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Democracy

Monsieur Dupont
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Available from many places online, this was written in 2006 by a former member of the UK group Subversion.

Every time an anarchist says, "I believe in democracy," there is a little fairy somewhere that falls down dead. - JM Barrie (Peter Pan 1928)

The guilt-ridden, double-checking tenets of democracy bother all fragments of radical opinion like a haze of late summer midges but the anarchist milieu seems especially prone to tolerating, even embracing, this maddening visitation...

The cyclical return within the milieu to the tenets of democracy is conducted by those who in other elements of their own analysis understand that it has nothing to do with either Greek ideals or power to the people and that in reality it consists of little more than a parade of cattle-prodded common senselessness, more LA Arnie than Athenian Socrates. These revolutionaries state explicitly in their most lucid moments the determinate relationship between capital and its political administration but it seems that even this is not enough and the temptation to refer back to the democratic form as an ideal is irresistible.

1. Democracy is a specialised form of political domination deployed as a universal objective value, it is set in place as a political end or ideal for society by an elite whose real power over society is not political at all but is grounded in an all-pervasive economic exploitation.

At the level of detail in direction, policy and law, the state's democratic practice is presented as somehow objective and final because of the overly involved process that has led up to it, in reality however the grounding of such a process, from its original conception to its execution, is contained within the bounds set by economically imposed scarcity. And the constriction of distribution is set by the party of capital as it pursues its own interest.

Let us take for our example the founding of the National Health Service; it has become the example par excellence, albeit a lonely and aged beacon of the glories of social democracy. If we take the NHS as our example, and we tick the boxes of its effectiveness in genuinely improving proletarian health and also the ongoing usurpation of the idea of public services by the commodity, if we accept all that but still retain our critical attitude then the questions we set are these: a) if the NHS was a concession of the dominant class, a maximum quantity it was prepared to give up, then what was it intended to prevent; b) what is the functionality of healthy workers for the bourgeoisie; c) what other policing, stratifying, organisational functions does it perform in the bourgeoisie's domination of society? If we critically situate the function of the NHS within the wider strategic intentions of the ruling class then we see that our gains have never really belonged to us. And what goes for the NHS is equally applicable to education, employment rights, social wages, political inclusion

and to all of the benefits of democracy.

Democracy is concerned with a degree of reflexive administration of the social body but the social body is not self-defining, it is determined by the commodity form. This means the administrative institution only has power enough to intervene in what already exists.

Democracy and its product therefore serves the party of capital on many levels but always as a disguise to its exploitative social mechanism.

The only voices, the only ideas, that have ever appeared within democracy's register, and this despite the representational claims of these voices, the only voices ever raised within the democratic schema are bottomline bourgeois. Thus a function of democracy is to restrict the appearance of what can be said and to portray this restriction as all that can be said – one of the secondary consequences of this restriction has been the enclosure and subsequent devaluation of many political reference points. For example tyranny, dictatorship, and totalitarianism lose practical application to lived reality when established democracy facilitates the deaths of twenty thousand people a day from starvation, causes the just-like-that deaths of ten thousand civilians in a war against Iraq, inflicts a death every minute because of its trade in small arms, and above and beyond all these and other mere details, imposes the systematic binding of billions of human beings to capitalist production. The democratic ideal does not state that life must be reduced to labour function nor does it say that most people will exist without any hope of owning the product of their labour.

Democracy itself is a euphemism for capitalism, as in "Britain is a democracy," and from this original mystification follow others. Democracy grants itself the right to take hold of and dictate the meaning of concepts like freedom which becomes freedom of speech, or freedom of the ballot box, and equality which becomes equality of opportunity, or equality before the law. In these cases, and many more, a universalist aspiration is honed down to the point that it mutely serves the narrow interest of the dominant class and accelerates the hold on society of that class's tightly defined form of ownership, a form that is always carefully withheld from the democratic horizon.

In other words, what is most fundamental to the scene, who owns it, who dictates its character, is always absent from all legitimised engagement with and conventional reflection on the scene.

2. The most radical democrats seek to establish what they call real or direct democracy, which they say will bring all socially occurring phenomena within the scope of the proposed popular assembly. In one bound they forget, in that endless oscillation that is chronic to the left, the objective influence of big money on the solutions they propose even after their own efforts to point out the specifics of such instances as examples of the problem of the present.

The left enthusiastically investigates the mutual benefits enjoyed between the political party in power and its corruption by capital; observe its glee as it exposes the Republican Party's allocation of re-build contracts in Iraq (what else did it expect?) but then carry its conclusions no further; it learns no lessons and seems pathologically incapable of connecting the specific to the general. It neither speculates on the likely manipulation by capital of the assemblies it favours nor does it consider for one moment the current influence capital has on its own pro-democracy line, which, lets face it, has a very convenient path-of-least-resistance quality to it. That cringeworthy Michael Moore-style blab, those American flags on peace demonstrations, "we are the true guardians of democracy," "we are the real patriots" as if such mystifications weren't also fragments of the real, true problem.

Radical and direct democrats seem ever-doomed to forget that the form society takes is not finally determined by public opinion, but by the ownership of property. The surface of opinions and of subjective values, even if regimented into a mass movement, are no opposition at all to the force of property ownership. Such movements press the button marked “have your say,” but it is connected to nothing, they are “making themselves heard” down the phone but the line is cut, they are “standing up for what’s right” but their feet are in quicksand. The petitions and lobbyings and protests and pressurings are so many open doors to empty rooms.

The labyrinth of participation turns out to be a fetish of alienated consciousness, “getting involved” is specially designed to convince the unwary that their concern is special, that this time they’re really making headway against all precedence of the circumlocution office, and that really, really change is very close now, ah but they aren’t and it isn’t – and if, as the radicals have diagnosed, this democracy is one sign of a fundamental economic alienation then it would be a strange medicine indeed that recommended its treatment by means of a blanket application of its symptom.

It seems that democracy occurs as a sublimated politics when the alteration of property ownership is forbidden. It is promoted as a form of political compensation for the cost to society of the original prohibition. It states that everything else, everything that doesn’t refer to ownership, is up for discussion, and yet we now see that even this limited remit must be continually revised – property is vulnerable, its needs change constantly, it requires constant care and protection. So, if it is now established that democracy at its heart is a trick to distract attention from economic domination of one class by another then it is unlikely that any popular assembly in any imaginable circumstance could defend itself against non-explicit manipulation from hidden forces, factions, splinters and so on (the contrary: the more open and honest the assembly is towards the citizenry the more responsive it is to hidden influence). I also do not see how any given democratic institution could prevent at least one degree of alienation opening up between itself and the social body, and in that unspoken space who knows what lurks?

Democracy cannot dismember capitalism.

If you are tempted to throw up your hands and demand what is to become of us, I’d reply only that the radical overthrow of ownership must come before the setting up of any political institutions – first make power explicit, then human beings can organise themselves accordingly.

3. The anarchists have recently fallen into a trap of attempting to formalise the constellation of discussion, disagreement, consent, legitimisation, delegation, and so on under the rubric democracy; the reason for this is several fold. For one it is the unthought-out application of a systematically impoverished vocabulary – what other words are there for people instituting themselves, as the end for their activity? For another the milieu wants to reassure a wider anti-capitalist protest movement which is supposedly mystified or intimidated by it.

MD has written long and self-importantly on the self deception of the anti-capitalist protesters so it is enough here to say that I do not think this essentially reformist movement is so very worthy of the milieu’s tender considerations. Anti-capitalism is an endless shading of opinions one into the other but basically it is a protest of the bourgeoisie against itself, a movement of and for social reform which nevertheless wishes to preserve its own economically derived class privilege of speaking to, and being heard by, government.

The anti-capitalists legitimise themselves by castigating unrealistic pro-revolutionaries and claim that they speak for the urgently poor. The accusation of irrelevance and unreality hurts and the anarchist milieu hides its face in shame, concluding that it has no licence to instruct the poor in the illusions of self-determination, anti-imperialism, and democratic political reform which it is decided must be the baggage of their liberation. In response to reformist bullying the milieu tacitly falls into line, in its aims and principles it adds other politically weighted oppressions to its class analysis, and swallows whole the leftist agenda. In this the milieu is wrong. It not only can but must extend its critique far beyond the easy target of America and “big business.” In its analysis it must include the recuperative part played by those false and essentially conservative solutions to America that are proposed by the left, all of which are easily contained by the commodity system. The stated aspirations of the anti-capitalist movement are not identical to the interest of the world’s poor; what we are told the poor want is what has been formulated for them as an alternative to the present and whilst the worst off’s rejection of present conditions is sharp and instinctive their commitment to the alternative blueprint is more shaky. Nevertheless their democratic representatives do not cease in their pushing forward of these aspirations to fair trade and democracy, and that says it all.

It is no miraculous feat of prophecy to predict that many if not all of those involved in the current protest movement will end up as future entrepreneurs and politicians of the establishment. Such is the history of political protest. The French, American, and Russian revolutions, and even the protests of the Sixties all disguised self-interested, economically based, ambitions behind a Birnham wood of slogans for universal emancipation.

4. Many energetic and independent souls have entered democratic politics saying they were going to bring the practice of democracy into line with its alleged ideals. All have ended instead by adapting themselves to what existed before them. The English rebel MP Diane Abbott, famous only for castigating her New Labour colleagues for sending their children to private schools, ends by sending her kid to a private school. I don’t criticise her, it’s inevitable, the political class are separate, her kid would certainly be a target, and the nature of privilege is that you can choose to escape what the rest of us have no choice in.

Those who attempt to reform privilege from within end up as its beneficiaries. So it is no surprise when, for whatever reason, democratic ambitions are proclaimed within the anarchist milieu and these we-don’t-mean-it-in-the-same-way-they-do self-described anarchists conclude their ignominious career by proposing anarchist intervention in the electoral process (as the former editor of Green Anarchist did in Freedom 9/08/03). When anarchists declare themselves democrats for respectability’s sake, so they can get on better at university research departments, so they can tap into a shared and honourable left tradition, so they can participate in the global forum, when they crown their decomposition by saying, “we’re democrats too, we’re true democrats, participatory democrats” they ought not be surprised at how enthusiastic democracy is to return the compliment, and of course to extract its price. Those who sign their names soon find themselves falling silent on a spray of other matters to which democracy and the force behind it are secretly hostile, and of that invisible bouquet class is the big, bold, blousey one.