

What do we mean by 'Direct' Democracy?

One of the most exciting features of the recent 'Occupy' movement has been the conscious effort to rethink and rework our modes of political relation and organization. Across the many Occupy sites, forms of democracy are being enacted which explicitly contest the idea that representative democracy is the only, or the best, shape democracy can take. The Occupy sites are thus experimenting with what can be called 'direct' democracy or 'participatory' democracy, in which there are no leaders and no representatives, and where all members have a voice and all members can contribute to the final decision. Many occupy sites also employ a consensus model of decision-making, in which factions are not pitted against each other to accumulate majority votes, but where all members must reach a common ground. However, the meaning of direct democracy and the reasons why it should be championed as truly democratic are still unclear. What do we mean when we say direct democracy? What vision of politics and what assumptions of the political body constitute this concept?

The critique of representative democracy is often taken to be a case of the critique of representation in general. A representation is always inadequate to what it represents, because it is always a partial and selective representation of what it represents. A representative, such as an elected official, does not represent the people, or even her constituency, but only represents a particular segment of the people. As such, the decisions of the representatives are decisions made in the name of the people and have consequences for the people as a whole, but actually represent only a skewed segment of the people. The Occupy movement has criticized representatives on precisely this basis; politicians do not represent the people, they represent corporate interests, the 1%, or the

capitalist system itself. We cannot simply get 'better' politicians or political representatives; the problem is in the nature of representative democracy itself.

On this basis, the call for direct democracy is made. In such a model, the people and the decisions the people make are not to be mediated by a representative. The people will make its own decisions, each person will have a voice and each person will have a say in the decision. In this way, the problem of representation can be avoided altogether. However, direct democracy does not dispense

however, attempts to enact a 'pure' self-representation: a representation which perfectly reproduces the political body within a decision without loss.

Despite the admirable attempts to enact direct democracy and consensus decision-making, I think we should be wary that pure self-representation is possible. I am not simply pointing out that a certain person or group of people do not 'get their way' because of consensus. Rather, the problem is that there is a necessary loss of the multiple under the unity that any representational model entails. If we wanted to provide an explanation of how the multiple is diminished under the unity, it would have to be done in terms of the content on the multiple itself. That is, to understand the loss, we would have to look at how the desires, alliances, and subject positions of the people interact with each other to engender the unity. In this way, there is a real danger of the emergence of new forms of power and new forms of systematic marginalization when the multiple represents itself under a unified decision. Of course, any system will have its problems, but if we think that the representations of direct democracy are pure, we will end up ignoring the problems and fail to do anything to account for their necessary failure. We should not, therefore,

automatically believe that formal direct democracy is the best model to enact real substantive democracy. I think the more radical experiment of political organization consists of asking: how can we organize such that we acknowledge the necessary failure of our attempts to represent our own desires?

-Amrit Heer



with representation. That is, it does not dispense with a structure in which there is, on the one hand, a people (as a multiple) and, on the other hand, the decision of the people (as a unity). That is, if the people have certain needs, wants, and desires, then the decision of the General Assemblies attempts to represent those needs, wants, and desires in decisions reached by the Assembly itself. As such, direct democratic General Assemblies are still based on a representative model of political organization. Direct democracy,