

Letters

Dear *Kick It Over*:

Nils R. Connor's critical comments about demarchy (*KIO* #31) are a welcome contribution to discussion about ways of organizing society without domination.

Briefly, in demarchy, the state and bureaucracies are eliminated. In local communities, decisions would be made by a network of "functional groups," each one dealing with a topic such as education, transport, manufacturing, etc. Members of the groups would be chosen randomly from volunteers for strictly limited terms. (See my article in *KIO* #30 or, for a fuller account, John Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible?* (London, Polity Press, 1985).)

In my view, because demarchy is based on abolishing the state and empowering the people, it fits within a broad definition of anarchism. Connor thinks not. He compares the etymology of "demarchy" (rule by the people) with that of "anarchy" (no rule) and concludes that demarchy is not anarchy. I don't think this analysis of the roots of words is very helpful. We should look at the way society is organized rather than the way words are constructed.

Every society has to make decisions. The question is, how? Possibilities are by dictators, by experts, by elected representatives, by bureaucrats, by mass meetings, by consensus and by randomly selected groups. Every system has strengths and weaknesses, and every system involves the exercise of power or persuasion, or both. Anarchists generally want to reduce the power of the few over the many and increase the role of rational persuasion.

In demarchy, the power of members of functional groups is limited in various ways: the length of service is limited, the issues addressed are limited in scope, and there is no mandate (since being randomly selected gives one no mandate from the community). Furthermore, there is no state or military to enforce decisions made by the groups: the decisions will only be followed if people agree to do so. Why would they? Precisely because those selected have credibility from having no vested interests in the results, and from having studied and discussed the issues in some depth.

Connor thinks demarchy may be inefficient, because the most appropriate person may not be selected. This is a standard objection to popular participation in decision-making. In my view, a bit of inefficiency is a small price to pay for promoting participation.

Connor is worried that statistical representation may result in minorities having undue sway. There are two possible solutions. First, those who are concerned about this could encourage suitable people to nominate for groups to redress the balance. Second, the problems could be taken to the "metacommittees" (a nice coinage by Connor) for solution.

The metacommittees, or second-order groups, deal with procedural issues such as how many people are selected to

groups. Burnheim suggested that members of metacommittees be drawn from those serving on normal first-level groups. Connor is legitimately worried about concentration of power in those who are most experienced, and suggests that the metacommittees be selected randomly from all people. It's a good idea. The main disadvantage is probably less efficiency! This is surely something that can be experimented with.

On one point, Connor has misunderstood demarchy. He believes that the randomly selected groups manage or oversee bureaucracies. Actually, in demarchy all bureaucracies are abolished. The groups implement decisions themselves -- although just how they would do this is something that needs more attention. In any case, the elimination of bureaucracies dramatically reduces the potential for domination.

Next, what about the military? This is a central issue. Armies and armed police are generally forces that serve domination by the few. Methods of nonviolent struggle, by contrast, can be used by anyone, and thus are much more compatible with participation and equality. I believe that demarchy is most compatible with nonviolent defence and nonviolent policing. There is not space here to deal with the many arguments about violence, nonviolence and social structure. Some of them are addressed in my book *Social Defence, Social Change* (London: Freedom Press, 1993).

Connor favours a society based on every individual making a contract with every other individual. In a community of 10,000 people, that's a lot of contracts. Who will enforce them? How are decisions about collective issues (transport, pollution, technical standards) made? In mass meetings? Doesn't a contract system give undue power to those with scarce skills who are willing to threaten to opt out?

Of course, any proposed alternative to present society can be confronted with a host of in-principle objections. The danger is that alternatives may be rejected before they've had an opportunity to be thought through, tested, revised, refined and adapted. Demarchy, I believe, is sufficiently promising to deserve much more examination from anarchists.

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Hi *KIO* Comrades!

Shell 63 here. Cheers for the ten copies of *KIO* #30. They went down well, especially since they arrived in the midst of Federal Election Fever. People were getting excited about that great non-event, the national election of March 13. And, afterwards, they heaved a sigh of relief because good