (Greek: βουλή, „council, assembly“) — council of citizens appointed to run the daily affairs of the city. After the reforms made by Cleisthenes the size of the boule was expanded to 500 men chosen by lot from all citizens. ([http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boule_\(ancient_Greece\)](http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boule_(ancient_Greece)))

⁴⁸ Lang, Amy. *But is it For Real? The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly as a model of state-sponsored citizen empowerment* (<http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Published%20writing/Amy-Lang%20P&S.pdf>)

offers empirical evidence on what the choosing by lot can look like in practice, though in a non-direct democracy.

In 2003 the Local Government of British Columbia, Canada created a Civil Assembly chosen by lot and aimed at formulating a referendum proposal for a new electoral system for the local parliament. Until then the electoral system in British Columbia was standard, based on elections, whereby the winner formed the local government. Many residents, however, were unhappy with this model, feeling that their voice was not being heard. This led to the creation of the Citizens' Assembly for Electoral Reform, comprised of 160 delegates chosen by lot among all the inhabitants of the province – one man and one woman from each of the 79 electoral districts of British Columbia, plus two delegates from the indigenous communities.

The work of the Citizens' Assembly passed through three stages. From January to March 2004 delegates gathered every weekend in Vancouver to explore alternative electoral systems through an intensive series of lectures, seminars and discussions. Each delegate received a fee of \$ 150 for each weekend of work. In the second stage, the summer of 2004, delegates took part in a series of public hearings across the province to discuss alternative electoral models and to hear reactions and feedback. In the third stage, the autumn of 2004, the Civil Assembly met again every weekend for intensive discussions at the end of which delegates prepared a referendum proposal for a new electoral law. To the surprise of many they did not choose a straightforward system of proportional representation, but rather what is known as the Single Transferable Vote system.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Single Transferable Vote (STV) is organized around multimember districts, which increases the proportional distribution of seats, if the districts have enough members. STV also uses a preferential ballot to rank other candidates in each district. In practice, candidates from the same party compete against one another for vote's preferences, as in a primary system, giving voters more choice about who will be

In May 2005, the Assembly's proposal was submitted for voting. However, the referendum did not pass, because electoral activity was 57.3%, slightly below the required 60%. One reason is that this referendum was confined to the framework of representation, which in the past decade has been in a serious crisis that deepens with time. But this experiment gives us valuable empirical evidence that we can use in the construction of other types of systems beyond representative democracy

From all we have said until now it becomes clear that sortition is an organic part of direct democracy. It plays a dual role – it helps facilitate the daily administration of larger areas, while preventing the emergence of hierarchies. In itself, sortition is not enough, as demonstrated by the experience gained from the experiment in British Columbia. But in combination with the institution of the general assembly, like the politia of Ancient Athens, it helps build sustainable, democratic processes and active citizenship.

Sortition can be used in different contexts, as was shown in the aforementioned examples. Neglecting it at the expense of other institutions is a mistake, as it is a mistake to restrict direct democracy only to the so-called "political" area, as populists with pro-capitalist views are trying to convince us today. It is difficult to imagine how a group, a society or movement will operate in a truly democratic way if it does not use all the mechanisms of direct democracy, and instead chooses only some of them, replacing the rest with undemocratic ones. The fact that some direct-democratic institutions and mechanisms may produce negative side effects, which is a principal concern, does not mean that we should abandon them. Precisely through the implementation and experimentation with these types of institutions, structures and mechanisms, we will be able to find their weaknesses and correct them.

their representative, and undermining a party's ability to control the candidate from that district. (<http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/BC-STV>)

The Commons as Paradigm Beyond State and Market⁵⁰

People called commons those parts of the environment for which customary law exacted specific forms of community respect. People called commons that part of the environment which lay beyond their own thresholds and outside of their own possessions, to which, however, they had recognized claims of usage, not to produce commodities but to provide for the subsistence of their households.

Ivan Illich ⁵¹

Introduction

In their book *The Economic Order & Religion* (1945) Frank H. Knight and Thomas H. Merriam argue that *social life in a large group with thoroughgoing ownership in common is impossible*.⁵² William F. Lloyd and later Garret Hardin, in the same spirit, promoted the neo-malthusian⁵³ term “Tragedy of

⁵⁰ Originally published by new-compass.net (07.01.2016)

⁵¹ Illich Ivan. *Silence is a Commons*, first published in *CoEvolution Quarterly*, 1983

⁵² McCloskey, Deirdre N.. *The Bourgeois Virtues*, The University of Chicago Press, 2006. p. 465

⁵³ Malthusianism originates from Thomas Malthus, a nineteenth-century clergyman, for whom the poor would always tend to use up their resources and remain in misery because of their fertility. (Derek Wall. *Economics After Capitalism*, Pluto Press, 2015. p.125)

the commons”⁵⁴ arguing that individuals acting independently and rationally according to their self-interest behave contrary to the best interests of the whole group by depleting some common-pool resource. Since then, the thesis that people are incapable of managing collectively, without control and supervision by institutions and authorities separated from the society, have successfully infiltrated the social imaginary.

Even for big sections of the Left the resource management in common is being viewed as utopian and therefore they prefer to leave it for the distant future, lingering instead today between variations of private and statist forms of property⁵⁵. Thus is being maintained the dilemma private-state management of common-pool resources which leads to the marginalization of other alternative forms.

But great many voices, trying to break with this dipole, were always present and currently growing in numbers. For the autonomists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri this is a false dilemma. According to them⁵⁶ *the seemingly exclusive alternative between the private and the public corresponds to an equally pernicious political alternative between capitalism and socialism. It is often assumed that the only cure for the ills of capitalist society is public regulation and Keynesian and/or socialist economic management; and, conversely, socialist maladies are presumed to be treatable only by private property and capitalist control. Socialism and capitalism, however, even though they have at times been mingled together and at others occasioned bitter conflicts, are both regimes of property that excluded the common. The*

⁵⁴ The concept was based upon an essay written in 1833 by Lloyd, the Victorian economist, on the effects of unregulated grazing on common land and made widely-known by an article written by Hardin in 1968.

⁵⁵ As Theodoros Karyotis demonstrates in his article *Chronicles of a Defeat Foretold*, published in ROAR magazine, Issue #0 (2015), pp 32-63

⁵⁶ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri. *Commonwealth*, The Bleknep Press of Harvard University press, 2011. p. ix

political project of instituting the common ... cuts diagonally across these false alternatives.

The falsity of the dilemma state-private can also be seen from the symbiotic-like relationship between the two supposedly “alternatives”. Author and activist David Bollier points at the historic partnership between the two⁵⁷. According to him, the markets have benefited from state’s provisioning of infrastructure and oversight of investment and market activity, as well as state’s providing of free and discounted access to public forests, minerals, airwaves, research and other public resources. On the other hand, the state depends upon markets as a vital source of tax revenue and jobs for people – and as a way to avoid dealing with inequalities of wealth and social opportunity, two politically explosive challenges.

At first sight it seems like we are left without an real option, since the two “alternatives” we are being told “from above” that are possible, are pretty much leading to the same degree of enclosure as we saw earlier, from which beneficiaries are tiny elites. But during the last years the paradigm of the “commons” emerged from the grassroots as a powerful and practice solution to the contemporary crisis and a step beyond the dominant dilemma. This alternative is emerging as a third way, since it goes beyond the state and the “free” market and has been tested in practice by communities from the past and the present.

The logic of the commons

The logic of the commons goes beyond the ontology of the nation-state and the “free” market. In a sense it presupposes that we live in a common world that can be shared by all of society without some bureaucratic or market mechanisms to enclose it. Thus, with no enclosure exercised by external managers (competing with society and between each other), the resources

⁵⁷ David Bollier & Silke Helfrich. *The Wealth of the Commons*, The Commons Strategy Group, 2012. In *Introduction: The Commons as a Transformative Vision*

stop being scarce since there is no more interest in their quick depletion. Ivan Illich notes that *when people spoke about commons, iriai, they designated an aspect of the environment that was limited, that was necessary for the community's survival, that was necessary for different groups in different ways, but which, in a strictly economic sense, was not perceived as scarce.*⁵⁸ The logic of the commons is ever evolving and rejects the bureaucratization of rights and essences, though it includes forms of communal self-control and individual self-limitation. Because of this it manages to synthesize the *social* with the *individual*.

The commons can be found all around the world in different forms: from indigenous communities resisting the cutting of rainforests and Indian farmers fighting GMO crops to open source software and movements for digital rights over the internet. Main characteristics that are being found in each one of them are the direct-democratic procedures of their management, the open design and manufacturing, accessibility, constant evolution etc.

The commons have their roots deep in the antiquity but through constant renewal are exploding nowadays, adding to the indigenous communal agricultural practices new 'solidarity economic' forms as well as high-tech FabLabs, alternative currencies and many more. The absence of strict ideological frame enhances this constant evolution.

The logic of the commons is deeply rooted in the experience of Ancient Athens. The greek-french philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis describes it as a period, during which a free public space appeared⁵⁹. Castoriadis depicts it as *a political domain which 'belongs to all'* (*τα κοινά* – the commons in Greek). The 'public' ceased to be a 'private' affair – i.e. an affair of the king, the

⁵⁸ Illich, Ivan. *Silence is a Commons*, first published in *CoEvolution Quarterly*, 1983

⁵⁹ Castoriadis, Cornelius. in "The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy" (1983), *The Castoriadis Reader* (1997), Ed. David A. Curtis. p. 280

priests, the bureaucracy, the politicians, or/and the experts. Instead decisions on common affairs had to be made by the community.

The logic of the commons, according to the anthropologist Harry Walker⁶⁰, could also be found in the communities of Peruvian-Amazonia, for whom the most desirable goods were not viewed as rival goods in contrast with modern economics which assume that if goods are enjoyed by one person can't be enjoyed by another. The Peruvian-amazonian culture was focused on sharing, on the enjoyment of what can be shared rather than privately consumed.

The swiss villages are a classic example for sustainable commoning. Light on this is being shed by Elinor Ostrom and her field research in one of them⁶¹. In the swiss village in question local farmers tend private plots for crops but share a communal meadow for herd grazing. Ostrom discovered that in this case an eventual tragedy of the commons (hypothetical overgrazing) is being prevented by villagers reaching to a common agreement that one is allowed to graze as much cattle as they can take care for during the winter. And this practice dates back to 1517. Other practice and sustainable examples of effective communal management of commons Ostrom discovered in the US, Guatemala, Kenya, Turkey, Nepal and elsewhere.

Elinor Ostrom visited Nepal in 1988 to research the many farmer-governed irrigation systems⁶². The management of these systems was done through annual assemblies between local farmers and informally on a regular basis. Thus agreements for using the system, its monitoring and sanctions for transgression were all done on grassroots level. Ostrom noticed that farmer-governed irrigation systems were more likely to produce not in favor of markets, but for the needs of local communities: they grow more rice and

⁶⁰ <http://bollier.org/blog/anthropologist-harry-walker-lessons-amazonian-commons>

⁶¹ <http://www.onthecommons.org/magazine/elinor-ostroms-8-principles-managing-commons>

⁶² Elinor Ostrom in Nobel Prize lecture *Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems* (2009)

distribute water more equitably. She concluded that although the systems in question vary in performance, few of them perform as poorly as the ones provided and managed by the state.

One of the brightest contemporary examples for reclaiming the commons is the Zapatista movement. It revolted in 1994 against the NAFTA agreement that was seeking the complete enclosure of common-pool resources and goods, vital for the livelihood of indigenous communities. Through the Zapatista uprising the locals reclaimed back their land and resources, and successfully manage them through participatory system based on direct democracy for more than 20 years.

The digital commons, on the other hand, include wikis, such as Wikipedia, open licensing organizations, such as the Creative Commons and many others. The social movement researcher Mayo Fuster Morell defines them as *"information and knowledge resources that are collectively created and owned or shared between or among a community and that tend to be non-excludible, that is, be (generally freely) available to third parties. Thus, they are oriented to favor use and reuse, rather than to exchange as a commodity. Additionally, the community of people building them can intervene in the governing of their interaction processes and of their shared resources."*⁶³

In other words, the logic of the commons is the strive towards inclusiveness and collective access to resources, knowledge and other sources of collective wealth, which necessarily requires the creation of anthropological type of socially active and devoted stewards of these commons. This means radical break with the dominant nowadays imaginary of economism, which views all human beings simply as rational materialists, always striving at maximizing

⁶³ <http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/digital-commons>

their utilitarian self-interest. Instead it implies radical self-instituting of society which to allow its citizens directly to manage their own commons.

The commons as model for the future

A main characteristic shared between the different cases of commons is the grassroots interactivity. The broad accessibility of such resources and their ownership being held in common by society, presupposes that their management is done by society itself. Thus a state involvement is incompatible with such a broad popular self-management, since statist forms are implying the establishment of bureaucratic managerial layers separated from society. That is, the commons go beyond (and often even detrimental to) the various projects for nationalization.

The same goes for the constant neoliberal efforts of enclosing what's still not privatized, against which during the last couple of years social movements across the globe rose up, and their alternative proposals included in one form or another a wide project of direct democracy. It inevitably includes every sphere of social life, and that goes for the commons as well.

A holistic alternative to the contemporary system, that incorporates the project of direct democracy and the commons, can be drawn from the writings of great libertarian theorists like Cornelius Castoriadis and Murray Bookchin. The proposals developed by the two thinkers offer indispensable glimpses at how society can directly manage itself without and against external managerial mechanisms.

As we saw in the cases presented above, the commons require coordination between the commoners so eventual "tragedies" could be avoided. But for many, Knight and Merriam alike, this could possibly work only in small scale cases. This has led many leftists to support different forms of state bureaucracy instead, which to manage the commons in the name of society, as the lesser, but possible, evil.

In his writings Castoriadis repeatedly repudiated this hypothesis, claiming instead that large scale collective decision-making is possible with suitable set of tools and procedures. Rejecting the idea of one "correct" model, his ideas were heavily influenced by the experience of Ancient Athens. Drawing upon the Athenian *polis*, he claimed that direct citizen participation was possible in communities up to 40.000 people⁶⁴. On this level communities can decide on matters that directly affect them on face-to-face meetings (general assemblies). For other ones, that affect other communities as well, revocable, short term, delegates are being elected by the local assemblies, to join regional councils. Through such horizontal flow of collective power common agreements and legal frameworks could be drawn to regulate and control the usage of commons.

Similar is the proposal, made by Murray Bookchin. Also influenced by the ancient Athenian experience, he proposes the establishment of municipal face-to-face assemblies, connected together in democratic confederations, making the state apparatus obsolete. According to Bookchin, in such case *the control of the economy is not in the hands of the state, but under the custody of "confederal councils", and thus, neither collectivized nor privatized, it is common.*⁶⁵

Such a "nestedness" does not necessarily translate into hierarchy, as suggested by Elinor Ostrom and David Harvey.⁶⁶ At least if certain requirements are being met. As is the case in many of the practice examples of direct democracy around the world, the role of the delegates is of vital importance, but often is being neglected. Thus their subordination to the assemblies (as main source of power) has to be asserted through various mechanisms, such as: short term mandates, rotation, choosing by lot etc. All

⁶⁴ Castoriadis, Cornelius. Democracy and Relativism. 2013. p.41

⁶⁵ Cengiz Gunes and Welat Zeydanlioglu in "The Kurdish Question in Turkey", Routledge, 2014. p.191

⁶⁶ For example Ostrom in *Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems* (2009) and Harvey in *Rebel Cities* (2012. p.69)

of these mechanisms have been tested in different times and contexts and have proven to be effective antidote to oligarchization of the political system.

Through such networking and self-instituting can be done the establishment and direct control of commons by many communities that depend on them. Another element that could supplement the propositions, described above, is the so called "solidarity economy". Spreading as mushrooms, different collective entities in different forms are rapidly spreading across Europe and other crisis stricken areas (like South America) allowing communities to directly manage their economic activities in their favour.

One such merging will allow society to collectively draw the set of rules which to regulate the usage of commons, while solidarity economic entities, such as cooperatives and collectives, will deal with commons's direct management. These entities are being managed direct democratically by the people working in them, who will be rewarded in dignified manner for their services by the attended communities. On the other hand, the public deliberative institutions should have mechanisms for supervision and control over the solidarity economic entities, responsible for the management of commons, in order to prevent them from enclosing them.

One example for such merging has occurred in the Bolivian city of Santa Cruz, where the water management is organized in the form of consumer cooperative⁶⁷. It has been functioning for more than 20 years, and continues to enjoy reputation as one of the best-managed utilities in Latin America. It is being governed by a General Delegate Assembly, elected by the users. The assembly appoints senior management, over whom the users have veto rights, thus perpetuating stability. This model has drastically reduced corruption, making the water system working for the consumers.

⁶⁷ <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWSS/Resources/WN5cooperatives.pdf>

The emergence of such a merger between the commons and the co-operative production of value, as Michel Bauwens and Vasilis Kostakis suggests⁶⁸, integrate externalities, practice economic democracy, produce commons for the common good, and socialize its knowledge. The circulation of the commons would be combined with the process of co-operative accumulation, on behalf of the commons and its contributors. In such a model the logic of free contribution and universal use for everyone would co-exist with a direct-democratic networking and co-operative mode of physical production, based on reciprocity.

Conclusion

The need of recreating the commons is an urgent one. With global instability still on the horizon and deepening, the question of how we will share our common world is the thin line separating, on the one side, the dichotomous world of market barbarity and bureaucratic heteronomy, and on the other, a possible world, based on collective and individual autonomy. As Hannah Arendt suggests⁶⁹:

The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so

⁶⁸ <http://peerproduction.net/issues/issue-7-policies-for-the-commons/peer-reviewed-papers/towards-a-new-reconfiguration-among-the-state-civil-society-and-the-market/>

⁶⁹ Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago, second edition, 1998, p.53.

that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely un-related to each other by anything tangible.

The paradigm of the commons, as part of the wider project of direct democracy, could play the role of the trick that manages to vanish the table, separating us, but simultaneously creating strong human relationships, based on solidarity and participation. And for this to happen, social movements and communities have to reclaim, through the establishment of networks and the strengthening of already existing ones, the public space and the commons, thus constituting coherent counterpower and creating real possibilities of instituting in practice new forms of social organization beyond state and markets.

Reclaiming the Urban Space⁷⁰

Change life! Change Society! These ideas lose completely their meaning without producing an appropriate space.

Henri Lefebvre⁷¹

The importance of the city nowadays is increasing since, for first time in history, the bigger part of the human population lives in urban spaces and the city's economic role is at its peak. As Antonio Negri suggests: *"the city is itself a source of production: the organized, inhabited, and traversed territory has become a productive element just as worked land once was. Increasingly, the inhabitant of a metropolis is the true center of the world..."*⁷². That's why it has been referred to over and over again in debates over political, economic, social and other strategies for the future.

Modern urban landscape is often being depicted as "dark" place⁷³: as a place of alienation, of gray and repetitive architecture, with high suicide rates, expanding psychological disorders and widespread metropolitan violence. It is being presented as prison and its inhabitants as prisoners, deprived by the state and capital from the right to intervene in its creation and development. This is actually true for most contemporary cities. Reshaping of urban landscape is taking place, which sometimes leads to the violent displacement of people from areas, whose value has risen, to others with lower one (such

⁷⁰ Originally published by babylonia.gr (04.11.2015)

⁷¹ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, 1991. p. 59.

⁷² Negri, Antonio. *Goodbye Mr. Socialism*, Seven Stories Press, 2006. p. 35.

⁷³ For example in Bifo's book *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (Verso, 2015) and Proyas's movie *Dark City* (1998)

as the infamous *slums*)⁷⁴. And this "game" with real human lives is being played in favor of capital and power accumulation - in the "cleared" lands are being erected shopping malls, office spaces etc. in the name of economic growth. Henri Lefebvre calls this type of city an oligarchy, managed for its inhabitants by an elite few state experts and corporate managers, thus ceasing to be a public space⁷⁵.

The common people, who become victims in these "schemes", on their part, are powerless to resist these processes, at least through the officially recognized legal procedures - neither through the judicial system, nor through the so-called political representatives, all of whom in position of authority and thus intertwined with capital. So amongst the grassroots are appearing different forms of resisting, reclaiming and recreating the urban public space. A colourful palette ranging from urban rioting to self-organized market spaces for product exchange without intermediates and neighborhood deliberative institutions (assemblies, committees etc.).

The loss of "meaning"

Big obstacle for people taking back their cities is the contemporary societal imaginary, viewing, as Richard Sennett suggests, the public space as 'meaningless'⁷⁶. Sennett points at the nineteenth-century, a period of rapid urbanization and economic growth, during which the outcome of the crisis of public culture was that people lost a sense of themselves as an active force, as a "public" (Sennett, 1992:261). Sennett suggests that during this period an important role in the process of depriving the public space from meaning was the adoption of more uniform dress and behavior codes, more passive demeanor and less sociability, all of which can be seen as byproducts of the emerging consumerist culture and logic of representativity of that period. As

⁷⁴ See Mike Davis. *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2006.

⁷⁵ <https://pathtothepossible.wordpress.com/2013/07/23/deleuze-guattari-democrats/>

⁷⁶ Sennett, Richard. *The fall of public man*, 1976

Peter G. Goheen says: “*The street became the place for illusion rather than exposure to the truth*”⁷⁷. In a sense, the public man was supplanted by the spectator who did not so much participate in the public life of the city as he observed it.

In order to overcome this point of view we are in need of new significations, which to give back meaning to the public space. And such can emerge only through practices of collectivities of citizens (i.e. the public), that would have positive and practical effect in the everyday life of society. Such processes already are taking place in the countryside and the village. Because of the crisis many are leaving the city life behind, returning to the villages, that once their parents and grandparents fled⁷⁸. In the countryside the city youth rediscovers communal ways of life, sharing of common resources, traditional and ecological agricultural practices etc. But for the majority of those, who undertake such steps, the village is an escape route from the uncertainty of the city, a form of escapism rather than part of political project for social change.

As for those who remain in the cities, living under conditions of growing precarity, unemployment and stress, the future does not seem so bright, with harsh austerity measures still on the horizon. This discontent is producing uprisings and mass mobilizations in urban areas, ranging from the Istanbul’s Gezi Park, Ferguson’s uprisings against police brutality, the anti-World Cup riots in the Brazilian cities and the Occupy and Indignados movements in the squares of every major city around the World. In all of these cases, in one way or another, the question with urban planning is being posed: can the city square obtain the role of main cell of public deliberation, i.e. simultaneously *agora* (meeting and exchange point) and basic decision-making body; should a global festival of consumerism, such as the World Cup, have the right to

⁷⁷ Goheen, Peter G. *Public space and the geography of the modern city*. p. 482.

⁷⁸ https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/neo-rurals-spain-lost-generation-economic-crash-rurbanization

reshape urban landscape, regardless of the ‘human’ cost; and who should decide if an urban green space (such as Gezi Park) is to be covered with concrete and transformed completely.

For cities of interaction

We can detect a direct link between these attempts of citizens at intervening in the urban landscape and the broader project of direct democracy (i.e. broad public self-management beyond state and capital). Actually in many of these uprisings and movements, the demands for participating in city planning and for participating in political decision-making in general were highly intertwined, because of the broad mistrust of authority, so typical for our times, and the rising interest in authentic democratic practices. According to Henri Lefebvre:

Revolution was long defined [...] in terms of a political change at the level of the state [and] the collective or state ownership of the means of production [...]. Today such limited definitions will no longer suffice. The transformation of society presupposes a collective ownership and management of space founded on the permanent participation of ‘the interested parties’ [the inhabitants or users of space]⁷⁹.

The demand for broad public intervention in the creation and recreation of the urban landscape can easily be positioned at the heart of the project of direct democracy, since as David Harvey describes it: “*The right to the city is [...] a collective rather than an individual right, since reinventing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization.*”⁸⁰

Already social movements are engaging in endeavors aiming at intervening in the reshaping of urban landscape. In the center of the city of Athens

⁷⁹ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, 1991. p. 422.

⁸⁰ Harvey, David. *Rebel Cities*, Verso, 2012. p.4

(Greece), on Notara Street⁸¹, different individuals decided not just to propose, but to practically initiate alternative solution to the refugee crisis. For years now arriving migrants were forced to seek shelter in open spaces such as parks and squares, exposed to police and fascist violence, rain, cold, etc.⁸² What this group of activists decided to do was to reclaim their right to the city. They occupied an abandoned office building, previously used by state bureaucracy, and turn it into housing space for migrants. And they did that through democratic procedures: the building is being managed through general assembly, open for both Greek activists, maintaining the space, and migrants, living in it, and through various working groups, subordinated to it. And this very project is being designed as exemplary for the possibility of reshaping urban landscape according to human needs and desires.

Something similar is taking place in the city of Manchester, where an empty office building was occupied by activists for housing rights and redesigned for being able to accommodate homeless people⁸³. This is their answer to the contemporary housing crisis in England, which left on the street 280 000 people so far⁸⁴.

Another example is the so called *Guerilla Gardening*⁸⁵. This is the act of people reclaiming unutilized urban space and turning it into botanical gardens in which they grow food. The term *guerilla gardening* was used for first time in the case of the Liz Chirsty Garden⁸⁶ but as practice can be traced back to the

⁸¹ <http://thebarbariantimes.espivotblogs.net/new-occupations-in-solidarity-with-the-refugees/>

⁸² <https://vimeo.com/15683049>

⁸³ <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/homeless-protest-charlotte-house-manchester-10215013>

⁸⁴ *The homelessness minority: England 2015*. p.vii
(http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/Homelessness_Monitor_England_2015_final_web.pdf)

⁸⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guerrilla_gardening#Examples

⁸⁶ The Liz Christy Garden is a community garden in New York, USA, started on 1973.

Diggers⁸⁷. Nowadays such gardens exist in many cities around the world (London, New York etc.). Usually the produced food is being distributed equally amongst the gardeners and their families and the gardens are being managed democratically. It is another case of people directly transforming urban landscape for the satisfaction of real human needs, beyond and often detrimental to state bureaucracy and market profiteering.

The right to the city is the right of citizens directly to manage their urban environment in ways that differ in scale and manner: from general assemblies being held on public squares to switches on the street lamps, so lighting could be placed under direct public control⁸⁸. However, it is not just the right to place the city in service of physical human needs but to make it reflect the very mindset of its inhabitants, i.e. the citizen's interaction to penetrate every sphere of urban space: such as the architecture, as was the case in the free city-states of medieval Italy where the citizens were participating in the urban planning through deliberative committees⁸⁹.

In conclusion, we can say that the urban issue is really becoming a central question today and the qualities of urban life are moving to the forefront of what contemporary protests are about. But in order the city to acquire again meaning as public space, it have to be linked with the project of direct democracy, since in it there is a real public, i.e. society consisted of active citizens. The greek-french philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis points at two stages in the pre-history of modern society in which such a public space was

⁸⁷ The Diggers were protestant radicals in England, often viewed as predecessors of modern anarchism (see Nicolas Walter. *Anarchism and Religion*, 1991. p.3). They were aiming at social change through the creation of small egalitarian rural communities.

⁸⁸ Sadler Simon. *The Situationist City*, The MIT Press 1999 p.110

⁸⁹ During his service in the Florentine Committee, Dante participated in the preparation and planning of the widening of the street San Procolo (Christopher Alexander, *The Oregon Experiment*, Oxford University Press, 1975. pp.45, 46).

created: the Athenian *polis* and the medieval city-states⁹⁰. We can also see the seeds of it in the Paris Commune, Barcelona of 1936-39, the New England Town Meetings and many more. Only by linking, both in theory and in practice, struggles for the right to the city with the broader project of direct democracy, the modern city can acquire a truly public meaning, instead of the one it has today as temple of economic growth, consumerism, alienation and oligarchy.

⁹⁰ See for example *The Greek Polis and the creation of Democracy* (1983) and *Complexity, Magmas, History: The Example of the Medieval Town* (1993)

Solidarity Economy as Political Economy⁹¹

Unlike many alternative economic projects that have come before, solidarity economics does not seek to build a singular model of how the economy should be structured, but rather pursues a dynamic process of economic organizing in which organizations, communities, and social movements work to identify, strengthen, connect, and create democratic and liberatory means of meeting their needs.

Ethan Miller⁹²

Nowadays the term solidarity economy is being used to indicate non-capitalist alternative realities that function inside the cracks within the existing capitalist system. The idea and practice emerged in Latin America in the mid-1980s⁹³ and has subsequently gained more and more popularity. It is a logic that aims to create “economic” structures that oppose the capitalistic structures and strives to generate and sustain autonomy in our economic lives.⁹⁴ These realities consist of a post-capitalist horizon of autonomous communities, in which the economy is returned to its place, i.e. to serve human life rather than being its ultimate goal.

⁹¹ Originally published by geo.coop (23.03.2015)

⁹² <http://www.geo.coop/archives/GEO71DS-OtherEconomiesArePossible.htm>

⁹³ Ethan Miller and Michael Albert. Post-Capitalist Alternatives: New Perspectives on Economic Democracy. Socialist Renewal Publishing Project 2009 p.17

⁹⁴ A good example of such structures are the Zapatista’s Coffee Cooperatives

At base, the essence of the solidarity economy is political economy, because in its core is enshrined the question of who makes the decisions on economic matters, in contrast to various other economic models, which emphasize the redistribution of wealth regardless of who makes the decisions. One of its main characteristics is direct democracy, which allows everybody participating in it to directly control the ongoing economic processes. Also the process of experimenting in real time, which the solidarity economy encourages, allows us to develop a clearer vision for the institutions and their functions in a participatory society and, thus, to formulate the conditions to transition from active opposition towards questioning the hegemony of the dominant political model.

For a long time now, however, the solidarity economy has been largely neglected by political movements. Maybe because they were too busy with their own affairs or maybe because the activist imagination is trapped in a static or dogmatic notion of utopia that, instead of fomenting action, provokes and encourages radical critique of everything that does not correspond with it.

One of the main reasons many activists decline to participate or support the solidarity economy is the fear that the status quo will co-opt these alternative realities. And while such co-optation attempts do exist and sometimes succeed,⁹⁵ the danger that this will be realized on a larger scale is not so great. Or, at least it is not greater than the danger of participating in political lifestyle/subcultural movements.⁹⁶ Most important is that the participants in

⁹⁵ <http://www.geo.coop/node/403>

⁹⁶ <http://www.alternet.org/visions/why-we-cant-depend-activists-create-change>

the solidarity economy alone discover and, through their participation, correct its limitations.

But the solidarity economy should not be viewed as just an alternative economic practice, but as part of the broader frame of the creative resistance. The logic of creative resistance is to serve as a basis for alternative structures inside the cracks of the contemporary system and not to allow them to become isolated islands of freedom. Instead of aiming only to destroy the contemporary system, creative resistance encourages the creation of the cells and building blocks of a future society founded on solidarity and autonomy, showing that it is possible in practice. And the solidarity economy in particular, by allowing people to lead their lives independently (as much as possible) from the state and capitalist markets, sets the conditions for the creation of a new anthropological type — something that is necessary to create a new world that is more just and democratic.

However we shouldn't be too eager for quick results, because there is a difference between desire and action. We should always consider our local context and its limitations and try to act in accordance. Creative resistance acts as a water drop that, with perseverance, breaks the rock.

The creative elements that consist in this type of resistance are not limited to the various forms of protest or even to the solidarity economy. They refer to a specific sociopolitical act that is directed, on the one hand, toward a more holistic understanding of today's power structures and the current situation as a whole and, on the other, towards creating possibilities for people to lead more independent and autonomous lives. Creative resistance is not an immediate demand or a program; rather it's a practical example that aims to build a bridge between the critique of the status quo and the creation of autonomous structures.

Creative resistance can take many forms — such as worker cooperatives, social centers, really free markets, art collectives, etc. — but no one and nothing can guarantee their smooth functioning. It depends upon those participating in it (because of the self-organized character of creative resistance and the solidarity economy in particular) and their social environment — what goals they set and what risks they are willing to take to make sure the transformative character of their project is not limited. If the transformative potential is lost, then we simply cannot talk of creative resistance. However, there are many things that can serve and support the longevity of such projects, such as online media platforms, network coordination and exchange of experience, critical thinking, going over the details, moving beyond the borders of ideological dogmas, cooperation with social movements, etc.

It is important not to give up on the solidarity economy even if projects sometimes fail. Each time we fail in one initiative, we can extract a lot of useful conclusions that help in the future. In a way this is the logic of creative resistance and the solidarity economy in particular — to experiment today with institutions that we would like to have tomorrow, in order to examine their flaws and correct them.

It is important to view the solidarity economy as part of something even broader than creative resistance — it should be seen as part of a general project of direct democracy. Here I speak not for representative democracy (i.e. liberal oligarchy) but for direct democracy (i.e. a democracy simultaneously directed against political domination and economic exploitation), i.e. horizontality - inseparably political (who decides) and functionally economic.

The principle of direct democracy is what makes the above mentioned projects and realities so flexible. During the last years, interest in direct democracy has risen together with the increased critique of authoritarianism

(the state) and every form of bureaucracy (syndicates, parties, corporations etc.)⁹⁷ operating outside the social base.

Direct democracy, as presented here, is impossible without changes in both the political and economic spheres, more concretely, direct democracy requires establishing collective ownership of the means of production, reclaiming the commons etc. Democracy cannot be direct if people participate in only one public sphere (in the political or in the economic). Therefore a direct-democratic society is not established by seizing the state apparatus but by creating citizen consciousness and federations of self-managed communities in which there is no separation between the political and the economic spheres.

But here we are not speaking of a concrete systemic model. The solidarity economy, creative resistance, and direct democracy are something else. They are realities, practices, and principles that we need to recreate through the prism of our local context. There is no perfect model. Everyone has to create his or her own system suitable for his or her reality, neighborhood, city, region.

But despite the fact that no model can be transferred directly from one place to another, the experience gained by those who resist collectively, such as the Zapatistas, offers knowledge for us all. We can learn from them, and the first thing we learn is that things can be organized in a different way.

Today's social movements have at their disposal a wide range of ideas and experiences, from which they can extract useful conclusions and tools for their struggles. The critique on authority no longer means chaos, but rather a grassroots struggle for direct democracy, which functions only when the

⁹⁷ <http://roarmag.org/2013/06/autonomy-revolution-movements-democracy-capitalism/>

oppressed participate in it. Contemporary forms of resistance aim to cultivate suitable conditions for the fullest expression of both human individuality and the collective satisfaction of the social needs through networks of self-sustaining local communities that coexist in harmony with nature. It is up to us to take advantage of the new horizons that are appearing.

Democratic Energy and Climate Change⁹⁸

Today, man is still, or more than ever, man's enemy, not only because he continues as much as ever to give himself over to massacres of his fellow kind, but also because he is sawing off the branch on which he is sitting: the environment.

Cornelius Castoriadis⁹⁹

The climate changes, caused by human activity, are forcing their position in the center of the public debates. And that shouldn't surprise us since the crisis they are about to cause is of much bigger magnitude than any other economic or refugee crisis we have experienced by now. If such a crisis occurs it is possible that it will change the face of the planet entirely, possibly making it uninhabitable for human as well as most animal species. This gives new strength and importance to the debate about how we will continue the development of our societies, without endangering our very existence.

The carbon emissions, being released into the atmosphere as a result of burning fossil fuels, are amongst the main factors, responsible for global warming. And the fact that the energy of our highly technological societies is being delivered mainly through these non-renewable and polluting resources raises furthermore questions about what could replace them and what would it take such a change to occur.

⁹⁸ Originally published by resilience.org (04.02.2016)

⁹⁹ Castoriadis, Cornelius. *The Rising Tide of Insignificance (The Big Sleep)*. (2003). p.122

In her book *This Changes Everything* Naomi Klein investigates in depth these urgent questions. She demonstrates the limitations and disadvantages of centralized energy sources such as nuclear energy and natural gases, both embedded in the contemporary corporatist, top-down model. She argues for transition towards localized, democratically managed renewables, that will prioritize human and environmental needs before profits and autocratic interests - i.e. they will be turned into commons. The proposal of commons based system beyond the dogma of constant economic growth is being shared by growing number of thinkers, social movements and communities.

Business, state and ecologic crisis

However for such a transition to be initiated we can't rely on the business, as Klein demonstrates in length in *This Changes Everything*, reviewing the fruitless, often even harmful to the ecologic cause, collaboration between the big green organizations and the corporate sector¹⁰⁰. No private company will dedicate its resources to a developmentalist model that prioritize human lives and nature before profits. By design these entities are based on growth through profiteering and expanding markets by all means necessary. Thus whenever they engage with renewables, for example, they use them in the frames of the capitalist growth doctrine, creating environmentally harmful and community exclusive, but highly profitable in capitalist terms, gigantic, centralized solar or wind parks etc. Furthermore, the energy sector, she notes, is temporarily constrained from turning to renewables on larger scale because of the exponential growth it is currently enjoying amidst the shale gas boom¹⁰¹.

The state, on the other hand, is traditionally seen as the sole alternative to the private sector, thus a potential ally against the polluting multinationals.

¹⁰⁰ Klein, Naomi. *Magical Thinking*. In *This Changes Everything* (pp. 191-290). Penguin Books 2015

¹⁰¹ Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything*. Penguin Books 2015. p130

But statist entities have proven to tend towards centralization, bureaucracy and unaccountability, and thus disconnected from local needs and experiences. The very states are deeply embedded in the growth based, extractivist imaginary of capitalist globalization, as Naomi Klein points at state-owned companies, ranging from scandinavian 'social democracies' to 'pink tide' governments in Latin America, that wreck nature for extracting resources which to trade in global markets¹⁰². The top-down socialist states of the past, with their five-year plans, were equally destructive of nature, as well as remote from the societies, whom they were supposedly 'developing'. This is ever more evident from today's China, whose Communist Party is easily adjusting its policies to the extractivist agenda, sacrificing even the air, its subjects breath, in the name of economic growth.

Instead a new approach is needed for such a crisis to be tackled efficiently. It cannot be resolved by mere reforms – as we saw above the capitalist economic model and the statist top-down decision-making processes are essentially predisposed towards enforcing, not preventing the ecologic crisis. This poses the need of holistic systemic alternative, compelling us to think outside the dominant institutions and come up with new ones or such that already exist in the margins of society.

Towards a new energetic paradigm

One such proposal is the creation of democratically managed, by the communities that use them, utilities like energy cooperatives or commons. Such model strives at local sustainability and satisfaction of human needs (reflected by the participatory character) instead at profiteering and growth. This will enable communities to have control over their energy sources in contrast with other ones managed privately or by the state, thus directing them away from dirty fossil fuels and towards much needed renewables. Naomi Klein notes that such type of commons based renewables can be

¹⁰² Ibid, pp.176-182

cheaper than dirtier alternatives. One of the reasons: they can be source of income for their communities when unused power is being fed back to the grid¹⁰³.

Decentralization and communal participation are of great importance for the succesful acceptance of renewables by society. Klein speaks¹⁰⁴ of many reasons why communities would rebel against large-scale, privately or statistly owend ones - from the noise of densely positioned wind turbines to the threat of inflicting damages to wild life and ecosystems posed by gigantic solar parks. In contrast, communally owend, locally based renewables are hugely accepted by local residents due to their smaller, human and environmentally friendly scale, the energetic autarchy they provide for their communities, revenues from selling back to the grid and so on.

Germany's energy sector is long been examplatory for the establishment of many such utilities¹⁰⁵. Nearly half of its renewable energy is coming from sources, in the hands of farmers and citizen groups. Amongst them are many energy cooperatives, which amount close to the staggering nine hundred. These utilities play dual role: simultaneously they produce clean power and generate revenue for their communities by selling back to the grid.

Germany's predecessor in this field however is Denmark¹⁰⁶. In the 1970s and 1980s, more than 40% of country's electricity was coming from renewables - mostly wind. And roughly 85% of them were owned by farmers and cooperatives. As in Germany, Danmark's most committed to sustainable energy were not statist entities or privately owned companies but local communities. In the last years many multinationals have entered the energy sector of the country, creating difficulties for the communal renewable utilities.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.133

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p.132

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.131

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p.131

Transitional strategies

As we observed above we can't overcome the ecologic crisis through the private sector and the nation state. Dimitrios Roussopoulos, coming from the tradition of social ecology, emphasises firmly that the overcoming of the ecological crisis can be done through stateless and direct-democratic manner¹⁰⁷. In a way Naomi Klein's thought intersects this logic by recognizing the potential grassroots social movements and communities have to resist and initiate solutions to the climate crisis¹⁰⁸.

From the history we can see that the main enforcer of emancipatory social changes were not artificial managerial mechanisms like the nation-states but society itself. The abolition of slavery, the introduction of universal suffrage rights, the eight hour work day and many more were all product of struggles waged and won by social movements over governments and authorities. The environmental cause is no different; however, as Klein and Roussopoulos also suggest, it have to be understood as part of a wider emancipatory struggle, in order to overcome the weaknesses it temporarily have: the messianism it often embraces, the neglecting of other causes and the elitist attitude, it sometimes have.

One way to approach these and many more weaknesses, is the ecological movements to be radically democratized. Thus professional "negotiators" will be replaced by assemblies of rank-and-file activists and concerned citizens, creating healthy human relationships and linking these movements with society - i.e. emphasizing on the squares rather than the luxurious corporate or government offices and dimming the separation between "activists" and "ordinary people". With no top-down "professional" leadership to collaborate with political and economic elites, the messianism and elitism couldn't easily find fertile soil to grow on. And since the environmental

¹⁰⁷ <http://new-compass.net/articles/interview-dimitri-roussopoulos>

¹⁰⁸ Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything*. Penguin Books 2015. p.459

matters are interlinked, the social movements that deal with them should have intertwined character. This would imply the establishment of network of groups, each leading its fight, collaborating however on global level with other ones.

The interaction of the ecological movements with other social movements is of crucial importance. One of the reasons is that all spheres of human life are interconnected, and this includes humanity's relationship with nature. As we have seen above capitalist economics, mixed with top-down bureaucracy, influences our health as well as that of the planet and so on. Thus anti-capitalists, ecologists and direct democracy movements all should collaborate with one another, transfusing from one struggle into another.

Such collaboration could prove very fertile especially for the ecological movements. For example the growing number of municipal platforms participating in local election, like the recently established in Spain *Network of Cities for the Common Good*¹⁰⁹, could provide friendlier environment for communally owned and managed renewable co-ops. The *Olympia for All* municipal platform in Olympia, Washington (USA), for instance, has made environmental commitments in its platform¹¹⁰, showing ecologically friendly face. Thus in a globalized system, hostile towards grassroots initiatives, as we saw from the Denmark's experience where the liberalization of the market gave hard time to energy co-ops, the radicalization of municipalities could provide much needed breathing space for collaborative experiments.

Conclusion

The climate crisis is quickly unfolding and we listen about it ever more often from scientists, journalists and even blockbuster movies. We see its signs in the form of natural disasters to appear with greater frequency and destructiveness. But the dominant institutions seem to be unable to tackle it

¹⁰⁹ <https://roarmag.org/magazine/anti-capitalist-politics-21st-century/>

¹¹⁰ <http://olympiaforall.org/index.php/platform/>

successfully. It's not without a reason to suggest that it is not because of lack of political will, but a consequence of the growth based top-down politico-economic system which nowadays squeezes all of Earth. The resistance is also starting to take global shape: activists from the US, experienced in the anti-shale gas struggle, share their experience with Canadian communities resisting fracking, who on their part share their know-how with French movements struggling against shale gas extraction and so on¹¹¹.

However, for the effective tackling of the climate crisis, a more holistic approach is needed. As Cornelius Castoriadis suggests, this struggle has to be integrated into a political, direct-democratic project, one that goes beyond "ecology" alone¹¹². Otherwise, he warns us, ecology can potentially give strength to neo-fascist, messianic ideologies, excusing the establishment of authoritarian regimes, who to impose draconian restrictions on a panic-stricken and apathetic population¹¹³.

¹¹¹ Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything*. Penguin Books 2015. pp.303-304

¹¹² Castoriadis, Cornelius. *The Rising Tide of Insignificance (The Big Sleep)*. (2003).

p.116

¹¹³ *ibid.*

Part 3:

Beginning from Today

Direct Democracy is not Utopia¹¹⁴

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 Castoriadis¹¹⁵

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.

¹¹⁴ Originally published by libcom.org (31.05.2015)

¹¹⁵ 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.* (<http://www.notbored.org/ASA.pdf>). p 8

The very concept of democracy emerged in Ancient Athens¹¹⁶ 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 (*ekklêsia*)¹¹⁷. 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 Clisthenes¹¹⁸ 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 emperor¹¹⁹. 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.

¹¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian_democracy

¹¹⁷ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesia_\(ancient_Athens\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesia_(ancient_Athens))

¹¹⁸

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

¹¹⁹ 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>

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 assemblies¹²⁰, took care of the important local administration. These assemblies were appointing delegates¹²¹ (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 Kwangju, South Korea, the people rose up in the so called Kwangju's people revolt¹²². 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 Kwangju 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 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 began¹²³. 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

¹²⁰ <http://new-compass.net/articles/popular-assemblies-revolts-and-revolutions>

¹²¹ Marx, Karl. (1871) „The Paris Commune”. In *The Civil War in France* (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/>)

¹²² <http://www.eroseffect.com/articles/Paris%20Gwangju.pdf>

¹²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Civil_War#Social_revolution

democracy and solidarity. For the success of this model speak authors such as George Orwell and Gaston Leval¹²⁴.

One contemporary example for society, whose organization is based on democratic participation, are the Kuna people¹²⁵. 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 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 Movement¹²⁶ (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 families¹²⁷, living in a MST settlement. Each one of them appoints one man and one woman to

¹²⁴ In the books *Homage to Catalonia*(1938) by George Orwell and *Social Reconstruction in Spain: Spain and the World* (1938) by Gaston Leval

¹²⁵ Notes from Nowhere. (2003) *We are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism.* ([http://artactivism.members.gn.apc.org/allpdfs/107-\[essay\]Autonomy.pdf](http://artactivism.members.gn.apc.org/allpdfs/107-[essay]Autonomy.pdf)). pp 113-4

¹²⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landless_Workers%27_Movement

¹²⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landless_Workers%27_Movement#Organizational_structure

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 Mills¹²⁸ 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)¹²⁹. 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 steps¹³⁰.

In Rojava a direct-democratic system is also being put into practice. In its core are the communes¹³¹ (i.e. general assemblies), consisted of neighbourhoods with population of around 300 people each. The communes appoint co-presidents to participate in the Canton administration¹³². In each commune function five or six different committees. The communes function in two

¹²⁸ 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

¹²⁹ 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

¹³⁰ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Panchayat-Act-helps-villagers-regain-control-over-resources/articleshow/8002860.cms>

¹³¹ <http://new-compass.net/articles/revolution-rojava>

¹³² <http://www.biehlonbookchin.com/rojavas-communes-and-councils/>

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. More on the social experiment of Rojava will be reviewed in the next Chapter.

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-management¹³³. The local assemblies of each settlement, a basic decision-making institution, sends delegates to the regional councils, which decide on production, redistribution etc¹³⁴. 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 standard of life has risen significantly¹³⁵ - 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 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

¹³³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zapatista_Army_of_National_Liberation#Ideology

¹³⁴

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

^g

¹³⁵ <http://www.elkilombo.org/the-classmates-iii-those-who-were-not-are-not-and-will-not-be-invited/>

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.

Towards Autonomy: The Social Experiment in Rojava¹³⁶

Co-written with Michalis Koulouthros

The autonomous region of Rojava, as it exists today, is one of few bright spots – albeit a very bright one – to emerge from the tragedy of the Syrian revolution.

David Graeber¹³⁷

In the last decades the Kurdish struggle for freedom was not only a firm voice of resistance against the dominant social and political order, but also managed to formulate and initiate practical steps towards the realization of a liberated society. After many years of oppression, the Kurdish forces began to regroup, forming armed units of self-defense. During the period in which the leftist Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) was quickly turning into a regional political power, a new antagonistic example appeared in the midst of the Kurdish liberation movement, based on the values of democratic confederalism and autonomy.

¹³⁶ Originally published by babylonia.gr (11.10.2015)

¹³⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis>

Already before the beginning of the uprising in Syria, residents of Rojava had created the first self-organized councils and committees, and hence had begun to establish a radical democratic organization for the majority of the population in the region. Since June 19th, 2012 the cities Kobane, Afrin, Derik and many other places were liberated from the control of the Syrian regime, revealing the power and the influence of the Kurdish struggle. Military bases were occupied and the overwhelmed government troops chose to surrender.

Nowadays this new paradigm of autonomy and self-organization is being threatened both by the Turkish army from the North and by fundamentalist theological forces from the South, like ISIS and al-Nusra - organizations who traditionally are aiming at imposing heteronomy, centralization, patriarchy, theological violence and exploitation. Principles which the communities in Rojava strongly and actively oppose. In one of the most difficult geopolitical environments, they are laying the foundations of a new world based on democratic confederalism, gender and ethnic equality and community economy.

Democratic confederalism

In Rojava, we believe, genuinely democratic structures have indeed been established. Not only is the system of government accountable to the people, but it springs out of new structures that make direct democracy possible: popular assemblies and democratic councils.

Joint statement of the academic delegation to Rojava¹³⁸

Despite the widespread belief that the contemporary social conditions are too complex and self-organized forms of social organization are doomed to work only on a small and embryonic level, the radical political organization of the communities in Rojava gives a modern example of autonomous self-

¹³⁸ <http://roarmag.org/2015/01/statement-academic-delegation-rojava/>

institutionalizing and direct democracy. This is being achieved through the processes of the democratic confederalism.

The core of this system are the communes¹³⁹. The communes, established in each province of 300 people, are general assemblies, allowing broad public participation. In the communes are being discussed issues concerning all aspects of social life, starting from the technical and administrative issues up to the political ones. Issues such as energy, food distribution, patriarchic violence and family tensions are being tested at the table of the political debate. Each commune set up local single-issue committees with the task to discuss more specific topics in order to avoid bureaucracy and ease the operation of the general meetings. It is important to note that it is required each commune to be consisted at least of 40% women.

Each commune elects 2 revocable delegates to participate in the regional councils, in which is done the coordination between different communes which make up each region. There again are being elected delegates to take part in the city council, and then according to population criteria are being established the cantons. The cantons are the broadest and most central form of political organization in Rojava and basically they function as coordinating body between the different cities.

Gender Equality

Before the revolution women had no ability to speak or make a decision.

Now we have such an ability. We are active in every sphere.

Jina Zekioglu¹⁴⁰

One of the most interesting parts of the social experiment that is currently taking place in Rojava is the role of women and the goals set up by local

¹³⁹ <http://new-compass.net/articles/rojavas-communes-and-councils>

¹⁴⁰ <https://rojavarreport.wordpress.com/2014/02/16/the-women-of-rojava-have-broken-their-chains-part-ii/>

communities to achieve isomeric relations between the sexes. In a region such as the Middle East, which we are used to identify with the fundamentalist oppression of women and sexuality, the self-organized communities of Rojava provide a pioneering example of equality. The conscious political effort to equalize the relationship between men and women is reflected both institutionally, and socially. In the midst of an ongoing military conflict, usually favoring social automation, militarism and patriarchal imposition, the communities of Rojava are real proof that the political will and choice can overcome that which seems as necessity.

One characteristic example for this political goal are the women councils, formed by the communes. These are councils, within which no decisions on general issues are done, but are dedicated to the discussion of issues related to gender relations, violence against women and in general all questions concerning the relationship between the sexes. Of course this did not happen overnight. Already in 2003 was established the Free Democratic Women's Movement (DÖKH)¹⁴¹, a grassroots organization fighting from back then sexism and patriarchy, but also more generally nationalism, militarism, environmental destruction, economic exploitation etc.

Internationalist character of the struggle

The fundamental basis of this "Social Contract" is the equality and rights of all ethnic, racial and religious groups in Syrian Kurdistan, direct democracy and the rejection of the concept of the nation-state.

Evangelos Aretaios¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ <http://new-compass.net/articles/democratic-confederalism-and-feminism>

¹⁴² <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/evangelos-aretaios/rojava-revolution>

A common misunderstanding is that when discussing the issue of Rojava it is usually being identified purely as national liberation struggle. In contrast however with the traditional national liberation movements, which usually are targeting the creation of nation-states and national consciousness, the communities of Rojava are aiming at self-institutionalization from below, promoting a new paradigm of territorial claim.¹⁴³ The core of the social organization ceases to be the national identity of each person, and its place is being taken by the form of politicized citizen participating in social affairs. It's not by chance that in these communes participate people from all ethnic and religious groups of the area (Kurds, Syrians, Yazidis, Christians, Muslims etc.) with the only condition to respect the political principles of equality and horizontality.

Furthermore, in support with the resistance of Rojava have been established political forms of solidarity such as the Lions of Rojava,¹⁴⁴ formed by volunteers from all around the world, fighting alongside the YPJ / YPG, reminding us for forms of solidarity, that we can see from the days of the Spanish Civil War. It should be added also that international missions of academics¹⁴⁵ are visiting Rojava in order to come in contact with the social experiment there and learn from the actual forms of enlarged self-institutioning.

Community economy

*Though only just beginning, this economic model has,
with great determination and in spite of the war,
been realised in praxis by many in Rojava.*

Michael Knapp¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ <http://roarmag.org/2014/08/pkk-kurdish-struggle-autonomy/>

¹⁴⁴ <http://thelionsofrojawa.com/>

¹⁴⁵ <http://new-compass.net/articles/statement-academic-delegation-rojava>

¹⁴⁶ <http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/2015/02/06/rojava-the-formation-of-an-economic-alternative-private-property-in-the-service-of-all/>

Another main characteristic of the struggle of Rojava, completing and deepening the above mentioned elements, is the alternative economic management it practically proposes. The economic organization of Rojava is a reflection of its political project. The communities themselves call it "community economy"¹⁴⁷ and all parts of the population participate in it through production and trade cooperatives. The main goal of its economic activity is not growth, but the creation of local autarchy. Except necessity (since Rojava is being isolated and surrounded by hostile environment), this is a political choice in the direction of social ecology and liberation from capitalist exploitation.

For couple of years now they are trying to develop these forms of community economy through the establishment of academies, promoting the cooperative spirit and organizing seminars and discussions on the benefits of collaborative production.

Through these economic structures they are trying to meet the needs of their communities and simultaneously to keep the "war economy" going, which they need since the constant military conflict.

Self-defense

In nature, living organisms such as roses with thorns develop their systems of self-defense not to attack, but to protect life.

Dilar Dirik¹⁴⁸

The defense forces in Rojava resemble the principles of direct democracy and equality, embraced by the Kurdish communities. Men and women fight as

¹⁴⁷ <http://new-compass.net/articles/rojavas-threefold-economy>

¹⁴⁸ <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/Kurdish-Womens-Radical-Self-Defense-Armed-and-Political-20150707-0002.html>

equals since YPG (People's Defense Units) and YPJ (Women's Protection Units) military structures and battalions are separated, but there is no hierarchical relationship between them and the main barracks and the work systems are the same. Also military commanders are being elected by the battalion soldiers,¹⁴⁹ based on their experience, commitment, and willingness to take responsibility.

Dedicated to enlightenment and political consciousness, the Rojavan defense forces have established academies which to provide ethical-political education to the fighters of the various units (YPG, YPJ, Asayish etc.). The provided education is mainly focused on gender equality, anti-militarism, dialectic resolving of disputes, the values of democratic confederalism etc.

Conclusion

We are not fortunetellers; we can't possibly know what will happen in Rojava a month or a year from now. But we [...] can't just sit aside, watch what's happening and comment...

DAF¹⁵⁰

Because of these characteristics the struggle of the communities in Rojava can be viewed as integral part of the grassroots projects and radical endeavors, starting with the Zapatistas in Mexico, spreading to every corner of the Earth and culminating in global effort for social liberation, against both statist and capitalist management, theological obscurantism, exploitation, patriarchy and every form of oppression.

The positive aspects of the social experiment, taking place nowadays in Rojava, shouldn't be neglected in the name of ideological/dogmatic "purity",

¹⁴⁹ <http://towardfreedom.com/38-archives/women/4017-the-women-s-revolution-in-rojava>

¹⁵⁰ <http://www.anarkismo.net/article/27779>

as we saw different libertarian organizations¹⁵¹ taking stance against the events going on there, because of the historical background of some of the main characters in the Kurdish resistance movement (Öcalan, PKK etc.). Surely we have to keep in mind its authoritarian background but our attention should also be focused on the willingness of the Rojavan communities to open spaces of emancipation and participation, and how we could help them strengthen their democratic structures, become more self-sustainable and antagonistic to the dominant statist and capitalist forms, thus providing us with one more contemporary practical example for another society.

¹⁵¹ <https://libcom.org/news/anarchist-federation-statement-rojava-december-2014-02122014>

Football as a Commons¹⁵²

*Football blossomed in the slums.
It required no money and could be played
with nothing more than sheer desire.*

Eduardo Galeano¹⁵³

In his book *Football in Sun and in Shadow*, Eduardo Galeano pointed at the commercialization of the world's most famous sport and its detachment from the grassroots. In it he says that "when the sport became an industry, the beauty that blossoms from the joy of play, got torn out by its very roots. Professional football condemns all that is useless and useless means not profitable."¹⁵⁴ Once again we saw this in the 2014 World Cup in Brazil where modern football appeared for what it really is: a mechanism serving the logic of constant capital accumulation, aggressive towards those at the bottom who cannot afford to participate in this celebration of modern consumerist culture. It has been turned into spectacle, one more commodity in the shelves of the global supermarket, in which we can participate only as passive consumers.

But in contrast with many leftist intellectuals, for whom "football castrates the masses and derails their revolutionary ardor", for Galeano it was rooted deeply at the bottom of society with potential to sparkle human imagination,

¹⁵² Originally published by new-compass.net (06.08.2015)

¹⁵³ Galeano, Eduardo. *Football in Sun and in Shadow*, 1997. Verso Books, 2003. p.30

¹⁵⁴ Galeano, Eduardo. *Football in Sun and in Shadow*, 1997. Verso Books, 2003. p.2

blunted nowadays by bureaucratic logic. In his own words “for many years football has been played in different styles, unique expressions of the personality of each people, and the preservation of that diversity seems to me more necessary today than ever before.” Antonio Negri points¹⁵⁵ at another capacity of the most popular game: “the great merit of football lies in its ability to make people talk amongst each other”, which in my opinion is quite necessary in a period where alienation is degrading the social fabric.

In this line of thought football can be viewed as a commons, shared by everybody who loves and practices it, However, there is now a fierce attempt of privatization of the sport. Though millions of people all around the world share passion for football, they do not have any influence upon their favorite teams. Instead they are being placed in the hands of corrupted football associations and federations which prioritize the maximization of profits which constantly produces scandals on huge scale like the latest scandal around the FIFA’s president Sepp Blatter.

But even 27 years before these words of Galeano, during the events of May ’68 in Paris, one of the first stands against the trend of bureaucratization and privatization of football was taken. While millions of workers were on strike, students had occupied the universities, the president had fled the country and France seemed on the verge of revolution, a group of football players occupied the headquarters of the French Football Federation for six days¹⁵⁶. In their communiqué they acknowledged that football had been snatched away from the players and the fans and put in service of profit. They demanded the immediate dismissal of the profiteers of football through a referendum of all 600,000 French footballers.

Later on, during the late 70’s in the Brazilian football club Corinthians the players decided to take in their own hands the team they played in.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208

¹⁵⁶ <https://libcom.org/library/football-footballers>

Motivated by Socrates¹⁵⁷, the famous captain of the team during that period, the players started discussing and voting with a simple show of hands on all matters which affected them, from simple things like what time they would eat lunch to challenging the dreaded concentração, a common practice in Brazil where players are practically locked up in a hotel for one or two days before a game. One of the most notable decisions they made was, in 1982, having "Vote on 15th" printed on the back of their shirts to motivate fans to vote in the first Brazilian multiparty elections since the 1964 military coup. The model of self-management they created was called Corinthians Democracy (Democracia Corinthiana)¹⁵⁸. However in this experiment, though the players had a say in what affected them, the fans were not involved in the democratic processes.

One example in which the management of a football club was put in the hands of the fans was the case of Ebbsfleet United, participating in the English Conference South. On 13 November 2007, it was announced that the website MyFootballClub (MyFC)¹⁵⁹ had entered a deal to take over the club. Approximately 27,000 MyFC members gathered the necessary £700,000 (£35 per member) for the deal. All of the members owned an equal share in the club but made no profit nor received a dividend. The members had a vote on transfers, player selection, budget, ticket prices and all major decisions. Because of the democratic nature of MyFC, it was announced that manager Liam Daish instead would become head coach. His backroom staff remained at the club. Under this type of direct-democratic management by the fans, during the season 2008 Ebbsfleet Utd. won both the FA Trophy, becoming the first team from Kent to win it, and the local Kent Senior Cup.

On April 23rd 2013, after a dramatic decline in membership (from 32000 in its peak to just 1000), MyFC members had voted in favor of selling their

¹⁵⁷ <http://libcom.org/library/s-crates-midfielder-anti-dictatorship-resister>

¹⁵⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corinthians_Democracy

¹⁵⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MyFootballClub>

shares of Ebbsfleet Utd. This decline in interest can be attributed to many factors, like the constant skepticism expressed by club officials blaming the website even for “damaging the club”¹⁶⁰ or that it became a economic burden for some of its members during period of global financial crisis, or perhaps the fact that the members of the MyFC viewed this just as a hobby and did not link their democratic endeavor to a wider project for direct democracy that covers all spheres of social life.

In all of these cases we can find imperfections: in the first one, even though the role of the players was being extended beyond the football field, politicized and loaded with democratic characteristics, the fans remained out of the democratic processes. In the latter we see the opposite. However, they offer us invaluable experiences and models, which if combined, could give us a potential base for the de-privatization of football and its commonization. In order for such a project to be long-lasting, it should be linked to a wider project for social democratization. As Cornelius Castoriadis says, direct democracy cannot exist only in one public sphere, as the inequalities in the rest of them, caused by their non-democratic character, sooner or later will effect the former one¹⁶¹.

Therefore, the turning of football into a common, managed directly by the players and the fans, is a feasible possibility and has already been attempted. In the words of Eduardo Galeano: football “is much more than a big business run by overlords from Switzerland. The most popular sport in the world wants to serve the people who embrace it”.

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http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/london/hi/front_page/newsid_8967000/8967067.stm

¹⁶¹ <http://www.athene.antenna.nl/ARCHIEF/NR01-Athene/02-Probl.-e.html>

Steps Towards a New World¹⁶²

*On some occasions, rare though they are,
the slogan “Another world is possible,” becomes reality.*

Raul Zibechi¹⁶³

Nowadays the exit from the so-called economic crisis in Europe has become the main topic of conversation. Various politicians, “experts” and technocrats speak of possible exits from the critical situation in which our societies have been trapped. But their proposals rarely go beyond unlimited economic growth and neoliberal austerity politics, which are being imposed in increasingly authoritarian ways¹⁶⁴, the consequences of which are increasingly difficult to hide. The other alternative which is being presented to us by the mass media is the one of the radical left parties (such as the the Spanish Podemos).

But in the midst of the heated debates and worsening living standards, on the horizon has emerged a third alternative – one coming from the grassroots.

¹⁶² Originally published by geo.coop (15.04.2015)

¹⁶³ Teo Ballve and Vijay Prashad. Dispatches From Latin America- Experimenting Against Neoliberalism. 2006. LeftWord Books. p.352

¹⁶⁴ http://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/Analysen/Analysen_Left-Wing.pdf

Seeing high unemployment¹⁶⁵, activists from various social movements have decided that since the contemporary system cannot provide them with jobs, they'll create them outside of it. Workers from the occupied factory Vio.Me. in Thessaloniki raised the slogan: "The bosses can't? We can!" The populations of the impoverished European societies have gotten tired of waiting for the support of their governments and have decided to take things into their own hands. Seeing that the state is not planning on helping them, that it collaborates with the corporate sector who was partly responsible for the crisis¹⁶⁶ – and not its alternative – the people realized that they can count only on their own powers and the solidarity in their communities.

All across Europe have emerged, like mushrooms, horizontal structures, through which people try to manage their daily problems. Through such structures they strive to find alternative ways for satisfying their daily needs, which neither the private nor the state sector can satisfy. These "economic" structures take different collective and cooperative forms, covering various spheres of services, production, etc. Many of them are inspired by the practices of revolutionary movements around the world such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil, the "recuperated" factories in Argentina, and many others.

Here I'll review only a few examples of such practices amongst the thousands which have emerged in the cracks that neither the state nor the private sectors can fill. They constitute one possible exit from the financial and political crises of today. And something even more, they seem to be promising steps towards another world, one based on real democracy and solidarity.

¹⁶⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics

¹⁶⁶ <http://www.epsu.org/a/4969>

Fralib – factory under worker’s self-management in Marseille, France

Fralib¹⁶⁷ is an herb processing and packaging factory close to the French city of Marseille, France. A couple of years ago the previous owner, the chemical and food giant Unilever, decided to move its production of Lipton tea abroad in order to minimize labor costs. The 80 workers of Fralib held many campaigns for boycotting the corporation Unilever, demanding that the factory stay open.

After this proved impossible, the workers decided to take production into their own hands. On May 26, 2014, an agreement was finally signed by the workers and Unilever, after which the factory officially became a cooperative.

Fralib is one of a handful of European factories that have been converted to direct management by workers. The direct-democratic management of factories is a practice with a long history – especially in Argentina where over 300 of these worker-run factories exist and over 13,000 workers are employed in them (see Report of the Fourth Survey of Recovered Businesses in Argentina, 2014).

Vio.Me. – occupied factory under workers’ self-management in Thessaloniki, Greece

Vio.Me.¹⁶⁸ once produced high class building materials like plasters, glue, waterproof grouts, etc. During 2011, the ex-owners announced bankruptcy

¹⁶⁷ <http://www.workerscontrol.net/authors/victory-fralib-workers-new-chapter-begins>

¹⁶⁸ <http://www.viome.org/>

and stopped paying salaries to their workers. These events were followed by long struggles in the Greek courts by the workers, with the aim of obtaining legal control over the factory. After three years with no success, they decided to occupy the factory anyway.

On February 12th, 40 workers of Vio.Me. entered the factory and started production (mainly of washing and cleaning products). Since the occupation, the factory is being managed on the basis of direct democracy, with complete equality between the workers and no bosses! All decisions concerning Vio.Me. are being made in general assembly, and the salaries between all workers are equal. Each worker is an equal member of the factory, which guarantees its horizontal character. Their products are being distributed exclusively through the networks of the solidarity economy (social centers, consumer cooperatives, etc.).

Pagkaki – cooperative café-shop in Athens, Greece

The idea behind Pagkaki¹⁶⁹ was born after the first serious hits of the crisis in Greece, when a group of unemployed people started discussing possible ways for exiting the trap of unemployment. As declared on their website, most of them were engaged in precarious work in conditions hostile to any sense of dignity and creativity. They decided to try to create a new type of work space based on collectivity, mutual aid, direct democracy and solidarity between the workers. So in 2010 the café-shop Pagkaki was opened.

The cooperative belongs to all working in it. All decisions concerning the functioning of Pagkaki are made in general assembly, which is attended by all the workers. They have decided that if surplus revenues emerge after their salaries are paid, these will not be distributed among the Pagkaki members, but will go to paying the loans needed to open the co-op. The collective has

¹⁶⁹ <http://www.pagkaki.org/en>

decided that once those have been paid, this “extra” revenue will be used for financial support for other cooperatives and collectives.

The collective of Pagkaki, as declared on their website, prefers collaborating with producers from the alternative and solidarity trade, who share their principles of self-management and solidarity (as Zapatista’s coffee, MST sugar, etc.), while simultaneously trying to maintain prices that are affordable to all.

The New Leaf Co-op – cooperative shop in Edinburgh, Scotland

The New Leaf¹⁷⁰ is a cooperative shop, collectively owned and managed by the people who work at it. The idea of its creators is to find work in times when unemployment is high, but also to have this work embody democratic practices and solidarity. As their website says, The New Leaf Co-op offers healthy vegetarian food at affordable prices. They focus on organic, locally sourced and fair-trade products, with as little packaging as possible.

Their aim is to pay themselves a living wage while also being able to provide their customers with more healthy and affordable products. As with the Pagkaki, located on the other end of Europe, the workers of New Leaf Co-op have declared that they plan to channel a portion of their revenues toward other projects with similar positive/cooperative aims.

All members of the cooperative undertake equal amounts of responsibility in its management. All of them are equal co-owners. The management of the co-op is being done, as with all initiatives mentioned so far, on the basis of direct democracy and non-hierarchy. A decision is made when consensus is reached, i.e. a decision acceptable to all members.

¹⁷⁰ <http://newleafcoop.co.uk/>

Whats next?

These are just a few examples amongst the thousands of structures that now provide livelihoods for a growing number of people in Europe. These types of horizontal structures are now withstanding the crisis and helping those involved in them to lead dignified lives. Proof of this are the thousands of new such initiatives, which are continuing to emerge across Europe, inspired by the already-existing ones and their successes. These practices are not only offering economic alternatives, but also political, social and ecological ones. They are undoubtedly “cracks” in the contemporary system as defined by John Holloway¹⁷¹, because in them the leading principles are participation and solidarity, not the alienation and hierarchy typical of capitalism and the state.

And these “cracks” are starting to build networks between each other. From some of the above mentioned examples, we can see that they interact and help each other (with products, financially, etc). Nowadays it is possible for people in Europe to cover some of their needs through the solidarity economy. The contribution of the internet to this is huge – thousands of websites exist, containing data and information about these structures and assistance networking between them and the consumers. Networks such as RIPESS¹⁷² connect participants in the solidarity economy in Europe and around the world. Contrary to today’s dominant European institutions, which spread nationalism and oligarchy¹⁷³, the solidarity economy encourages direct democracy and solidarity.

¹⁷¹ Holloway, John. Crack Capitalism. Pluto Press. 2010

¹⁷² <http://www.ripess.org/?lang=en>

¹⁷³ <http://th-rough.eu/writers/bifo-eng/european-union-dead-how-can-we-get-rid-corpse-how-can-we-restart-process-creation-u>

But we must not have illusions that the solidarity economy alone can lead us out of the crisis or even towards a new world without the help and the struggle of a political force. However, we must not mistake this force with political party – the people, not only in Europe, but all across the world are losing their faith in electoral politics because of all the unaccomplished promises and the unsustainability which accompanies it¹⁷⁴ [11]. Such force can be seen in movements struggling for autonomy, direct democracy and mutual aid, which share the same core values as the solidarity economy. And already, realizing that in order to have any chance for success there is a dire need for connectedness, anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist movements from different European countries are forming networks such as Beyond Europe¹⁷⁵ [12].

We can't now say how these structures will develop in the future. The only sure thing is that they are promising signs that another world is possible and parts of it are materializing here and now, providing us with invaluable experiences.

¹⁷⁴ <http://roarmag.org/2013/06/autonomy-revolution-movements-democracy-capitalism/>

¹⁷⁵ <http://beyondeurope.net/>

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We live in an unjust world. And the ever increasing injustices are causing growing number of people to be taking the streets, protesting policies imposed by governments and corporate lobbyists, discussing and developing solutions to the crises, caused by the bureaucratic management and capitalist growth, and struggling to implement in practice their desires for better, more just world.

Amongst the social movements new meanings and significations are picking their way through the police barricades, the media manipulations and the widespread cynicism. Liberated from the chains of the ideological 'purity' and the 'growth' doctrine, the proposals of the direct democracy, the commons, the solidarity economy and many more are nowadays flourishing, igniting the imaginary of more and more social movements and communities.

All of these elements are intertwining with each other into project of autonomy, which suggests that society can create its own institutions without external authorities and the individuals, constituting it, are fully aware that they, and not some external force, are doing it.

The present volume gathers articles, written by Yavor Tarinski in the period between 2015 and 2016 and published online on different websites. These articles examine the above mentioned topics, emphasizing on their participatory character. In a sense, this book examines the modern efforts at establishing autonomy in different spheres of human life: the resources we share, the cities we live in, the products we produce, the decisions we take etc. It presents a colorful puzzle of participatory politics that can take us closer to the creation of one truly autonomous society.

