

**Reviewer: Brian Martin**

*Is Democracy Possible? The Alternative to Electoral Politics* by John Burnheim

Nearly everyone, from communists to capitalists, says they are in favor of democracy. But "democracy" is interpreted in various ways, and in the dominant versions--so-called representative democracy in the West and so-called people's democracy in the East--rule by the people is highly attenuated if not eliminated altogether.

Anarchists support a democracy in which people have a direct say in how their lives are run. This can be called participatory democracy, direct democracy or self-management, among other terms. But what does it mean in practice?

One anarchist answer is that the form of social organization cannot be specified in advance, but will arise in the course of actual struggles, as has occurred in historical episodes such as the Paris Commune and the Spanish collectives. This answer is perhaps too easy, as it sidesteps the challenge of spelling out long-term visions so they can be incorporated as part of day-to-day struggles.

Another answer looks to various styles of small-scale cooperative organization, linked together through federations. For groups of dozens and perhaps hundreds or even thousands of people, cooperatives or collectives using consensus methods are a well-known and viable form of organization (also having well-known problems).

It is at a larger scale, from thousands to millions of people, that the greatest uncertainties and difficulties arise. High-level decision making is important even under self-management, for example, to deal with potentially global environmental issues. One answer is the delegate system, in which the elected delegates are always accountable and recallable by those they represent. But this seems much too close to traditional representative democracy. What structural mechanisms are there to ensure that delegates do not come disproportionately from power seekers, and do not use their positions to create new hierarchical structures?

John Burnheim's book is a valuable contribution to the debate on the role and forms of democracy for a large complex society. In brief, he argues for a

jury or lot system of decision making in both politics and economics as a complete alternative to the state and bureaucracy.

Burnheim writes as a philosopher, not an anarchist. Yet his argument fits neatly in the anarchist tradition. His first chapter presents the case against the state. The section headings suggest the line of argument: "The State Is Unnecessary"; "Why We Should Get Rid of the State"; "Democracy Versus the State."

Bureaucracy, as a way of organizing the work of people, is the foundation of the state. Therefore it is appropriate that Burnheim next presents an argument against bureaucracy, both state bureaucracy and corporate bureaucracy.

He then turns to political decision making. He argues against voting and electoral politics before presenting what he sees as the alternative: a diversity of functional bodies, the members of which are chosen by lot. This can be called statistical democracy, Athenian-style democracy, the jury system, or the lot system, among other terms. Burnheim introduces his own word, "demarchy," for this alternative.

There are many ways that a lot system can be organized. Burnheim argues that each decision-making body would have a specified domain, such as public transport, libraries, or building regulations. There would be no central body making far-reaching decisions. The membership of each decision-making body would be randomly selected from volunteers in a way that resulted in a statistical representation of the population from which it was drawn--by gender, ethnic origin, age, etc.--thus avoiding an imbalance due to certain types of people being more likely to volunteer. By selecting only from volunteers, people would be obtained who feel strongly about the particular issues involved and are probably quite knowledgeable. Members of the bodies would gradually be replaced after fixed terms, thus giving a large proportion of the population a direct involvement.

While these bodies would make decisions, they would have no executive or administrative power in the sense we know it today. Since there is no state--no military, no administrative bureaucracy--the representative bodies would depend on cooperation to implement any decisions reached. If they came to some highly unpopular result--and could not convince people of its merit--then non-cooperation would make that decision ineffective.

Furthermore, there is nothing in Burnheim's picture to inhibit the expression of opinion and the organization of activities outside of the statistically chosen representative bodies. Political debate would continue as people saw fit. But instead of appealing to top-level elected authorities backed by the power of the law, the police and the army, political debate would serve to establish general opinions which would, most likely, be represented sooner or later on the functional bodies. The bodies would have authority in this situation only inasmuch as they continued to convince people of the soundness of their decisions.

Burnheim also envisages high-level bodies, for example, to hear appeals about the structure of the bodies themselves. He thinks that the members of these higher-level bodies should be chosen by lot from candidates nominated by colleagues on the first-order bodies.

Demarchy also can be applied to economics. Burnheim argues that economic production could be organized with demarchic bodies making decisions about markets in land, money and labor. The application of this idea to land is the most straightforward, and builds on the ideas of Henry George. Burnheim proposes a range of specialized authorities charged with regulating specified resources, such as areas of farmland, forests, and water. The membership of these bodies would be chosen by lot, as before. Each trustee body would be able to allow uses of the resource in exchange for rents. Thus the bodies would be able to take into account environmental effects, use of nonrenewable resources and so forth. The rents would replace taxation, which would no longer exist due to the lack of a state and bureaucracy. The unified treatment of politics and economics is a great advantage, since it overcomes the usual focus on political democracy which leaves unexamined the autocratic relations found in most workplaces.

This book is not light reading. It is written in the rather abstract style of political philosophy, and does not get down to many practical details or provide historical examples. But while it requires concentrated attention, it is not obscure; it is clear and accessible and has little jargon. The advantage of this style is that the key issues are highlighted.

Two questions spring to mind. First, is demarchy desirable? That of course is something for each person to decide for him/herself. Personally, I am sympathetic precisely because there will be strong objections to demarchy from elites of all varieties, not only current politicians and top bureaucrats, but also powerful figures within alternative movements. Demarchy is a threat to all these people because the lot system allows those who are less confident, eloquent or charismatic to have an equal chance to be on decision-making bodies. I can think of no greater recommendation for a proposed system of political and economic organization than the opposition of power brokers from all sides of the political spectrum.

The second question: is demarchy possible? Burnheim makes some preliminary suggestions for strategy, such as promoting demarchic practices among quasi-nongovernmental organizations (the so-called quangos). Other possibilities are trade unions--where a lot system can undercut the power of factions and empower the rank and file--and services such as schooling and medicine, but he recognizes that all the major political and economic forces are moving toward more centralization and bureaucratization of power, quite opposite to what is proposed by demarchy.

The challenge for activists raised by Burnheim's book is to try to turn a good idea for democratic politics and economics into practical campaigns. This is an enormous challenge, since most political organizing works within the present structures rather than trying to change those structures. Anarchists are among the few critical of the "system" who do not try to use the electoral system to elect "better" candidates or build a movement that will eventually result in a mass party "of the people." While these aims are worthy enough in themself-

ves, they assume that the electoral system is the path for democratic politics rather than looking for more democratic alternatives to electoral methods.

A beginning step is to experiment with demarchic methods in alternative groups themselves, or at least the ones that are large or complex enough to require more than small-scale consensus methods. That itself will be hard enough to promote, since some powerful figures in alternative groups will present the usual arguments against the lot system. The great advantage of demarchy as an idea and as the basis for campaigns is that its appeal can, in principle, cut across the usual political divisions.

Statistical democracy can never be by itself a solution to all the ills of the world. It can only be one more ideal or campaign focus among many other struggles. But it does offer the prospect, after much more theoretical elaboration and practical experimentation, of providing the basis for a challenge to present structures of electoral politics.

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