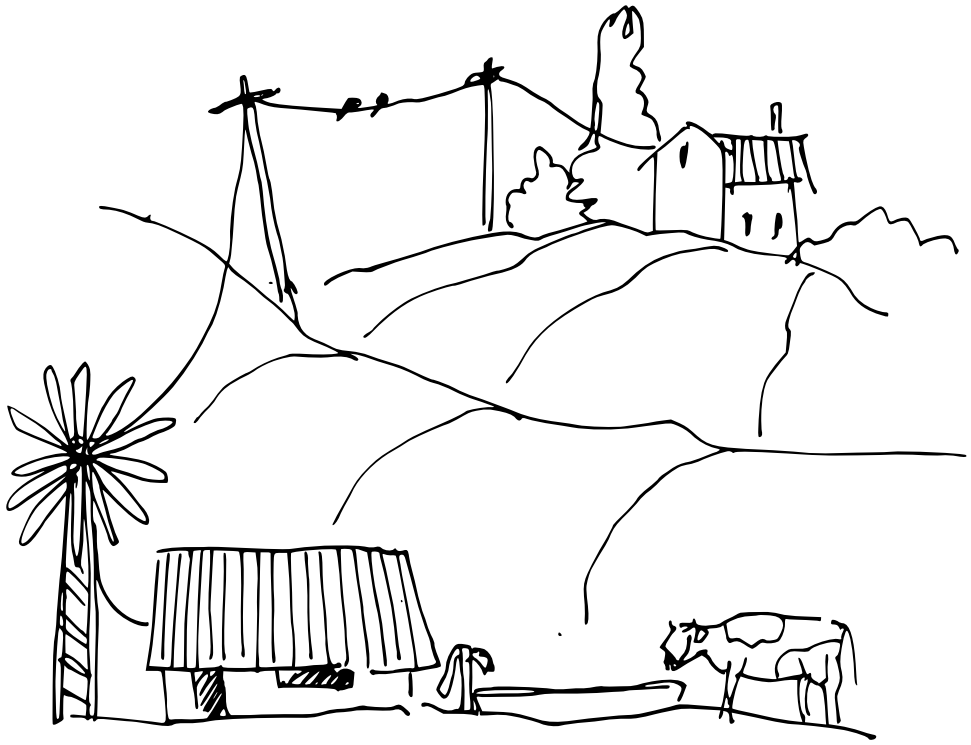
Radical Democracy & Autonomy:

What do we mean?

A Conversation



Around the world, many people feel that democracy is not working. The idea of a government based on representation through electoral systems seemed very promising, but is demonstrably failing. Perhaps the problem is deeper than simply poor implementation: what is commonly called democracy often preserves the rituals of elections, parties, representation and participation; while the actual power to shape collective life is transferred to states, markets and corporations. This conversation dwells on this deeper issue, starting from a simple but important question: what would it mean for people – and the wider webs of life- to recover the capacity to govern themselves, their own lives, territories, their social, political and economic relationships and futures?

The following conversation is between an imaginary person – could be anyone with a curious mind – and the Global Tapestry of Alternatives, represented here by its Thematic Group on Radical Democracy and Autonomy.

GLOBAL TAPESTRY *of*
ALTERNATIVES

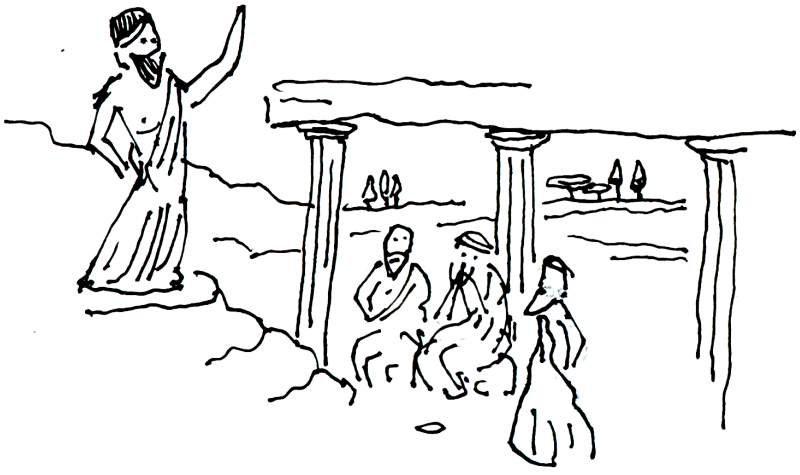
You are using the phrase 'radical democracy and autonomy', sometimes also 'self-determination', a lot these days. What do you mean by these terms? How is 'radical' democracy different from democracy?

Let's first go back to the basics. As you know, through history there have been many forms of decision-making. Here we are discussing one specific kind – democracy. This term originates in the Greek language, with *demos+cracy* meaning 'rule of the people'. In its simplest form, it implies most or all members of a collective (such as citizens of a country) are able to participate in taking decisions, rather than decisions being taken only by a ruler or small set of people.

Let's talk about governance, about how we take decisions in our collective spaces (villages, urban neighbourhoods, regions, countries, institutions, etc). Do we all take part? Does one leader or a small group of people take decisions on our behalf? Are some people, and nature as a whole, systematically excluded? If we are all (or many of us) taking part, does the majority decide?

While some historians believe that democracy emerged in the Greek city-state practice of popular assemblies (restricted to non-slave male citizens), such communal or collective governance is known to have existed for much longer, including in many Indigenous peoples, local communities, and the rest of nature. Indeed, this may have been widespread, until the rise of the nation-state and liberal democracy, in which decision-making agency shifted to the state (defined here as a centralised political institution with regulatory power in a given territory). Functions that were once owned by local communities became bureaucratised and centralised.

So its currently dominant form, present in most countries of the world with some variations, is what could be called 'representative' or 'electoral' democracy. Here, citizens[1] of a nation-state engage in voting candidates or political parties into power, and are able to participate in some or many forums of decision-making. Even though citizens in such a system may have significant freedoms and 'human rights' (hence the term 'liberal' democracy), a lot of power is concentrated in the elected representatives, and in the institutions of bureaucracy or management they set up.



So don't we simply need to "fix" democracy, by ensuring greater participation?

It is not that simple. Many struggles do demand more participation, more accountability, more rights, and more freedom from authoritarian rule. These are important. But we also need to ask whether the dominant form of democracy itself has become too closely tied to centralized states, industrial economies, experts, elections, and bureaucracies. In many cases, "more democracy" may still leave most people without real power over the conditions of their lives, including over who controls the economy. For us, it is not simply more participation inside the same system, but a deeper shift in where power resides.

So when we talk of 'radical democracy' (some people use the terms 'direct democracy' or 'participatory democracy', but for us 'radical' more aptly conveys the rooted and grounded nature), we are emphasizing the locus of power for decision-making is in the people – in collectives where everyone is able to participate, at least for decisions that are directly related to their lives. So...

(interrumping)

Wait, wait, you seem to be using the word 'radical' in some other sense – does it not mean being an extremist?

No, not at all. It means (in its original Latin form), going to the roots, or rooted. So in this sense, we are saying that democracy in its truest meaning should be about going to our own roots as humans, where it is our birthright to be able to make decisions for ourselves, and which recognise that we are part of nature, not apart from it.

Why should we hand this over to a small set of people – especially in the context of large territories like countries or nation-states, where such rulers may not even know the conditions of living, the dreams and aspirations, the talents of many of those they are taking decisions for?

So, as we were saying, radical democracy is where we can all take part in governance. At its most basic level, this would be in our village communities, our urban neighbourhoods, our collective institutions, where we can meet face-to-face for deliberation and decision-making, and where nature around us, which we are embedded in, can also participate.

Ok, but even in such a situation, there is surely no guarantee that everyone can take equal part? After all, communities are not homogenous, and there are so many old and new inequalities and discriminations within them?

Absolutely right! Gender, class, caste, and other forms of marginalization or negative discrimination (including against the rest of nature) can work against equal access to decision-making democracy. This is where, according to us, at least four crucial ingredients make up the recipe of radical democracy:

• **Everyone must have the equal right to participate in decision-making**. Collectives may want to specify some sort of minimum age for this, but we would argue that even children need to be involved in some way, e.g. through their own assemblies that can put opinions into the main decision-making forums.

• **Everyone must be able to build the capacity to participate meaningfully**. In so many contexts, we see that women, or marginalized classes/castes, are present in decision-making forums but are not able to participate. Building such capacity may require separate processes, such as forums for women to empower themselves.

• **There must be easily accessible forums for decision-making**. Several factors are important: proximity, accessibility to those with disabilities, an atmosphere of safety, etc.

• **There has to be wisdom or maturity in the decision-making**. This could mean, for instance, that the majority does not impose itself on minorities, but also that people accept the responsibility of participating, rather than passively leaving everything to a few individuals. It would also mean enabling the voice of the rest of nature to come in through appropriate means and methods, such as having spokespersons for other species.

Now, getting to these four crucial ingredients is not easy, nor do they necessarily occur simultaneously. Some collectives may start with one and gradually work in the others, or they may start with several at the same time. Several processes, such as separate empowerment institutions and activities by/with marginalized sections, may be needed on the way. So, for instance …

(interrumping)

Wait, before you talk about methods, could you describe the terms 'autonomy' and 'self-determination', which you also use?

Wow, you interrupt a lot! But good, it makes the conversation livelier. Yes, 'autonomy' and 'self-determination' are also crucial practices and concepts that are complementary to or help substantiate, but not necessarily the

same as 'radical democracy'. Also, different peoples and communities in different parts of the world prefer different terms, especially as expressed in their own languages. In Abya Yala, for instance...

Who? Where? You folks use all these new terms...

He he, sorry, actually the opposite of new! Abya Yala is the Indigenous term for Latin America; and Turtle Island for North America. You know, the colonial period saw the erasure and change of lots of local and ancient names for places, and a part of our struggles is to reclaim our own names ... ok, but that's a different story. Or actually, it is not.

When people seek autonomy or self-determination, they are asserting that they want to be independent to decide their own present and future, taking into account their way of seeing the world and the construction of a collective memory based on their understanding of their historical and current context, their dreams and visions, their own knowledges and ways of being (including how they name their landscapes), and what they want to accept from the rest of the world. It would be, as some peoples of Abya Yala say, to *"walk with the past ahead of us"*.

Autonomy is relational, meaning that people are seeking the freedom to self-determine in relation to something external or larger (e.g. a nation-state).

Autonomy is therefore not only about political independence or cultural recognition. It is also about recovering the capacities – or moving from nouns to verbs, as our friend and elder Gustavo Esteva used to say – to provide care, decide, heal, learn, cultivate , repair, defend and celebrate life together. Many modern institutions promise inclusion through services, programs, markets or even expert-designed solutions, but these can also make people dependent on systems they do not control. Autonomy asks how communities can regain practical

power over the conditions of their everyday lives. Radical democracy in itself may not be relational in that the collective practicing it is not necessarily doing it in relation to an entity outside of or larger than it. In today's world, thought complete isolation is extremely rare (some Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation in the Amazon may be such examples), so the practice of radical democracy also is, for the most part, an assertion vis-à-vis an external or larger entity.

Hmm... you're beginning to lose me, with all this abstraction. Can you give some examples of radical democracy and autonomy?

Sure. As mentioned above, such practices and concepts have existed for centuries, perhaps millennia, many pre-dating the Greek. Several of these are likely to be continuing in current times, albeit in modified or altered forms, and often hidden by the modern forms of governance that are constitutional or legally mandated in liberal democracies. For instance, in trans-Himalayan parts of northern India, systems of headmen selected by the village assembly, and answerable to it, have existed for centuries before the institutions of self-governance that India's Constitution has mandated over the last few decades.

More recent innovations to this ancient theme have also sprung up in various regions. Perhaps the most famous are the Zapatista autonomous region in Mexico, and the Kurdish Rojava region of democratic confederalism in North & East Syria. Both assert complete freedom from the nation-states in which they are located, though there is continued relationship of conflict and tension, and some ongoing negotiation. The struggle for Indigenous self-determination has also enabled several peoples in Abya Yala (Latin America), Turtle Island (North America), Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Australia, to be relatively or (more rarely) completely autonomous of the nation-states they are located within. Many Indigenous peoples and other local communities across the world self-govern what they call 'territories of life'. The Guna (Kuna) people in Panama, since 1925, have practiced self-determination and self-governance through the Guna General Congress, enabling effective territorial control, and serving as a global benchmark for the practical application of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) as a fundamental and non-negotiable safeguard to defend community sovereignty against external pressures and interventions in their ancestral territories.

Some traditional communities in central, north and north-eastern India also self-govern, but continue to relate to the state in various ways; as do Indigenous peoples of the Arctic. In Taiwan, the contemporary form of tribal community councils has evolved

from Indigenous peoples' movements of resistance to, and collective negotiation, with the colonial government.

Struggles for radical democracy and autonomy are also found in highly industrialised or urbanized societies. Assertions of neighbourhood democracy, consisting of regular assemblies of all residents, local or participatory budgeting and planning, are even found in towns and cities. For instance, the self-governing township of Christiania in Copenhagen has declared itself an experiment in anarchy, for several decades, though it has to continuously negotiate with the city government. In Acaptazingo, in Mexico City, residents have built forms of self-governance through assemblies, mutual aid, collective work and re-commoning practical knowledges. Today they harvest food, water, energy and security from their communal practice. Such experiences show that various degrees of autonomy can also be built in dense urban contexts marked by housing struggles, insecurity, and state neglect. At the same time, they remind us that autonomy is never perfect or finished: it has to confront internal conflicts, questions of durability, and pressures from institutions that may try to absorb, discipline, or criminalize it. In this sense, radical democracy is a relational process, constantly shaped through internal dynamics of the collective or community, its relations with other collectives and communities, and its interplay with the formal architectures of state power in so far as these continue to exist.

It is important to recognise that practices and concepts of radical democracy and autonomy are very diverse across the world, with no one 'model' encompassing them all. However, they all have some common values that we are explaining in this document.

The dividing line between liberal and radical democracy can sometimes be fuzzy. For instance, in some countries like Switzerland, significant decision-making happens at the level of individual settlements, coordinating with each other at County levels. But these are still within the framework of national Swiss law, so autonomy is restricted. In most countries, while the state promises individual liberty, human rights and protecting private properties to its citizens (not necessary delivering these, of course!), at the same time, it takes control over the commons and deprives communities of their collective rights as the custodians of these commons.

Ok, you mentioned processes and methods used to achieve radical democracy, autonomy – can you explain? And who takes a lead in all this?

The examples given above, and many more around the world, display a wide array of processes, methods, and tools. We won't describe all of them here, but some worth mentioning:

• **Consensus**: Rather than rely on majority opinion (which is what electoral or liberal democracies tend to do), radical democracy emphasizes deliberative processes that enable voices of all to be considered and respected, including those of dissent. A decision is only taken when all those participating have agreed to it, or, at the least, have agreed to not stand in its way even if they have a contrary view. This could of course also be influenced by invisible or informal hierarchies, which underlines the crucial importance of capacity and of dealing with inequities, mentioned above and below.

• **Subsidiary empowerment**: Given histories of marginalization and inequity, in many communities there have been separate processes of building capacity and confidence, e.g. independent women's assemblies.

• **Informed decision-making**: Full information about the context and implications of a decision is given in advance, and is also explained during a decision-making event.

• **Facilitation**: Collectives often choose one or more people who can be trusted to be fair facilitators/ enablers. Such a person enables and helps conversations and decision-making processes to move forward, These can be rotated so that no one individual concentrates power.

• **Study circles**: Many collectives have set up processes of sub-groups that will study a particular issue in depth, and present it before the collective for a fully informed decision.

On the question of 'leadership', there is no single answer. One thing that seems to be common to all or most radical democracy initiatives is the agency of historically marginalised sections. Women in particular have played crucial roles. What is also important is that 'leadership' is less about dominant power, and more about enablers to help catalyze society, who listen to people who are otherwise silenced and enable them to be heard, or who, as the Zapatista say, 'lead by following'.

Many concepts of democracy are very human-centred. Is your vision different?

Indeed. Our idea of radical democracy, derived from the kind of initiatives mentioned above, brings all of nature (including the 'more-than-human'), into governance. Most or possibly all Indigenous peoples have always done this, in various forms of what some of us call 'earthy

governance'. Governance emerges not from centralized authority but from the recognition of interdependence between people, ancestors and descendants, spirits, and ecosystems. The whole of nature plays a fundamental role in shaping political order, as rivers, mountains, and forests are often seen as subjects with agency rather than objects/ resources to be exploited and managed. As Taiwan's Indigenous people say: *"we are embedded in inter-species habitats and connected to all beings around us as a community. This is implemented with life rituals and seasonal ceremonies around the year, and when we make any decision, all beings should be considered."*

This re-centering of democracy around ecological and spiritual relations opens a path to rethink politics as something grounded in reciprocity and care rather than domination and control. The community or collective in this sense, is not only that of humans, but of all life in the area, and even of spirits of the landscape/seascape (hence the term mentioned above: 'territories of life'). In doing so, they remind us that genuine democracy grows not in parliaments but in natural ecosystems and communal assemblies where human life is inseparable from the vitality of nature.

What you describe seems feasible at small scales. How will larger levels of governance and coordination work with such an approach? Would you not need some form of government body or state for this?

Good point. There are a number of conceptual and some practical examples of such governance at scales much larger than a few settlements. For instance, in the case of the Zapatista and Kurdistan, the attempt is to coordinate over larger landscapes through representative institutions. These are made up of delegates selected by each local unit of radical democracy, often chosen on the basis of equal representation of genders, ethnicities, etc.

Now, you would wonder, how are these different from what exists in liberal democracies today, where institutions made up of elected representatives govern larger areas – what we have above called the 'state')? In fact, there has been ongoing debate on whether 'representation' is compatible with democracy at all, since institutions comprising of representatives or delegates would be one-step removed from the direct processes on the ground. But, in so far as larger landscapes have to be governed, some form of representation is necessary.

In radical democracy, there is an attempt to not allow these institutions to concentrate power – not, therefore, become a 'state' in its conventional sense. This is done through many methods: frequently rotating representatives or delegates, recalling them if they are not carrying out the mandate given to them, doing public audits of such institutions, making such delegates go through regular 'education' processes to re-instill core values of radical democracy, and so on. Of course, by no means is this completely successful, several factors such as traditional hierarchies and maybe even some elements of human nature (such as ego and greed) can be challenges.

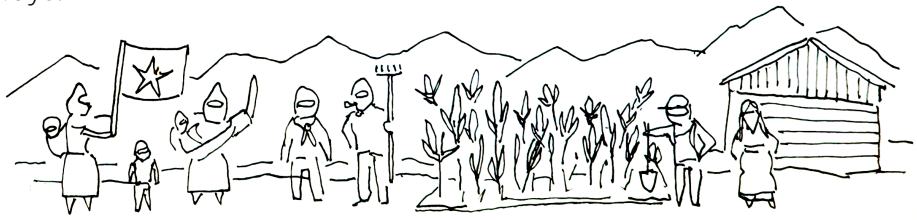
Perhaps the question then is not about scaling-up all the solutions that work at the small scale, but to think about how to connect and coordinate across larger scales, without losing the human scale at which people can deliberate, disagree, correct mistakes, and remain accountable to one another. Radical democracy means ensuring that wider coordination remains rooted in local assemblies, recallable delegates, rotation of responsibilities, public accountability, and the capacity of communities to withdraw consent when institutions begin to concentrate power.

In Kurdistan's practice and philosophy, such landscape-level governance is called 'democratic confederalism'. Gandhi spoke about decision-making as expanding concentric circles around the basic units of 'village republics'. Other regions or worldviews have used other terms and approaches.

These initiatives present powerful examples of organizing from below, offering visions of pluriversal radical democracies, and of connecting across landscapes and biocultural regions including beyond nation-states. They open up the possibilities of existing and being in their own ways.

Wait, so are you saying that, in such a system, we don't need a state, at all? Could this not lead to anarchy? Who makes laws – or do you not need them?

There is no simple answer to this. Movements like Kurdistan and Zapatista, and other Indigenous and peasant peoples, and revolutionaries like Gandhi and Ocalan, perhaps even Marx (in some of what he wrote, especially around the Paris commune experience), believe that there is no need for a centralised state for people to be able to govern themselves. In one sense, these thinker-practioners are anarchists – but please note that the popular concept of anarchy (an=without; archia=ruler) as disorder and mayhem is a distortion of its original meaning. Rather, it denotes a process of self-governance (from small to fairly large scales, as in the



examples given above) without a state, but by no means does it signify an absence of any norms or rules by which people govern themselves. Said simply, anarchy is not the same as chaos or disorder. There may or may not be any statutory laws, laid down or formally recognised by a central body, but there are certainly customary (written or unwritten) norms that are collectively decided upon (some call these 'social contracts' although the term is now inevitably associated with the nation state, which makes it somewhat problematic), and methods of justice and arbitration that are also transparent and democratic.
But of course, this could be considered a long-term or ideal vision. In the here and now, we are located within nation-states, which are territories with defined and identifiable national boundaries governed by a state (government and other relevant entities). We cannot suddenly wish away the state. Even if we can, as do the Zapatista, live autonomously resisting or explicitly not recognizing the state, there will come points when some negotiation, some dialogue, or even some confrontation will be required. Although Ocalan is clear about the need and possibility of stateless societies, he accepted that in the interim, there will have to be negotiations and confrontations with the governments of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, to enable the Kurds to live autonomous lives. He advocates for processes of strengthening the social system through self-governance and self-sufficiency, rendering the state unnecessary.

Such relations with the state may seem to be similar to those which citizens engage within liberal democracy, in so far as there are negotiations for rights, freedoms, spaces for participation, mechanisms of ensuring accountability, etc. However, there is a fundamental difference: in liberal democracy, there is an acceptance of the state as necessary; in radical democracy, it is accepted only as a current reality but which in the longer term must cease to exist. We may struggle to create more spaces, transform the state from within, but we are doing these only insofar as they would further crack open its edifice, even as we gain the capacity, and maturity to self-govern. Such positions can be messy, constantly shifting, and non-linear; what is important is, beyond the immediate practice of struggle and negotiation, what the long-term vision is.

Note that this is not only different from conservative or authoritarian notions of governance, but also from the conventional Leftist ideas of 'capturing power or the state'. History seems to show that even the most revolutionary party, or the one with the best intentions, when it forms the government of a nation-state, ends up reproducing many of the flaws of liberal democracies: centralizing power, compromising on ideals to stay in power, distancing itself from ground realities, retaining neo-liberal economic models (even in the name of 'socialism' or the "fight against poverty") by

striking deals with old or new elites and undermining grassroots and popular movements, and so on. These failures not only apply to the traditional Leftist strategies of the twentieth century but also the 'progressive' governments of recent decades. The transformative choice is not between a right-wing or left-wing party being in power (though the latter is likely to be much better for welfare, etc), but between such centralized power, and power that is radically distributed amongst people (and nature) as a whole.

So, are you saying that in the long-term, nation-states themselves cease to exist? No more countries? Kind of like what John Lennon sang in his revolutionary song '*Imagine*'?

'Imagine there's no country', he sang. Yes, something like that, if we equate 'country' to 'nation-state'. But then, humans will still need territorial markers and borders, for governance; as does even nature! A growing movement is towards 'biocultural regionalism' or 'bioregionalism', in which political governance is re-oriented to be more mindful and respectful of natural flows and connectivity, linked to cultural and economic flows, and even boundaries that are defined by these. For instance, a governance unit could be the watershed of a river, with all settlements within that watershed being part of some local-to-landscape governance structure. These might intersect with some other such units, defined by mountain ranges, or the territory of a nomadic pastoral or fishing community, etc. We are not going into detail on this here (already this note is too long!), but suffice it to say that radical democracy does require us to rethink current nation-state boundaries, or other political boundaries that have, for historical reasons (often colonialism), disrupted natural, cultural, and people's own economic flows.

So, if there are no nation-states, what happens to the United Nations? How do you do governance at the global level?

Very hard to say! The United Nations came up in a certain context, post the European-originated war called World

War II, and centred around nation-states, though with significant opportunities for civil society participation. It has been very useful in establishing progressive international agreements on human rights, environment, arbitration, and so on. But it has also failed badly on many counts, especially the currently burning issues such as the blatantly illegal military aggressions, such as the genocide perpetrated in Gaza by Israel with the support of the United States and the subsequent attack on Iran by these same two states; the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the situations in the Congo, etc.; the climate crisis (after 30 Conferences of the Parties, no solution is in sight) and global inequaty (which has reached historic highs).. So, proponents of radical democracy and ecological justice argue that we need new configurations for global governance, that put peoples of the world, and nature, at the centre of decision-making. What could this look like?

There are many proposals, such as that of a World Democratic Confederalism made by Ocalan or others that speak of an internationalism but this time built from "the many belows" or from the ground up. Such global governance institutions could be built on local and bioculture-regional units of radical democracy, with peoples of the world nominating delegates to wider and wider levels of governance.
Will these work? Will they be able to confront the destructive forces of economic globalisation? What would local-to-global economic and political connections look like? No-one can say for sure, but they would certainly be worth trying, perhaps at regional levels first and then up to the globe, with a lot of feedback mechanisms to learn from mistakes and take corrective steps along the way.

Those of us who are proposing this discussion on strengthening local government processes, self-governance, and various expressions of "radical democracies" are aware that the course of history unfolds in contradictory directions and that a struggle is underway. Viewed from a less optimistic perspective and considering the power dynamics of the past centuries, one might think that what is happening now is the opposite of what we desire: greater concentration of power, more impersonal and dehumanized government structures, strengthened technocracies, and greater verticality and centralization. This could lead to further destruction of locally autonomous ways of life, and building on colonial nation-states and supranational structures, head towards some form of unified world government. This is all the more reason for people's movements everywhere to get greater clarity on what we want when we say 'democracy', and unite our efforts at making this a powerful counter-current.

Ok, you mentioned processes and methods used to achieve radical democracy, autonomy - can you explain? And who takes a lead in all this?

Radical democracy as a political act cannot succeed unless there are also fundamental transformations in all aspects of human life in an integrated, intersectional way – including the economic, socio-cultural, and technological. This note is not the place to go into these aspects in detail. In other places, GTA or its constituents have outlined how these areas would need to be interwoven in order to bring about such a transformation[2]. But in brief, the radical democratization of the economy will entail producers taking back control over means of production, and consumers over what/how consumption takes place; the re-commoning of land, nature, knowledge; recognizing and valuing labour of various kinds including what goes into reproduction; prioritizing relations of caring and sharing and mutual aid above monetary and financial ones; radical localization that helps achieve high levels of self-reliance for basic needs, while also welcoming people from 'outside' who are need to be part of the local region; well-being indicators that replace GDP and are locally relevant rather than universal.

One reason this is so important is that liberal democracy has often separated "politics" from "the economy." People may be formally equal as citizens, while having very little say over land, work, food, housing, energy, technology, or the organization of production and consumption, not to mention the massive socio-economic inequalities that it seems to tolerate. Radical democracy cannot accept this separation. If the economy shapes everyday life, then the economy must also be brought back under collective, ecological, and ethical decision-making.

Of course, radical democracy and autonomy are not anti-knowledge, anti-technology, or anti-education; they ask who controls tools, infrastructures, learning, and institutions, at what scale, and with what purpose. Some technologies, cultural and spiritual practices, and forms of learning strengthen people's capacities to meet their needs, care for each other, repair their worlds, and govern collectively, while others deepen dependency on 'experts', corporations, states, external markets, dogmatic religious institutions or other such systems that most of us have no control over. For this reason, radical democracy cannot be reduced to decision-making procedures: it must also transform social relations, culture, education, care, and everyday life, confronting established hierarchies of gender, caste, race, class, age, ability, and colonial domination. And it must do so through a diversity of creative, innovative methods that are accessible to all, including the use of multiple art forms.

A radical democratic approach asks whether any tool, school, institution, or infrastructure expands autonomy, sufficiency, commoning, dignity, and justice, or whether it reproduces extraction, inequality, dependence, and centralized control. None of this means over-romanticizing community or autonomy; these are unfinished practices of collective learning, correction, responsibility, care, and struggle.

And, of course, all of this needs to happen within the bounds of what nature can provide us, what at global levels are called 'planetary limits'. Let us keep in mind that 'economy' and 'ecology' come from the same root, the Greek word 'oikos', which means home. So if ecology is about understanding (and through that understanding, respecting) home, and economy is about managing it, surely the former should precede or subsume the latter? This also relates to the 'earthy governance' point made above. Perhaps the rest of the world can learn from many Indigenous peoples, peasants and other local communities who still, despite enormous counter-pressures, sustain elements of living with and within nature.

It is said that power is essentially corrupting, or dominating. In RD/A, how is this avoided?

This depends on how one conceives of, or defines, power. Most of us tend to think of it as the ability to make others do what they may not want to do, to put it a bit crudely. Or of the ability of the state to crush dissent. But we could also think of it as the capacity to do good ... in this sense, power 'with' or 'for' rather than power 'over'. There is no homogenous way that power operates, but in a radical democracy, power is broadly rooted in the ground, suffused with care, subordinated to feedback from people and the rest of nature. It is also about the power to defend one's rights against domination and oppression. There is no authority without responsibility. With appropriate forums, the agreements, organization and maturity (as mentioned above), this becomes a responsible, caring exercise of power.

Ah, interesting … normally, you folks talk only about rights – human rights, rights of nature … but now you've also mentioned that power can be responsible. So, does radical democracy embed a notion of responsibility?

Yes indeed. Many Indigenous peoples have lived with the principle of responsibility towards the earth and each other, as being an integral part of well-being. They have evolved sophisticated systems that respond to the benefits as also the uncertainties of natural rhythms and ecosystem cycles, which also remind them of limits and therefore the need for taboos and restrictions in behaviour.
Gandhi, when asked what he thought of human rights, said that first one must talk about duties, then about rights. Worldviews such as swaraj consider rights and responsibilities, freedoms and restraints, as two sides of the same coin; or many Indigenous peoples do not even talk in such language, but rather about following rhythms of nature and the limits to human activity that these entail, enforced by taboos and customs.
Peter Kropotkin in the seminal book Mutual Aid, argued that collective work and helping each other has been an important form of organising autonomous societies. A lot of Kropotkin's arguments came from observing the rest of nature and ancient human societies, as to how cooperation was given priority, and not competition, which many Western[3] theorists essentially focused on. An organised self-ruling community is not seeking individualistic freedom, but is rather seeking autonomy with responsibility towards all of life. And as mentioned above, this includes not only the world of humans, but all other species and elements of nature. In this sense many ancient notions of governance are much deeper and nuanced than liberal democracy.

What about sustaining such an initiative beyond one generation of founders, how is inter-generational transmission ensured?

This is a crucial question, as often a very radical initiative falters when its original 'founders' are gone. But this also relates to the need to radically restructure 'education', towards more nature- and community-based learning. Here, one can learn from the diverse ways in which Indigenous peoples and other traditional communities have passed on ways of being, doing, knowing, and behaving from generation to generation. Oral and visual forms have been crucial, including story-telling, songs, dance, theatre, art, 'schools' of learning embedded within communities. These spaces are important because they represent a collective memory as well as a shared worldview. To this can be added the newer techniques,

including in writing, audio-visual and digital formats. Most important are processes of enabling new generations to build the capacity and the passion of continuing what their elders may have started, but also the space to innovate and evolve with their own ideas and practices, and what they learn from other societies. In many radical democracy initiatives, children and youth are encouraged to sit in on assemblies and other collective events, to absorb aspects that would be hard to 'teach' in formal settings. Festivals and rituals become times for youth who have gone out for education or jobs to come back and reconnect with community and place. In some, there are institutions of only children or youth, that 'mimic' the adult governance forums, enabling them to learn processes like consensus decision-making, resolving disputes, challenging unjust hierarchies, and bringing in all available knowledge. The rapidity with which things are changing in current times, makes such inter-generational continuity especially hard – but for this reason, it is all the more important to build these processes into the governance and cultural core of transformatory initiatives.

NOTES

[1] Originally meaning legal resident of a city or town, it now denotes such a resident of a country.

[2] See, for instance, see GTA's common criteria for understanding radical alternatives: *https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/weavers:criteria*; for a more detailed treatment of intersectional transformation, see *https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Alternatives-Framework-7th-Avatar-digital-v1.4.pdf*

[3] We use this term to denote certain trends in ideological and material forces arising in the geographical West, which have become dominant in the last couple of centuries, including rationalism to the exclusion of other ways of knowing, separation of humans from nature and treating the latter as commodities ('resources'), reductionism of the whole to the sum of its individual parts, and so on. Graeber's sharp take on the notion of 'the West' is worth looking into: *https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/david-graeber*

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