

Is it plausible to think that representative democracy could be made more participatory?

Toni Prug, toni@irational.org

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Introduction: What is a Democratic Political System?

Two additional questions need to be addressed before I can proceed with the main one. Firstly, given the historical and current¹ debates on democracy, the question arises whether we should have the minimum requirements for a representative democracy in order to call a given system a democracy. Let's take the most known and politically entrenched historical debate as an example. ([Lenin, 1977](#), pg. 368-72)² The second additional question is: if our starting point is the most wide spread form of representative democracy, liberal democracy, can we speak of making something more participatory, if it already isn't what we assume it to be? In the words of Michael Chossudovsky:

Under neoliberalism, Western social democracy has been steered into a quandry: those elected to high office increasingly act as puppets or bureaucrats acting on behalf of real political power operating discretely behind the scenes. In turn, a uniform economic discourse and ideology has unfolded ([Chossudovsky, 2003](#), Crisis of the State, pg 305)

Fifteen years ago, in the dawn of radical political changes in Eastern Europe, in the time of renewed optimism in representational liberal democracy, these views could have been seen as controversial. Today, when the quality of life in

¹see "The Political and Its Disavowals" ([Zizek, 1999](#), pg 187-191)

²Take, for example, freedom of assembly and freedom of the press. [...] In practice the capitalists, the exploiters, the landowners and the profiteers own 9/10 of the best meeting halls, and 9/10 of the stocks of newsprint, printing presses, etc.. The urban workers and the farm hands and day laborers are, in practice, debarred from democracy by the "sacred right of property" [...] The present "freedom of assembly and the press" in the "democratic" (bourgeois democratic) German republic is false and hypocritical, because in fact it is freedom for the rich to buy and bribe the press, freedom for the rich to befuddle the people with venomous lies of the bourgeois press, freedom for the rich to keep as their "property" the landowners' mansions, the best buildings, etc..

lot of Eastern European states has plummeted ³, it is difficult to see how such suffering can be the result of the rule of the same people who are suffering i.e. how then can these representational political systems be called democratic?

Therefore, by removing the implications of the two questions – that we are apriori talking about democratic political structures, and that such structures are liberal democracies – we now ask:

Is it plausible to think that certain representational political systems could be made democratic by becoming more participatory? And if it is, then which ones?

I argue that in liberal capitalist societies this is not possible because, through mass media, illusions necessary for consent are manufactured and skilfully deployed, (Chomsky, 1989, pg 48)⁴; political participation is reduced to a spectacle of selection of consumable images, and, for Hobbes and Marilyn Manson⁵, it is fear that binds and ensures social order (Hardt and Negri, 2000, pg 323). *Private property and its freedom of use is antagonistic with genuine democratic political systems*. Representative democracy can only be made more participatory in communist societies, with redistribution of wealth and security for all, and that the main condition for such societies is radical participation – both in its quantity and methodologies – where representation and delegation are mixed according to urgency and logistics of the task, and where power is practiced as an ability to do, not as the domination over. Would it not be ironic if those radical methodologies end up being partially based, and initiated via, the same communication networks that enabled the explosive expansion of capital in the first place? Every inch of land that capital conquered could end up being reclaimed by the people, or like in the opening words of Hardt and Negri's Multitude:

The possibility of democracy on a global scale is emerging today for the very first time (Hardt and Negri, 2004, preface)

³ Using a poverty line of \$4 a day (in 1990 purchasing power parity dollars), the UNDP estimates that poverty in Eastern Europe and the CIS countries increased from 4 percent of the population in 1988 to 32 percent in 1994, or from 13.6 million to 119.2 million. In other words, prior to the transition to a market economy, mass poverty was unknown [...] (Beams, 1999)

⁴In the democratic system, the necessary illusions cannot be imposed by force. Rather, they must be instilled in the public mind by more subtle means. [...] Debate cannot be stilled [...] it should not be, because it has system-reinforcing character if constrained within proper bounds. Controversy may rage as long as it adheres to the presuppositions that define the consensus elites, and it should furthermore be encouraged within these bounds, thus helping to establish these doctrines as the very condition of thinkable thought while reinforcing the belief that freedom reigns.

⁵Rock star talks in controversial documentary about link between fear, that is produced, and consumption (Moore, 2002)

Liberal Parliamentarism: In the Name of People! - Dictatorship Of the Capital

I will first explain why am I excluding liberal parliamentary capitalisms from the discussion. There are several reasons why i think that, today, the claim that liberal parliamentary capitalism is democratic should be dismissed. Contrary to the common belief, the starting point in all discussions and theoretical work should be its undemocratic nature. First, participation is limited to only voting once every few years (there are exceptions, like Switzerland with its referendums and more participatory political system); second, global mass media corporations indirectly control public opinion and thus the voting power, as Noam Chomsky, or Bob Franklin (Franklin, 1997) argue so well, furthermore these gignatic powers are only answerable to their shareholders (Curran, 1981, The Liberal Theory of Press Freedom, pg 287-301); third, capitalism attempts to satisfy the desires that it itself produces (consumerism at any cost, since profit is the only goal), and is thus a hysterical social order of infinite growth with no positively determined social goals (i.e. no well-being, no democracy) beyond individual greed (it all rests on corporate shareholders); fourth, with current neo-liberal economic dogmas⁶ spreading, working hours are on the increase and there is less, not more, time for democratic participation; fifth, again because of neo-liberalism's goals of significantly reducing social security provided by the state there is less security, which translates into fear and the resulting increase in obedience of employees and citizens - which is also contrary to democracy, since fearful people can not participate in social affairs freely; sixth, Max Weber's writing on bureaucracy describes in detail how bureaucratic organizations create elites that become self-serving and worry about self-preservation most (19th century developments in education and training (Weber, 1948, pg 214-244) are founding elements of beaurocracies), and how capital demands growth of beaurocracy; seventh: in its constant expansion global capital conquers, starts wars and overthrows governments that don't serve its goals.

Most of the issued from above, and any other ones concerning (non)democratic nature of parliamentary liberal capitalist political systems rarely gets discussed today. Assumptions that liberal capitalism is not only democratic, but the only democracy worth investigating, is even stronger since changes in East Europe. Human, and other, rights armies are waving ideological flags of democracy world-wide, first trying to sell the idea to domestic populations, then warning them of possible consequences if those Western values aren't accepted, and finally either resolving to physical violence, or striking the deal with local dictator ready to cooperate on key Western strategic interests. (Hardt and Negri, 2000, pg 38)⁷ The choice is between false democracy (liberal parliamentary capital-

⁶i call them dogmas because many states and regions have economically collapsed last couple of decades due to uniform imposition of economic rules by IMF and World Bank (Chossudovsky, 2003, see)

⁷we are referring here principally to the organizations dedicated to relief work and protection of human rights, such as Amnesty International, Oxfam, and Medecins sans Frontieres [...] moral intervention intervention has become a frontline force of imperial intervention. These

ism), or non-existing one (dictatorship) i.e. in both options people loose – democracy is not an option. No wonder that the most censored story of the last few years in the USA has been “The Neoconservative Plan for Global Dominance”⁸.

Some questions, whether liberal “democracy” promotes long-term benefits, and whether political equality can coexist with economic inequality (Heywood, 1997, pg 77), do get asked, although the structure of the questions is questionable. What about access to resources, like mass media and hard cash to run election campaigns? Is it not clear that participation costs vast amount of money? What political equality then? Theoretical, i guess. It reminds me of findings of British Royal Commission on the Press which declared in 1949 that “Free enterprise [...] is a prerequisite of a free press”, only to report in 1977 that “Anyone is free to start a daily national newspaper, but few can afford even to contemplate the prospect”(Curran, 1981, pg 288). Isn’t it the same with standing in elections? And if Zizek is right when he writes:

Today’s liberal-democratic hegemony is sustained by a kind of unwritten Denkverbot similar to the infamous Berufsverbot in Germany of the late 60s – the moment one shows a minimal sign of engaging in political projects that aim to seriously challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: “Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new Gulag!” The ideological function of the constant reference to the holocaust, gulag [...] is thus to serve as the support of this Denkverbot by constantly reminding [...] And it is exactly the same thing that the demand for “scientific objectivity” means: the moment one seriously questions the existing liberal consensus, one is accused of abandoning scientific objectivity for the outdated ideological positions. This is the point on which one cannot and should not concede: today, the actual freedom of thought means the freedom to question the predominant liberal-democratic “post-ideological consensus” – or it means nothing (Zizek, 2002, pg 167)

it ought to be one’s duty, from any different ideological stance, to challenge such hegemony. It is no coincidence that in our political theory seminar, when we presented ideologies, time run out when we reached marxism and fascism. What was that if not the uncscious at work, implementing Denkverbot that Zizek talks about, or a symbolic repetition of the ban that German State imposed on “extreme” (communist and fascist) political parties in 50’s.

More Participation: Paris to Porto Alegre

Different forms of participation in representative political structures have a long history. The Paris Commune, being the most inspirational moment and the first

NGOs are completely immersed in the bio-political context of the constitution of Empire.

⁸<http://www.projectcensored.org/publications/2004/1.html>

successful worker's revolution, existed from March 26 to May 30, 1871. Delegates were immediately revocable, bound by the formal instructions (Marx, 1871, chapter The Paris Commune)), with a salary of average worker. Both Marx and Lenin wrote inspirational texts about it, taking over some of its principles for Soviets. Yugoslav workers councils (Grgurevic, 1974), announced in 1949, that became a base for later self-management state policy were also under its influence. Popular assemblies used in south Brazil today (Porto Alegre) and practiced in the past by Miguel Arraes in 1962 (Arraes, 1969), are a combination of delegation and representation, with the power to decide what will portion of the budget be spent on. This technique practiced in Porto Alegre since 1988 has now been tried in 70 other cities across the world, and the biggest win, symbolized in saying:

Happiness is not a safe port; it is a way of navigating

was said to be “de-bureaucratizing the planning system”, in a process which is not fixed, but inviting, open, changing, and another step of administration towards “informality, not as a synonym of illegality or anarchy, but as a culture of self-determination, of dialogue and reciprocal education in experimentation. [...] following the lesson of Paolo Freire” (Allegretti, 2001).

In an interview in 2001, Tarso Genro, former deputy mayor of Porto Alegre claimed that it is not just Brazilian problem when he said: “the question of direct participation combined with representative democracy is a fundamental obstacle in resolving the impasse of representative democracy”. He sees this reinvention of democracy as something whose “basic principle is precisely the absence of a universal principle” (Allegretti, 2001), so that methodology of its application will be changed each time, according to local situation. Bingo! True this practice of Brazilian poor and Workers Party (PT), we are lead back to the Žizek from the start of this essay and his Ticklish Subject: for Ranciere “politics proper” is when an excluded groups demands to be recognized and heard in the public sphere, on an equal footing with the rulers, or more so, when it stands for true Universality, as singular standing for universal – a short circuit between Universal and Particular. (Žizek, 1999, pg 188) Is this not what we have with the politics in south Brasil? An “absent centre of political ontology”, a missing universal: for it is its every singular act of participation of the poor directly in budget allocation that stands for the Universal. Hence, it stands perfectly when Žizek affirms:

Ranciere proves against Habermans, the political struggle proper is therefore not a rational debate between multiple interests, but the struggle for one's voice to be heard and recognized as the voice of legitimate partner”. (Žizek, 1999, pg 188)

That is why Arraes, after winning a surprise election in 1962, in north-east, said at the State Assembly that he speaks with such conviction because he knows that thousand of Brazilians, who are his equals could stand in his place, and he is there as a man OF the people, NOT FOR, NOR IN THE NAME OF the people.

Arres' idea was to bypass both existing executive processes, and bureaucrats who would always confine people to passivity. Instead he trained people in "administration of public resources", and created a school for improvement of people. "The privileged class protested violently and mobilized press radio and television [...] in the protest against the 'instane regime established in Pernanmbuco' ".(Arraes, 1969, pg 8-12) Army coup in 1964 ended the farytale, but memory and the idea remained. It resurfaced in 1988, south in Porto Alegre this time. Since first World Social Forum in 2001, the story of participatory budget, mixture of delegation and representation and public assemblies has been spreading around the world.

In the West, elements that are very likely to remake political representation radically – including enabling its combination with flexible, yet accountable, delegation – are present in electronic communication and collaboration tools. Administration of public resources, general bureocracy that stifles democracy will become doable by mass participation, on many ocassions with far more, not less, efficiency. That is already happening in some walks of life⁹, but it will take some time for it to reach the wider public and thus possibly uncover its potential.

Conclusion

Not only is it plausible to think that representative democracies can become more participatory, but more importantly, with the above described new political forms, the importance and power of parliaments is likely to weaken significantly. There is even a possiblity of them eventually becoming obsolete, although it is more plausible tht they will adapt to new ways of doing politics. As Alain Badiou noted, "Parliamentary politics as practiced today does not in any way consist of setting objectives inspired by principles and of inventing the means to attain them"(Badiou, 2001, pg 31). People still dream and hope though, and if parliaments, especially undemocratic liberal capitalistic ones, can not facilitate those dreams and hopes, those will be, like they have been throughout history, turned into acts. The question is: what will the nature of those acts be?

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⁹volunteer run, politicaly engaged, explicitly subjective, network of independent media centres, with over 100 nodes, <http://www.indymedia.org>

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