

Are Anarchism and Democracy Opposed?

A Response to Crimethinc

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Summary: Crimethinc has initiated a discussion about the relationship between anarchism and democracy. Their opinion is that anarchism must be opposed to democracy—not only to bourgeois representative democracy but also to direct, participatory, libertarian-socialist, democracy. I argue, instead, that there is a struggle over the meaning of “democracy,” and that anarchism can and should be interpreted as the most radical, decentralized, and participatory extension of democracy.

Crimethinc, the “Ex-Workers’ Collective,” is organizing a discussion of the relationship between anarchism and democracy. They have published a series of essays, including “the flagship text in the series, *From Democracy to Freedom*.” (Crimethinc 2016) and a supporting essay by Uri Gordon (2016). They are suggesting that local groups discuss their proposed readings and related questions.

Their view is that anarchism is not consistent with any concept of democracy. They reject not only capitalist representative democracy but even the direct democracy of libertarian socialist communes or workers’ management of industry, accepting neither majority rule nor consensus. My contrary view of the matter was expressed in the title of my essay, “Anarchism as Extreme Democracy.” (Price 2009) So I think it may advance the discussion if I express my opinion. I do not intend to go over their “flagship text” point-by-point, but to cover what I think are the major issues.

As they note, “democracy” has been almost the universal good word. It was once despised by the upper classes as meaning “mob rule.” Now it is acclaimed in the imperial bourgeois states as it was recently in the “Communist” (totalitarian) People’s Democracies, as well as by liberals, conservatives, social democrats, and many (but far from all) anarchists. “Such is the sway of the word democracy that no government or party dares to exist, or believes it can exist, without inscribing this word upon its banner...” (quoted in Draper 1977; 18) This was not said recently but in 1849 by the French historian and politician, Guizot.

In general, “democracy” is defined as the “rule or power of the people (the ‘demos’).” In his *Politics*, Aristotle classically defined “democracy” as a constitution in which “the free-born and poor control the government—being at the same time a majority.” (quoted in Wood 1995; 220). Of course, Aristotle was not an anarchist. Nor was he a democrat.

Today’s near-universal acceptance of “democracy” does not show that everyone is using the same meaning. There is a difference between the view of the officials who send out the police to suppress demonstrations, in order to “maintain democracy,” and that of the demonstrators who chant, “This is what democracy looks like!” As Gordon writes, “...Democracy is an ‘essentially contested’ concept—its meaning is itself a political battleground.” (2016; 1) For such terms, Draper writes, “...their meanings have become pawns in a social and ideological struggle. The interpretation of ‘class struggle’ becomes a weapon of class struggle, just as the meaning of ‘democracy’ becomes an arena for the struggle to determine what democracy shall mean.” (Draper 1977; 18) (For a review of the historical struggles over the meaning of “democracy,” see Part II of *Democracy Against Capitalism*, by the late Marxist historian, Ellen Meiksins Wood [1995].)

Unfortunately, Crimethinc has given up on this struggle over the meaning of “democracy.” They interpret the “rule or power” or “government” of the “people” as meaning a state. Therefore they accept the dominant interpretation of “democracy” as referring to the existing bourgeois democracies, as opposed to being a standard by which these states may be judged (and found wanting). They recommend that anarchists and other libertarian socialists give up the claim that these states are not really democratic. They propose that revolutionaries stop using the ideal of democracy to fight against the system. They insist that the bourgeois theorists are right: democracy means a state—therefore it inevitably means oppression and exploitation.

Humans have governed themselves for tens of thousands of years in tribal assemblies and village councils, as David Graeber points out (as they quote him). This demonstrates, he argues, that people are capable of organizing themselves through direct democracy, without states (or markets or classes). While accepting the anthropological history, Crimethinc rejects Graeber's argument simply by denying that this long history should be called "democracy." It doesn't fit their definition in which democracy means a state.

Similarly, they assert, "This is not an argument against discussions, collectives, assemblies, networks, [or] federations...." (Crimethinc 2016; 1) Their goal, they write, is "to create mutually fulfilling collectivities at each level of society....These can take many forms, from housing cooperatives and neighborhood assemblies to international networks." (44) This may sound like a radical conception of democracy to most people, similar to Cindy Milstein's program (which they cite) of federated, directly-democratic, communities. Not to Crimethinc. "...When we engage in these practices, if we understand what we are doing as democracy—as a form of participatory government rather than as a collective practice of freedom—than sooner or later, we will recreate all the problems...." (1) So if people even think that what they are doing in a collective is "democratic," then they will recreate the state, because democracy (as Crimethinc defines it) is a form of "government," a term by which they mean "state." This is argument by definition. Other anarchists regard direct, participatory, democracy as precisely the "collective practice of freedom."

I will now focus on two major arguments against democracy as raised by Crimethinc and other anarchists. (I) "Democracy" is the ideology and political system of existing capitalist states. It is the mechanism by which factions of the ruling class work out their differences. It serves to bamboozle the masses into believing that they are free and have power over the government. Anarchists should expose this false ideology, it is argued, not support it.

(II) Anarchists oppose all forms of rule, not only rule by individual dictators or by minorities. They also oppose rule by the "people," or "the working class," or "the majority," it is argued. "...Force...is what democracy has in common with autocracy and every other form of rule. They share the institutions of coercion: the legal apparatus, the police, and the military...." (4) Therefore, democracy should be rejected in principle—even the most decentralized, participatory, and pluralist socialist-democracy.

Opposition to Existing Bourgeois Representative Democracies

I agree that all anarchists should be in revolutionary opposition to the existing states which label themselves "democracies." Even the most participatory and responsible states (which is not the United States) are still oppressive and exploitative, supporters of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and other forms of domination. Bourgeois democracies are still "the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie." Workers and all the oppressed should aim to overturn and dismantle these states—and replace them with alternate institutions which embody the "collective practice of freedom." To this end, anarchists seek to expose the fraudulent nature of the pseudo-democratic ideology which these states use to fool the people.

a) However, a few comments may be added. For one, it is easier to live under a bourgeois democracy than under a dictatorship or totalitarian regime. Politically, it is easier to organize radical study groups, to publish anarchist literature, and to form radical organizations. It is easier for workers to form unions and for People of Color and immigrants to form community associations. These are limited but real advantages. This should not lead to anarchists' supporting the bourgeois-democratic state, but to

anarchists supporting the limited advantages which the people have under the bourgeois-democratic state—as against fascist attack, for instance.

Crimethinc correctly quotes the great Italian anarchist, Errico Malatesta, as saying that (in his opinion) anarchists should not, in principle, support democracy any more than they support dictatorship. But Malatesta also believed that the capitalist democratic state was preferable to a dictatorship, if only because anarchists could use its ideology against it. “...The worst of democracies is always preferable, if only from the educational point of view, [to] the best of dictatorships... Democracy is a lie, it...is, in reality, oligarchy, that is, government by the few to the advantage of a privileged class. But we can still fight it in the name of freedom and equality...” (Malatesta 1995; 77).

b) Of all class societies, capitalism has the greatest split between its state and its economy. While many states claim to be democratic, they make no such claim for their capitalist economies. That the corporations and firms are run top-down, as authoritarian institutions, is openly admitted. The rationalization for the capitalist economy is not “democracy” but “free enterprise.” Therefore, to demand a democratic economy is not to reinforce the existing ideology but to challenge it at its root! Workers’ management of industry, consumer cooperatives, self-governing agri-industrial communes, planning from the bottom-up, etc., are democratic concepts completely antithetical to the dominant ideology of capitalism.

c) In a text included on Crimethinc’s reading list, Uri Gordon argues that “...anarchist invocations of democracy...[are] problematic because its rhetorical structure and audience targeting almost inevitably end up appealing to patriotic sentiments and national origin myths.” (Gordon 2016; 1) He criticizes statements by Murray Bookchin and Cindy Milstein about positive aspects of the U.S. Revolution and New England town meetings.

Like all nations, our society has always been divided between oppressor and oppressed: between the bourgeoisie and the working class, white supremacy and People of Color, patriarchy and women, heteronormativity and LGBT people, and so on. As a result, its history is also divided, between the dominant discourse of the great White democratic imperial nation, and opposed, often hidden, traditions of the struggles of the oppressed. This is the history of radical mechanics and sailors during the Revolution, of American Indian resistance, of slave rebellions, of the abolitionists (Black and White), of the IWW, of workers’ mass strikes in the ‘30s, of women’s fights for their rights, of Stonewall and ACT-UP, etc., etc. That is the tradition of revolutionary democracy. It too is part of the “contested concept” of the meaning(s) of U.S. history. The reactionary meaning of the dominant history must be exposed, but should anarchists deny the revolutionary and libertarian traditions? These are the traditions of our class and of our people!

d) Crimethinc claims that the use of “democracy” reinforces the dominant discourse of the existing system. Instead they call for “freedom” (From Democracy to Freedom is the title of their “flagship” paper). But “freedom” is at least as much a code word for capitalism. Our society is supposedly a bastion of “freedom.” The terrorists “hate us for our freedom,” we are told. The economy is “free enterprise” with a “free market.” We live in “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” according to our national anthem. The non-Communist countries are the “free world” (including the dictatorships). When the French government criticized the U.S. attack on Iraq, right-wingers changed french fries to “freedom fries.” Similarly for freedom’s synonym “liberty.” The Declaration of Independence promised “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The Statue of Liberty sits in New York harbor. And so on. Just about every argument which Crimethinc uses against the term “democracy” can be used against “freedom” and “liberty.” Just as much as “democracy,” “freedom” is really a “contested concept,” whose meaning is a “political battleground.”

II. Is Democracy Oppressive in Principle?

Certain anarchists reject democracy as an abstract principle. Just as they oppose monarchy (the rule of one) or oligarchy (the rule of a few), so—they argue—they must oppose the rule of the many, the people (democracy). By what right, they ask, does a majority, or even the whole population, tell a minority or even one person, what they must not do? As previously quoted, Crimethinc believes that even the best libertarian democracy must use force and coercion, leading to “the legal apparatus, the police, and the military.” (4)

However, it is impossible to organize a society, even the freest, without some coercion—reduced to the minimum possible at the time. An anarchist revolution will take away the wealth and property of the capitalists—which the rich will regard as terribly coercive, no matter how nonviolently done. They may resist with counterrevolutionary armies! Also, after a revolution, there will still be demoralized anti-social people who have been hurt by the loveless society of capitalism. They will not immediately vanish. While anarchists do not believe in punishment or vengeance, they do believe in protecting people from anti-social actors (such as rapists). This too requires coercion.

For such reasons, anarchists and other revolutionary socialists have long advocated replacing the specialized layers of “police and military” with a popular militia, the armed workers and former oppressed, under leadership of popular councils—so long as this remains necessary. Crimethinc does not mention this.

More to the point, it is impossible to have an organized society (even one organized from the bottom-up) without collective decision-making. (I leave out personal decision-making, such as choosing a religion or having a sexual orientation, which are indeed none of the business of majorities.)

Crimethinc asks, “...If all those decisions were actually made by the people they impact, there would be no need for a means of enforcing them.” (7) But what if there is disagreement among the people who are impacted by a collective decision?

Suppose there is a commune where a minority believes that a new road should be built. There is discussion in the commune. They win over a majority of the people but a (new) minority still does not want the new road. But either the road will be built or it won't. This is coercion, not by the police but by reality. If the resistant minority vetoes the road (under consensus) then they are coercing the majority to give up its desire. If the majority wins (in a community of majority-rule, with respect for the rights of minorities), then the minority must live with an unwanted road. They could leave their homes and friends, of course, but any new place they go will also have to decide on roads. Or they could stay. They might be in the majority on the next issue.

The goal of anarchism is not to have absolutely no coercion. It is to abolish the state (which is the institution of coercion under capitalism). The state is a bureaucratic-military socially-alienated machine. It has layers of professional police, prison guards, soldiers, politicians, lobbyists, judges, and bureaucrats, who stand above and over the rest of society. In “The State: Its Historic Role,” Kropotkin writes, “...What [do] we wish to include by the term ‘the State’ [?].....It not only includes the existence of a power situated above society, but also of a territorial concentration as well as the concentration in the hands of a few of many functions in the life of societies....A whole mechanism of legislation and of policing has to be developed in order to subject some classes to the domination of others.”

(Kropotkin 2014; 254)

In place of the state mechanism, anarchists propose the self-organization of the people (meaning the former working class and oppressed). There will be federated and networked workplace councils and neighborhood assemblies, militia units and other popular associations. Collective decisions

will be made—as much as possible—through dialogue and discussion and the use of cooperative intelligence. When everyone is involved in governing then there is no government. Anarchism is democracy without the state.

Have Anarchists Advocated Democracy?

There is some dispute about whether anarchists historically were for or against the term “democracy.” Gordon quotes Proudhon, Bakunin, Berkman, and Malatesta rejecting democracy. He concludes, “The association between anarchism and democracy makes its appearance only around the 1980s, through the writings of Murray Bookchin.” (Gordon 2016; 2) This is untrue. For one, Paul Goodman, probably the most well-known U.S. anarchist of the ‘sixties, presented his anarchism as consistent with an extension of the radical-liberal democratic tradition, including Jefferson and John Dewey.

Perhaps more accurately, Andrew Cornell writes of the 40s to the 70s, “During the years under consideration, anarchists developed a greater appreciation than their ideological predecessors for the practice of democracy as an ideal.” (Cornell 2016; 17) This was due, he feels, to the influence on anarchists of the “1960s conceptual invention, participatory democracy” (same) and the feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and LGBT movements.

Actually, the record is more mixed than that. Of course all anarchists, from the start, have opposed bourgeois-democratic representative capitalist governments, often referring to them simply as “democracies.” And anarchists have supported the rights of individuals and minorities to freedom in many areas (religion, sex, speech, art, life styles, etc.)—areas which do not require collective decision-making. At the same time, almost all anarchists have advocated group decision-making, at work or in communes, using terms such as “self-governing, self-managing, autogestion, self-rule, self-determination.” What they have meant in practice has been usually indistinguishable from radical, participatory, democracy.

P.J. Proudhon (the first person to identify himself as an “anarchist”) wrote both negative and positive things about “democracy.” Iain McKay quotes him as writing, “We want the mines, canals, railroads handed over to democratically organized workers’ associations...that vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic and social Republic.” (quoted in McKay’s “Introduction” to Kropotkin 2014; 8) Again, Proudhon advocated a system of federated communes, with mandated and recallable delegates. “The imperative mandate, permanent revocability, are the most immediate, undeniable, consequences of the electoral principle. It is the inevitable program for all democracy.” (quoted in same; 9) This was a century before the 1980s and Murray Bookchin.

Conclusion

Crimethinc rejects “democracy” because they have worked out a definition which requires democracy to mean domination, coercion, government, and the state. Then they focus on the existing representative democracies under capitalism, using them as proof of the inevitable failures of even the best democracy.

Instead, I have focused on “democracy” as an historically contested term, pointing to the real-life struggle over its meaning (not just its definition). This is also true of “freedom,” a term which Crimethinc favors, as it is for other terms (such as “anarchism” or “socialism”). Unfortunately, Crimethinc has given up on the struggle over “democracy,” letting the capitalists have the final interpretation.

That is consistent with the general weakness of Crimethinc. They do not write about how the tiny minority which wants anarchist revolution can win over the big, (as yet) non-revolutionary, majority. Granted, before revolutionary anarchists really reach the majority, they must reach out to a layer of radicalizing and militant activists who are open to becoming anarchists in the next period. These people could cohere into organizations and networks. But to win them over, they must be persuaded that revolutionary anarchists have an analysis of the system, a program for changing it, a vision of a better society, and a way to reach the broad population. This will not happen if anarchists reject the popular concept “democracy” and the revolutionary democratic tradition. It requires a recognition that anarchism is democracy without the state.

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