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Direct democracy: An anarchist alternative to voting

August 5, 2011

by beyondresistance



Image by El Cartel

With elections around the corner, various parties and their members will be out seeking your vote, your support, or at least your attention. “It’s the time for you to have a say in how the country is run”, as the adverts say. You might also hear a rather different message from some corners, namely anarchist ones. Not only do anarchists say “don’t vote”, but they usually follow it up with “organise!” They also talk about ‘direct democracy’.

So what does that actually mean? If voting is the only way to have your say, why would anarchists question it? And what does the ‘organise’ and ‘direct democracy’ bit entail?

While there are many reasons why anarchists think voting and parliamentary representation is a bankrupt way of directly looking after our many needs and wants, such debates are not the main focus of this wee text (these arguments can be found at on various websites such as www.libcom.org or www.anarchistfaq.org). What we want to try and illustrate here is the ‘organise’ part of the critique—the ways of doing things anarchists refer to as self-management and direct democracy. These are summed up by a thing called ‘federalism’—a tongue-twister of a word that will be explained by thrashing the analogy of grocery shopping the extreme!

How democracy works now

Politics, political parties, and our current system of parliamentary democracy all rely on ‘representation’. Politicians are elected by popular vote to represent us and our interests, and in exchange, we give them the power to make decisions—in short, to govern us. We do this either a) voluntarily every 3 years (because we are led to believe that this is the most logical and efficient way of doing things); or b) unwillingly through the use of coercion or force.

This means the power to make laws, to regulate and control society, are in the hands of those in power (politicians), and are binding on you and me. Because we pass on these responsibilities we advocate a system of hierarchy—a pyramid-like structure with a few at the top, and the rest of us at various levels below. The system can be described as top-down, because information and power are concentrated with the few representatives, who make decisions for the people. If those representatives at the top don’t do a good job, we are allowed the right to replace them every three years by voting in another bunch of people at the top. This is a very basic run down of things, but it will do for here.

For anarchists, it is this very kind of hierarchy and imbalance of power that causes most of the problems in today’s world, because it means a tiny group of people (politicians, corporations), have more power, more say, and more control than others. This loss of control at the bottom leads to things like greed, exploitation and poverty—we who have no power are exploited by those with power, whether it be economic, social or political.

An alternative

Anarchists propose that **a better way to do things would be to ensure that no one has more power than another, that everyone was equal and had an equal say in their direct affairs. We believe important decisions such as where and how we work, how we live, and how we relate to each other, should be decided directly by all**

those involved. This is what we mean by ‘direct democracy’, and as we shall see, is totally different to ‘representative democracy’.

“Anarchism is a theory for social change based on the essential belief that no person has the right to have power over another person. When you accept the notion that every person has their own personal freedom, it becomes clear that our present social structure does not allow people equal footing. It does not allow us control over our own lives.”

So, how do anarchists think direct democracy would work? And how do they think that ‘bigger’ tasks such as ‘running a country’ could be done, without falling back into structures of unequal power, control and hierarchy? How do we ensure all decisions are made fairly, democratically, and directly, in all aspects of life—local, national and international?

Far from advocating chaos, anarchists are strong believers in organisation—and in particular, ways of organising that are as non-exploitative as possible. Anarchists don’t just want to flip the ‘pyramid’ upside down, so the bottom becomes the top and the top becomes the bottom—we would rather do away with the pyramid all together! Instead, horizontal and equal forms of decision making would replace it, making the most out of non-hierarchical systems that would function—not up or down—but from the outside edges-in, from the peripheral to the centre. This form of direct democracy is known as Federalism.

Confused? In fact, we do this kind of organising in most aspects of our lives already.

Take, for example, the weekly task of going grocery shopping for the house or flat. A few of the flatmates are entrusted with carrying out the task of getting the groceries agreed to earlier by the whole flat (the dreaded shopping list), and it’s then their job to do (administer) the tasks set out (ie the shopping). We expect them to stick to the list we all agreed on, and this would make sense, because they helped create it too. They are part of the group and the decision making process, so to change the list affects them also. They might come back from the shopping with suggestions on how to do it better next time, but these are only suggestions, to discuss together as a group.

The key here is the nature of power and representation. The ‘delegates’ of the task put forward by everyone (in this case, the grocery shopping) are temporary, administrative (doing) in nature, and do not have any power to make binding or final decisions. If they really sucked at the shopping and spent all the flat money on

booze and chips ('awesome' some might say), then obviously the next time around the group would decide on different flatmates to have a go. In fact, we all know the task of getting groceries swaps around as it's fairer that way. Anarchists say, why not take this kind logical system and apply it our wider lives?

The key aspects of direct democracy is the fluid and temporary nature of delegation; that delegates are directly involved in the decision making, and are directly from and for the group; and that everyone involved has a direct say in the issue at hand (whether that's shopping, running a community garden, or an entire workplace/community). What's cool about it is the equal balance of power in making decisions, and the non-existence of an exploitative hierarchy. It is in this way that direct democracy and self-management takes place—meaning you can have the maximum input in what directly effects you. When this process joins together with other groups doing the very same thing (such as between communities or workplaces, or even countries), federalism on a larger scale takes place—following the same structures and the same principles.

Still not sure if this is a better way of doing things? Lets bash this shopping analogy out even further, and see how the shopping would take place under the current system of 'representation'.

The people who you 'elected' to go shopping—and who promised they would 'stick to the list'—have decided to not only stay and live at the supermarket, but try and control everything else about the flat from there too. They try to make sure you've got the right groceries from where they are, as they say it's more efficient than making trips back and forth. So, the flat trusts that those in the supermarket will somehow know what the flat needs each changing week, even though they are now separate and removed from the flat. If they start to get it wrong and become completely out of touch with the flat's various needs, then all you can do is wait three years to vote in another group—who, funnily enough, also happen to live at the supermarket! And finally, if you decide to go out and actually do the shopping yourself, and at a different kind of supermarket, they send out the trolley boy's after you!

This analogy is terribly cheesy (as is this pun), but when it comes down to it, it's sadly accurate. The representative system is far from efficient—in fact, its illogical, wasteful and completely divorced from our everyday lives. That's why anarchists advocate direct democracy, direct participation, and a system of inclusive, equal, federalism. That's also what it means when we say, "don't vote—organise!"